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## ASEAN Regional Forum 2011: China and the United States

BY MEIDYATAMA SURYODININGRAT

**Meidyatama Suryodiningrat,**  
Editor-in-Chief of *The Jakarta Post*,  
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States and China.”

Perceptions often determine reality. The fact is that US meetings and statements at this year’s ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) hosted in Bali—a meeting of 27 Asia-Pacific and other global foreign ministers—were more predictable theater, but with little new substance. There was the usual rhetorical reassurance of the US commitment to Southeast Asia, yet other than the role of the United States as a counterweight to a phobia of Chinese dominance, the United States brought nothing new to the table. For China, the ASEAN meetings served as long-term agenda setting and faith building with the region which slowly yields trust. This concept is echoed in a July 21 commentary in the newspaper that I edit, *The Jakarta Post*, under the headline: “In 1986 Reagan was a VIP in Bali, now China is the VVIP.”

Once considered a dawdling unwieldy talkfest, the annual ARF has now become a showcase for soft competition and nuanced agenda setting in Southeast Asia between the United States and China. This year’s ARF meeting marked an evolutionary benchmark in the conception of regional power relations for the 21st century between the two, and their relations with the rest of East and Southeast Asia.

Four consistent themes were evident at this year’s ARF, and at other ASEAN centered-meetings, that can be categorized under perennial, internal, regional and contextual. The first relates to the on-going “perennial” issues of Myanmar and North Korea. The former saw no detectable progress as a cautious ASEAN remained reticently soft in its handling of its recalcitrant fellow member, while the European Union and the United States expressed a predictable tone of discontent. Concerns over the Korean Peninsula were not necessarily abated in Bali, but the informal meeting between the two Korean foreign ministers on the sidelines of the ARF served as vehicle for future talks separate from the ARF.

The “internal” issue that has preoccupied ASEAN for several months now has been the border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia. The cross border skirmishes between them have become as big of an embarrassment to ASEAN as is Myanmar. The dispute has seriously called into question the realities of ASEAN’s community building efforts and conflict resolution capabilities, especially when two of its members can so readily throw themselves into open conflict resulting in multiple casualties.

The important “regional” issue obviously relates to the South China Sea. After two decades of informal discussions and exhaustive talks, ASEAN and China agreed to formalize a stronger code of conduct to avoid conflict in the South China Sea. The area potentially represents a major flashpoint for the region as China, Taiwan and four ASEAN states—Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam—all claim territory in an area which includes sea lanes that provide transit to 50 percent of global trade. Dubbed the “Guidelines on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of



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Parties in the South China Sea,” this seemingly marginal step forward is a boost for ASEAN’s preventive diplomacy, and a giant leap in ASEAN practical cooperation and confidence building with China.

ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan described the agreement as “momentous and historic,” a reflection that the ARF works. Meanwhile Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi said it was a “very important” landmark. However, the significance of the agreement was even more “momentous” for other reasons. It highlighted the continuing success of China’s quiet assertiveness, and, to some, the declining immediacy of the United States.

As China took what most in ASEAN see were bold conducive steps towards facilitating cooperation and solidifying regional trust, the image of the United States remains as insurance and counterbalance to Chinese hegemony. While China focused on cooperation and conciliation during the meetings, Secretary Clinton appeared less assuaging in her comments as she seemingly challenged China when she stated “We also call on all parties to clarify their claims in the South China Sea...” Though her remarks echoed those at last year’s ARF meeting in Hanoi, this year the Chinese side responded with poise and confidence. It was not surprising thus that it was China who became the “breakout star” at this ARF meeting. Admittedly, the United States still grabbed its share of headlines; however it was in large part, if not all, due to the fanfare and celebrity status that Secretary Clinton attracts.

Almost all countries in Southeast Asia *want* the United States to maintain a significant presence in the region. They realize that the US presence has been, and continues to be, a stabilizing force for the region. In fact, the main concern over the past decade has been Washington’s slow retreat. The evolution of regional power politics has evolved such that countries now accept that while the US presence can never be as dominating as before, the United States is still one of the most reliable partners for preserving regional power equilibrium.

This leads to the “contextual” issue which is the subtheme of diplomacy and quiet jockeying for influence currently underway within ASEAN and the region. The search for a 21st century regional security architecture in East and Southeast Asia has been an underlying debate with various false starts and quick stops over the years. Already on the wayside are former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s Asia-Pacific Community and former Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama’s East Asian Community.

Unlike the zero-sum superpower rivalry of the Cold War, the Asia-Pacific security architecture structure will not be of a single hegemony against another but rather multiple paradigms, existing atop overlapping architectures as the two major powers—China and the United States—find an equitable equilibrium. Who can influence—not dominate—the creation of these architectures will ultimately be best positioned to eventually hold sway over regional relationships.

As Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa said after meeting with Clinton: “[A] collaborative and cooperative mindset is certainly the kind of spirit and outcome that we are promoting ... we are keen to avoid for our region the kind of divisions that would not be in the interest of any countries in this part of the world.” ASEAN’s regional meetings and the subsequent East Asia Summit in November serve as the foundation of this multilayered regional edifice. Recognizing the palpable anxiety of ASEAN, China has—politically and economically—strategically invested itself as a partner of the process without flexing its power or too much rhetorical grandstanding.

It is against this backdrop that regional leaders will meet at the East Asia Summit later this year, a meeting that many in this region will watch closely to see if US President Barack Obama can bring anything more than his charm and celebrity to this concert of Asia.