

# THE IMPACTS OF AMERICAN PIVOT TO ASIA POLICY ON ASEAN

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**Abstract** - American post-Cold-war foreign policy has always made a number of impacts on world politics. The twenty-first century has witnessed the power shift from the Western world to Asia with the establishment of a variety of regional institutions and cooperation. Consequently, the Obama administration initiated the *American pivot to Asia* (a.k.a. strategic rebalance policy) as a response to the growing importance of Asia and a commitment to multilateralism and regional security architecture. Up to now, the policy has made certain impacts on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the ASEAN-U.S.-China relations. Accordingly, this paper studies the impacts of American *pivot to Asia*, assesses the effectiveness of cooperation between ASEAN and the U.S., and evaluates benefits and challenges of ASEAN and their member states. The paper also analyzes the future of ASEAN-U.S. relations and American Asia policy to propose implications for these relations after the pivot in the upcoming period.

**Key words** - foreign policy; American pivot to Asia; the U.S.; ASEAN; impacts

## 1. Rationale

Asia has witnessed the development of a number of factors affecting security environment and regional cooperation in the twenty-first century. One of those factors is the rapid rise of China, its growing influence in Asia Pacific, and determination to realize the *China dream* to become a global superpower. Another factor is the U.S.' efforts to build American-led trans-Pacific architecture, implementing the *pivot to Asia* as an adjustment to its Asia Pacific policy. The third factor is the new effort of ASEAN in realizing their community, first and foremost with ASEAN Economic Community, and shaping regional security framework with ASEAN at the center. Those three factors have been inter-correlated and have had impacts on adjusting awareness and strategic inputs of related countries in the region. Accordingly, the American *pivot to Asia* has made certain impacts on ASEAN-U.S. relations and ASEAN-U.S.-China relations. The paper, studying impacts of American *pivot to Asia*, assesses the effectiveness of cooperation between ASEAN and the U.S., and analyzes the benefits and challenges of ASEAN and their member states to examine the American Asia policy to propose implications for these relations after the pivot in the years to come.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Overview of ASEAN

#### 2.1.1. Development process

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded on August 8<sup>th</sup> 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand. Up to now, ASEAN has been a political, cultural and economic alliance of ten countries in Southeast Asia. The five founding countries include: Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand. ASEAN expanded to include Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia in 1984, 1995, 1997 and 1999 respectively. The main aims of ASEAN are to accelerate economic, cultural

and social development to promote regional peace and stability. ASEAN is committed to intergovernmental cooperation and support among member nations in various forms ranging from training, technical transfer, to equipping research tools in fields of education, profession, technology, and administration [1].

After 50 years of establishment, ASEAN, from a sole security alliance, has become a regional intergovernmental organization, a political - social - economic mechanism in Asia Pacific, and an inevitable partner in foreign policy making of major powers and centers of the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### 2.1.2. ASEAN policy making process

The foreign relations of ASEAN are always in compliance with its principles and goals as noted in *The ASEAN Charter*. ASEAN will develop relations of cooperation, dialogue, partnership, and mutual benefits with other countries, organizations and mechanisms internationally and regionally. The political movement in Southeast Asia has facilitated ASEAN member states to pursue a balance of powers. In this sense, ASEAN stays closely coordinated with its Dialogue Partners to ensure effective implementation of the Plan of Action 2016-2020 aiming at accelerating the realization of ASEAN Community Vision 2025. The bloc has enhanced its driving and engaging role in the evolving regional architecture, based on mechanisms led by ASEAN. Besides, ASEAN has fully and effectively implemented the modified *Plan of Action on Sustaining and Enhancing central role of ASEAN* [1]. The 26<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in 2015 reaffirmed that the bloc should actively contribute to regional peace, security, stability and development for better addressing and responding to traditional and non-traditional security threats [4].

### 2.2. Overview of American Pivot to Asia

#### 2.2.1. Formation

There are debates on whether the U.S. has pivoted to Asia. While some argue that this "rebalancing" policy is considered the third time the U.S. has pivoted to Asia, others believe that the U.S. has never neglected Asia Pacific since 1959 after its struggle to take over Hawaii.

