

## 'American advances in Asia: No real gains for ASEAN'

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The United States' recent Asian diplomacy has been most interesting. The US has drawn ASEAN countries into the guarded enmity between the US and China. Is this to Southeast Asia's benefit?



Earlier this year China took a noticeably more proactive stance vis-à-vis its regional partners. After first asserting the South China Sea to be a 'core interest' during bilateral discussions with the US, a term generally reserved for its claims to Tibet, Taiwan and Xinjiang, China defied US diplomatic efforts by using its veto-powers in the UN Security Council to block actions against North Korea in the aftermath of the Cheonan incident.

The ensuing tension in the region provided the momentum for the US to finally make headway on the Asian engagement it announced when Obama took office. Mere weeks after the Security Council meeting the US stepped up, accepting ASEAN's invitation for it to join the East Asia Summit and announcing its intention to play a role in the South China Sea. In doing so, the US rebuffed China's claim and argued that it is in the US' national interest to protect its and others' access to, and security in, international waters. In forming this position, the US has in one strike placed itself in direct opposition to China, which has always opposed the intervention or mediation of non-parties.

Unsurprisingly, Southeast Asia often serves as a proxy theatre for the US and China to fight out their battles over North-East Asia. With the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area firmly in place and China ensconced within the Asian integration process through (the exclusively Asian) ASEAN+3, [the US needed to step up its game](#). Its recent moves show that this has taken place, but whether ASEAN stands to gain from this position is questionable.

In all fairness ASEAN has been vying for further US support in the region, and the US intending to join the East Asia Summit is as much as it could have hoped for. American Southeast Asian advances are well-timed as well, with [Obama's long-postponed visit to Indonesia](#) weighing down on the region's traditionally strong ties with its security guarantor. Although American support for ASEAN's South China Sea claimants is welcomed by some, it has also provoked a clash of Southeast Asian interests. Vietnam has embraced a

potential American role in the dispute, while the Philippines has made clear that, as far as it is concerned, American involvement is not only unnecessary, but also unwanted.

These internal divisions point out an important draw-back of America's recent moves. Increased engagement is much welcomed, but not if it feels like an anti-China rather than a pro-ASEAN policy. With ASEAN already struggling in the face of China's dominance, it does not need another great power using it as a pawn in a broader strategic game. And any liaison with the US can justifiably be interpreted by China as an effort to balance China's influence in the region, which places ASEAN's economic and security interests at risk.

Although ASEAN countries could be tempted to go along with America's new bout of Asian engagement in order to make short-term diplomatic and political gains, it would be unwise to abandon precaution when becoming mixed up in a rivalry game between the region's two super powers – a lesson which the region's history should have taught the countries several times over. In light of the increased tensions in the region and the divided response to a potential American role in the South China Sea, ASEAN should prioritise Southeast Asian unity and sovereignty, and as such reject playing any role in Sino-American competition and thus forego aligning itself with America in regard to the South China Sea disputes.

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