INTRODUCTION

As Chair of ASEAN in 2015, Malaysia adopted the theme of “Our People, Our Community, Our Vision” to emphasize that ASEAN has established 2015 as the year for realizing the political-security, economic and socio-cultural pillars of the ASEAN Community, with special emphasis given to people-centered initiatives. This off-the-record symposium identified key policy initiatives and collaborative efforts among the U.S., ASEAN and other East Asia Summit (EAS) member states and clarified issues of common interest in advance of the 7th US-ASEAN Leaders Summit and the 10th EAS to be held November 21-22 in Malaysia.

The symposium was enriched by active participation from senior Malaysian and U.S. officials as well as a wide range of regional and U.S.-based experts. About 110 participants took part in the seminar, many of them staying for most if not all of the seven hours of its proceedings.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy recommendations emerged explicitly or implicitly from the symposium:

1. The U.S. should encourage ASEAN to develop mechanisms for consulting regularly with all its non-ASEAN partners in the EAS, especially regarding major evolutionary changes in the Asian security eco-system.
2. Because, as the U.S. strongly asserts, active ASEAN involvement is vital for the management of South China Sea issues, ASEAN should step up its efforts to conclude the South China Sea Code of Conduct.
3. The EAS should develop mechanisms to avoid incidents in areas of competing territorial claims in the South China Sea and establish multilateral channels of communication among the concerned parties.

4. ASEAN should accelerate efforts to reach internal consensus regarding major policy issues on the EAS agenda.

5. Although they may not be suitable for the EAS agenda, which should remain focused on a limited number of highest-priority topics, ASEAN should not shy away from addressing sensitive internal issues such as the recurring haze emanating from Indonesia and refugees from Myanmar.

6. To avoid further over-extension, ASEAN should become more selective in the organizations it joins and the initiatives with which it associates itself.

7. Recognizing that ASEAN-initiated economic arrangements will be strongly affected by the advent of China’s AIIB and the U.S.-led TPP, a forum of economics and security officials and experts should be established to set guidelines for ensuring that those new developments do not undermine economic interdependence or engender conflict.

8. Foreign and regional bodies focused on valuable government-to-government and people-to-people exchanges initiatives and support for civil society institutions should understand that rhetoric from ASEAN leaders about a “people-centered ASEAN” does not imply that the elites plan in the near term to share agenda-setting and policy implementation responsibilities with broader publics, though, as with the EU’s evolution, that may well happen in the long term.

OVERVIEW

The symposium was launched with opening remarks delivered by the Deputy Chief of Mission of the Embassy of Malaysia and a senior official of the U.S. Department of State. Another senior U.S. official delivered the symposium’s keynote address during the luncheon.

In his opening remarks the senior Malaysian official stressed that 2015 marks a significant milestone for ASEAN, as it is the year that the ASEAN Community is being inaugurated and Malaysia is charged with leading the institution toward establishing its “post-2015 vision.” Malaysia’s goal, he stressed, is to achieve greater economic, social and political integration for the betterment of the lives of the region’s people. In that respect it hopes to steer ASEAN closer to its goal of creating a people-centered ASEAN in accordance with the “Kuala Lumpur Declaration on a People-Oriented, People-Centered ASEAN” adopted in April 2015. Concurrently, it will promote progress on the three ASEAN Community blueprints that were established in 2009: (1) the Political-Security Community Blueprint; (2) the Economic Community Blueprint, and (3) the Social-Cultural Community Blueprint.

As it prepares for the mid-November ASEAN and EAS Leaders Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia has identified several long-term challenges that will require ASEAN’s attention in the coming years. First, ASEAN member states should resist mounting pressures to put national interests ahead of regional interests. Second, recognizing that the ASEAN agenda has predominantly been elite-driven, they should make greater efforts to build greater public awareness of its initiatives. Third, more attention must be given to addressing the development
gap that exists between ASEAN member states. And lastly, with tensions rising with respect to territorial disputes in the South China Sea, ASEAN must work harder to find common ground that avoids splitting its members.

The senior U.S. official began by praising Malaysia’s performance as ASEAN Chair in both handling the organization’s challenges and helping shepherd its many accomplishments during the current watershed year. Establishment of the ASEAN Community, most notably the ambitious ASEAN Economic Community (EAC), represents a major step forward that has attracted great interest from U.S. business circles that welcome the new opportunities it will afford for investing and operating in an increasingly integrated ASEAN market.