In fact, American *pivot to Asia* was introduced in the second decade of the twenty-first century when there were significant international political changes. The 1997 economic crisis of Asia and later 2008 global financial crisis led to collapse and bankruptcy of a number of major financial institutions in the U.S. and Europe. Also, the global economic power began to shift to China making this nation the second largest economy, threatening the first largest economy – the U.S.A.

The pivot policy (a.k.a. Strategic Rebalance policy) was first developed when President Barack Obama took

office. In early 2009, he asked his cabinet to re-distribute the engagement and presence of the U.S. on the world map. In February 2009, Hillary Clinton made her first Secretary of State visit to Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, and China. Five months later, at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) she announced that America was pivoting to Asia – a region having critical role towards world peace and prosperity. She also announced a plan to establish a dedicated Mission to ASEAN in Jakarta, and initiate Lower Mekong Initiative [7].

However, the official establishment of this rebalancing policy was on October 11<sup>th</sup> 2011 when Foreign Policy published Hillary Clinton's groundbreaking article namely "America's Pacific Century" with the forewords "*The future of politics will be decided in Asia not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be at the center of the action*" [2].

Since 1977, the ASEAN-U.S. dialogue partnership was officially initiated. In period 2005-2010, enhanced partnership was established in 2005; the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia was signed in 2009, opening door for the U.S. to join the East Asia Summit (EAS); Ministerial Meeting between the four Lower Mekong countries and the U.S. was held in 2009; a dedicated Military Advisor/Liaison Officer at the U.S. Mission to ASEAN Jakarta was established in 2011. At the third ASEAN-U.S. Leader's Meeting in Bali, the leaders approved of the Plan of Action for the period 2011-2015 for *Peace, Sustainability and Prosperity*. In late 2015, at the ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, the ASEAN-U.S. partnership was elevated to a strategic dialogue partnership [7].

### 2.2.2. Principles and Goals

\* **Principles:** The Obama Administration put an emphasis on quiet diplomacy with willingness for negotiation and avoiding conflicts. In other words, America would prefer to employ diplomatic tools to deal with regional challenges rather than military power whenever possible.

\* **Goals:** The U.S. works to strengthen its presence and intervention in Asia Pacific to maintain economic benefits, political influence, cultural and military powers to dominate countries challenging such an American presence. The goals include:

- **Economic goals:** To bring the U.S. out of financial crisis and sustain its economic leadership as the world largest economy.

- **Political goals:** To strengthen American voice at regional forums, organizations, and multilateral platforms to establish a U.S.-led security mechanism to continue the role as the leading center of the world.

- **Cultural goals:** To introduce American values, particularly freedom, democracy, human rights, and religions, to increase American influence in the region.

- **Military goals:** To counter expanding military forces of major powers in the region, especially China, and to support American allies to improve their military strengths for protection and attack.

- **Diplomatic goals:** To enhance relations with its allies

to balance strategies between the West and the East, between the U.S. and other political, economic and military centers; attracting countries to form new alliance to contain the growths of China and Russia [5].

### 2.2.3. Advantages and challenges of implementing rebalancing policy in Southeast Asia

The policy adjustment of rebalancing had certain *advantages*, including high consensus from most of the Congress. After a decade busy concentrating on anti-terrorism in the Middle East and South Asia, the U.S. realized their benefits in all fields, from socio-economic, political-security, to cultural-educational, in Asia Pacific. In addition, the rapid rise of China posed a threat to global leadership and long-term benefits of the U.S. in Asia Pacific. The controversial acts of China since 2013 have "awaken" ASEAN member countries, thus, triggering immediate search for territorial defence measures [3], [6].

