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Renewed American Diplomacy: Keeping Southeast Asia on US radar screen

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FOR THOSE who have been wondering what the second Bush administration has in store for Southeast Asia, Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick's eight-day visit to the region recently was encouraging. Above all, it was a significant display of the kind of diplomacy that too many have ceased to expect from the United States after President Bush's first term.

Following Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice's visits to Northeast and South Asia in March, the Deputy Secretary's visit served to reassure Southeast Asia that it remains on Washington's radar screen. Symbolically, Mr. Zoellick observed the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in the Asian theatre, at Corrigedor in the Philippines.

In terms of style, Mr. Zoellick was impressive. At various stops, he stated his interest in "consulting with our partners, sharing some ideas and listening to their thoughts about the direction for the next four years". The emphasis on consultation and listening regarding issues of common concern was accompanied by material aid in the form of a substantial post-tsunami reconstruction package for Indonesia and promises of help with economic liberalisation in Vietnam.

And when he publicly discussed thorny issues such as Myanmar's upcoming chairmanship of ASEAN and religious freedom in Vietnam, Mr. Zoellick was consciously diplomatic in appearing firm but not overbearing or hectoring. More importantly, in terms of substance, the Deputy Secretary made all the right noises about issues most important to the region, while taking a broader and more consultative approach to the key issue for the United States -- terrorism.

The emphasis during Mr. Zoellick's trip on economic issues was particularly appreciated in a region that has laboured under the U.S. foreign policy banner of the "second front" in the war against terrorism since 2002.

As the previous U.S. Trade Representative responsible since 2001 for negotiating a wide range of trade agreements including the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement and the U.S.-Singapore Free Trade Agreement, Mr. Zoellick is familiar with the economic and developmental imperative in Southeast Asia.

During his stops in Bangkok and Singapore, he particularly stressed the Bush administration's determination to negotiate more free trade agreements with other countries like Thailand and

Malaysia. But he was also careful to explain that American FTAs take a longer time to negotiate as they are more comprehensive than agreements offered by other countries like China.

His schedule also included meetings with businessmen and politicians about the changing Vietnamese economy, and visits to technology parks in Vietnam and Singapore. In Manila, he announced a US\$10 million military financing package for defence reform in the Philippines.

From a political point of view, one key aim of Mr. Zoellick's trip was to highlight U.S. reconstruction aid to Indonesia after the December 2004 tsunami. He duly traveled to Aceh, where he signed an agreement to build a US\$245 million road along the devastated province's western coast. But the Deputy Secretary also pledged a broader economic development assistance package for Indonesia, committing US\$73.7 million over the next five years.

This U.S. offer comes on the heels of China's recent pledge of US\$5 million in assistance and US\$300 million in low-interest loans for reconstruction in Indonesia's disaster zones.

The other important set of issues addressed by Mr. Zoellick involved Southeast and East Asian regionalism. On this subject, he sent two main signals. First, a warning that Southeast Asian solidarity may get in the way of U.S.-ASEAN relations, if the Association were to accept Myanmar as Chair next year. While the issue is yet unresolved, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's government had the interesting opportunity during the Deputy Secretary's visit to play up its own role as a mediator in the issue.

Second, Mr. Zoellick signaled that Washington is eager for Indonesia to revive its leadership role in ASEAN, which declined after the 1997 financial crisis. This is because of the confluence of three factors conducive to American interests: the desire to support democratically-elected President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono; the recognised importance of Indonesia as the largest and relatively moderate Muslim country; and Jakarta's support for an open inclusive Asian regionalism that will not exclude the U.S.

Significantly, while counter-terrorism cooperation was discussed throughout the Deputy Secretary's trip, the topic was relatively underplayed in public. It was only in the Philippines where he discussed at length terrorism involving Muslim rebels in southern Mindanao linking up with Jemaah Islamiah and Al-Qaeda. But here, he adopted a softer line than the U.S. Manila embassy charge d'affaires, whom last month remarked that Mindanao was fast turning into a centre for terrorism and risked becoming an Afghanistan.

Instead, Mr. Zoellick focused on Islamist extremism, recognising that Southeast Asia is increasingly important in the intra-Muslim struggle for the "soul of Islam". He spent time in Malaysia talking to the Prime Minister about Islam Hadhari, or Civilisational Islam, and consulting with scholars and members of religious parties and human rights groups, suggesting that the country held lessons for Iraq and Palestine.

From the Southeast Asian point of view, the Zoellick tour was associated with some significant political developments. Over the next two months, President Yudhoyono, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, and Prime Minister Phan Van Khai will visit Washington. And U.S. strategic ties with certain countries have been reaffirmed: The U.S.-Malaysia defence agreement providing for the logistical support, supplies and services has been extended for

another ten years; while Mr. Zoellick declared U.S.-Singapore ties to be "exceptional".

Mr. Zoellick's remarks addressing China and Southeast Asia at the end of his tour in Singapore were particularly encouraging. Saying that it would be "foolish and ineffective" to try to "contain" growing Chinese influence in Southeast Asia, he sounded a positive note by insisting that Washington needs instead to pursue its own "activist agenda" towards the region, especially through deepening economic ties.

This attitude reflects an understanding of key concerns and interests of Southeast Asian states, which have constantly argued that they do not want to choose between China and the U.S., but would rather develop and deepen economic and political relations with both. The assistance, economic and strategic initiatives during this trip also serve to remind the region that the U.S. still retains greater capacity than China to contribute to economic development and security here.

By demonstrating that Washington recognises the economic imperative of the region, that it would rather peacefully compete with Chinese economic influence in the region, and that it can address more sensitively top U.S. strategic priorities that are shared by Southeast Asia but subject to domestic constraints and sensitivities, Mr. Zoellick has performed a significant service in boosting U.S. relations with the region.

Certainly, the region will keep a sharp eye out for concrete results, especially regarding the progress of FTA negotiations for Thailand and Malaysia, and the resumption of military ties between the U.S. and Indonesia.

For now, however, if the renewed diplomacy demonstrated by Mr. Zoellick reflects the Bush administration's attitude towards the region, we may look forward to a fruitful U.S.-ASEAN relationship for the next four years.

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