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### The role of ASEAN in the US pivot to Asia strategy

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#### Abstract

In the US pivot to Asia strategy, ASEAN is considered an organization that plays a very important role. After 10 years of implementation, the US has achieved some successes not only in the political-diplomatic field, but also in the multilateral level. However, there are still some limitations such as internal attention and resources that are sometimes

consistent, and some US engagement measures have not been effective. In this essay, our group will mainly talk about the overview of research issues, the current situation and solutions about the role of ASEAN in the US pivot to Asia strategy.

**Keywords:** ASEAN, US, Asia, Pivot Strategy

#### 1. Introduction

In the past, countries in Southeast Asia were influenced by world powers such as China, Japan, the US and Russia. Today, Southeast Asia has become an area of fierce competition between the US and major countries, especially China.

ASEAN has a relatively large role in maintaining and promoting cooperative relations among member countries. This is seen as the main driver in regional affairs, taking on a central role in the regional security architecture. In addition, ASEAN also plays an important role in the US implementation of the "pivot" strategy to the Asia-Pacific.

Over the past few years, the Obama administration has taken a series of positive steps that underscore the growing importance of ASEAN as a regional organization to the United States. In particular, on November 21, 2015, the two sides agreed to elevate the US-ASEAN relationship to a strategic partnership. This is a very important event, opening a new phase in US-ASEAN relations. This once again proves the important role of the Southeast Asia/ASEAN region in the US's Asia-Pacific rebalancing policy, and at the same time further affirms the US determination to participate in the Asia-Pacific region. this area. For ASEAN, just before the establishment of the ASEAN Community on December 31, 2015, relations with the US were upgraded to a strategic partnership, and the identification of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 will facilitate Favorable conditions to promote and deepen US-ASEAN relations. After two terms of the Obama administration, the US - ASEAN relations are considered to be developing strongly, in fact in many fields, it has become an important priority in the Asia - Pacific policy of the US. The progress made in US-ASEAN relations under the Obama administration is considered a solid foundation for the development of this relationship under the new US administration.

Therefore, it is necessary to study and analyze the role of ASEAN in the US pivot strategy to summarize the important stages in the US policy making process towards ASEAN. At the same time, through analyzing important contents, finding new points in the Obama administration's policy towards ASEAN compared to the previous administration, in order to clarify the advantages and disadvantages of this policy, and at the same time draw on strategic considerations of the United States, and the intentions of ASEAN, and forecast future developments in the security situation in the Asia-Pacific region.

Vietnam is an active member of ASEAN. The correct awareness of the importance of ASEAN in the US pivot strategy will help Vietnam seize opportunities and advantages and promote the development of Vietnam - US relations. Therefore, understanding the role of ASEAN in the US pivot strategy has great practical significance, which will help Vietnam and the US narrow the difference in policies towards each other and lay a solid foundation for the future. development of the US and Vietnam.

#### 2. Research overview

In October 2011, then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the "pivot" strategy to the Asia-Pacific "is to ensure and maintain the US leadership role in the world". -ASEAN, marked by the US beginning to accept the establishment of a limited multilateral security framework with the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), since the second term of former US

President Bill Clinton. The US recognizes the central role of ASEAN. At the beginning of his office, President Obama emphasized his support for ASEAN's central role in regional community building during the first meeting of the bloc's leaders in Singapore at the end of 2009.

## **2.1 About strategic partners**

Since 1977, ASEAN-US dialogue relations officially started and it has been nearly 40 years now. From 2005 to 2010, the bilateral relationship took place at a normal rhythm, with the establishment of an enhanced partnership (2005); signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (2009); The US Secretary of State's Conference with the 4 Lower Mekong countries (2009); and set up a permanent US Ambassador to ASEAN (2010).

At the ASEAN-US Leaders' Meeting in Bali (Indonesia), the two sides approved the Action Plan for the new period 2011-2015, aiming to implement the Enhanced Partnership for Sustainable Peace and Prosperity.

