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## US STRATEGIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: ANALYSIS ON THE US MEGA-REGIONALISM AND ASEAN

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### ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss the US regionalism agenda towards ASEAN. ASEAN as the Southeast Asia only regional organizations has significant implications for US trade and economic agenda. This paper will try to understand what is the current policies that the US policymakers enforce in the Southeast Asia. This article will focus on multilateral diplomacy that the US has implemented and what the impact towards US interest in Southeast Asia. Additionally, it will discuss the future and prospect of ASEAN towards US regionalism agenda, more importantly with the rise of the Chinese economy. This paper also will try to find the significance of ASEAN towards the US regional initiatives to contend Chinese domination in Asia. This article will be using latest literature review this paper will focus on the current issue and provide critical approach on how ASEAN respond in the US agenda. More importantly to show what the direct impact of US regional agenda toward ASEAN, and vice versa. This paper will use SWOT analysis to underline the primary strategy of the US and significance of the ASEAN. This paper also uses qualitative data analysis for support the recommendation and analyses the future of ASEAN.

**Keywords:** *US Mega-regionalism, ASEAN, economic, trade and multilateral diplomacy*

### INTRODUCTION

ASEAN is the regional organizations that formed by five countries in Southeast Asia, which are Indonesia, Thailand, Burma, Singapore and Philippine<sup>2</sup>. Inspired by the sharing same history and identity, those countries decided to form a regional organization that could give more economic stability and increases cooperation between Southeast Asian countries. The intention to build a regional organization of Southeast Asian countries has never been about military or security issue. From the beginning, it was clear that ASEAN consists of newly formed states that have the willingness to get together and create more economic opportunities.

ASEAN undeniably is one of the regional organizations that face a sophisticated challenge that closely connected with the international dynamics and domestic politic dynamics within its members. ASEAN was born in the middle of Cold War when the Southeast Asian states fragmented by two strongest ideologies, which are Liberalism

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<sup>2</sup> Karen A. Mingst and Margaret Karns. *International Organizations: The Politics and Processes of Global Governance 2<sup>nd</sup> Editions*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010, pp. 191.



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and Communism. Additionally, Southeast Asian countries also have minimum experience as independence state, most of the states just have their independence after the end of World War 2<sup>3</sup>. The countries in Southeast Asia undeniably have minimum experience of diplomacy ability and minimum influence toward international politics since the formation of ASEAN. Besides that, Southeast Asia states have always been facing continuous conflicts between its members, whether had been finished or still ongoing since 1967. The dispute between Indonesia and Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia also Singapore and Malaysia haunted the initiators of ASEAN about the future of this organization and worried if ASEAN will not survive for a long time. Coincidentally, growing tension that caused by the Cold War aggravated many Asian-African states to hold a summit in 1955 Asia-African Conference. Hereafter, this conference becomes the skeleton of multilateral diplomacy between Asia-African countries<sup>4</sup>. Undeniably, 1955 Asian-African Conference also contributed an inspiration toward regionalism in Southeast Asia.

Shockingly, other Southeast Asian states joined ASEAN between 1984 to 1999. The other countries that joined ASEAN in later time were Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997) also Cambodia (1999). The motivation of those states joining ASEAN has varied based on the political or economic interest. Brunei for example, encouraged by the volatility of its domestic politics, Brunei leaders seek sponsorship to join ASEAN from Singapore and Indonesia<sup>5</sup>. In contrast, the motivation of Vietnam to join ASEAN is mainly encouraged by the collapse of Communist support. Vietnam was aware that joining ASEAN will become tremendous opportunity to improve economic and trade cooperation after the fall of Communism. Similarly, Vietnam also encouraged by the lack of multilateral economic cooperation<sup>6</sup>. It clear that the different interest among members of the ASEAN inspired by many norms, value, and principles that derived from the aspiration of the members. ASEAN also faced the constant problems about sovereignty and domestic politics. All of the members have been implementing different ideologies political systems and fundamental laws. Therefore, it is difficult for ASEAN to incorporate this differences toward the norms, values, and principles as a regional organization. The creation of ASEAN ways is the realization of this problem and become the foundation of

<sup>3</sup> Karns and Mingst, *International Organizations*, pp. 190

<sup>4</sup> Karns and Mingst, *International Organizations*, pp. 192

<sup>5</sup> Weatherbee, Donald E. "Brunei: the ASEAN connection." *Asian Survey* 23, no. 6 (1983), pp. 730

<sup>6</sup> Tuan, Hoang Anh. "Vietnam's Membership in ASEAN: Economic, Political and Security Implications." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* (1994), pp. 262.





