

# Re-Thinking US Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia: is it Containment Against China or Against Terrorism?

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## **Abstract**

*The dynamic of the United States foreign policy toward Southeast Asia is very much affected and influenced by the rise of China and the terrorism thread in 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the era of first Bush Administration, US foreign policy was focusing on the issue of terrorism after the 9/11 tragedy. In this issue, US was engaging Indonesia and Philippines in terms of military cooperation and security. Meanwhile, in the second Bush Administration the main focus of US foreign policy was flipped into the containment against China due to the influence of China into Southeast Asia in terms of economics (free trade agreement). In the era of Obama first administration, US eventually prioritized the SEA region both bilaterally and multilaterally, which is different from the Bush administration. However, the scope of the policy remains, the same to the previous one, on the containment against China and terrorism. U.S under Obama remains emphasis on the three main elements of the containment policy; economic, alliance/partnership and diplomacy with more concentration than the Bush's. It can be concluded that this enhanced US posture in Southeast Asia is Washington's recognition that ASEAN is the core of both regional security and economic activities and that the US must play a major role in regional affairs as well as continuing to strengthen bilateral ties.*

**Keywords:** *US Foreign Policy, China, Southeast Asia, ASEAN, Terrorism, and Containment policy,*

## A. Introduction

The US foreign policy like wears many masks. Sometimes, it look like a guardian angel, but sometimes even like a monster and one cannot imagine any other country whose foreign policy could be characterized as “beautiful imperialism”. (Inoguchi, 2000: 267) One of the continuities linking the foreign policies of the Bush and Clinton administration was the support for expanding what so called as “zone of democracy” because this goal could provide one of the foundations of US foreign policy for containment against communism after World War II. (Holsti, 2000:151) In the 1990s, the targets of US promotion of human right and democracy have been mainly China, Myanmar, and Indonesia with an array of different sanctions had been imposed at different times. The presence of US President Barrack Obama in Singapore for APEC Summit was the first time ever since taking office in January with the leader of Southeast Asian Nations on November 14, 2009. (CNN International, 2009) Previously in 2003 was also attended by George Bush with mainly focusing on the issue of terrorism in Southeast Asia. (Frost, 2003) Nevertheless, A lot of media and scholars were trying to analyze that the Obama’s participation since he become president would be the big step in the US foreign policy to reengage the region after the long period of negligence. (Al-Jazeera, 2009) US has seen Southeast Asia as strategic locations which also full of natural resources. It is also an area of growing economic importance and where concerns exist regarding the proliferation of WMDs. That would be the reason why US need to engage with SEA (Southeast Asia). On the other hand, historically, one of the main foreign policy that had been implemented extensively since the Cold War era was “the containment policy” to encircle the rise of communism. Moreover, as Mearshimer (2006:160) argued that China cannot rise peacefully and if it continues its dramatic economic growth over the next few decades, the United States and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential of war.

Hence, this paper will try to explain that the current trend of the US foreign policy aims to contain the influence of China in this region. Throughout my paper I will briefly show how the containment strategy has developed from time to time in US foreign policy strategy in order to provide the sufficient background of what I want argue. In the first section of the paper, I will briefly discuss the development of the US – SEA foreign relations before the end of Cold War to identify how the containment strategy had been initiated and the interests of the US in SEA. After that I will discuss the challenges that affect American foreign policy on SEA in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which I will also explain how the US deals with all of those obstacles. Lastly, I stress on how current trends of American foreign policy toward SEA look like and argue why such policy is the consistent containment strategy from the past.

## B. US-SEA relations before the end of Cold War

The US engagement in Southeast Asia began two hundred years ago with the concentration around two main aspects; security and economic. According to Emrys Chew, he categorized the relations between Southeast Asia and the US in three main phases. The first phase took place from 1776 - 1946. During this time, the US had exercised her imperial power by colonizing the Philippines and spreading democratic beliefs to the indigenous people and the region especially the capitalism system. The Second phase of relations was during the Cold War (1946 – 1989) when the US had seriously taken ‘containment policy’ against communism. In this period, the US has transformed to be the liberal democratic empire. SEA, in this period, was a strategic military location because the US wanted to encircle the rise of the red through her democracy and liberal values promotion. Lastly, it is the post - Cold War period (1989 - Present), which could further

classified into two sub stages; American's hegemony (1989 - 2001) and the American in Fear (after 9/11 to Present). (Chew, 2009:7-15) During the presence period, SEA has been identified to be the potential hub of those violent extremists and terrorists; therefore, Chew suggested "it became a crucial frontier once again in US' military strategic calculation". (Chew, 2009:17)

"Containment policy" was considered to be the official grand strategy of the US throughout the Cold War. George F. Kennan, the former US Ambassador to the Soviet Union, suggested the US to pursue containment policy in the series of his letters to Washington and the article "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" which published in *Foreign Affairs*. (Viotti, 2010:55)