The official also noted that Malaysia, as ASEAN Chair during the EAS’s 10th anniversary year, has used its position to strengthen the consensus that the EAS should to be the premier forum for addressing major issues affecting not only the region but also the global community. In looking ahead to President Obama’s attendance at the US-ASEAN ad EAS Leaders Summit, the official said that the U.S. has high expectations for the elevation of the US-ASEAN relationship to a Strategic Partnership. He hopes the EAS will produce a statement affirming a shared vision that includes emphasis on the principle of ASEAN’s continuing centrality.

Among the issues the U.S. wants to address at the ASEAN and EAS meetings are illegal fishing, transnational crime, trafficking of persons, unregulated logging, illegal trade of wildlife and environmental protection. He also hopes that all parties can sign on to the statement on climate change agreed to when President Obama was in Myanmar for last year’s US-ASEAN summit.

Regarding the South China Sea (SCS), while the U.S. welcomes Malaysia’s efforts to produce consensus statements on the issue at ASEAN meetings, it also recognizes that ASEAN faces serious hurdles in engaging China with a single voice. Nevertheless, the U.S. hopes ASEAN’s leaders will continue to seek common ground for engaging the Chinese on measures to reduce tensions and reach equitable, sustainable solutions. Although the U.S. takes no position with respect to SCS territorial claims, it does have a significant national interest in freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of disputes, interests shared by the international community and all maritime nations.

The first session focused on changes in the geo-strategic environment and their implications for US-ASEAN-EAS cooperation. Panelists noted that in addition to the launching of the 2015 ASEAN Community, the region is currently witnessing much greater involvement by outside powers, particularly China and the U.S. China’s assertive reclamation projects in the South China Sea and its well-funded initiatives under the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and “One Road, One Belt” raise both concerns and attractive opportunities. The U.S. rebalance – including both its stepped-up defense of freedom of the seas and the conclusion of the TPP negotiations – has similarly forced the countries of the region to readjust their thinking. While the panelists each approached these issues from different perspectives, there was agreement that the great power activism is proving a challenge to those who want “ASEAN centrality” to mean more than that the institution essentially functions as providing a “central” venue for meetings involving powerful non-ASEAN actors. In that respect, concern was expressed that ASEAN has taken on so many memberships that it is now over-extended, that it is being overshadowed in the
EAS, that its ineffectual efforts to curtail Chinese behavior in the SCS are ceding that role to the U.S. Seventh Fleet, and that the advent of the AIIB and the TPP may pose serious challenges to the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASEAN centrality more generally.

The role and potential of the EAS was another major focus. One panelist emphasized that the U.S. has a strong political-security interest in promoting the EAS as an institution capable of assuming concrete form and producing results in line with U.S. priorities. In addition to concerns related to the SCS, of most interest to the U.S. are regional security issues such as religious extremism, cyber security, and maritime security cooperation. If the EAS lives up to expectations, the next administration can be expected to continue the current rebalance policies. One panelist noted that the stepped-up involvement of China and the U.S. poses challenges that must be managed through positive changes in the Asian security eco-system in such areas as economic interdependence, institutional development, and domestic consolidation. Despite some pessimism about ASEAN’s capacity for handling the many issues on its plate, several participants highlighted positive factors such as region-wide strong economic growth, growing intra-ASEAN cooperation, and stable societies whose ideological differences are less divisive than many outsiders assume.

The next session delved more deeply into South China Sea issues, with specific attention given to China’s reclamation and construction activities and related assertive action by its vessels operating in those areas. Panelists from the region explained Malaysia’s cautious approach of dealing with this challenge essentially through bilateral interaction with China, while the Philippines advocates a stronger, more unified response. Aside from SCS matters, the panelists also noted the importance of ASEAN cooperation in areas such as disaster relief, transnational crime, response to disasters, and Islamic extremism. The panelists called for ASEAN to become more “outcome-oriented” regarding the SCS and other issues, both in its own deliberations and in its contributions to the EAS. However, several panelists and members of the audience said the time has now passed where ASEAN – or any of its individual member countries – has the capability to significantly influence Chinese behavior in the SCS; only the U.S. has that potential. Much discussion revolved around the substance of the Chinese claims as well as the U.S. position based on “freedom of the navigation operations” (FONOPS) thinking and its adherence to widely accepted interpretations of the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). One panelist added that the U.S. has taken many important steps toward security and non-security cooperation with ASEAN through joint exercises, marine conservation programs, and working with the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Pus).