Nevertheless, upon implementing the rebalancing policy, the U.S. encountered a variety of financial and security *challenges*, including a strict budget cut on overseas military activities and new concerns in the Middle East and Europe, *i.e.* the rise and spread of the Islamic State (ISIS), and the Crimea crisis, etc. In fact, the annexation of Crimea by Russian Federation has concerned the West about expansionism of the Russian Federation. Furthermore, the U.S. has acted as a neutral peacemaker rather than a devoted ally in Southeast Asia. Take the case of its neutrality toward territorial disputes on the East Sea. In this sense, such a strategy resulted in a negative perception of neglecting allies and partners in the hotly-debated disputes in the region. Finally, Southeast Asian countries always want protection from the U.S. yet refrained from getting engaged in conflicts between the U.S. and China. Similarly, the U.S. wants to provide protection to its allies yet reluctant to get involved in regional bilateral disputes [3].

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### 3.1. Positive impacts

Basically, the pivot to Asia has made a variety of positive impacts on ASEAN regarding political - security, trade-economic, and educational - cultural activities.

#### 3.1.1. Enhancing Cooperation in Political - Security Activities

The U.S. prioritized assistance to ASEAN to enhance their capacity of ensuring security, especially maritime one, based on bilateral diplomacy and regional fora. The U.S. increased its naval forces in the Pacific, conducting one military exercise after another, and expanding military alliance with some ASEAN members. America has become a critical counterbalancing entity when China announced its Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in 2013. The U.S. responded fast, consistently and announced that they would not recognize ADIZ, and worked harder to strengthen American military presence in the region [6].

The U.S. and ASEAN actively deepened their cooperation in fields of counterterrorism, anti-proliferation of nuclear weapon, transnational criminals and human trafficking. In 2013, the U.S. Pacific Command and ASEAN conducted a number of exercises namely

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM+), Military Medicine, counterterrorism ADMM+, Maritime Security ADMM+, and Disaster Relief ARF with both civil and military participation. The U.S. expanded new initiatives suggested in APEC, *i.e.* establishment of a fund on supply chain connectivity, and formation of a working group on anti-corruption and transparency. In addition, America would further cooperative activities in humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and rescue.

The U.S. was actively engaged in ASEAN-led fora and institutions like ARF, EAS, ADMM+, and Expanded ASEAN Maritime's Forum. At ARF, the U.S., Japan and the Philippines co-hosted ARF Inter-session Meeting (ARF ISM) on Maritime security and built ARF Action Plan on Maritime security in period 2015-2017; organized a number of conventions, conferences on marine environmental pollution and conservation, maritime security, and anti-piracy. The U.S. also encouraged cooperation in six prioritized fields of ADMM+; proposed and hosted mariner training program under EAS framework. The U.S. and ASEAN shared respective concerns about non-traditional security challenges. After a series of terrorist attacks in Jakarta (Indonesia), it was true that Southeast Asia has emerged as a critical point for terrorism, especially in countries with significant population of Muslims. In the future, the U.S. will encourage cooperation with ASEAN in fields of information exchange, shared actions, and building capacity for law enforcement and counter crime agencies to better prevent terrorist schemes. [3]

ASEAN member countries have different benefits and perceptions on East Sea disputes. To better accommodate specific benefits of each member, the U.S. made efforts in avoiding provoking conflicts or militarizing the region. In fact, the U.S. has worked closely with ASEAN to ensure peace and stability in the region, as well as support ASEAN in capacity building in sea law enforcement, marine resources and environmental protection.

Up to now, the U.S. has been the sole superpower that can counterbalance rising China. Even though the U.S. has no disputes with China upon the East Sea, its core values of maritime freedom and navigation still exists. Thus, the U.S. emphasized a peaceful resolution for disputes based on international law. The presence of the U.S. resulted in a diplomatic counterbalance with China, so ASEAN countries can harden their actions upon encountering China on the East Sea [6].

