

# Clinton's ASEAN appearance signals US "back in Asia"

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In a bid to bolster US standing and counter growing Chinese influence, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton attended the summit of the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Thailand last week and signed ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC).

Initially proposed in February, when Clinton made her first foreign trip to Asia (Japan, South Korea, China and Indonesia), the signing of the treaty opens the door for the US to what has become an important regional forum that was largely neglected under President Bush. At that time, ASEAN secretary general Surin Pitsuwan expressed the hope that Clinton would end Washington's "diplomatic absenteeism" in South East Asia.

The Bush administration had refused to sign the TAC treaty, making the US the only Pacific power not to do so. China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and India all signed the treaty in recent years, as a basic requirement for taking part in the East Asian Summit that began in 2005. The summit, which is an extension of the ASEAN plus three (China, Japan and South Korea) grouping, is increasingly regarded as a key Asian economic forum.

ASEAN has long regarded the amity treaty as the constitutional foundation for participants to settle disputes peacefully, not interfere with each other's internal affairs and renounce the threat or use of force. The US has a long history of aggression in South East Asia—including the Vietnam War and the US-backed Indonesian military coup in 1965. Given its doctrine of preemptive war, the Bush administration was reluctant to commit itself to the treaty.

The Democrats criticised the Bush administration for failing to pay sufficient attention to Asia, particularly the rise of China. Clinton's predecessor, Condoleezza Rice, skipped the ASEAN summit twice in the past three years as well as other major ASEAN meetings. Even close US allies like Australia signed the TAC, fearing they would be marginalised by the emerging bloc of Asian powers.

The Obama administration's decision to sign the treaty

indicates a shift toward strengthening US influence in Asia. Clinton told the ASEAN summit: "The United States is back in South East Asia. President Obama and I believe that this region is vital to global process, peace and prosperity and we are fully engaged with our ASEAN partners on the wide range of challenges confronting us."

Clinton announced plans to open a mission to ASEAN, with an ambassador in Jakarta, to demonstrate its importance to Washington. Moreover, on the sidelines of the ASEAN summit, Clinton held a US-Lower Mekong Ministerial Meeting with Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. According to the US State Department, the meeting was the first of its kind. While the topics were the environment, health, education and infrastructure, Washington's real purpose was to counter China's influence in the region.

Clinton made no secret about US aims. Asked by reporters in Bangkok if the US was trying to balance China's rise, she cautiously declared: "I know that a lot of China's neighbours have expressed concerns [over its rise], so we want to strengthen our relationships with a lot of the countries that are in East and South East Asia."

A study in May by the US Congressional Research Service explained that the main reason for not signing the treaty was that it "would constrain US freedom of action, particularly its ability to maintain or expand sanctions on Burma"—a major Chinese ally in ASEAN. However, not signing it left many ASEAN leaders feeling "neglected by the United States".

The Congressional study pointed out the US has crucial interests in the region. ASEAN holds over 500 million people and "some of the world's most critical sea lanes, including the Straits of Malacca, through which pass a large percentage of world's trade. The straits also are important routes for US naval deployments around the globe, including the Middle East and South Asia".

"Furthermore, diplomatically and strategically, Southeast Asia is the site of a contest for influence among China, the United States, and to a lesser extent Japan. China in particular has expanded its presence and influence in

Southeast Asia since the early 2000s,” the study continued. China’s trade with ASEAN increased over the period 1995-2008 by 1,034 percent to \$231.1 billion—compared to 75 percent for the US to \$178 billion—eclipsing the US as South East Asia’s third largest trading partner. At same time, the 2002-2006 data showed that US direct investment in the region was still far ahead of China.

Despite having signed a treaty of non-interference, Clinton aggressively targetted two of Beijing’s allies—Burma and North Korea—at the summit. She called for ASEAN to be tough on the Burmese junta, using the trial of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi as the pretext.

Clinton suggested at a news conference that military cooperation between North Korea and Burma involved the sale by Pyongyang of nuclear and missile technology to Burma. “It would be destabilising for the region. It would pose a direct threat to Burma’s neighbours. And it is something, as a treaty ally of Thailand, that we are taking very seriously,” she said. Last month, the US navy shadowed the North Korean cargo ship Kang Nam, alleging it was shipping weapons to Burma in violation of a recent UN Security Council resolution.

US influence in the region is waning. Clinton told Thai television on July 22 that ASEAN should expel Burma. However, Thai prime minister Abhishit Vejjajiva rejected the call, explaining that while ASEAN and the US “have the same goal, we cannot implement the same policy”. The ASEAN summit issued a relatively mild statement expressing “grave concern” over Suu Kyi’s arrest, but did not condemn the junta or call for punitive action.

The *Wall Street Journal* cited Nyo Ohn Myint, a senior member of Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy, who explained that ASEAN leaders “don’t want to criticise the regime too strongly” because of their growing political and economic ties with China.

After returning home, Clinton focused her attack on North Korea. She told NBC’s “Meet the Press” that North Korea was “very isolated now” even from its allies. She said Beijing had been “extremely positive and productive” in pressuring North Korea to abandon its nuclear programs, while “even Burma” was backing the UN resolutions imposing sanctions on Pyongyang. At the ASEAN summit, Clinton said, “everyone else just didn’t listen” to the North Korean representative’s criticism of the US.

Clinton’s comments cannot cover up the fact that the US no longer dictates terms in South East Asia as it did for decades. A Burmese historian Thant Myint U told *Asia Times Online*: “There’s a huge gap between the US rhetoric on Burma and its ability to actually influence events on the ground. As America’s relative power in the region diminishes, the worry is that this becomes a more general

trend, with nice-sounding statements on human rights and grandstanding for domestic audiences taking the place of more modest but more results-oriented policies.”

In her first trip to China in February, Clinton urged Beijing to keep buying US government bonds, symbolically demonstrating the shifting relative position of the two countries. The ASEAN summit was held just a week before the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, which in the words of Eswar Prasad of the Brookings Institution, showed “Washington has less leverage over Beijing than at any point in recent history.” He explained: “The US now has enormous financial needs for its budget deficit and current account deficit, making it more dependent on China than ever before.”

Far from withdrawing from Asia, the US is attempting to exploit its continuing military superiority to offset its declining economic power. The Bush administration’s neo-colonial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were aimed at consolidating US dominance in the key energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. It also attempted to strengthen the US strategic encirclement of China through a system of alliances and bases, stretching from Japan and South Korea to South East Asia and the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia.

The Obama presidency has continued the same policy. Significantly, Clinton arrived in Thailand after spending five days in India during which she signed military and economic agreements. Washington regards New Delhi as a strategic partner to counterbalance China in the region.

In that context, Clinton’s slogan of “back to Asia” will only intensify tensions with China and further add to political instability in the region as rivalry for influence grows. The ASEAN summit at Pattaya in May was postponed after supporters of ousted former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra blockaded the venue. Along with deepening social tensions, US-China rivalry is a significant factor in the political turmoil in Thailand and other countries in the region.



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