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non-interference principle. This paper will focus on analyzing those challenges and using a critical approach to find the future of ASEAN with the current context.

### **THE US MEGA-REGIONALISM AGENDA AND ASEAN: POSSIBILITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

ASEAN has a very complicated, yet very insightful relation with the US, and the US has been famously known as the major player in the ASEAN dynamics. In the economics perspectives, the US is becoming the most valuable partner for ASEAN. The US still has the extent of interest in ASEAN members natural resource<sup>7</sup>. In this matter, the ASEAN natural resource is undeniably crucial for the US especially after the successfulness of the APEC to produce more trade agreement among its member. The US wants to promote economic liberalization and non-discriminatory relation with ASEAN, with the tendency of the US policy derived from the latest development toward ASEAN economic development. Since the implementation of ASEAN FTA (AFTA), the US have intensively increased cooperation with many key players in East Asian economies, including ASEAN. The US has been intensively improving its relationship with ASEAN prior to responding the significance of the China-ASEAN relations.

With the military domination in Asia Pacific, the US has the more extensive capability to influence the decision-making process of the ASEAN members<sup>8</sup>. Regarding the economic aspect, the US could utilize its military domination as the source of legitimation toward many trade and economic ties. Legitimation is the biggest problem in the ASEAN, as we know ASEAN inspired by the struggle of superpower states in the Cold War. ASEAN established in the context of the regional instability in the Southeast Asia. Legitimacy is paramount, and it will affect the perception and identity of the countries that might have the agenda of mega-regionalism like the US. Compare to China, and the US has more legitimation because of the outstanding relationship that already happened even before the creation of ASEAN. The US should have a more plausible scenario for pursuing more intensive trade relations with ASEAN, with the most important legitimation, the US policy toward trade initiative with ASEAN could be conducted smoothly.

<sup>7</sup> DeRosa, Dean A. "ASEAN-US Trade Relations: An Overview." *ASEAN Economic Bulletin* 3, no. 2 (1986), pp. 171

<sup>8</sup> Emmerson, Donald. "Challenging ASEAN: The US Pivot Through Southeast Asia's Eyes." *Global Asia* 7, no. 4 (2012), pp. 24





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With the extent of the liberalization in Southeast Asia, the US could use its leading economic partners such as Singapore, Brunei, Malaysia, and the Philippines to persuade other members of ASEAN. Even though the US still have an ambivalent position among the members of ASEAN, the reputation of the US economic relations with four countries could become the very foreseeable example that shows how beneficial economic ties with the US. As one of the countries that have very ambitious mega-regionalism agenda, bringing up the case of legitimation and reputation is crucial, more importantly in the context of the diversity in Southeast Asia. The most common issue that could contribute to the triumph of the US mega-regionalism agenda is the benefits that developing countries could get to improve their economy.

For most of the ASEAN states, the US is a very promising market and source of investments<sup>9</sup>. The US should follow the extent to which ASEAN members have economic and geo-economics interests toward the US mega-regionalism agenda. For example, how many ASEAN countries want to export their agricultural products as an alternative source of their revenue besides mining commodities and oil production, and the other interest is to improve the economics through prospering small and medium enterprises. That kind of economic interest is tremendously important for ASEAN countries, especially the countries that still in the stage of developing their economy. The second aspect that the US should pay attention is about strategic industries and military expenditure. Almost all of the ASEAN countries desperately depend on the foreign military arms and weaponry. Many ASEAN members will gladly pursue arms and weaponry trade relations with the US in order to improve their strategic industry qualities.