The U.S. revisits and renews traditional alliance, and deepens cooperation with emerging partners. In September 2013, the official consultancy initiative on the Code of Conduct (COC) to suppress behaviors of parties on the East Sea led to capacity enhancing for its allies and partners in the region. The Department of State announced an aid package of \$32.5 million on regional and bilateral maritime assistance, of which \$18 million was spent on capacity improvement for Vietnamese coastal guards [8]. The U.S. also recognized the needs for Global Hawk of Singapore, and capacity improving of logistics and air transport of Indonesia. The U.S. continued

to support allies and partners in these fields to increase maritime cooperation. The Pentagon even discussed about shifting more small destroyers to dock in partner countries to enhance maritime capacity. The U.S. sent four battle ships to Singapore, increased armed forces in the Philippines, deepened military cooperation with Vietnam, Malaysia, and other ASEAN countries. Vietnam and the U.S. have elevated defence and naval relations. Vietnam opened the port of Cam Ranh for commercial repair activities for all marine forces. In July 2011, the two countries strengthened their relations in non-combat training programs. Similarly, the U.S. and the Philippines co-organized a number of naval exercises. In late 2011, after the "Manila Announcement" reaffirming the alliance, the U.S. gave the Philippines a new flagship and sent newest battleships to Singapore naval base. At the third ASEAN-US Summit in Kuala Lumpur in 2015, ASEAN and the U.S. agreed to elevate their relation to a strategic partnership and approved of the Plan of Action 2016-2020 marking a newer and stronger cooperation. On February 16<sup>th</sup> 2016, U.S. President Barack Obama officially invited ASEAN leaders to attend the Summit in California. This has been the first summit to be held in the U.S. showing mutual respect and deeper cooperation.

With American presence in the region, ASEAN has worked hard to strengthen its influence and emphasize its critical role, rebalancing its relations with major powers in Asia Pacific. Accordingly, regional security has been maintained and importance of ASEAN has been leveraged to become an inevitable role in political security dialogues in Asia Pacific.

### 3.1.2. Expanding Economic - Trade cooperation

In economic and trade activities, the U.S. has been the third largest investor and fourth largest trade partner of ASEAN. In 2014, the trade between the U.S. and ASEAN totaled \$216 billion, accounting for 8.2% of ASEAN total trade. Also, the U.S. Foreign Direct Investment in ASEAN reached \$226 billion. The number of American tourists to ASEAN member countries rose as well, making up 3.2% of the total number of tourists to ASEAN (with 3.2 million visits) [7]. The ASEAN-U.S.' economic and trade cooperation was conducted under the ASEAN-U.S. Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) and the Expanded Economic Engagement Initiative in the 21<sup>st</sup> ASEAN Summit in Cambodia. The U.S., during the Obama administration, set priority to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in an attempt to establish a U.S.-dominated Asia-Pacific trade system, which became a foundation for the rebalancing policy. TPP is an open agreement to all APEC economies and probably to all ASEAN members in future. There were 12 economies participating in the negotiation of TPP until January 2017 but there are only four ASEAN members namely Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam, representing 40% of world total products and 25% export goods and services. TPP removes trade barriers at and beyond borders like inconsistent regulations preventing the flow of services, investment and technical transfer. In 2012, the U.S. launched the Expanded Economic Engagement Initiative (E3) based on existing agreements to encourage non-TPP economies to achieve certain standards that may

allow their membership in the future. [2]

In terms of connectivity, the U.S. assisted ASEAN under the *ASEAN Connectivity through Trade and Investment* with four major goals including: ASEAN single window development for cargo clearance; Small and medium enterprises (SME) promotion; Energy-efficiency technologies; and Information, and Communication Technology (ICT) implementation. More importantly, the U.S. cutting down on travel restrictions and increasing visa duration has facilitated short business visits for workshops, joint research, and exchange expansion between different levels of companies and agencies in public and private sectors.