In his luncheon keynote address the senior State Department official expressed appreciation for Malaysia’s performance as ASEAN Chair and said the U.S. looks forward to learning more about its vision for progress beyond the inauguration of the ASEAN Economic Community at the end of this year. He then emphasized the importance ASEAN has as the convener of the East Asia Summit (EAS), which the U.S. hopes this year will move toward stronger institutionalization and agreement on specific issues of common concern that deserve priority consideration. That list includes maritime issues, cyber security, global terrorism, trafficking in persons, drugs/narcotics, and wildlife and forestry preservation. Emphasizing that it is essential for the EAS remain nimble and not get bogged down in endless meetings and reports, he said
that at the forthcoming session the U.S. will ensure that the EAS agenda is focused on the most pressing issues, like the South China Sea. He concluded his formal remarks by again stressing the importance of ASEAN unity and centrality, because a united ASEAN supports regional peace and stability in a manner beneficial to all. In the question and answer session that followed, the official said the forthcoming U.S.-ASEAN Strategic Partnership agreement will establish new benchmarks and goals to deepen the relationship and achieve impacts that complement objectives to be announced soon in ASEAN’s post-2015 vision statement.

Responding to another question, he said that the rebalance, the TPP, free trade agreements (FTAs) and measures to stimulate economic growth are all reshaping the region and advancing U.S. as well as regional interests in this time of new security challenges and changing political dynamics throughout East Asia.

The first panel in the afternoon discussed the ASEAN Economic Community and the roles of the TPP and the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The panelists noted the remarkable economic transformation of the region and voiced optimism that further progress will be achieved regarding the major issues on the table for the AEC post-2015: i.e., market access and cross-border movement of people, goods and services. When the official implementation of the AEC takes place at midnight on December 31, 2015, it will start a long evolutionary process aimed at bringing all ASEAN member tariffs down to zero. Similarly, the overall goal of the RCEP, which embraces not only the ASEAN countries but also its six FTA partners (including China), is to bring coherence to the different existing FTAs, so that companies operating in and between countries can have seamless movement with respect to supply chains, customs, and ease of doing business. Much of the discussion focused on the just-concluded TPP negotiations. Unlike the slow moving and permissive AEC and RCEP, the high standard TPP includes just four of the ten ASEAN countries: Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam. While some panelists argued that having some ASEAN members in the TPP would serve as a useful impetus for AEC and RCEP dynamics – and might spur some eligible countries to seek membership in it – others expressed fears that it will split ASEAN into two camps and thus undermine regional cooperation. It was agreed that the ASEAN TPP signatories would all derive great benefits, with Vietnam being the biggest winner. The Chinese, who had originally been hostile to the TPP, now have changed their stance. Not only have they come to terms with it, they are beginning to see its benefits to them, for example, through setting up joint ventures in Vietnam (as is allowed under TPP rules).

The panel addressing the topic of “Building a People-Centered ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community” had a particularly lively discussion, with a general consensus expressed that the talk about ASEAN being people-centered did not mean that the masses were to be invited to take part in setting agendas or implementing projects. Commenting that this pillar has received much less attention and produced fewer notable results than the other pillars, it was noted that ASEAN’s progress to date has been in the political-security and economic areas and was due to inter-governmental actions inevitably controlled by elites. Further, the expression “people centered” can best be understood referring mainly to building public awareness of ASEAN and its goals and accomplishments. Many of the panelists and members of the audience lamented that the institution is so elite-driven at a time when ASEAN’s governments have trouble addressing tough issues faced by its peoples such as the Rohingya refugee flow and the haze blowing in from Indonesia. Faced with these criticisms, some panelists and members of the public pointed
out that the ASEAN governments at this stage – like the leaders of the EU in its formative years – cannot be expected to share power with civil society groups. However, despite that reality, there is still considerable space for small-scale projects aimed at exchanges and capacity building. One participant cautioned the U.S. to exercise careful cultural and political sensitivity when embarking on new initiatives, as the political climate throughout the region is becoming quite nationalistic and in Muslim countries more anti-American.

In wrapping up the symposium the chair of the final-session summarized highlights of the proceedings by first noting that the U.S. views the EAS as the region’s premier security forum, one that offers rich opportunities for addressing not only South China Sea issues but also trafficking, logging, fishing, and global concerns like terrorism and climate change. It wants the EAS to become institutionalized but also to remain nimble and flexible. The U.S. understands the current strains on ASEAN’s unity, but considers it as its default partner of choice and recognizes its importance as being at the center of meetings and regional organizations. On economics, the TPP will over the long term produce a big disparity between the winners, who join it, and the losers who do not. The TPP would not have brought along Japan and Vietnam without the rise of China, but no one should underestimate the Chinese just because they are not part of it. Neither should anyone underestimate India’s economic growth potential. Though “socio-cultural community” is simply a term of convenience, it is also clear that ASEAN has not done enough in this area, where progress lags far behind that for the other two pillars.

**CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS**

**Welcome and Opening Remarks**

The symposium was launched with opening remarks by the Deputy Chief of Mission of the Embassy of Malaysia and a senior official of the U.S. Department of State. Another senior U.S. official delivered the symposium’s keynote address during the luncheon.

In addition to addressing specific challenges facing Malaysia as 2015 ASEAN Chair in hosting the November 2015 ASEAN-US Leaders Summit and the East Asia Summit, the symposium also zeroed in on the long-term internal and international issues affecting the entire region.

In his opening remarks the senior Malaysian official stressed that 2015, with Malaysia holding the chairmanship, marks a significant milestone for ASEAN. Malaysia’s goal is to achieve greater economic, social, political integration to ensure that the lives of the region’s people are advanced. In that respect it hopes to steer ASEAN closer to its goal of creating a people-centered ASEAN in accordance with the “Kuala Lumpur Declaration on a People-Oriented, People-Centered ASEAN” that was adopted in April 2015. Concurrently, it will seek to make significant progress on the three ASEAN community blueprints that were established in 2009: (1) the Political Community Blueprints; (2) the Economic Community Blueprints, and (3) the Social-Cultural Community Blueprints. It is important to note that leaders adopted the “Kuala Lumpur Declaration on a People-Oriented, People-Centered ASEAN” in April.

With only a few months left, he stressed, there remain many challenges that need to be addressed by ASEAN. First, is the issue of nationalism and regionalism. ASEAN member states are
increasingly putting national interests ahead of regional interests. Second, ASEAN member states are competing between themselves. As the ASEAN agenda has been predominantly elite driven, there is a low level of awareness among communities about ASEAN initiatives. The idea of bringing ASEAN closer to the people has to be shared more widely. Third, there are different levels of development and political systems among ASEAN’s member states. Moving forward, ASEAN needs to focus on addressing the development gap between ASEAN member states. Lastly, tensions are growing with respect to territorial disputes in the South China Sea. It is important for ASEAN to maximize common ground and minimize differences between its members. Malaysia will continue to play an active role in order to drive this agenda forward and calls for strong support from the international community in doing so.

In his opening remarks the senior U.S. official began by noting that 2015 has already been a big year for ASEAN, with many challenges and accomplishments. It has witnessed the establishment of the ASEAN Community, including its particularly ambitious ASEAN Economic Community pillar. The main challenge moving forward, he said, is communicating clearly to those who will be affected by the implementation of these measures. The U.S. considers the establishment of the AEC an especially significant step forward, as technical implementation of its systems will, in principle, make it easier for American businesses to operate in ASEAN. For continued progress, however, the question of harmonization of standards poses a huge challenge.

In serving as ASEAN Chair during the EAS’s 10th anniversary year, Malaysia has helped solidify the strong consensus among EAS members that ASEAN should continue its central role in hosting the premier forum for future discussion of regional and even global issues. It is noteworthy that Secretary of State John Kerry and the ASEAN foreign ministers together released a statement on the Iran Nuclear Agreement. This development, with Malaysia as ASEAN Chair ably blazing the path forward, clearly demonstrates how ASEAN is not only able to act in concert on a regional level, but is also assuming greater global relevance.

The official said that the U.S. looks forward to launching the U.S.-ASEAN Strategic Partnership Agreement while President Obama is in Kuala Lumpur. Details still need to be worked out, he added.

Among the issues the U.S. wants to address at the ASEAN and EAS meetings is illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. Recognizing that this problem is directly related to transnational crime, the U.S. is prepared to help shape an environment where fishing practices are sustainable. Other specific concerns to the U.S. and ASEAN are trafficking of persons, illegal logging, and illegal trade of wildlife.

Regarding the South China Sea, the U.S. recognizes both some progress and some continued challenges. Malaysia has admirably spearheaded the process of producing coordinated statements on the subject out of major ASEAN meetings, but at the same time the institution has faced real difficulties engaging China and speaking as a single voice. Additionally, China has acted to change the dynamics in a way that does not benefit ASEAN. It is therefore essential that all parties work together to reach an equitable and sustainable solution. Although the U.S. takes no position with respect to overlapping claims of sovereignty and territorial ownership, it does
have a significant national interest in freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of disputes, interests shared by the international community and all maritime nations.

