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Shifting Regional Dynamics Urgently Require Better US Strategic Communications and Southeast Asia Policy Adaptation

By Derek Mitchell

SYNOPSIS

Regional dynamics are shifting despite the best efforts of the US and Southeast Asia to maintain a stable status quo. To protect their interests, this Commentary recommends that the US up its strategic communications game and Southeast Asia raise its voice more assertively to shape governance norms in the 21st century.

COMMENTARY

The recent ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute opinion [poll](#) placing the United States below China in regional favourability has engendered a robust debate. Is this a harbinger of something fundamental and a lasting shift in Southeast Asia, and thus a wake-up call for the United States to get its act together? Or is it a transient hiccup based largely on popular discontent with US Israel/Gaza policy, particularly within Muslim-majority nations, and thus little cause for long-run concern?

Having just spent two weeks (ending May 25) as a Visiting Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), I observed no clear consensus among observers on this question. But poll numbers aside, a consensus does appear to exist that the US brand has taken a heavy hit in recent years and complacency would be dangerous.

Southeast Asian Attitudes toward the US and China

Several factors were cited as driving the shift. US political dysfunction, exacerbated by the Trump factor, remains a source of deep anxiety, if not bewilderment, raising questions about US credibility and staying power.

Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in 2022 was viewed as unnecessarily provocative.

The Biden Administration is viewed as overly militarising its strategic competition with China while failing to have a compelling regional economic and trade agenda, which is a regional priority.

US failure to sign the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement, and later the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), was considered by one specialist as the most damaging "own goal" in modern US-Asia relations, hovering like a spectre over US regional credibility.

Once admired for its values, strength, and political fortitude, the United States is also increasingly viewed, particularly by younger generations, as disappointing, even hypocritical, with US political and material support to Israel, as it kills many women and children in Gaza, inciting particular fury.

China, meanwhile, fortified by information (and disinformation) campaigns and a robust diplomatic, trade, and investment agenda, is viewed by a growing number of Southeast Asian elites as adapting itself to regional sensibilities and providing connectivity, resilient supply chains, a reasonably open market and increasingly high-quality investments, including infrastructure development.

China's focus on common regional development is applauded, while its political and economic model is even admired by some as potentially worth emulating.

With momentum seemingly on China's side, the region's traditional hedging strategy among great powers appears to some Americans to be morphing more and more into a lean toward China. But such a view is premature and simplistic.

The United States retains many advantages, not least its status as Southeast Asia's second largest trade partner and single largest investor, totaling more than US investments in China, Japan, Korea, India, and Taiwan combined.

In addition, few in the region have illusions about China's fundamentally hegemonic ambitions and remain quietly supportive of the traditional US role as an off-shore balancer, even if they prefer the United States to lower the regional temperature. Southeast Asian nations continue to hope for the maintenance of a peaceful and stable status quo that will enable them to focus on internal development.

The US and Southeast Asia Must Adapt, Not Ignore Shifting Regional Dynamics

To recover lost ground, the United States will not necessarily need to do anything extraordinary or beyond its limited resources and political capacity at the moment. It simply requires the United States to play to its strengths, and in particular, to up its "smart power" game, including rectifying what was universally observed to be its most glaring shortcoming: its strategic communications.

Interlocutors commonly bemoaned how the United States consistently failed to speak in the language of the region, deploying generic, unexceptional, and rote talking points about advancing a "free and open Indo-Pacific" and placing its regional strategy largely

in the context of “countering China”, instead of focusing its rhetoric on matters of priority concern to them, e.g., national development.

In short, where the United States has an excellent story to tell, it fails to effectively tell it. That must change.

Meanwhile, as despair over events in Gaza threatens to harden the attitudes of future generations of Southeast Asians toward the United States, US diplomats have reportedly failed to make much of an effort to explain the rationale for US policy to local populations.

As uncomfortable as that may be, and even if such explanations may not win many converts, the failure to address the issue at all is creating an information vacuum that conspiracy theorists and Chinese propagandists alike fill to America’s strategic disadvantage. The United States is complacent about this shortfall at its peril.

At the same time, Southeast Asians too must reflect and adapt their policies to keep pace with rapidly evolving regional dynamics. It’s all well and good to want the continuation of the regional status quo and hope at all costs that regional tensions do not lead to conflict. But the regional status quo is shifting under their feet regardless of their desire to stand athwart history and yell “stop”.

This is due primarily to China’s violations of international law, provocative diplomatic and military activity in and around Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the Philippines (let alone India, Japan, and elsewhere), and other assertive, if implicit, steps to establish its regional hegemony.

Japan, Korea, Australia, and India all recognise this reality and have taken steps both individually and collectively to counter Chinese assertiveness and prevent the kind of strategic miscalculation that has led to incalculable destruction in central Europe. Great power ambition for “spheres of influence” has returned, as have violations of the most fundamental tenets of the post-World War II international order, to the detriment of nations large and small.

It is understandable that Southeast Asian nations cannot afford to choose between relations with great powers. But asking them to choose what norms, standards, rules, and laws should govern the conduct of states in the 21st century and enforcing them accordingly, is a reasonable expectation. Free riding is no longer a responsible or viable option, nor are demands of respect for “centrality” if nations choose to avoid making their voices heard on the most fundamental strategic challenges of our time.

Nor is remaining quiet about continued provocative activity. Freely and openly criticising the United States for its perceived shortfalls is standard fare and perfectly legitimate. But there should not be a double standard for democratic nations that celebrate free speech and autocratic states that do not. Holding one’s tongue for fear of retaliation only sends a signal that the PRC’s often illegal activities may continue without cost, to the detriment of the region’s long-term interests.

The US and Southeast Asia Must Up Their Strategic Games

Both the United States and Southeast Asian nations need to up their game if the coming decades are to be one of continued stability, security, common development, and sovereign equality as opposed to one of power politics, jungle law, spheres of influence, and regional hegemony.

The United States remains an imperfect power with profound domestic challenges. But its role in the region remains the same as it has been for decades: to help maintain a rough balance of power to promote dialogue, deter military aggression and coercion to settle disputes, create a secure atmosphere for the region to prosper, and help nations protect their sovereign independence.

That continues to serve regional interests. The question is whether Southeast Asia will move out of its comfort zone, adapt its policy to the times (including acting more proactively on behalf of the people of Myanmar), and do its part to support this vision.

Likewise, the United States cannot assume its story will tell itself, nor in the Information Age should it underestimate the dangers of failing to proactively shape regional narratives through more effective communication with governments and citizens alike. Greater diplomatic finesse and deployment of a more thoughtful, sustained strategic communications strategy are past due.

Ambassador Derek Mitchell is Senior Adviser to the President and Asia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, USA. He was recently a visiting senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798