However, it was not until November 2015, at the 3rd Summit in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), that the relationship between the two sides achieved a breakthrough, with the establishment of the ASEAN–Strategic Partnership–America.

## **2.2 In fact**

According to observers, the program of the ASEAN-US Summit this time has discussion sessions with important contents such as: economy - trade, with the theme of Promoting the AEC Economic Community in an innovative direction and business.

It is known that ASEAN currently occupies a particularly important position for US companies. Bilateral trade in goods and services in 2014 was 254 billion USD, making ASEAN the 4th largest trading partner of the US. US FDI into ASEAN also reached 226 billion USD (2014), putting the US in the group of the largest investors in ASEAN.

Washington hopes that through this Conference, it will convince more members of ASEAN to join the TPP. Currently, Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei, and Singapore are founding members. Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand also expressed their intention to consider the possibility of joining TPP in the near future.

However, according to analysts, currently some members of ASEAN are still concerned that the TPP could split ASEAN, between the members joining with the rest, while there are some countries joining both. TPP and RCEP mechanism (RCEP initiated by China).

The absence of China in the TPP, one of the leading trading partners of many ASEAN countries, is also a difficult problem, not only for countries participating in both mechanisms, but also for Washington, especially the diversity of the TPP. political and economic diversification of the AEC. While Singapore pursues free market principles, Indonesia maintains a high level of protectionism, Myanmar is the least developed in the region.

## **2.3 On politics - security**

With the theme Protecting Peace, Prosperity and Security in the Asia-Pacific. Accordingly, maritime security issues, counter-terrorism, transnational and non-traditional challenges and regional strategic perspectives. In particular, the issue of sovereignty disputes at sea, aviation and maritime security in the East Sea are issues of special

concern to both sides.

It is known that the value of goods circulating through the East Sea is about 5 trillion USD per year. China's promotion of illegal land reclamation and construction along with unreasonable claims of sovereignty over the East Sea has made many countries in the region and the international community concerned about China's outrageous actions that threaten the sea lanes. this important fortune.

The US is particularly interested in maritime security in the region. US Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes said that the US supports the settlement of disputes and problems through international law "not the type of big country bullying small countries".

Washington also demonstrated its tough stance by announcing a plan to spend \$150 million over the next two years to support ASEAN nations to strengthen their military power and agreements with the Philippines and Singapore on maintaining the presence of the Philippines. military presence in the East Sea, increased patrols by B52 aircraft and aircraft carriers.

Shohib Masykur, a scholar at the Institute of American-Indonesian Social Studies, said that Beijing's actions are not tied to its claims and therefore, the South China Sea will be a flashpoint for security in the region.

Dan Kritenbrink, senior director for Asian affairs at the US National Security Council, said that Washington sees this special summit as an opportunity to reinforce its goal of "order building." law-based" in the South China Sea.'

Thus, the ASEAN-US relationship, after many challenging years, has now reached the maturity to deepen and reflect more substantively the strategic partnership that the two sides have signed.

The focus of the "pivot" is economic and diplomatic, but the military aspect is in focus with notable moves: capacity development to counter China's growing assertiveness in the East China Sea. and the East Sea; and strengthen military cooperation with key allies in the region.

## **2.4 Obstacles ahead**

The US has signed defense cooperation agreements with the Philippines and Australia. The US is also promoting dialogue between Japan and South Korea, fearing that the rift between Tokyo and Seoul could weaken the US position in Asia. Japan and South Korea have no longer expressed doubts about America's security commitments.

In Southeast Asia, the US considers opportunities in four countries, including Indonesia, Thailand, and Myanmar. Top US leaders have also focused on multilateral forums and organizations of growing importance in Asia: the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, etc.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was at one time going smoothly and is considered a great success of the Obama Administration.

