



TALKING POINTS

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Talking Points for: Satu Limaye, East-West Center in Washington

Southeast Asia has emerged as a focus of America’s relations with the Asia-Pacific. And this focus directly implicates China’s own growing relations with the region. Southeast Asia has responded to American and Chinese courting with a mix of perspectives; on the one hand welcoming the attentions offered but wary of the “strategic exposure” that results. A particular fault-line in Southeast Asian perspectives about the US and China are between publics and elites. Another is between the hopeful views of economic benefits to be gained by closer relations with China, and worries about China’s approach to territorial and sovereignty disputes. America’s and China’s agendas toward Southeast Asia are different. America is focused on strengthening bilateral security alliances, deepening emerging partnerships, expanding trade and investment, broadening its military presence in Southeast Asia and advancing democracy and human rights in the context of a more cohesive and integrated ASEAN. Meanwhile, China has focused to date primarily on strengthening its economic relations with the region and pushing its claims on maritime disputes with apparently little regard for ASEAN’s unity and coherence. At present, US-China interactions in Southeast Asia lead me to the following conclusions:

- Southeast Asian publics and elites are much more concerned with the US-China relationship than they are about either the role of the US alone or China alone. It is the US-China dynamic in Southeast Asia that matters because both countries are now fully engaged in the region for the first time in a generation.
- Regarding this US-China dynamic, Southeast Asia does not want to make a choice between the US or China but nor does it want a “too hot” or “too cold” US-China relationship. The region wants a *goldilocks* US-China relationship that preserves their autonomy and ability to maximize and focus on socio-economic development.
- The region has a strong demand for US presence but expects the US to have a calibrated supply of that presence. If anything, the region worries the US will not be able to supply the demand due to budget cuts and sustained attention.

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