

# WebMemo



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## A Meaningful Agenda for President Obama's Meeting with Southeast Asian Leaders

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The Bush Administration did a great deal for U.S. relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It developed the ASEAN Cooperation Plan, the Enterprise for ASEAN Initiative, the ASEAN-U.S. Enhanced Partnership, and the U.S.-ASEAN Trade and Investment Framework Arrangement. The Bush Administration also opened free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations with Malaysia and Thailand and saw to successful conclusion a comprehensive U.S.-Singapore FTA that has resulted in a 73 percent increase in U.S. exports to Singapore. And it was President Bush who appointed the first ever U.S. Ambassador to ASEAN.

Unfortunately, the Bush Administration's public diplomacy was not as successful. President Bush's decision to cancel a U.S.-ASEAN leader's summit in 2007, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's intermittent attendance at regional meetings, and Assistant Secretary Chris Hill's seeming indifference to Southeast Asia contributed to a damaging impression of American withdrawal. That conclusion was neither fair nor accurate, but it proved difficult to shake.

President Obama has the opposite problem. His attention to the region is helping to correct the impression of a declining American commitment. Dispatching Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Indonesia on her first trip abroad and her attendance during the July ASEAN foreign ministers meetings were important high profile gestures. And now the President has lined up his own summit with ASEAN leaders.

But, thus far, his engagement has lacked substance.

No one expects President Obama to immediately produce a list of accomplishments like the one it took the previous Administration eight years to build. It is reasonable, however, to expect the President to use this week's U.S.-ASEAN summit meeting in Singapore to lay down markers on the most important issues in the U.S.-ASEAN relationship: free trade, Burma, and the rise of China.

**Free Trade.** There is nothing more important to ASEAN than trade. It is where ASEAN has achieved its most concrete results: The ASEAN free trade area and FTAs with China, India, South Korea, Japan and others. At a minimum, President Obama should indicate an interest in moving toward a U.S.-ASEAN FTA. He should pick up on the Bush Administration's intent to negotiate American entry into the Transpacific Partnership, which already includes Singapore, Brunei, Chile, and New Zealand. And he should pursue APEC's interest in a free trade area of the Asia Pacific encompassing its 21-country membership.

President Obama should also maintain the traditional U.S. interest in comprehensive "gold standard" FTAs. High quality means tougher nego-

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tiations. But the region does not need a catalyst to speed them toward managed trade. Nor does the U.S. need a trade policy that fights the market for the right to pick winners and losers.

**Burma.** The Obama Administration's Burma policy is not that new—it is essentially a continuation of the previous sanctions policy combined with a new level and tempo of outreach. Last month, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee that “a fundamentally different U.S.–Burma relationship will require real progress on democracy and human rights.” Among the things he identified as constituting “progress” were the release of “all” political prisoners, the “unconditional” release of Aung San Suu Kyi, an end to conflict with minority groups, and genuine dialogue among the government, democratic opposition, and minorities.

It is important that President Obama *himself* make these conditions for lifting sanctions clear to ASEAN leaders. Leaders will listen to him in way that they will not listen to official policy statements from the State Department. And if he does not say it, they can only assume that there is a disconnect between the State Department and the President's real focus. President Obama can sit at the same table with Prime Minister Thein Sein and the other nine ASEAN leaders, as is planned. (President Bush was prepared to do the same with the Burmese foreign minister in 2007.) But if what President Obama says about Burma does not cause discomfort among the leaders present, he has said it wrong.

Burma is an issue at the heart of the struggle for ASEAN's future. Is it a rules-based organization defined by its charter's commitment to democracy, rule of law, human rights, and fundamental freedoms, or is it a networking opportunity? By helping ASEAN provide the right answer, not only will the President help Burma and the cause of freedom in other undemocratic ASEAN regimes; he will strengthen the case for American engagement.

**China.** The rise of China is the unspoken subtext for the U.S.–ASEAN meeting. Both sides recognize the role that an energetic American diplomatic presence in Southeast Asia can play in balancing China's growing influence.

The ASEAN countries have major economic interests at stake in their relationship with China. They will be keenly interested to know that the U.S. has no intention of blowing that up. When Republicans were in power in Washington, the ASEAN countries worried about the “Panda slayers”—those so alarmed about China's geopolitical position and fast-growing military strength that they force American friends to choose sides. With the left in control of the government, these countries are concerned about the protectionism of organized labor and environmental groups.

The ASEAN leaders, however, may also reveal concerns about China.

China's economic role in the region is not entirely positive—particularly with regard to currency policy. During the Asian financial crisis, the Chinese received rave reviews for not devaluing their currency and thereby undercutting Southeast Asia's ability to export its way out of economic trouble. In truth, the PRC's policy then had nothing to do with the welfare of its neighbors. Its policy was all about stability and control. Today, the same desire and its peg to a falling dollar are putting upward pressure on other regional currencies.

President Obama should also listen for common concern about China's military buildup and creeping assertiveness in the South China Sea. Much of the focus on the speech that founding Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew delivered in Washington a couple weeks ago was on his invitation to the U.S. to help the region maintain balance vis-à-vis China. The Minister Mentor wondered aloud about the purpose of the military hardware on display during the PRC's 60th anniversary parade. He allowed that it “cannot be just be to deter foreign intervention in a conflict between Taiwan and the Mainland” before noting China's massive claims in the South China Sea and pointing out that the Chinese “have built on several islets, fishing outposts, and coastguardvessels patrol them. Later, behind these small patrol craft will be a blue-water fleet.”

Concerns such as these are usually the preserve of Washington's China-skeptics. Lee Kuan Yew, a high priest of foreign policy realism, blessed them for a broader audience.

President Obama should be clear that although the U.S.–China economic relationship is of great importance to his Administration, he hopes China’s emergence as a great power will proceed constructively and that, as assurance, the U.S. will stand by undiminished in its traditional role of guarantor of the peace and security of the region.

**Focus on What Matters.** The capitals of ASEAN nations are very tolerant of dialogue for dialogue’s sake. In fact, they often testify to its dubious positive value. Americans, however, are not as patient with

mere conversation. Without results, engagement of ASEAN will not be taken seriously in Washington. The worst case for the U.S. would be a series of fruitless discussions that only confirm ASEAN’s reputation as “talk shop” and devalue American participation. The President can benefit U.S. national interests directly and impact its strategic position for the long term by helping ASEAN prove its value. He can only do that by focusing on what counts.

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