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Time for the Administration to Turn to Substance in Southeast Asia

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In the next couple of weeks, the Obama Administration will be engaged in high-level diplomacy with America's treaty allies and friends in Southeast Asia.

Secretary Clinton will be in Bangkok tomorrow to meet with Thailand's leadership, including Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya. She will then go on to attend the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference and ASEAN Regional Forum. In the week following Secretary Clinton's trip, the President of the Philippines Gloria Macapagal Arroyo will meet with President Obama at the White House.

It is well worth the minor investment in time, attention, and transpacific travel to remind America's friends and allies—as well as its rivals—that the United States is in Asia to stay.

The Obama Administration clearly recognizes the importance of this message. Yet, even as it reaps rewards for “showing up,” the Administration has arrived at a point where it must turn to substance. Now seven months into its first term, the Obama Administration's key policy people, including an Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, are in place. Engagement is not an end in itself. The Administration must now begin to make some of the tough policy choices.

Trade and Investment. First and foremost, ASEAN and the ASEAN countries are concerned with trade and investment. They have entered into more than 20 trading arrangements, including the ASEAN Free Trade Area, an ASEAN–China free

trade agreement (FTA), and agreements with Japan, South Korea, and India. Granted, none of these approaches the “gold standard” of U.S. FTAs, but in sum, ASEAN's agreements constitute a formal economic integration that America is largely watching from the sidelines.

The United States has a single trade agreement with an ASEAN country—a lucrative agreement with Singapore. Agreements with Thailand and Malaysia have been left on the table. During the Bush Administration, the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) was often working against political and economic developments in the region—although the Thais and the Malaysians certainly deserve a fair share of the blame for the failure to conclude agreements. The USTR was also working against political winds in Washington; for instance, the failure to renew trade promotion authority in 2007. But the situation is much worse today.

The Obama Administration's trade policy is a mystery. “Buy America” provisions in the 2009 stimulus package provide a fig-leaf to countries looking for excuses to protect local industries from globalization. And stiffing South Korea on its FTA, after Seoul bent over backward last year to accommodate

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adjustments demanded from the U.S. Congress, has left an impression in the region. At some point very soon, the Administration must put a coherent free trade policy in Secretary Clinton's ASEAN bag. They could start by reviving U.S.-Thai talks and bringing to conclusion U.S.-Malaysia negotiations.

Burma Policy. Neither the ASEAN nor the U.S. can move forward from the continuing impasse in Burma. The problem of Burma's dogged and brutal authoritarianism encapsulates a fundamental issue: whether ASEAN can find a rule-based "new ASEAN way" that, among other things, upholds its charter's commitment to democracy, rule of law, and fundamental freedoms. How ASEAN responds to the situation in Burma will determine its external orientation. (The ASEAN meetings in Phuket this week are already off to a poor start with the adoption of terms of reference for its new human rights commission that empower it only to promote the concept of human rights, not to monitor or investigate abuses, let alone punish them. The idea that this can evolve into something with more teeth—when the same members are there to block it—is a pipedream.)

Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) tower over Burmese politics. Their landslide victory in Burma's 1990 parliamentary election—later annulled by the junta—gives them enormous moral force. The junta believes it has supplanted that 1990 election with its referendum last year on a draft constitution. They promise to organize a new national election next year. U.S. policy should press for a 2010 election that, if it is truly free and fair, will validate the 1990 verdict. In order to ensure free and fair elections, the junta must:

- Release all political prisoners, including the leaders of the NLD and Suu Kyi herself;
- Amend the constitution to reduce the role of the military and permit full democratic participation; and
- Allow for international supervision of the election.

Any election that does not permit Suu Kyi's participation does not pass the test.

Between now and the new elections there should be no major changes in U.S. policy. It should maintain

pressure on the regime and continue to encourage others to do the same. At this point in time, high-level contact and/or normalization of diplomatic relations would demoralize the opposition by taking away the small amount of leverage that sanctions give them.

Regarding humanitarian assistance, the question has always been: How much can be channeled through third party NGOs before it starts spilling over the sides in significant quantities to the government? This is still the crux of the matter. If there is more the U.S. can do to help with HIV/AIDs and other issues, it should, but it should not change the measure by which it allocates assistance.

This is the Burma policy the U.S. should bring to Bangkok, the ASEAN meetings, and President Arroyo. If the junta fails to meet the requirements, the U.S. has yet another example of the junta's bad faith and further justification why "maximum pressure"—the policy pursued by the Bush Administration and largely enshrined in U.S. law—is the only answer to the oppression in Burma and the black eye it has given ASEAN.

Support for Democracy. Thailand and the Philippines are democracies whose people have the freedom to change their governments through the ballot box. While these democracies are imperfect and developing, they are democracies nonetheless. Indeed, try telling President Arroyo the Philippines is not a democracy. She is *savaged* in the press on a daily basis, and every year she is put through the paces of an impeachment vote. Or tell Prime Minister Abhisit of Thailand—who weeks ago endured a protest of 30,000 supporters of a former prime minister who has called openly for "revolution"—his nation is not a democracy.

Several factors tie the United States more closely to the Philippines than any other country in Southeast Asia: a long, shared history of struggle, the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, current cooperation against terrorists in Mindanao, and even extensive family connections. President Arroyo's meeting at the White House will be an opportunity for President Obama to reaffirm these ties. He should also be clear, however, that his respect for President Arroyo is grounded in the constitutional order of the Philippines and the office she holds.

The Filipino public is obsessed with the possibility that President Arroyo will attempt to hang on to office despite elections for her successor in May next year. Indeed, many are looking to the example of Honduras to deduce the likely American response. Much of the speculation in Manila is unsubstantiated and politically motivated. But President Obama must be acutely aware of the circumstances. Anything he says that can be interpreted as support for an unconstitutional extension of President Arroyo's term or a change in the constitution to otherwise allow for her continued leadership will have a destabilizing impact on the Philippines.

Playing the Asia Game. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit this week targets two of the most important places she did not have time to visit in February—India and Thailand. President Obama fills another of those boxes by meeting with President Arroyo here at home. These visits and the leaders that President Obama receives at the White House are symbolically very important. Stabilizing the American commitment to ASEAN is also key. The Administration deserves credit for understanding this fact, but the symbolism of its commitment will soon be exhausted. It is time to address the difficult issues.

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