

THE U.S.-ASEAN RELATIONS: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore how the U.S.-ASEAN relations have developed since the early 1990s up to 2017. It will focus on examining the networks of engagement that have affected the development of the U.S.-ASEAN relations across three areas: trade relations, development assistance and security cooperation. Employing archival research and content analysis as the main methodology, the paper will establish evidence to demonstrate that by mutually building effective mechanisms for trade, the United States and ASEAN have fostered their trade relations. Also, the United States have contributed considerably to economic development in ASEAN member states through assistance programs provided by U.S. agencies. Furthermore, it will show that the United States and ASEAN have enhanced their security cooperation that ultimately contributes to maintaining peace and stability in the Southeast Asian region. Building on the progresses of their successful relationship, the U.S.-ASEAN partnership continues to play an increasingly important role in regional and global peace and prosperity.

KEY WORDS: the United States, ASEAN, partnership, Southeast Asia, cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

The Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) formed in August 1967 by five countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) sought to work together to better deal with challenges in Southeast Asia. Over the time, ASEAN has grown to 10 countries: Brunei Darussalam became a member nation in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999 (Henderson 1999, ASEAN 2000, and Stubbs. 2002). On 7 October 2003, at the Ninth ASEAN Summit in Bali, Indonesia, the ASEAN leaders adopted Declaration of ASEAN Concord II which paved the way for the establishment of an ASEAN Community (ASEAN, 2014). The ASEAN Community is built on three pillars: an ASEAN Security Community, an ASEAN Economic Community and an ASEAN Socio-cultural Community. This Agreement marked a milestone in the history of ASEAN as it demonstrates ASEAN member states endeavour to become a major player and better contribute to peace and prosperity at the regional and global levels. Especially, the realization of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 is an evidence of ASEAN member states' concerted efforts to promote regional economic integration (ASEAN, 2015). A decade after the creation of ASEAN, in 1977, the United States began engagement with ASEAN

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as a dialogue partner. Over four decades, the United States and ASEAN have mutually constructed their partnership on the basis of shared interests. Over four decades, the U.S.-ASEAN partnership has evolved significantly and become critical to regional security and stability.

U.S.-ASEAN relations have attracted much attention from scholars and analysts. Some focus on analysing the dynamics of this relationship under a specific U.S. administration. For instance, *“The Power of Balance:” Advancing US-ASEAN Relations under the Second Obama Administration* by Prashanth Parameswaran provides a critical evaluation of impacts of Obama’s rebalancing to Asia on U.S.-ASEAN relations (Parameswaran, 2013). He underscores the significance of Southeast Asia to U.S. interests and puts forth some recommendations to further advance U.S.-ASEAN relations. Richard P. Cronin chose to explore how the second Bush administration engaged with Southeast Asia in his paper entitled *The Second Bush Administration and Southeast Asia* (Cronin, 2007). From Cronin’s observation, the Bush administration mostly concentrated on two main policy goals towards Southeast Asia: (i) gaining cooperation against terrorism; and, (ii) strengthening bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) to enhance economic and strategic relations with ASEAN member states. Richard P. Cronin held that the U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia contributes to regional stability and U.S. “soft-power” is important assets for Washington to expand its influence in this region. Recently, Malcolm Cook and Ian Storey published their research on the Trump administration and Southeast Asia. Their paper titled *The Trump Administration and Southeast Asia: Limited Engagement Thus Far* demonstrates that the Trump administration has invested more time and energy in Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and Northeast Asia than in Southeast Asia (Cook & Storey, 2017). The Trump administration has not crafted a clear approach to Asia yet. However, it is warned that the Trump administration might radically change U.S. foreign policy and U.S. engagement with East Asia. Malcolm Cook and Ian Storey suggest that there Southeast Asian leaders should use ASEAN forums, APEC and the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue to engage with the Trump administration.