## **2.5 Military- Challenges from the Philippines and Thailand**

Rebuilding relations with former foe the Philippines, including assisting the country to increase its military capabilities, is an important part of the US "pivot" strategy. The Philippines has become a pivotal place for the US military presence in the region. The US has access to Philippine facilities, including Subic Bay, which was the largest US military base in Southeast Asia before its closure in 1992. The US-Africa Defense Cooperation Agreement

allows Washington to do so. significantly increased presence in Southeast Asia and the South China Sea. Meanwhile, Thailand and the US have a close relationship, cultivated since the Cold War. Thailand is a strategic pillar of the United States in the region, serves as a gateway for the United States to access Asia, and is often seen as a key non-NATO ally of the United States.

Thailand often gets preferential treatment when it comes to military aid, including very good credits to buy weapons. The annual US-sponsored "Cobra Gold" exercise held in Thailand is the most important exercise in Asia.

But it seems that the attitudes of these two allies are changing.

The fact that Mr. Obama was insulted by the new Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and declared "secession" made Manila-Washington relations like a bucket of ice water. However, experts say that Thailand is the biggest failure in the "pivot" strategy.

The voice of the US was not influential in the two military coups that took place in a short time in Bangkok. Meanwhile, China is trying to woo Thailand wisely, through a strategy of economic diplomacy combined with culture. This trend is being driven by the economic integration of ASEAN.

The death of Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej on October 13 seems to add another level of challenge to US-Thai relations, as the King played an important role in solidifying bilateral relations after the World War II.

## **2.6 Economy: TPP is suspended for a long time**

China's influence in Asia today derives mainly from economics. Meanwhile, the US has played a rather obscure role in promoting the economy in the Asian axis, with a few free trade agreements signed with close countries such as Australia, Singapore and South Korea.

That's why the US pushed for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) - one of the most important and largest trade deals to date.

TPP is a trade agreement between 12 countries in the Pacific Rim, signed in February 2016 in New Zealand after many rounds of negotiations. TPP is still waiting to be ratified by the National Assembly and then implemented. TPP is considered an important element in the US pivot to Asia policy.

After a difficult "journey", earlier this year, it seemed that the TPP was about to come to an end. But in the context of the US preparing to have a new president who does not support TPP, this agreement is forecasted to be a long time from being implemented.

## **2.7 Ability to change axis**

The US leadership may have been very determined when it came to the "pivot" strategy to Asia, but perhaps also did not fully understand the impacts of the changing domestic political and economic situation, along with the decline. America's quagmire in the Middle East, and emerging factors in Asia. Therefore, the "pivot" strategy is considered to have not left much of an impression.

For example, in Southeast Asia, where allies and partners want the US to take a more assertive stance on the South China Sea issue, the US acts as a peacemaker. And again, what Mr. Obama called the "huge potential" for America in Asia remains largely invisible, while the Middle East still occupies much of Washington's mind.

However, many analysts say that Washington is not expected to change its policy towards Asia, because it cannot ignore the strategic importance of this region.

## **3. Reality**

The history of Southeast Asia has always been "involved" by world powers such as the US, China, Japan and Russia (formerly the Soviet Union). At present, Southeast Asia has become an area of fierce competition between the US and major countries, especially China because this area is the lifeline traffic gateway for the development of the marine economy and national security and defense.

As the largest organization in Southeast Asia, ASEAN has proven to play an important role in maintaining and promoting cooperative relations among its member states, being the "main driving force" in the ASEAN countries. regional issues, assume a central role in the regional security architecture and have a very important position in the implementation of the US strategy of "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific.

Over the past few years, the Obama Administration has made a series of positive moves that underscore the growing importance of ASEAN to the United States as a regional organization. Especially on November 21, 2015, the two sides agreed to upgrade the US-ASEAN relationship to a strategic partnership. This is a very important event, opening a new stage for US-ASEAN relations. That once again proves the important role of the Southeast Asia/ASEAN region in the US policy of rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region, and at the same time affirms more strongly the US determination to engage. in this area. For ASEAN, the relationship with the US was upgraded to a strategic partnership right before the establishment of the ASEAN Community on December 31, 2015 and the identification of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 will create favorable conditions, promote and deepen the relationship between the US and ASEAN. After two terms under the Obama administration, the US - ASEAN relations are considered to have developed strongly and become substantive in many fields, becoming an important priority in the Asia - Pacific policy. of America. The progress that the US - ASEAN relations have made under the Obama administration are considered to be solid foundations for the development of this relationship under the new US administration.