To identify the interest of the US in Southeast Asia, the Department of State once notified in the 1909 secret memorandum, "so long as the US holds the Philippines, ... Our interest in Asiatic water require the prevention of the establishment of predominant interests ...". (Kindermann, 1972:365) According to this letter, US's key interest is the Asiatic water, which in this sense refers to the South China Sea, the sea space between the Philippines and China. Through this sea lane, huge amount of trade between the US, East Asia, SEA and inner Asia (India and the Middle East) occurred. Therefore, if any other countries could gain influence over the aquatic territory, it would possibly bring a massive loss to US trade in this region. During World War II, the US had cooperated with other territories, French Indochina and British Malaya, to fight against the Japanese in SEA to protect their interests, aquatic territory. (Kindermann, 1972:370)

After all, during the first period of the US engagement in SEA, we can see the beginning to use the containment strategy. It was taken place in form of balance of power where the US formed the ally with several other territories to push the Japanese influence from the region. However, the form and pattern of containment during this period was not well elaborated in any document because Japan had weighted war against the US and her allies. (Matloff, 1944) Importantly, the policy implementing during this period solely emphasized on the protection of the US interests in the region especially in the Philippines and South China Sea, not to protect any SEA nations from being occupied.

### **C. US Foreign policy objective and challenges toward SEA in 21<sup>st</sup> century**

In this era SEA was known as the headquarter of several extremist groups, such as, Jemaah Islamiya, which is based in Indonesia, Abu Sayaff Group in the Philippines, Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines, etc. For decades, these groups have operated in SEA attacking the civilians and government officials. The presence of the US is as counter attack of terrorism. (Acharya & Arabinda, 2007:75-90)

Washington needed to re-engage in SEA for three reasons. First of all, SEA was reported to be the hub plotting the attack in the American soil. David Braun identified that the top al Qaeda leaders had met several times in Malaysia to plan for the attack in New York and the Washington, D.C. (Braun, 2011) Secondly, the US had long been concerned with the terrorist activities in this region e.g. Bali. (Bhakti, 2013) Thirdly, SEA consists of two main important Muslim states, Indonesia and Malaysia. Thus, the US needed to create the allies with these states in order to make the War on Terror, not the War on Islam. (Capie & Acharya, 2002)

Apart from the terrorist threats, another challenge in the US foreign policy in SEA is the rising of China. After the 1997 Economic Crisis, China has continuously increased her role in Southeast Asia. China became main supporter of the Chiang Mai Initiatives (CMI), the ASEAN's financial back-up plan in time of crisis. (Lanteigne, 2009:157) Moreover, China also enhanced her trade relations with most of countries in the region even to the American-sanctioned countries, such as Myanmar. (Eckert, 2013)

The terrorist threats and the rise of China are the key challenges in SEA that the US faces in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, beside that there are also others such as WMDs, the environment, economic factors, etc. Those problems directly affect US interests in the region which require immediate action from Washington. However, the US still need to consider the best direction that can deal with both challenges, at the same time, provide positive image to the US as a whole.

In term of economic relations, China mainly underlines two key issues; the economic assistances and Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Primarily, China encourages the strong integration of ASEAN because the stronger ASEAN is, the more benefit, China will get. Chinese government also emphasizes more economic interaction with SEA countries in multilateral level, ASEAN, rather than bilateral relations. (Sutter & Huang, 2013) To assist SEA countries, China stresses on the infrastructure development and inter-ASEAN Connectivity. During the 12th ASEAN – China Summit, China establishes a USD 15 billion credit facility, including USD 1.7 billion preferential loans and USD 10 billion ASEAN-China Investment Cooperation Fund to support the project in SEA. (ASEAN, 2012) As a result, such investments would create win – win situation because it will enhance more trade among SEA countries and China can gain more profits from trading with them.

To sum up, the terrorist threats and the rise of China are the key challenges in SEA that the US faces. Both problems directly affect US interests in the region which require immediate action from Washington. However, the US still need to consider the best direction that can deal with both challenges, at the same time, provide positive image to the US as a whole.

#### **D. Bush Vs Obama Foreign Policy**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the US foreign policy toward SEA can be divided in two main phases; the first and second Bush administration, and the first and second Obama administration. In all phases, Washington has significantly pursued unofficial “containment policy” in addressing the two challenges, terrorist threats and the rise of China.

In the 2001, the task force report emphasized that the US need to engage in this region for three reasons. “First, Southeast Asia remains important to American economic, strategic, political, and humanitarian interests, and while not in itself vital, holds the potential to trigger major crises absent sustained attention and cogent policies. Secondly, US policy toward Southeast Asia has been viewed as unnecessarily ad hoc, overbearing, and reactive; it needs both a strategic context and a focus. Lastly, Indonesia, the world’s fourth-largest nation and biggest Muslim community, major oil and gas exporter, fulcrum of ASEAN, and the region’s most important state, remains in the throes of social, political, and economic instability”. (Kerrey, 2001:2-3) However, the suggestion has not been taken for grant until the second Bush administration.