Other scholars have focused on analysing various dimensions of U.S.-ASEAN relations such as economics, trade, or security. For instance, *ASEAN Centrality and the ASEAN-U.S. Economic Relationship* by Peter A. Petri and Michael G. Plummer examine how ASEAN could make the best use of its size, dynamism, and role in the Asian economic and security architectures to benefit ASEAN member states’ economies (Petri & Plummer, 2014). The authors suggest that the United States could play an important role in ASEAN’s economic growth through its deepening trade relations with some ASEAN

members and supporting ASEAN's development. Regarding security realm, in their work titled *Moving ASEAN-US Security Relations to a New Level?* Fides Quintos and Joyce Teodoro highlight the strategic importance of ASEAN to the United States and discuss the possibilities of elevating U.S.-ASEAN security relations to a new height (Quintos & Teodoro. 2014), while Muthiah Alagappa's *U.S.-ASEAN Security Relations: Challenges and Prospects* provides a balanced review of U.S. ASEAN security relations during the Cold War (1950-1989) in which he puts forth obstacles for U.S.-ASEAN security cooperation and sketches out possible shapes of U.S.-ASEAN security relations (Alagappa, 1989).

Since the establishment of the United States -ASEAN dialogue relations in 1977, this relationship has been under academic telescope. However, most studies focus on a dimension of the relationship in a short period of time. Surprising, little research has been done to cover four decades of the partnership in various dimensions including trade, investment, development and security cooperation.

In order to fill in the gap, this paper seeks to examine developments in the U.S.-ASEAN relations. Using archival research and content analysis as the main methodology, the paper demonstrates that the United States and ASEAN have built a productive relationship over their 40 years of partnership. The paper will show how the U.S.-ASEAN partnership has evolved, particularly since the early 1990s, and what the U.S. and ASEAN have done to strengthen trade relations, development cooperation and promote Southeast Asian stability. It also underlines what can be seen as the main achievements in the U.S.-ASEAN partnership as well as how this partnership has contributed and will contribute to regional peace and prosperity. As ASEAN has grown significantly and become a major trading partner of the United States and the largest destination for U.S. investment flow in Asia, U.S-ASEAN relations continue to appeal to both researchers and policy-makers.

The paper will proceed as follows. The next section will look at trade and investment between the United States and ASEAN. The third section will critically assess how U.S. assistance has accelerated economic development of ASEAN member states. The fourth section will analyse the impact of U.S.-ASEAN security cooperation on the regional peace and security. Last but not least, the paper highlights the significance of the U.S.-ASEAN relationship for both the United States and ASEAN. In an increasingly interdependent world, the United States and ASEAN tend to increase cooperation and coordination in trade, development aid and security to protect and advance their mutual interests.

TRADE RELATIONS

Since the 1990s, the bilateral trade relations between the United States and ASEAN have become more interdependent. In 2006, the United States and ASEAN concluded the U.S.-ASEAN Trade and Investment Arrangement (TIFA). Since then, the United States and ASEAN have sought to collaborate to deepen U.S.-ASEAN trade relations and promote ASEAN regional economic integration. Under the auspices of the TIFA, ASEAN and the United States have achieved positive results in various areas namely, digital economy, trade facilitation, logistics, trade finance, and trade and environment. In 2012, at the U.S.-ASEAN Leaders' Meeting in Phnom Penh in November, the United States and ASEAN launched the Expanded Economic Engagement (E3) Initiative (Hiebert, 2012). The E3 aims to establish a framework to broaden U.S.-ASEAN cooperation to increase trade and investment that should support job creating in all 11 countries (Ibid). For example, two-way goods trade between the U.S. and ASEAN reached \$177 billion in 2008. In 2016, two-way goods trade totalled \$234 billion (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2015). Since 2010, U.S. goods exports to ASEAN countries have rose about 58%, with leading U.S. goods export categories such as electrical machinery, machinery, aircraft, optic and medical instruments, and miscellaneous grain, seed, and fruit (Ibid). U.S. domestic exports of agricultural products to ASEAN were \$11.2 billion in 2016, with top categories namely soybeans, cotton, soybean meal, wheat, and dairy products. Also, U.S. services exports to ASEAN stood at \$27.1 billion in 2015 growing 11.7% from 2014 (Ibid). U.S. trade in goods and services with ASEAN helps to create over 500,000 jobs in the United States (Ibid).

