

America's role in South-east Asia

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ONCE every four years, the Asia Foundation submits a report on America's role in Asia to the incoming President of the United States. The report is in two parts: The first written by three Asians, one each from North-east Asia, South Asia and South-east Asia; and the second, by two Americans. For the third time, Asia Foundation asked me to write on America's role in South-east Asia. Here is what I would tell either a President John McCain or a President Barack Obama:

Dear Mr President,

You, the 44th President, will inherit a world very different from the one that the 41st president, George H.W. Bush, knew.

The Cold War ended during his tenure. For a brief moment, the world was unipolar and the US was its unchallenged hegemon. That unipolar world gradually became multipolar during the tenure of the 42nd president, Bill Clinton, as Europe, China, India, Russia, Japan and Brazil emerged as new centres of power. Today, the world's power structure is very fluid.

Newsweek's Fareed Zakaria has described it as the 'post-American world'. The 44th President will no longer be able to impose America's will on the world. You will have to use a mixture of hard and soft power, diplomacy and force, to persuade the world to accept American leadership.

South-east Asia recognises that the US is a resident power in the Asia-Pacific region. Over the past half a century, it has played an indispensable role. It helped maintain peace and security, without which the region's economic and social transformation would not have been possible. Thus, despite the widespread disagreement with US policies in Iraq, the Israel-Palestine dispute, the treatment of detainees in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, South-east Asians continue to admire America. The region wants to engage the US more consistently, comprehensively and strategically, not less.

Our problem is that the US, though a superpower, is not well-informed about the world. Few Americans know that the US has more cumulative investments in South-east Asia - US\$100 billion - than in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan combined. Few know that the two-way trade between the US and the region amounts to more than US\$170 billion - exceeding US trade with Latin America - or that the US exports twice as much to the region as it does to China.

And our importance to America is not just economic but also political and strategic. I doubt if many in your administration are aware that one-third of world trade and two-thirds of the world's energy and liquefied natural gas pass through the straits of Malacca and Singapore. Nor are they aware that there are more Muslims in South-east Asia than in the Middle East; or that Asean, which many mistakenly view with disdain, is integrating and institutionalising, and has emerged as the region's facilitator, convener and peacemaker.

Mr President, the region does have other suitors. Asean has already concluded free-trade agreements with China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand. China has overtaken the US as the region's top trading partner.

So what should you do? I would urge you to take 10 steps to restore America's position in the region:

First, you should convene a summit meeting with Asean leaders. Japan, India and China have already held such summits.

Second, you should sign the Asean Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand, Russia, France and Britain have already signed the treaty. The US is the odd man out. You might sign the treaty at your first Asean-US summit.

Third, the US could be more proactive in nurturing the Asean Regional Forum (ARF) and help it to make the transition from confidence building to preventive diplomacy. At this year's ARF, the US proposed a standing coordinating mechanism to respond to humanitarian emergencies. Your administration can build on such constructive suggestions.

Fourth, the US and Asean should begin dialogues on energy security, climate change, on human rights - the three central challenges of our time. Asean is establishing a human rights body, as provided for in the Asean Charter.

Fifth, you should uphold, not abandon, America's commitment to globalisation, free trade, and international institutions and rules. Urge your Congress to empower you with fast-track negotiating authority so you can conclude the 'Doha Round' of trade talks. America's soft power resides in globalisation. You invented it. Do not abandon it.

Sixth, American and Asean public and private sectors should jointly launch a major initiative to help Asean countries improve their infrastructures - highways, sea ports, airports, communication networks, power grids, etc. On the Asean side, laws and policies can be changed to enable the US private sector to participate in infrastructure development.

Seventh, America and the region should intensify their cooperation across a wide spectrum of non-traditional security challenges - among them, Avian flu, HIV/Aids, malaria, tuberculosis and other threats to public health; drug and human trafficking, maritime piracy, natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies; food security.

Eighth, the US should respond in a constructive way to the rise of Asia, especially of China and India. Asean would like the US to continue treating China as a responsible stakeholder, not an adversary. Nothing would be gained by Washington playing off China and India, or China or Japan, against each other.

Ninth, America's interests would be better served if it were to exercise its public diplomacy effectively. We urge you to launch programmes to build cultural, artistic and intellectual bridges between the US and South-east Asia. Americans should and can compete with the Alliance Francaise, British Council, Goethe Institute and the Confucius Institute.

Tenth, the US and Asean should consider establishing a Group of Eminent Persons to take stock of US-Asean relations and recommend steps to elevate these relations to a higher strategic level.

Mr President, the world is 'post-American'. That's a given. But a post-American world need not, should not - and we pray, does not - mean a world without America.

The writer, Singapore's Ambassador-At-Large, is chairman of the Institute of Policy Studies. Think-Tank is a weekly column rotated among eight leading figures in Singapore's tertiary and research institutions.