

ASEAN summit opens in Myanmar

Joseph Santolan
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On November 12, world leaders gathered in Naypyidaw, Myanmar (Burma), for the first day of the two-day Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit. The gathering of the 10-nation member organization, with heads of state from the United States, China, Russia, Japan and elsewhere in attendance, took place immediately after the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Beijing.

Wednesday's plenary session dealt primarily with the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Initially proposed in 2003, the AEC aims to more closely integrate economic trade, financial flows and skilled labor migration throughout the ASEAN region. The deadline for the AEC's completion is in late 2015. The ASEAN member countries represented a collective \$2.4 trillion economy in 2013. Negotiations over the AEC have largely dealt with the reduction of tariffs.

The sharp tensions over the South China Sea and previous calls for the creation of a Code of Conduct (COC) were pointedly avoided.

Over the past year, Washington continued to ratchet up pressure on China as it escalated its 'pivot' in the region. In March, Manila brought a case before the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) in The Hague. The case, which disputes Beijing's claim to the South China Sea, was drawn up and is being argued by Washington.

In April the Obama administration concluded the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) basing deal with the Aquino administration in the Philippines. EDCA allows the United States to station an unlimited number of forces anywhere in the country. In October, Washington lifted the ban on the sale of lethal maritime weaponry to Vietnam. Throughout 2014, the United States conducted more military exercises and made more port calls in the Southeast

Asian region than in any earlier year.

Despite the aggressive militarist drive of the US in the region, questions are growing about the White House's ability to continue to implement its pivot. In October last year, Obama was at the last minute unable to attend the ASEAN summit, because of the US government shutdown. This year, he arrives in Myanmar following the US midterm elections and the debacle it produced for his Democratic Party. What is more, Washington's attentions seem to be focused on Ukraine and the war in Iraq and Syria, where Obama just committed another 1,500 troops.

Editorials throughout the Southeast Asian region are full of speculation that the "lame duck president" cannot enforce US dictates in Southeast Asia.

Beijing meanwhile has announced it is looking to create a "21st Century Maritime Silk Road," a trade route of investment throughout regions of Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The Silk Road Fund set up by China for infrastructural investment and regional trade totals \$US40 billion. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen announced this week that Cambodia would receive \$500 million a year in loans and donations from China for the next several years.

Pointedly left out of the Silk Road proposal is the Philippines. Under President Aquino it has been the most aggressive US proxy in the region. The two leading business newspapers in the Philippines expressed concern over this state of affairs this week. The *Business World* spoke of a "weakened Obama," while the *Business Mirror* wrote of the need for "fostering a deeper relationship with China ... The biggest hindrance we face in establishing closer ties with China is our fear of offending the United States." It continued: "We must accept the fact that China can conveniently exist without us. We need China, economically and even socially."

Speaking to the press at the APEC summit, Philippine undersecretary of foreign affairs, Laura del Rosario, addressed the country's exclusion from the "Maritime Silk Road," saying "of course, we feel like we're alone." Having for months stated that he would raise the issue of the South China Sea at the ASEAN summit, President Aquino chose not to do so. He explained his silence after the first plenary session by saying: "We've publicized those, is there a need to beat a dead horse?" Perhaps China had a "creative solution," he continued, and "once it's presented why don't we try to explore that possibility and resolve this issue?"

Obama will join the political discussion today during the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the US-ASEAN summit. As his aggressive approach to China at the APEC meeting on trade issues demonstrated, Obama has no intention of being a "lame duck" president on the "pivot to Asia" or any other issue.

The ASEAN summit is being held in Myanmar, which is serving its final year as head of the organization, a position it will now relinquish to Malaysia.

Over the past three years, Washington has lifted sanctions on Myanmar under the pretext that the military junta was opening up to democracy and human rights. What was truly at stake in the restoration of economic and political ties with Nyapayidaw's junta was its reorientation away from Beijing and toward Washington. This shift was most clearly embodied in the cancellation of the Chinese-backed Myitsone dam project in 2011 by President Thein Sein.

Myanmar is now in the midst of preparations for elections in 2015. The leading contenders for political power are the military junta, under Thein Sein, through the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), and the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) under Aung San Suu Kyi.

Over the past three years, opposition leader and Nobel peace laureate Suu Kyi, having been elected to parliament, has revealed that she is every bit capable as the military of ruthlessly prosecuting the interests of the ruling elites. She has backed the junta on every major human rights violation, including the crackdown on the Kachin population and the violence against the Rohingya Muslim minority. She also sided with a major copper mine in a land dispute against local

farmers.

Suu Kyi and the NLD's remaining objections to the infringement upon democratic rights by the USDP is strictly limited to the demand that the Burmese constitution be revised to allow her to run for president. The current constitution forbids Suu Kyi, whose deceased husband and children are foreign citizens, from contesting the post.

President Obama will meet with both Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi in the next two days.



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