In the current context, especially during Obama's presidency, there had growing economic interest of the US toward countries in East Asia. President Obama has been consistently engaged in the negotiation, talks and building agreement on the economic sectors and often end up with trade agreements or memorandum of understanding. The US interest in countries in East Asia is closely connected with the recent development of the US economy after 2008 crisis and the rise of China. The US considerably changes its perception on the trade agreements that accentuate non-discriminatory policy. Through the policy of non-discriminatory, the US will be easier to conduct trade agreement with ASEAN countries. Based on the various economic condition of the ASEAN countries, the policy of non-discriminatory could accommodate many countries

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<sup>9</sup> Stubbs, Richard. "ASEAN plus three: emerging East Asian regionalism?" *Asian Survey* 42, no. 3 (2002), pp. 445





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join either TPP or APEC. Thus, the US mega-regionalism agenda in Southeast Asia could find its momentum to be realized.

Other opportunities will be about the expanded role of the US in the regional dynamics. In the matter of fact, ASEAN is the regional organization that practically does not have any political power. The US could play a significant role in the intervention of several conflicts through its trade relations with countries in Southeast Asia. The current conflict that happens in Cambodia and Myanmar, for example, could utilize by the US to gain more participation of the ASEAN countries engage in the developing those conflicting countries' economies. Moreover, by helping their economy, the conflict could be minimalized, because conflicts that happen in those countries caused by devastating inequality and poverty. Thus, the US should utilize its position as investor or leaders toward those countries in order to help the countries improve<sup>10</sup>. This kind of strategies had implemented during the post-Vietnam war in the 1970s toward affected countries like Vietnam, Cambodia and Lao PDR. By the incentive from the US or any financial institutions that led by the US such as WB or IMF, many poverty countries in Southeast Asia could be helped through financial aid. The US could make this kind of arrangement to secure its interest to realize the mega-regionalism agenda.

Financial aid that initiated by the US often makes countries in Southeast Asia become the valuable allies. The nature of liberal order is to make any countries obey the hegemon through aid and financial obligation. With the financial support, countries that desperately need the assistance will automatically adjust its policy and foreign policy to support the US agenda, with all cost. The longstanding relations that the US have toward financial air has been shaped many countries to pursuing more intensive cooperation with the US<sup>11</sup>. Countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore have become the 'vivid' example toward prosperity that provided by joining the economic cooperation with the US. Those countries had survived from the devastating crisis in 1998 because of the US financial aids through IMF and WB. In the end, those countries could back to its foot and pay off the debt.

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<sup>10</sup> DeRosa, *ASEAN-US Trade*, 172

<sup>11</sup> Stubbs, *ASEAN plus three*, 444-445



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## US MEGA-REGIONALISM IN SOUTH EAST ASIA: THE ERA OF UNCERTAINTY

The US has a problem of uncertainty, especially regarding the passiveness toward dynamics conditions of ASEAN members domestic politics and their political dilemma. The US has been continuously implementing discriminatory policy when pursuing the trade and economic relations. The discriminatory policy caused uncertainty of the countries that want to pursue economic and trade ties with the US. The problem of democratization, human rights, and political factor become the biggest obstacles that the US faced<sup>12</sup>. There are many countries that willing to have relations. Unfortunately, with the discriminatory policy, those countries unable to adjust with the US precondition will tend to find another alternative. The US discriminatory policy often contributes significant distance with the countries that might be valuable for the US. Recently, Brunei implemented Islamic Sharia Law, in which that countermand the universal declaration of human rights. The US deter Brunei to suspend the sharia law through degrading the economic relations. Unfortunately, Brunei did not respond to that and continued its intention to implement Sharia law. Brunei is the top oil producers in Southeast Asia, yet it could not have substantial trade relations because of the sharia law and human rights.

The passiveness toward regional dynamics also causes the weakness of US influence compare to China. In this context, China has successfully implemented the more flexible, non-discriminatory and smoother trade relations with ASEAN. Evidently, the ASEAN-China free trade area had taken to effect in 2010. The US still struggle with the revitalization of APEC and realization of TPP. This means that the US has been considering ASEAN unimportant until President Obama come to the office. It was President Obama that underlined the value of economic and trade relations besides counterterrorism cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. The US could not rely on the hegemonic policy, in which that hopes for the countries to come to the US. However, the US should consider that proactive toward ASEAN members is the best strategy, for now, at least to restrain the aggressiveness of China toward ASEAN.