### 3.1.3. Expanding Educational - Socio - Cultural Activities

ASEAN encouraged the U.S. to enhance cooperation in technology, education and provide scholarships for ASEAN students; facilitating cooperation in epidemic prevention; Mekong river cooperation, energy security; natural disaster and climate change management; public diplomacy; and biodiversity cooperation. The current adolescent population accounts for about 65% of total ASEAN population. Hence, the U.S. promoted a network for ASEAN youths to address global and regional challenges, created new opportunities and built ASEAN identity. The Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI), launched in late 2013, has so far attracted 47,000 young talents aged 18-35 to build leadership capabilities and promote connectivity in ASEAN to solve critical global and regional challenges, and promote relations between American citizens and young leaders in Southeast Asia. The U.S. also provides 700 Fulbright scholarships on a yearly basis to ASEAN university lecturers, researchers, and officials in diplomatic and governmental agencies to go to the U.S. for studying and researching in a period of 3 to 4 months. Additionally, the U.S. supports ASEAN-U.S. Science and Technology Fellows Program, which is an initiative to help early career scientists to be more engaged in policies that drive national priorities and have impacts on the lives of ASEAN citizens [7].

From 2011-2016, the U.S. worked on a variety of projects and activities to support gender equality in ASEAN nations via regional mechanisms like ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and the Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC), ASEAN Women Entrepreneur's Network (AWEN), The Great Women in ASEAN, and The Science Prize for Women, ASEAN Convention against Trafficking in Persons, especially women and children, etc. For example, the U.S. supported ACWC by facilitating its legalization, developing social service networks, and addressing domestic violence. The American government promoted opportunities for equality at workplace under AWEN. The Great Women in ASEAN initiative has helped companies expand their markets and take the most of the ASEAN Economic Community. Besides, American Peace Corps doubled the number of nations and voluntary activities in ASEAN. In fact, climate change cooperation has been one of the priorities of the U.S. and ASEAN. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> ASEAN-U.S. Summit in 2014, the two partners announced the Joint Statement on Climate Change in which the U.S. committed to addressing climate change through implementation of ASEAN Plan of Action

on climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Last but not least, the U.S. made the most of its economic partnerships to increase its influence on countries that were reported to make progress in achieving democratic and human rights goals. The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor established its office in Northeast Asia and the Pacific to increase assistance to democracy and human rights programs. The U.S. also focused on the media and Internet freedom apart from development programs on marine laws and regulations, public diplomacy, and military cooperation to advance human rights matters. In the 2014 annual fiscal report, the Department of State proposed an increase of 30% (at \$98.6 million) to "Equality and Democracy Programs" in Northeast Asia and the Pacific regions [3].

### 3.2. Negative impacts

However, the pivot to Asia has made certain negative impacts on the regional security architecture.

#### 3.2.1 Intervention into ASEAN domestic affairs

As the U.S. prioritized democratization in its international agreements, the country advanced comprehensive intervention through cooperation, financial aids, and science-technology development projects to force ASEAN member countries to reform their democracies following American model. Moreover, bilateral and multi-lateral channels, hard and soft powers have been employed to push ASEAN countries to adjust their human rights laws, etc. resulting in concerns about sovereignty and human rights in ASEAN. As a consequence, the bloc was reluctant and concerned about American assistance and intervention [6].

#### 3.2.2 The East Sea disputes

The pivot so far has been done mostly in words with a wide range of statements and promises. American presence in Asia-Pacific has been inconsistent and instable. Actually, one of the goals of Washington was to maintain its presence in Asia Pacific to simultaneously contain and comfort China to avoid direct encounter. The U.S. has not been ready for their interventions into regional territorial disputes. At 2010 Shangri-La Dialogue, Secretary of Defence Robert Gates reaffirmed that "even though the U.S. has *not taken side* in regional territorial disputes, we will be opposed to any threats to maritime freedom on the East Sea". The U.S. has shown its determination in limiting its East Sea benefits to maritime freedom protection. For the sake of economic benefits, China is believed to avoid challenging regional maritime freedom and possible conflicts with the U.S., yet China will continue to challenge ASEAN's security architecture. This consequence is believed to be rooted from the lack of consensus between ASEAN members on resolutions to address territorial disputes and encounter rising China. This has resulted in a hindrance to American pivot to Asia since the intervention strategy will not be effective once the bloc lacks unity and consensus [3].

