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The Obama Doctrine and Southeast Asia

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ON 10 DECEMBER 2009, the annual Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to US President Barack Obama. A controversial recipient, his acceptance speech outlined his world vision, and provided insight into US engagement with Southeast Asia.

IN A move that has proven controversial, Norway's Nobel Peace Prize this year was awarded to United States President Barack Obama for his new vision of global peace and what the US should do in its pursuit. The award was deemed by its critics as premature, given that his vision has yet to bear fruit. Despite this, President Obama's speech should be noticed by Southeast Asia as it was peppered with references to the region within the context of global peace and security. This illustrates not only the region's significance but also offered food-for-thought for decision-makers in Southeast Asia.

The US president acknowledged the ongoing wars in which the US is engaged, and used his acceptance speech to provide rationale and justification for the ways in which his administration pursues such wars in the name of global peace and security. The president recognised the US role as a "standard bearer" in the conduct of war, governed by international standards and enshrined in the Geneva Conventions. He also recognised that universal rules and norms need to be applied consistently to ensure the future legitimacy of justified military action, as an act of last resort to keep the peace.

Three Ways to Peace

In the pursuit of peace, President Obama outlined three ways in which a lasting peace can be sought. The first was to ensure that the international community is outcome-driven and that words must be followed by deeds. Within Southeast Asia, the ongoing political insecurity in Myanmar was mentioned more than once as an example. The US current strategy of measured diplomatic engagement with the military regime, while a difficult and sensitive issue, must be pursued as part of a multifaceted approach towards assisting the democratic transition.

However, while the US is willing to engage diplomatically with Myanmar, sanctions will remain until there are tangible developments. An American diplomat recently noted that 'we should be careful not

to confuse process with progress'. In other words, while the current US policy uses multiple foreign policy tools, this cannot work without reciprocal action from the military regime. On this issue, the American diplomat recounted that the recent meetings in Naypidaw had been rather more briefings than dialogue, and that the final word needed to come from the military leader, Than Shwe, who was not present at the meetings.

The second way in which the US President outlined the US approach to global peace and security was through recognition that only a “just peace based on the inherent rights and dignity of every individual” can ever last in the long run. The president recognised that protecting these human rights would allow for peace and security to prosper, and he noted that without protection “peace is a hollow promise”. Indeed the US commitment is illustrated through its invitation to the commissioners of the newly established ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights to visit the United States in 2010, and the administration’s recognition that the establishment of the human rights mechanism is a positive and important step.

The third way in President Obama’s drive for global peace and security is through the recognition that peace and security is no longer only about maintaining borders, but also about the security of the individual -- referred to in academia as Human Security. President Obama said: “For true peace is not just freedom from fear, but freedom from want” – a term coined in the United Nations Development Programme’s 1994 Human Development Report. There was recognition that security encompasses both old and new understandings, and that security and development are mutually inclusive in the pursuit of a just peace.

In other words, without tackling issues of access to food, water, healthcare, education, shelter; and supporting community resilience, and fostering cooperation and understanding among communities, states, regions and the international community a durable peace will remain unobtainable. In this vein, Scot Marciel, the US Ambassador for ASEAN Affairs recently spoke about increased cooperation between the US and ASEAN as institutional partners on trade and growth as a vehicle to promote development; notably through the ASEAN free trade area due to begin in 2015. However, Marciel noted that there is an emerging need for regional leadership in making this a reality.

Implications for Southeast Asia

What President Obama’s speech outlined was that the current administration is willing to engage with others, support partners and make use of all foreign policy tools to achieve tangible outcomes to the challenges that the international community faces. There was recognition in his speech that while the US was the global military power, there was a need to share responsibility in the pursuit of global peace and security.

The implications of this for Southeast Asia are clear. The US supports the regional ASEAN architecture, as evidenced through the appointment of an ASEAN Ambassador, and the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. That support, however, comes with an expectation that it is reciprocated with tangible developments on keeping its own house in order in line with international obligations.

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