The total value of U.S.-ASEAN bilateral trade has increased 78% since 2004, from US \$ 153 billion to US \$ 273 billion (East West Center, 2017). ASEAN's surplus in goods with the United States totalled US\$ 77 billion in 2015 while the United States' surplus in services with ASEAN totalled US \$ 8 billion (Ibid). Overall, bilateral U.S.-ASEAN trade from 2004 to 2015 has grown at an average annual rate of 5% (Ibid). Meanwhile, ASEAN statistics, foreign direct investment (FDI) flows from the United States to ASEAN grew up to US\$ 12.2 billion in 2015, this made the United States become ASEAN's third largest source of FDI (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2016). No doubts, there has been a strong growth in trade relations between the United States and ASEAN. Now, the United States has become ASEAN's fourth biggest trading partner while ASEAN was fourth largest U.S. export market and trading partner (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2015).

In addition, trade relations between the United States and ASEAN continue to rise with the launch of the U.S.-ASEAN Connect announced by President Obama at the historic U.S.-ASEAN special Leaders' Summit in Sunnylands, California. This is the U.S. Government's strategic framework for economic engagement with ASEAN and the ASEAN countries (USAID, 2015). U.S.-ASEAN Connect, resting on four pillars (Business Connect, Energy Connect, Innovation Connect, and Policy Connect) was initialized to outline a strategic vision for U.S. economic activities in Southeast Asia as remarked by President Obama:

I affirmed our strong support for the ASEAN Community and pledged that the United States will continue to be a partner in ASEAN's efforts to integrate economies and reduce barriers to trade and investment. I'm also announcing a new initiative - U.S.-ASEAN Connect - a network of hubs across the region to better coordinate our economic engagement and connect more of our entrepreneurs, investors and businesses with each other (The White House, 2016).

U.S.-ASEAN Connect will bring about meaningful measures and mechanisms to support U.S. economic engagement in Southeast Asia. The creation of U.S.-ASEAN Connect reflects both the U.S. and ASEAN's desire to further cooperate to enhance U.S.-ASEAN trade and investment. With their common approaches to investment in *ASEAN-US Cooperation in Fostering International Investment* and to transparency in the *ASEAN-US Cooperation in Fostering Transparency and Good Regulatory Practices* the U.S. and ASEAN leaders have sought to set up clear framework for businesses and firms from both sides to have more chances to work together and to achieve together (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2015).

The establishment of different organizations has connected the United States and ASEAN more closely in their union, such as the U.S.-ASEAN Business Council and the U.S.-ASEAN Energy Work Plan. The bilateral relations between the United States and ASEAN member countries help to promote the shared values and objectives that form a basis for the U.S.-ASEAN partnership. The achievement of the U.S.-ASEAN partnership continue to be exceptionally impressive, for instance, the U.S.-ASEAN Business Council has effectively assisted more than 3,500 small and medium-sized firms. These initiatives have been launched to meet the main commitments of the U.S.-ASEAN partnership: nurturing ASEAN emerging leaders, assisting economic integration, dealing with transnational challenges, empowering ASEAN women, and strengthening maritime cooperation.

It is undeniable that the U.S.-ASEAN partnership has benefited both the U.S. and ASEAN peoples. As for the United States, ASEAN as a bloc is the third-largest economy in Asia, and the seventh-largest in the world, with a combined GDP of US \$ 2.4 trillion (Alice Salinas, 2016). Also, ASEAN has a young population with 65% its 632 million people under the age of 35 (Ibid). This is a massive market for U.S. businesses and investments. As for ASEAN, the United States has an excellent source of technology, science and engineering that ASEAN really need to boost its economy. U.S. assistance programs have equipped ASEAN young adults with the knowledge and skills to address potential challenges facing ASEAN. As ASEAN and the United States are highly complementary economies, there are various opportunities for the U.S.-ASEAN partnership in the future.