During the first Bush administration, the US mainly rushed solving the problem of terrorism rather than dealing with the rise of China. SEA is recognized by Washington as “the second front” in the War on Terror. (Capie & Amitav, 2002:1). Thus, the engagement of the US in this region relied mainly on the bilateral relations with key strategic states, namely the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia, mainly on maritime security issues.

Washington imposed military cooperation to her key partners in the region, for example, the US assigned the status Major Non – NATO Ally to the Philippines and Thailand. (BBC News, 2014) Sheldon Simon (2011:2) presented, “in an eight-hour visit to the Philippines on October 18, 2003, President Bush announced an additional \$340 million aid package which included more training for Philippine forces fighting the Abu Sayyaf kidnap-murder gang and al-Qaeda-linked operations in the southern Philippines.” This engagement with the Philippines was not that surprising because ASG and JI has extensively motivated in most part of the country; therefore,

the stronger military support is undoubtedly required.

In the second Bush administration, the foreign policy of Washington, to some extent, was different from the first four years. The US did not only see the need to contain terrorism but also the rise of China. Moreover, the policy also leaned toward more multilateral engagement because the US had crucially faced economic crisis and criticisms. However, the persistency of counterterrorism theme still remained a large part in the policy platform.

Significantly, in National Security Strategic 2006, the US addressed the threat of the rise of China on her platform. (Government of USA, 2006) The US recognized that Chinese has expanded her influence globally; however, Washington emphasized that the more power China gains would also mean the more responsibility that China must hold. Considering the U.S platforms toward China, the U.S, tends to contain Chinese influences in other regions. One part, the U.S addressed “China’s leaders must see that they cannot let their population increasingly experience the freedoms to buy, sell, and produce, while denying them the rights to assemble, speak, and worship. Only by allowing the Chinese people to enjoy these basic freedoms and universal rights can China honor its own constitution and international commitments and reach its full potential.”(Government of USA, 2006) Regarding this phrase, the US declared her will to differentiate between the American and Chinese ideology and also spotlight that the U.S would urge Beijing to internally adjust her administration before making the commitment to the world. In other words, the US would unofficially practice the containment policy aiming to encircle Chinese influences in the world through American democracy promotion and her different moral high ground.

In 2008, Barack Obama was elected to be the President of the US. He came with the idea of “change” throughout his campaign. Under this new administration, the US eventually prioritized the SEA region both bilaterally and multilaterally which is different from the Bush administration. However, the scope of the policy remains, the same to the previous one, on the containment against China and terrorism. Catherine Dalpino argued that in the past decade [before the Obama administration], “the United States has forged a de facto separation in its relations with mainland and maritime Southeast Asia.” (Dalpino, 2010:5) However, the whole thing changes before Obama took office in 2009. The US recognized both mainland and maritime SEA as a region. The US finally created a post, the US Ambassador to ASEAN, to strengthen her tie and enhance partnership with ASEAN countries. During the first month of Obama administration, Hillary Clinton, the Secretary of State, paid the very first state visit to Indonesia as a part of her Asian tour. In Indonesia, she emphasized that the US will reach out more to the Indonesia as a recognized world largest Muslim country. (Murphy, 2009)

Considering the overall engagements of the US in SEA, the U.S under Obama remains emphasis on the three main elements of the containment policy; economic, alliance/partnership and diplomacy with more concentration than the Bush’s. It can be concluded that this enhanced US posture in Southeast Asia is Washington’s recognition that ASEAN is the core of both regional security and economic activities and that the US must play a major role in regional affairs as well as continuing to strengthen bilateral ties. (Simon, 2011)

## **E. Conclusion**

US foreign policy toward SEA in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was much affected by the rise of China and the threats of terrorism. In the first Bush administration, the US bilaterally engaged to certain states which the terrorist threats affected, especially Indonesia and the Philippines. The US used the containment technique to encircle the terrorist groups because these groups could damage the

US maritime interests; however, the US did not emphasize much of relations to the countries on the main land SEA. During the second Bush's, the policy toward SEA mainly change, the US recognized more Chinese influence in the region. Thus, the US began to engage closely with SEA countries both on the bilateral and multilateral levels. Importantly, the US put the terrorist agenda to grant access for her influence in the region. However, the achievement was not much as the US internally faced severe economic crisis. Until 2009, the Obama administration began. The US stressfully put lots of attention to SEA and Asia – Pacific region. It was clear during this period that the US wants to counterbalance the influence of China in the region. The US continuously engages with SEA especially on multilateral level and the US also presents in almost every ASEAN multilateral summit. This move, then, resulted in more presences of the US in the region to compete with the Chinese influences. Nonetheless, the US still emphasized on the fight against terrorism in the region, but this cooperation mainly concentrates on bilateral level with certain states.

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