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US Opportunities for Positive Engagement with Thailand and the Philippines

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In recent years, domestic turmoil has rattled the stability of both the US-Philippines and US-Thailand alliances. Thailand and the Philippines have gone through major leadership changes and since the inauguration of President Trump, US policymakers have not yet reformulated an effective approach to our Southeast Asian alliances.

The United States must not waver on its security commitments to Thailand and the Philippines. The central strategic task for policymakers is to maintain strong relationships with our partners in light of domestic challenges. This may be accomplished by sustaining and expanding transnational cooperation with our allies and signaling an urgently-needed US recommitment to Southeast Asia.

Enhancing Principled Engagement with the Philippines

The Philippine public has an overwhelmingly positive image of the United States (92% favorable). As tough as President Duterte's anti-America stance may be, his rhetoric has not translated into serious policy: he would not risk public backlash and the fury of political elites who have vested interests in the stability of the US alliance.

With the Philippines seated as the 2017 ASEAN chair, the United States should make an effort to foster closer relations with Duterte. He has expressed fondness for Trump, and pushing for a meeting during the ASEAN summit in November represents an opportunity to reformulate US-Philippine dynamics. With the meeting hopefully focusing on bilateral trade, business, and investment arrangements, positive results can set the bedrock for discussion regarding the future of the alliance in the same way that Secretary of Defense Mattis' visits did for US alliances with Japan and South Korea.

The US humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) campaign in the Philippines after Super Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) represents perhaps the best demonstration of the advantages of increased multidimensional engagement with the Philippines. The United States was at the forefront of providing disaster relief to areas affected by the category five superstorm. Total US assistance included \$87 million in direct disaster aid and \$59 million in private sector contributions. As was the case for American HA/DR for the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake that struck Japan, an overwhelming air of public gratitude permeated the relief efforts on the ground. For example, through U.S. HA/DR, some Philippine leaders and commentators even argued that the US response, and the resultant increase in soft power, greatly strengthened the case for an enhanced military presence in the country. In contrast, China was criticized for its paltry initial contribution to disaster relief efforts in the Philippines. The major takeaway is that the United States must continue to build upon these principles and compound these lessons within a broader enhancement of bilateral engagement.

David Lee, Researcher at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “The central strategic task for policymakers is to maintain strong relationships with our partners in light of domestic challenges.”

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

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Expanding Scientific Cooperation with Thailand

There is little doubt that the US-Thai alliance is underperforming. In Thailand, a May 2014 military coup deposed a democratically elected civilian government, forcing the United States to withdraw assistance from Thailand and freeze many alliance activities. The passing of the revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej, and the succession of Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn (Rama X) has added unknowns to the stability of the alliance. However, there are domains of cooperation in which the Thai bureaucracy can access US counsel on non-politically sensitive issues, while providing Thai society much needed space to adapt to a new monarch.

The change in the US approach to joint scientific research demonstrates the power of attitude in advancing US-Thai cooperation and people to people exchange. In 2013, NASA proposed a plan to Thailand to base an airborne project at U-Tapao airbase. US policymakers framed NASA’s project as a legitimate request from a post-Cold War strategic ally; as such, Thai political elites perceived the environmental study as an understated attempt at increasing US military presence and feared reactions from China.

In contrast, three years later, NASA and USAID launched a project to strengthen regional environmental monitoring in the lower Mekong region that required the approval and participation of Thailand. The project put far less emphasis on the use of military installations, and focused almost exclusively on benefitting and interacting with the people of the Mekong — and Thailand cooperated. In the same way, the United States should continue to approach multi-dimensional cooperation and increase funding for the establishment of programs that increase public engagement.

The value of enhancing people to people exchange in the context of such cooperation is that it humanizes the fundamental US effort in both the Philippines and Thailand. By approaching transnational cooperation in non-strategic and non-abstract terms, the United States breaks down barriers of misperception and improves overall public awareness of environmental concerns in Thailand while facilitating American soft power in the Philippines.

Signaling Commitment to the Region

The Trump administration can play a unique role in resetting the dynamics of US relations in Southeast Asia by placing stronger emphasis on collaboration and prosperity to avoid fomenting acrimony. Policymakers can do this by beginning to highlight a stronger commitment to the region. President Trump announced his intention to participate in the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Leaders Summit taking place in the Philippines and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Leaders’ Summit in Vietnam, both taking place November. He has also invited Duterte and Thai Prime Minister Prayut to the White House in spite of criticism from human rights advocates. The administration must ensure a smart, concerted implementation of these plans to demonstrate that the United States has firmly grasped the bridles of its foreign policy. Following up on the successful visits by Secretary Mattis and Vice President Pence to the continent, the United States should initiate further high-level trips to establish solidarity and signal American commitments in the Philippines and Thailand. Both allies stand at a crossroads and US policymakers must signal, through creative and careful engagement, that they are not forcing allies to choose exclusively between China and the United States — instead, a multi-pronged effort that infuses soft power and transnational cooperation would aid the Trump administration in effectively communicating its pledge to positive developments for stability in the region and ultimately the integrity of our alliances.

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