#### 3.2.3 ASEAN – U.S. – China relations

With American presence, international relations in Asia Pacific have become so sensitive and complicated. An insignificant action, or even no actions at all, would lead to serious encounter which might be worsened to become conflicts. It is true that no countries would like to take side

between Washington and Beijing. This is actually a challenge when the three international relations actors pursue contradictory goals. While the U.S. wants to maintain a status quo in the region, China would like to change it, and ASEAN is making efforts to go beyond regional borders to play a larger role in world politics. The inefficiency of the pivot lies in security dilemma on the East Sea with a more aggressive expansion of China. The growing encounter and competition between major powers on the East Sea result in a more complication and tension to existing territorial disputes [5].

#### 4. Finality of the rebalance policy

In the next two years, the U.S.' Asia policy, especially the U.S.-China relations, will be "on hold". In time of the 2016 presidential campaign, Beijing focused on economic priorities and preparation for the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China while the U.S. would be focusing on its domestic affairs.

In fact, with American withdrawal from TPP, it is very likely for the rebalance policy to be ended as TPP has been considered the core pillar of the pivot. In addition, President Trump proposed an increase of \$54 billion to the 2018 defence budget in an attempt to adjust primary focus of the Asia policy to military first rebalance [9]. This critical shift would be really different from American traditional role in the region in terms of economic and diplomatic focus. Thus, these changes result in uncertainties in U.S. relations with its allies and partners in Asia, particularly Asia Pacific, and do harm to the U.S.' leadership in the region.

However, as America has been and always will be a Pacific nation, the Trump administration will more or less continue their commitment to the region to maintain the status quo of Asia Pacific policy so as not to jeopardize regional security having consisted of various economic and political disputes and conflicts.

In reality, the pivot to Asia has contributed significantly to bringing ASEAN-U.S.' relations to a new height, expanding regional trade, and enhancing regional peace and stability. Even though the Trump administration has not figured out a specific Asia Pacific policy in the time being, they understand the need to address key security issues in the region. Accordingly, ASEAN and the U.S. should deepen their cooperation to expand influence in the region to address critical challenges such as the non-peaceful rise of China and the North Korea nuclear threats. In other words, ASEAN needs to cooperate with the U.S. to counterbalance major powers and increase its influence worldwide. Meanwhile, the U.S. needs to realize its commitment related to the implementation of the ASEAN-U.S. Strategic Partnership 2016-2020 in order to reassure its allies and partners about its presence in the region, and its willingness to enhance the trans-Pacific American-led architecture. In this sense, ASEAN-U.S. relations have been shifted to a new phase: more efficient, more practical, mutual benefits and for world peace and prosperity. Therefore, the two partners have boosted their cooperation and proposed a variety of solutions, initiatives and development orientation to promote regional integration and capacity building.

#### 5. Conclusion

The pivot to Asia has been a meaningful and historical shift in American foreign policy, which includes cooperative and conflictual relations between major international relations actors, *i.e.* the U.S., ASEAN, Russia, and China. The pivot has been a critical change factor driving international relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Indeed, the rebalance policy has made a wide range of impacts including critical steps forward in all fields from security-political, socio-economic, to educational-cultural aspects. More specifically, the U.S. supported ASEAN to improve military capabilities contributing to the East Sea security protection. Besides, the pivot has increased ASEAN's political status via a number of conventions and high-ranking leader visits, facilitating bilateral trade between ASEAN-U.S. relations. However, the American presence in Asia-Pacific results in a variety of challenges ranging from the competition for influence of major powers in the region and American intervention into domestic affairs of ASEAN member countries to complication of the U.S.-ASEAN-China relations [7].

However, since the 45<sup>th</sup> president Donald Trump took office, the Obama's legacy of rebalancing policy has been more or less over. As the situation in the Middle East, most notably Syria, gets worse, the U.S. attention has been disproportionate and diverted back to the Europe and the Middle East. Indeed, even though the Trump administration has not seen in detail what the formulation of foreign policy toward Asia will be, it cannot be denied that the U.S. has always been a Pacific power and would continue to maintain its presence in the region.

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