Under the Trump administration, some have warned of certain disruption in U.S. economic engagement with Southeast Asia as the result of Trump's America-first foreign policy (Parameswaran, 2016). However, the reality shows that there remains much continuity in U.S. economic policy to ASEAN as President Trump and his administration commit to strengthening U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific (Yoshida, 2017). During his first visit to the Asia-Pacific as Vice President of the United States, Mike Pence met with ASEAN Secretariat and reaffirmed that "The relationship between the United States and ASEAN is a strategic partnership. And under President Trump's leadership, the United States is already taking steps to strengthen our partnership with ASEAN and deepen our friendship" (The White House, 2017). He also met with members of the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) and underscored the significance of U.S. trade with ASEAN. The United States under Trump has demonstrated that forging stronger trade relations with ASEAN is important to the United States. With a huge market of US\$2.6 trillion and over 622 million people, the ASEAN Economic Community continues to be a vital partner to the United States (ASEAN, 2015). As stressed by U.S. Vice President, Mike Pence: "By strengthening our economic ties, the United States and ASEAN member nations can foster jobs, prosperity, and growth in new and unprecedented ways" (The White House, 2017). That President Trump will attend U.S.-ASEAN summit and the East Asia Summit in the Philippines, and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Vietnam in November 2017 demonstrates that far more continuity in the Trump administration's approach to ASEAN than what had been suggested by the naysayers. The Obama administration's Secretary of State John Kerry once said "ASEAN really is front and center in the region's multicultural architecture, and we want it to remain there" (John Kerry, 2015). Now the Trump administration's Secretary of State Rex Tillerson reconfirmed

that “ASEAN is an essential partner” (U.S. Mission to ASEAN, 2017). With the continued commitment by the United States to ASEAN, the US-ASEAN trade relations are poised to be elevated to newer heights.

DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

Apart from boosting trade activities with ASEAN to assist sustaining economic growth in both ASEAN and the United States, Washington has paid much attention to development assistance for ASEAN member states. ASEAN is a group of countries with a wide range of wealth disparities. ASEAN member states have been facing numerous development challenges over the years. Some of these development challenges can be best addressed by nation states. However, many are transnational issues that require regional or international cooperation to deal with. The United States, through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), have focused on various transboundary issues including combatting trafficking in persons, promoting science, technology and innovation, workforce development, cultivating emerging leaders and managing and reducing disaster risks (USAID, 2017). For instance, the United States assists ASEAN’s transnational crime officials and human rights bodies to sustain victim-centered approaches to fighting human trafficking. Noticeably, the United States helps ASEAN to harmonize domestic human laws across Southeast Asia (ASEAN, 2015). The United States provided more than US\$ 1 million aid for an all-hazard Disaster Monitoring and Response System at the ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance (Ibid). The United States also assists to carry out “One ASEAN, One Response” initiative which aims to mobilize ASEAN’s assets and capacities to deal with disasters. Especially, the USAID Connecting the Mekong through Education and Training (USAID COMET) program supports young adults from the Lower Mekong region to work all over ASEAN and even abroad. It is estimated that over the last five years, the United States has funded more than US\$ 4 billion on development programs in ASEAN (East West Center, 2017). It reflects U.S. wish to collaborate with ASEAN to improve socio-economic state of this bloc. As ASEAN plays an increasingly important role in the Asia-Pacific multilateral architecture, the United States seek to assist ASEAN to deal with development challenges to sustain prosperity and stability in the region. This was underlined in President Obama’s speech in Kuala Lumpur in 2015: “I’ve deepened America’s cooperation with ASEAN because a united, integrated and effective ASEAN in the center of Asia is the force of stability, prosperity and peace.” (Mary Alice Salinas, 2015) In addition, the ASEAN-U.S. Partnership for Good Governance, Equitable and Sustainable Development and Security has

been established. This is a five-year development program sponsored by USAID and U.S. Department of State (USAID, 2017). This program is designed to enhance institutional capacities and build up regional policies to realize ASEAN's political-security and socio-cultural objectives. For example, during the process of regional integration, ASEAN member states really need support and help to deal with legal and legislative issues including understanding the ASEAN Charter and court administrative matters. To prepare the ASEAN members to deal with these challenges, the United States offer aid assistance to ASEAN's judicial representatives to build up networks that can facilitate regional legal procedures and practice. Another program supported by the USAID and the U.S. Department of States is ASEAN Youth Volunteer Program which aims to promote regional integration by enabling ASEAN's young adults to take part in volunteer chances that raise awareness about regional issues (USAID, 2017).