During the ASEAN and EAS meetings in November the U.S. also wants to talk with its partners about climate change. When President Obama went to Myanmar last year for the ASEAN summit, he agreed to a statement on climate change between the U.S. and ASEAN on contributions to limit carbon emissions. Eight of 10 ASEAN member states have since signed on to the statement. Viewing climate change as the biggest issue of our time and thus taking it very seriously, the U.S. is encouraging the remaining two nations to agree to it before the forthcoming United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris.

Finally, the U.S. official expressed the hope that the EAS will produce a statement affirming its shared vision. In that context it will emphasize its continuing strong support for the principle of ASEAN centrality. Recognizing that ASEAN inevitably faces serious challenges when seeking policy consensus among its ten diverse members, the U.S. intends to work closely with ASEAN and particularly the ASEAN Chair to make this possible.

Discussion, Questions and Answers

In response to a comment comparing the institutional weakness of the ASEAN Secretariat with its more powerful counterpart, for the European Union (EU), the Malaysian representative agreed that more funding should be made available for useful ASEAN projects and expanded responsibilities for the secretariat.

Another questioner commented on the changing conditions in the South China Sea and asked how ASEAN and the U.S. can effectively use “track two” diplomacy to engage China on the issue. The State Department representative replied that in view of China’s current posture of appearing to do the minimum amount necessary to keep talks on the subject moving forward, it is essential that ASEAN speak with a coherent single voice. Otherwise, it is easier for Beijing “to split the herd.”

Following up on that discussion, a participant commented that it is easy to be skeptical of all that China is saying. Some people argue that ASEAN should stay out of South China Sea disputes; that the issue is simply too big for ASEAN to handle. If ASEAN should stay out, what is the alternative? From the U.S. point of view, would it be desirable for ASEAN to stay out and leave it to be handled by the major powers? The State Department official answered the latter question with a firm “No.” As far as the U.S. is concerned, he added, there will be no solution if the matter is simply a bilateral US-China issue. ASEAN is necessarily involved because four of its members are claimants to islands in the South China Sea. In short, turning its back on the problem and saying it is too difficult would not make sense for ASEAN. The Malaysian official responded to the question by commenting that his country takes the clear position that territorial issues should be resolved by ASEAN consensus based on claimant states interests.

Commenting that some observers have concluded that the new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is a challenge to ASEAN centrality, one participant asked if the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) also poses a challenge to ASEAN centrality. The State Department official
answered that the TPP is not exclusive or divisive, but instead is open to new members and simply seeks to raise standards for all and promote integration of economies and trade.

In response to a query about Malaysia’s intentions for using its experience as ASEAN Chair to help ensure progress under the next chair in such areas as climate change, fishing in the South China Sea and strengthening ASEAN centrality, the Malaysian official said he was confident that many of its achievements will be carried forward by future ASEAN Chairs.


After the chair opened the session by saying that the panel would focus on what ASEAN has achieved, what has not been achieved and what it can do going forward, the first speaker began by emphasizing what is at stake for the U.S. in the EAS. The U.S. has been explicit in wanting to see the EAS be elevated as the region’s premier leaders-led forum for addressing political and security issues throughout the region. Doing so, the speaker continued, would mean giving the EAS a more concrete form and charging it with addressing specific deliverables. In the U.S. view, this transformation will produce concrete results and make it easier for U.S. leaders to justify the time committed to working with it. In addition, questions about the U.S. staying power in Asia continue to be recurrent, as well as questions about its long-term willingness to work closely with regional institutions. If the EAS can prove itself as an effective mechanism with clear and direct benefits in terms of U.S. priorities and agendas, doubts about the U.S. commitment to Asia will be neutralized. These considerations are all the more salient as the U.S. heads into its next election cycle. Overall, the Obama administration has shown it is committed to regional institutional engagement and is willing to adapt to regional feedback. Developing and deepening cooperation on areas of identified concerns is important, as well as developing different areas of cooperation in multilateral frameworks and within institutions. For its part, ASEAN has a tremendous stake in deepening and ensuring the future of US engagement. In that respect, it must also address questions about whether its ambitions regarding “ASEAN centrality” represent aspirations beyond the region’s institutional and political capacity.