Since Barack Obama came to power, along with the strategy of rebalancing and pivoting to Asia, the US relationship with ASEAN has been continuously focused. And because of that, the frequency of high-level meetings between ASEAN and the US in recent years has also increased accordingly.

Starting from the first ASEAN-US summit in Singapore in November 2009 on the sidelines of the APEC Summit and the second ASEAN-US meeting in September 2010 on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly. China in New York, since then before the high-level meeting in Sunnylands this time, the ASEAN-US Summit takes place every year.

Notably, in the ASEAN-US high-level meetings, the decision to go to the first ASEAN-US summit in November 2009 was the most important, showing that the US not only pivoted with words but also determined to act. This decision was made after the US was the first country outside of ASEAN to decide to send an Ambassador and set up a

permanent diplomatic mission beside the ASEAN Secretariat.

Besides, the Obama administration's choice of high-level meeting takes place early, not late as usual (usually at the end of the year), when the US President has almost exhausted his role before leaving office in January 2017, showing that the US wants to do "something" substantive in its relations with ASEAN.

Many observers inside and outside the region expect the East Sea story to be the focus of the meeting and there will be a "breakthrough" between the US and ASEAN in this regard. Then there are also assessments that China will be the "object" of the ASEAN-US summit in Sunnylands.

Certainly, the South China Sea is important and a priority on the agenda. However, those who think like this may be more or less disappointed when the conference is over.

The US-ASEAN relationship has many issues to discuss and promote cooperation. The key here is that there needs to be a strong ASEAN, regional peace and stability must be maintained and ASEAN itself must have an important and decisive voice in its own and regional affairs. The US and US-ASEAN relations only help promote, but cannot and cannot replace ASEAN.

Looking back at the history of international relations in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and early 1970s, it is easy to see that the situation in the region at that time had some similarities with the Middle East today, such as: the Indochina War; the presence of 540,000 American troops in South Vietnam; Mao-it rebel groups operating in Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines; backwardness, economic instability; especially the competition between the big countries America, China, and the Soviet Union in the region.

At that time, ASEAN leaders chose solutions: Do not rely on one-way, depend on big countries; implement an independent, self-reliant foreign policy, taking regionalism and ASEAN as the priority; implement economic nationalism, consider socio-economic development as the key.

Thus, it is necessary to study and analyze the role of ASEAN in the US pivot strategy to summarize an important stage in the development of US policy towards ASEAN. At the same time, through the analysis of important contents, find new points in the ASEAN policy of the Obama Administration compared with the previous administration in order to clarify the successes and shortcomings of this policy, as well as contribute to learn the US strategic calculations and intentions towards ASEAN, and forecast developments in the security situation in the Asia-Pacific region in the coming time.

Vietnam is an active member of ASEAN. Proper awareness of the importance of ASEAN in the US pivot strategy will help Vietnam take advantage of opportunities and advantages to promote the development of Vietnam - US relations. Therefore, understanding the role of ASEAN in the US pivot strategy has important practical significance, contributing to helping Vietnam and the US narrow the difference in policies towards each other, creating a solid basis for the US development of the Vietnam-US relationship.

#### **4. Solution**

The basic, long-term goal is to put countries on the trajectory of US-led capitalism. Along with that is the

restoration of America's position as the sole superpower and world hegemony.

To achieve the above goal, the Obama administration has clearly stated the contents and measures to implement:

First, strengthen bilateral security alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand and the Philippines on the basis of maintaining political consensus on the core values of the alliance relationship. Ensure flexible alliances to meet new challenges and take advantage of new opportunities; secure defense capabilities and information infrastructure to deter any provocation.