Obviously, such development assistance from a developed country like the United States to ASEAN that comprises of many developing countries is valuable. U.S. development fund for ASEAN has contributed considerably to ASEAN socio-economic development. ASEAN member states consider their national interests mainly in terms of socio-economic development. They need U.S. development programs that deal with social issues and bring about economic opportunities for the ASEAN people. In return, winning the souls and hearts of the ASEAN people best serves U.S. strategic interests in Asia. U.S. development assistance for ASEAN is essential to realizing ASEAN and U.S. vision of a prosperous and peaceful Asia.

SECURITY COOPERATION

The unity and stability on which ASEAN's future prosperity depend have faced substantial challenges, both traditional and non-traditional. The rising influence of China and its strategic competition with the United States, territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the threat of climate change require ASEAN to further cooperation with the United States in terms of security. China's growing assertiveness has threatened to disturb peace and security in the region and created new tensions and uncertainties that may divide ASEAN member states. Differences in ASEAN member states' approaches to Beijing's claims in the South China Sea, for example, may threaten ASEAN solidarity and security. In that context, ASEAN's security cooperation with the United States has been broadening and deepening. A careful reading of the Joint Statement on the ASEAN-U.S. Strategic Partnership, the Joint Vision Statement on the ASEAN-U.S. Enhanced Partnership, and statements of ASEAN-U.S. Summits shows

that both ASEAN and the United States see strengthening ASEAN-U.S. security cooperation will help to maintain regional peace and security.

Over the years, the United States has been collaborating with ASEAN to promote dialogue and deal with regional security challenges through such ASEAN-led mechanisms as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM- Plus), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF). Both sides also establish exchange programs for military officers, defense officials, and coastguard officials. Against the backdrop of China's new assertiveness in the South China Sea, the United States have supported ASEAN member states to increase their maritime security and safety (ASEAN, 2015). The United States show enthusiastic supports for ASEAN-led regional mechanisms and make efforts to help ASEAN to advance maritime security and awareness. For instance since 2012, the United States and ASEAN have co-chaired the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Maritime Security Inter-Sessional Meeting. Especially the United States join the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus. In early 2015, the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) held a workshop on Shared Maritime Awareness with the participation of representatives from all ASEAN Member States and a follow-on workshop was organized in 2016. The United States also sponsored the Expanded ASEAN Seafarer Training (EAST) Workshop on Counter-Piracy for the third time. These efforts are part of U.S. security assistance to ASEAN concentrated on strengthening maritime security capacities.

Both ASEAN and the United States have worked closely to promote freedom of navigation in the sea and air, exercise of self-restraint, non-use of force or the threat to use force, and peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law, namely the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and standard measures recommended by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and International Maritime Organization (IMO). This has been reflected in US President Barack Obama's speech at U.S.-ASEAN summit in California in 2016: The United States and ASEAN would increase "security cooperation to meet shared challenges" and to ensure peace and stability in Southeast Asia, adding that the United States would increase maritime assistance to regional allies and partners to enhance mutual capacities to protect lawful trading activities and respond to humanitarian crisis (Asian Affairs, 2016).

Especially, U.S. military takes part in annual and biennial exercises with eight ASEAN member states. Besides strengthening ASEAN-U.S. maritime cooperation, the United States and ASEAN have deepened cooperation within

the ARF and increase capacity building, exchange of experience and sharing of knowledge and expertise in such areas as preventive diplomacy, disaster relief, counterterrorism and transnational crime including cyber-security, non-proliferation and disarmament (Ibid.). As Southeast Asia is vulnerable to natural disasters; the U.S. military has provided ASEAN with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief through Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) missions in the region (East West Center, 2017).