Regarding the specific question of the EAS, the panelist continued, its viability ultimately rests on ASEAN maintaining some kind of neutrality from the specific agendas of the larger powers. That does not mean, however, that ASEAN should shy away from taking positions on areas that are perceived to be a challenge to the region; it just requires ASEAN to walk a fine line. If the EAS is to be the premier leaders summit in Asia, it will be necessary to maximize US-ASEAN cooperation within the EAS, but also overall U.S.-ASEAN-EAS cooperation. A transformed EAS of the future does not require an institutional cultural overhaul, but does imply giving serious attention to areas of common concern. Promising areas to focus on include transnational security issues, such as religious extremism, cyber security, transnational security, and regional maritime security cooperation. No doubt there are questions about ASEAN processes and whether they are equipped to facilitate consensus among the different parties. However, process is about more than just getting to intra-ASEAN consensus, but also about supporting the EAS framework through inclusive consultations with its eight non-ASEAN states. That is the major procedural challenge facing ASEAN that is now on the table, the panelist concluded.
The next speaker expressed continuing concern about the rapid internationalization of ASEAN quickly over the last decade that has made it strategically exposed. In other words, its agenda ambitions have surpassed its capacities. When looking for the balance between constructive internationalization and strategic exposure, it appears that the internationalization impetus is causing ASEAN to answer to and deal with countries with very divergent interests, which is pulling ASEAN and its members in different directions. Given the current geopolitics of the region, we will likely see more of this and not less. ASEAN straddles a second balance, one of being an arena in which far larger and more capable powers express their own norms, rules and values, and play out their political and economic agendas, and also being itself an actor in addressing such issues. ASEAN, given its location and the present-day regional geopolitics, is particularly susceptible to being used essentially as an arena and treated less as a serious actor. In sum, ASEAN seems to be losing its autonomy that it had five or six years ago.

Finding a balance between “ASEAN centrality” and the EAS becoming the premier forum, the speaker continued, suggests no easy answer. In any case all parties find it in their interest to continue to say they support ASEAN centrality. When it comes to strategic partnerships, it seems a stretch to include such issues as wildlife, fishing, and human trafficking. However, from the standpoint of functional differentiation, ASEAN may be the right place to pursue illegal fishing and trafficking, etc., but is certainly not the right place to deal with issues related to the Islamic State and macro security issues like the Iran nuclear agreement. It seems that global issues will be better addressed in the EAS.

Lastly, the panelist identified four important current trends. (1) The global and regional environment is producing increased contestation over rules, norms, values and institutions. For example, the TPP and the AIIB, which both reflect this change, each complicate ASEAN’s efforts to settle on its own vision for the future. (2) The geopolitical picture in Southeast Asia is once again quite complicated with Sino-Russia, Sino-India, Sino-Japan, Sino-China and other powerful actors now engaged and driving the contest over rules, values, and distribution of power. (3) The U.S. is strengthening bilateral relations with countries in the region, most recently with state visits to Washington by the leaders of India, Indonesia and South Korea. This trend towards bilateralism, combined with the return of geopolitics, makes the challenges to ASEAN a more complicated and difficult environment to navigate. And (4) there is the issue of the South China Sea, where the contestation is no longer over what ASEAN can do as an institution. We are past that in terms of U.S. and Chinese strategies, the panelist concluded: now the issue is how the U.S. and its allies on the one hand and China on the other, will deal with individual Southeast Asian countries on issues such as freedom of navigation and military capacity building efforts, etc.

The final speaker on this panel, in offering some general observations, pointed to the fact that Asia is currently experiencing a number of changes. Notably, there has been a recent power shift – Asia’s share of global GDP rose from 17% of total global GDP in 1950 to 40% today. Additionally, U.S. military expenditures were 18.5 times larger than China’s in 1995, while today they are only a third larger. Such changes and trend lines cannot be wished away. At the same time, we have also seen changes in the fast evolving Asian security ecosystem in such interconnected and overlapping areas as economic linkages, security architectures and domestic politics. For example, today we see that multilateral institutions far outnumber bilateral alliances.
Big powers like China, the U.S., Japan and India are players in both bilateralism and multilateralism. In terms of domestic politics, Asia is not a paradigm of democracy, but is more stable today because of economic growth and economic links like production networks and regional trade. In addition, Asia does not have as much of an ideological divide as many outside observers assume, especially if you compare the current environment to the Cold War. Moreover, the US is not changing China’s behavior in the same way that it did during the Cold War. The main current challenge for Asia is how these new realities can be managed through achieving positive changes in such areas as interdependence, institutional development, and domestic consolidation. Institutions matter, but they need to be strengthened. In this respect, the EAS requires a more solid structure and a better consultative process for setting its agenda. ASEAN centrality is not the same thing as being given a stake in the US agenda in East Asia.

The speaker then expressed agreement with the four points made by the previous panelist, and complimented the realistic comment that the internationalization of ASEAN has created burdens for it that are beyond its capacity to handle. Regarding the global regional nexus; there are many things ASEAN can do, not through ASEAN, but through its participation in global organizations. ASEAN countries can work within global organizations, especially on issues such as climate change. ASEAN is not the lead institution, but those global institutions have the capacity to deal with the issues and reduce ASEAN’s burden. Regrettably, ASEAN seems to be losing a bit of its autonomy and agency, and needs to stay united to deal with the new challenges. What, this panelist asked the previous one, are the policy implications and what can ASEAN do to deal with those that threaten its stability?