Second, strengthen relations with emerging countries and potential countries such as China, India, Indonesia, Singapore, New Zealand, Malaysia, Mongolia, Vietnam, Brunei and island nations in the Pacific. Positive.

Third, strengthen the engagement of regional institutions by fully participating in forums and organizations such as ASEAN, APEC, EAS... and playing an active role in formulating the ASEAN agenda. these forums.

Fourth, expand relations, expand trade and investment in the region through APEC, G20 and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) to promote market opening, reduce trade barriers, enhance transparency and fulfill commitments to fair trade.

Fifth, to increase the US military presence in the region, on the one hand to "modernize" military relations with its allies in Northeast Asia, on the other hand, to seek to increase its presence in Southeast Asia and Southeast Asia. Indian Ocean.

Sixth, pressing countries to carry out reforms to strengthen the protection of democracy, human rights and political freedom in the American and Western style.

The United States has increased its commitment to the East Asia region, increased diplomacy, participated in regional forums, and signaled its intention to strengthen the US military presence in the region. The US is likely to increase its activities in the region in the near future, as well as be ready to face "threats" from China. The current US "pivot" to Asia takes place in the context of China's strong military and economic development, the COVID-19 epidemic, and disrupted relationships since the Trump administration. To balance China's influence in the region, the United States will want to increase its presence, not only through military support, investment, and infrastructure development, but also reaffirm its position with China. multilateral organisations.

The US is actively contributing vaccines through different channels and mechanisms to countries around the world, including Asian countries. However, the problem of effective distribution and "vaccine diplomacy" is also raised. So far, the Biden administration has sought to rally allies and partners to respond to what they say are China's increasingly coercive foreign and economic policies. But analysts say the US will need to strike a balance between emphasizing the "China threat" with opening up to other strategies, such as the economic one.

US officials also insist that they are not aiming for confrontation with China. Currently, the US and China still have many different issues, notably trade conflicts related to the two sides' tariff programs. In the latest dialogues, there has been no progress in resolving differences between the two sides.

China is the 3rd largest trading partner of the US, as of 2020. Clearly, the US will want to find a way to balance

competition and cooperation in this relationship.

- What is needed to engage us with innovation Asia is the consolidation of an economic position in a region that is currently an uphill battle and largely beyond the control of the US government.

- Important developments have occurred recently in the deepening of Asian economic ties with the Obama administration. That is, the United States has ratified a free trade agreement with South Korea. Japan has agreed to begin negotiations as a member of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a multilateral free trade area.

However, China has become the largest and most important trading partner to our East Asian allies, including South Korea, Japan and Taiwan (China). As the transnational production networks around China continue to expand, they have become an indispensable element in the economies and unifying factor in the Asia-Pacific region. During a recent trip to Asia, Secretary of State Clinton acknowledged the lack of focus on the economic aspects of the region and she tried to highlight the importance of the US economic role in the region. Secretary Clinton's rhetoric during the visit did not seem convincing enough. Increased military deployment is not a compatible deal with alliance issues. America's allies want us to firmly engage their military forces even as they focus on maintaining a strong cooperative relationship with China. Washington maintains close ties to the Japan-Korea alliance and has made efforts to maintain a stable supply of the trilateral relationship. Will those wealthy allies have to pay more for their defense? Indeed, those pursuing a "pivot" policy seem determined to innovate in ways that bring more resources to defense.

- In economic terms, the US will strengthen the promotion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), including the early admission of Japan and Korea; take advantage of barriers such as trade protectionism to prevent the penetration of Chinese products into the US market.

Transfer market share in the US market to India and Southeast Asian countries; while accelerating capital withdrawal from China, shifting manufacturing from China to Southeast Asian countries.

In the new trend of cooperation, in addition to security issues, the US also wants to promote economic and diplomatic cooperation with ASEAN countries, considering it as one of the important pillars of the "central Asia" plan. ASIAN".