The Trump administration has repeatedly raised their concern over China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. In a *press briefing with New Zealand Prime Minister Bill English* on June 6, 2017, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson made it clear that

...we are, I think, of one mind with many others in the region as well in conveying to China that these actions they're taking to build islands and, more alarmingly, to militarize these islands threatens the stability, the stability that really has served China as well or better than anyone in terms of China's ability to grow its economy. It's been this very stable environment that has existed. These actions of theirs threaten that stability, and we ask that they cease those activities (Tillerson, 2017a).

Washington expressed its willingness to work more closely with ASEAN on security as stated clearly by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in May 2017: "we've got a lot of work to do with ASEAN nations and re-solidifying our leadership with ASEAN on a number of security issues ...and the South China Sea" (Tillerson, 2017b). Henceforth, U.S.-ASEAN security cooperation remains to be one of the priorities in U.S.-ASEAN partnership. Increasing security cooperation with the United States will be certainly welcome by ASEAN people. The survey on U.S.-ASEAN relations under the Trump administration conducted by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies – Yusof Ishak Institute (ISEAS) in Singapore in 2017 demonstrates that ASEAN desires to see increased U.S. engagement with Southeast Asia. Up to 70% of Southeast Asians believe that Southeast Asia is "more stable and secure with active US engagement" (Valente, 2017). Furthermore, Washington has shown its willingness to play a part in securing peace and stability in Southeast Asia while ASEAN capitals have welcomed U.S. increased presence in the region (Hang Nguyen, 2016, Sutter et al. 2013). Two-thirds of Southeast Asians expect the Trump administration will continue to ensure freedom of navigation in the South China Sea (Ibid). ASEAN still considers the United States as the most powerful player in world politics and hope that the Trump administration will continue to expand U.S. presence in Southeast Asia.

CONCLUSION

In a practical sense, ASEAN and the United States partnership seems a mismatch because almost everything about them is different. ASEAN and the United States are located in different continents and they have very different cultures, politics, development levels and histories. Though the United States and ASEAN have the same goals to sustain peace and prosperity for their peoples, they have different ways to pursue their goals. However, these differences have not prevented the United States and ASEAN from engaging with each other. Within four decades, the United States and ASEAN have mutually constructed an effective working relationship through a wide range of sectors from commerce and development assistance to security. The United States and ASEAN have been keen to maximize future economic opportunities through multilateral mechanisms.

Their expanding networks of engagement in trade relations, development assistance and security cooperation have formed a functional basis and guaranteed U.S. ongoing goodwill and cooperation. The positive developments of the U.S.-ASEAN partnership over four decades are clear indications that the United States and ASEAN have acknowledged the importance of this partnership to their geopolitical future. Together, ASEAN and the United States have made it clear in the Joint Statement on the ASEAN-U.S. Strategic Partnership in 2015: "...we dedicate ourselves anew to bringing security and opportunity to our peoples and addressing emerging regional and global challenges in the continued promotion of a peaceful, stable, integrated, and prosperous Asia-Pacific community" (The White House, 2015). Indeed, it is critical for ASEAN and the United States to maintain the existing dialogue relationship and establish new mechanisms to create substantive developments in the fifth decade of their relationship. An effective ASEAN-U.S. partnership is essential to sustaining stability and growth in the world generally and in Southeast Asia particularly.

No doubts, U.S.-ASEAN relations have exerted important impacts on the ASEAN region. The last four decades have been impressive in various ways with the United States and ASEAN placing their partnership as a high priority. In reality, the United States was the very first non-ASEAN member states to appoint an ambassador to ASEAN, to have an ASEAN mission, and to send a military advisor to ASEAN in Jakarta. There are many firsts in the development path of the U.S.-ASEAN relations, and it is expected that the development of U.S.-ASEAN relations over the next four decades continue to be remarkable.

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