Another aspect that worth to mention is the political dilemma, more importantly about the political diversity and historical mistakes in the past. A problem like political instability in Thailand; human rights violations in Myanmar, Indonesia, and Cambodia; devastating post-Vietnam war ramifications in Vietnam, Lao PDR, and Cambodia; also,

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<sup>12</sup> Emmerson, *Challenging ASEAN*, 24





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the last is about political system differences in Malaysia and Brunei, supposed to be making the US more understand the political context. In contrast, the US government seems to impose the 'US standards' toward those countries. The US wants to promote liberalism, democracy, and justice even it could harm the economic and trade relations<sup>13</sup>. Imposing the Western standards to the ASEAN countries is very unwise because the US should consider the historical background and political identities that developed in the Southeast Asian societies.

ASEAN is the regional organization that also have a responsibility to coordinate its members toward responding non-traditional security issues and transnational crime. Undoubtedly, ASEAN is facing many problems regarding non-traditional security issues and transnational crimes<sup>14</sup>. Piracy, human trafficking, drug trafficking, arms trafficking and terrorism are the most intense issues that have been disturbing ASEAN members. Facing this problem is necessary to make sophisticated norms and regulation then the members of ASEAN could obey the norms and regulation. Unfortunately, ASEAN continues its non-binding norms and non-interference principle. ASEAN in this context, still perform such a non-binding resolution and forming coordination forum called ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), which has become the main body of ASEAN that focuses on the political and security issues<sup>15</sup>. APSC designated for creating a robust resolution that could respond all security and political problem that happens in Southeast Asia region. Unluckily, ASEAN could not arrange any regional military cooperation. ASEAN has deliberately avoided any form of collaboration, discussion, and alliance toward ASEAN agenda and multilateral discussion<sup>16</sup>.

The growing non-traditional security and transnational crime forced many members of ASEAN to forms their military cooperation bilaterally<sup>17</sup>. The first military cooperation between ASEAN members involves Indonesia and Malaysia. In order to avoid any territorial dispute, both of government agree to form such a joint border patrol. This cooperation is the most intense and comprehensive military cooperation between members of ASEAN<sup>18</sup>. Besides that, there is another military cooperation that is involving

<sup>13</sup> Emmerson, *Challenging ASEAN*, 24

<sup>14</sup> Karns and Mingst, *International Organizations*, 194

<sup>15</sup> Acharya, Amitav. *Constructing a security community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the problem of regional order 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 116

<sup>16</sup> Palmer, Ronald D., and Thomas J. Reckford. *Building ASEAN: 20 years of Southeast Asian cooperation*. Vol. 127. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1987, pp. 116

<sup>17</sup> Palmer and Reckford, *Building ASEAN*, 117

<sup>18</sup> Palmer and Reckford, *Building ASEAN*, 117





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Indonesia and Singapore. This cooperation caused by the growing transnational crimes that happen in Malacca Strait. Trafficking and smuggling have become the biggest problem in Malacca Straits, and it also makes countries around Malacca Strait have excessive financial losses<sup>19</sup>. ASEAN could not participate in this kind of action, and it is apparent that ASEAN does not have any significance toward responding non-traditional security issue and transnational crimes. In other words, ASEAN also could not become facilitator or coordinator that could make its member create a robust multilateral agreement specifically to respond these problems.