The previous speaker responded by saying first that the next few years will see a reprioritization of bilateral relations between the U.S. and Southeast Asia, especially during the coming election cycle and transition to a new administration. Secondly, in establishing a strategic partnership between them, the U.S. and ASEAN need both to work together on “deliverables” and to be assisted by increased outreach and a doubling of the budget. Third, ASEAN countries need to think carefully about which forms of international institutions and related forum they should associate with.

The first panelist emphasized the importance of ensuring that bilateral and multilateral arrangements pay attention to one other. For example China is pursuing multilateral as well as bilateral partnerships. ASEAN in this sense can be active in serving more as a facilitator than an arena in terms of helping build consensus on identifying the major issues on which the states should seek a unified position.

Discussion, Questions and Answers

From the floor one of the participants had three questions: (1) Is it correct to say that because of all its competing interests and other differences, the more ASEAN internationalizes, the more it unravels? (2) What does ASEAN think about the U.S. establishing a military force in the South China Sea, perhaps in the context of remilitarization of the Philippines? (3) Besides external challenges exposing some of ASEAN’s weakness, don’t they also offer lessons and opportunities? Each of the panelists responded. One commented on the third question by saying that, actually, if one looks historically at the institutional development of ASEAN, it is
punctuated by external challenges. The question is whether it can only react to the new developments or should be more proactive. Regarding the first question, the panelist said that ASEAN’s agenda needs to be constrained and less ambitious. Currently, the tendency is that every new leaders summit creates a new agenda or set of objectives, which sets the institution up for disappointment. Another panelist asserted that as ASEAN “broadens out” it will be put in more awkward situations it cannot control. Challenges are likely to increase because aspirant non-ASEAN players in the region are stronger and increasingly going to make claims on ASEAN. Regarding re-militarization, the speaker commented that the U.S. military presence in the Philippines could not be considered anything close to a massive American military force in the South China Sea. The U.S. has many ways to project power there that are not dependent on large military forces in the Philippines. As for ASEAN’s divisions into two tiers, within the next five years the divisions among the member states may look quite different than what we see today. The third panelist offered the comment that the TPP may have the effect of repelling countries away from regional arrangements and influence them to seek parallel arrangements, particularly given the fact that China and India, the two largest economies of Asia, are not part of the TPP. Asian security is a kind of overlapping interdependent ecosystem, where no single element can ensure security.

Session II: Strengthening the ASEAN Political-Security Community

The chair of this panel set the stage for the discussion by explaining that its focus would be on the management of disputes arising out of overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea from the perspectives of international law, regional cooperation, militarization and transnational security. Panelists were invited to address the central issue of how ASEAN can actively address political security challenges in the region without compromising its character and undermining its unity of purpose.

The first panelist focused on recent developments regarding China’s island building and what changes can be expected in the coming year. The speaker then showed aerial images of construction that has taken place since 2012 on Subi Reef, Mischief Reef and Fiery Cross Reef, three points of a “triangle” within which Chinese capabilities will be expanded. Though the Chinese Foreign Ministry in June said that reclamation and new construction have been completed, there are still reclamation activities taking place on the margins. Dredging and retaining walls are still being built, and we continue to witness the construction of dual-use facilities that can be used for both civilian and military purposes. On Mischief Reef, we have seen the laying down of a third airstrip and also a retaining wall put down. In addition, we have seen the establishment of concrete plants to support further construction. On Fiery Cross Reef there will be planes flying in and out any day now. We can argue about the ramifications, the panelist argued, but what is clear is that it is for military use. A three-kilometer airstrip is not needed for landing cargo planes or patrol aircraft; it is only needed for landing fighters and bombers. With these developments, China currently has the only airstrip really capable of military use in the South China Sea.

This panelist went on to address the Chinese assertion that it is not the first nation to engage in land reclamation in these waters. Vietnam and the Philippines did it in the 1970s and the Vietnamese have been active in this respect over the last ten years. However, all 29 of the land
features affected by Vietnamese activity over the course of the last 30 years have accounted for less than 10% of the land China has reclaimed in its seven features over the last 18 months. Also worth noting, the speaker stressed, is the clear legal distinction between expanding a rock formation and taking a submerged feature that doesn’t protrude above the water’s surface and turning it into an artificial island. Setting aside the legalities, the biggest concern for ASEAN is that tensions are inevitably going to rise in the face of exponentially greater patrol capabilities of Chinese military, naval and air forces operating in the South China Sea. Inevitably, we will witness increased run-ins between Philippine and Vietnamese fishermen and Chinese forces. In addition, increased harassment of oil and gas exploration carried out by non-Chinese business entities. In short, it will be impossible to maintain the status quo. The situation will deteriorate or, alternatively, ASEAN and China will have to reach agreement on some sort of long-term arrangement that will facilitate the managing of their relations in the South China Sea.