In the plan "Asia's focal point", Southeast Asia is considered the most important region. Accordingly, the US is very interested in the situation of territorial disputes in the East Sea, because this is the most important maritime route, accounting for over 60% of the world's maritime traffic. The US considers maritime security in the East Sea to be part of its national security interest, so this is also an important reason for the US to implement the "Asia-centric" policy.

Along with the "super-fast" economic development for many years, China is increasing its defense budget, purchasing more advanced and modern weapons and military technology, including stealth aircraft, aircraft, aircraft carriers, submarines and many warships, etc.

Of course, in the coming years, China's military power, especially its navy, cannot "comparable" with the US. But, with a population four times that of the US, with China's huge labor force and very high GDP growth rate, it's clear that no one can take them lightly. In the competition, the rivalry between China and the US will certainly be fierce.

Beijing's foreign policies and activities will be the main and most serious obstacle to the implementation of the Obama administration's "pivot-reverse" policy.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1 Deployment results

After more than 10 years of implementing the Pivot Strategy to Asia - Pacific, the US has achieved certain successes.

Firstly, in the field of politics-diplomacy, the US has strengthened "allies" and "partners" when building relations with countries in this region. Specifically, the US established a comprehensive partnership with Vietnam in 2013, with Malaysia in 2014 and with Laos in 2016. In addition, the US also upgraded relations, becoming a strategic partner with Indonesia, and Singapore. With India, becoming an American security "anchor" in the Indo-Pacific region.

On the multilateral level, the US has actively and actively engaged in promoting the agendas of EAS (East Asia Summit), ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum), ADMM+, institutionalization US-ASEAN high-level meeting.

The next highlight is defense cooperation, the US strengthens its relations with Japan, South Korea and Australia - important traditional allies of the US. These countries play a more proactive and active role with the US in regional issues, such as: implementing policies with China, increasing defense policies, purchasing advanced military equipment, and participating actively participate in bilateral and multilateral joint exercises. Besides, the US also sent troops back to the Philippine base for the first time since 1992. Most notably, the Diamond Quartet (US, Japan, India, Australia), security alliance AUKUS (US, UK, Australia) is a step towards the goal of building collective regional security, connecting US allies in Europe and Asia.

The United States is a key partner for a number of countries, has an important influence on security and economy, and is a partner that helps maintain strategic balance in the region. Economically, the US is still the main export market of the region with a total import value of over US\$3 trillion per year. For many years, the US has remained a key foreign investor in East and Southeast Asia with a total investment capital of over \$1 trillion. In terms of technology, although China is investing heavily to compete with the US, the US still holds many source and high technologies that will lead to economic growth in the coming period. In particular, in the context of the complicated development of the Covid-19 pandemic, the US became the largest vaccine donor country in the region with more than 89 million doses to East Asia and the Pacific and more than 84 million doses to South Asia and the Pacific. Central Asia (10 countries excluding India) as of early January 2022.

### 5.2 Limit

US internal and resources are sometimes inconsistent. Although political parties in the US basically support increased engagement in the Indo-Pacific, the change of government every four years and the policy adjustments of the new administration sometimes make the skepticism about America's resolve to engage. The congressional stalemate on the budget also disrupted US resources for the region at times. In addition, due to its global spread, there are times when the United States cannot focus resources on this region if it is not a matter of urgency.

Some US intervention measures in the region have not really

worked. The US withdrawal from the TPP (Trans-Pacific Economic Partnership Agreement) at the same time with the policy of pressure on the trade deficit and currency manipulation made it difficult for countries in the region to understand economic measures. in the American Pivot.

The fact that the US continues to raise the issue of US values in relations with other countries makes it difficult for cooperation to make substantive progress.

### 5.3 The role of ASEAN

The role of ASEAN in the US Pivot Strategy is necessary to summarize an important phase in the development of US policy towards ASEAN. At the same time, through the analysis of important contents, find new points in the ASEAN policy of the Obama Administration compared with the previous administration in order to clarify the successes and shortcomings of this policy, as well as contribute to learn the US strategic calculations and intentions towards ASEAN, and forecast developments in the security situation in the Asia-Pacific region in the coming time.

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