Territorial disputes with other countries should be resolved through ASEAN. The South China Sea dispute is involving many ASEAN members, such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Philippines, Brunei, and Malaysia<sup>20</sup>. If ASEAN could intervene this problem, the multilateral diplomacy to work around this issue could be easily conducted, because China has already included in the ASEAN strategic partner. Moreover, the emergence of terrorism in Southeast Asia is not a small problem. Terrorism in Southeast Asia involves many countries, such as Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia<sup>21</sup>. Responding terrorist activity through multilateral action in the vast region like Southeast Asia is unavoidable. Regrettably, ASEAN could not engage intensively because facing a problem like this need bilateral negotiations between three countries without ASEAN role. Terrorism that mainly centered on Malaysia, Mindanao Island in the Philippines and Indonesia contributes many challenges that ASEAN faces. Suicide bombings in Bangkok, Jakarta, Bali, Manila, and Sabah are the clear precedent that ASEAN unable to conduct appropriate multilateral preventive action against terrorism. ASEAN members should be aware that terrorism is a global problem and regional cooperation through multilateral body should be implemented<sup>22</sup>. ASEAN also should consider making ASEAN have extended legal capacity to act as multilateral organizations that facilitate its member to coordinate in respond of terrorism.

The US should consider those problems before engaging with its mega-regionalism agenda with ASEAN. The growing problem that might harm the regional area should be solved, or the US should commit to helping ASEAN members solve those problems. As already motioned before, the threat toward US mega-regionalism always

<sup>19</sup> Ho, Joshua H. "The security of sea lanes in Southeast Asia." *Asian Survey* 46, no. 4 (2006), pp. 561, see Acharya, *Constructing a security*, 216

<sup>20</sup> Weatherbee, Donald E. *International relations in Southeast Asia: the struggle for autonomy*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, pp. 143

<sup>21</sup> Acharya, *Constructing a security*, 244

<sup>22</sup> Acharya, *Constructing a security*, 245







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come from internal ASEAN rather than external. Thus, it is vital to see how the US respond to those problems. With the uncertainty and unproductive regional body, it will tackle the US mega-regionalism agenda because of regional instability. The US should use its legitimation and power relations with ASEAN members to solve contemporary problems that ASEAN faces. More importantly, US could engage in the mediation of the territorial disputes between China and ASEAN members. With this strategy, the US will get more capability to gather all ASEAN members to join its mega-regionalism agenda.

### **CONCLUSION : THE FUTURE OF THE US MEGA-REGIONALISM IN SOUTH EAST ASIA.**

The ASEAN and the US should have more power and capacity to ensure multilateral diplomacy works well in Southeast Asia. Mutual understanding between the US and ASEAN members is very crucial. It is important to build such a robust norms and regulations that give the US could respond to the strategic issue in Southeast Asia. ASEAN mainly focus on the economic issue, which also makes the connection with the US mega-regionalism agenda. Thus, strengthening the economic relations indeed become the primary interest of the ASEAN. The US just needs to provide with more precise, firm and robust commitment toward helping ASEAN members develop.

Through employing its legitimation, hegemony, and domination, the US government should consider taking a bold step by pursuing bilateral agreement before continuing the agenda of mega-regionalism. It is critical to get the reciprocal arrangement in order to secure the position of the US toward domestic politics of ASEAN members that might be fluctuated time by time. Pursuing bilateral cooperation also could tackle the external factors that might already take in effect, such as trade agreement with China. Bilateral cooperation also becomes the media for the US to understand any significant different between ASEAN members and the US itself.

As shown above, the US government should determine the certainty of the US mega-regionalism agenda. Even though the blueprint of the TPP has passed, it is imperative to conduct such a proactive movement for persuading countries in Southeast Asia to join the US mega-regionalism agenda. Even though, there already Chinese FTA with ASEAN had already realized. The US should ignore the Chinese strategies and start to make comprehensive action toward pursuing economic relations with ASEAN members. It is not the time to introduce discourse to ASEAN members because ASEAN



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has already suffered from the 2008 crisis and its contribute distrust among ASEAN members toward the US economy.

In the final analysis, the US should undermine political, human rights, historical mistakes, and ideological spheres. It is time to gather the ASEAN members into one place under the umbrella of the US mega-regionalism. In the foreseeable future, the US could focus on those kinds of problems. However, in the current development, it is time to the considerate aggressive movement of China towards ASEAN. Utilizing uneasy relation between China and ASEAN in the South China Sea, the US could provide support to the resolving the conflict in the South China Sea and use the US mega-regionalism agenda as the pre-requirement of the US support. With this relation, plausible strategies could be conducted in the persuading ASEAN members to support the US mega-regionalism agenda.

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