The next panelist focused on Malaysia’s national interests and where ASEAN fits into its foreign policy priorities. For starters, the speaker stressed, Malaysia is very proud to be serving as the 2015 ASEAN chair, wants to ensure the formalization of the ASEAN Community and, in general, considers ASEAN as a cornerstone of its foreign policy. At the same time it believes that ASEAN must itself address some important issues. First among those is to avoid being caught up in the predatory international environment and intervention by major powers, especially the Sino-US rivalry. Secondly, though – despite some domestic misgivings – it looks forward to engagement with free trade blocks, Malaysia also needs to tread carefully in the competitive international economic environment, so that the inevitable disputes do not end up dividing the nations of the Asia Pacific region. Third is the issue of ASEAN solidarity, or lack thereof, in resolving competing territorial claims in the South China Sea.

This speaker went on to offer “updates” on several contemporary security issues. He pointed out that in countering the spread of terrorist recruitment and activity within Malaysia, its police and security agencies have been very vigilant. Many arrests have been made and the police have been able to apprehend many activists supporting the Islamic State. A larger problem for Malaysia, however, is how to counter harmful teachings in Islamic education centers and religious schools. This problem is very difficult for a Muslim majority multiethnic country like Malaysia and controlling Islamic institutions is not easy, even if it is recognized that a great deal of costly surveillance of militant behavior will be required. Another problem that has been mentioned already is whether ASEAN has become over-extended. Malaysia itself is facing the same issue. For example, in the last few months, Saudi Arabia has been persistent in asking Malaysia to assist its operations in Yemen, a development that introduces a new spin in terms of the country’s engagement in counter terrorism. Similarly, regarding the capacity building efforts for Human Assistance Disaster Relief (HADR), there have been good discussions in the ASEAN region, but actual efforts so far have suggested that ASEAN will have difficulty in actually realizing its potential. Finally on the issue of the South China Sea, the question remains, how far is Malaysia willing to go in facing up to China? Thus far Malaysia has had no problems with the other claimant countries and has established five territorial entities of its own in the South China Sea. The Chinese have actively promoted military-to-military diplomacy with Malaysia. Concurrently, while Malaysia has participated in some small-scale naval exercises with other countries, it is still having internal discussion about how far to take such military cooperation with Beijing. Diplomatically, Malaysia believes that differences over South China Sea claims
should be handled according to the proposed code of conduct. Apart from its concerns in that area, Malaysia has put on the back burner its territorial issues with its neighbors, notably those raised by the Maritime Fulcrum Initiative declared by Indonesia.

The next speaker, participating over Skype, began by calling the South China Sea disputes ASEAN’s most challenging policy dilemma, because they have recently divided both ASEAN member states and the great powers. The claimants each have widely different security interests that are both individual and collective in nature. Thus, ASEAN faces serious impediments to operating consistently and with a fully unified approach. However, there still remain possibilities for differentiated yet common approaches. For example, transnational crime, addressed in the ASEAN political and security blueprint, is an area where ASEAN members – and their numerous civil society institutions – seem to be on the same page, while at the same time each is able to maintain and exercise its own sovereign approach to combating criminal behavior. Nuclear non-proliferation is an area where, ASEAN’s stance against nuclear weapons notwithstanding, increased technical assistance from outside is needed to help it monitor compliance with such international accords in which it is a party. The issue of Islamic extremism, a very sensitive topic, presents its own challenges due to doctrinal differences in the region’s Islamic populations. ASEAN’s member states have demonstrated interest in dealing with this issue, but are moving forward cautiously and cooperatively, putting emphasis on fostering greater information exchange and intelligence sharing. Lastly, on the issue of climate change, and dealing with natural disasters such as typhoons and tsunamis, the speaker suggested that ASEAN should more actively test its response systems and preparedness, and conduct risk management exercises.

The following panelist offered an ASEAN voice focused on Vietnam. It became an ASEAN member nation just twenty years ago and has deeply appreciated the institution’s capacity for building trust and enhancing cooperation, especially in helping manage regional tensions relating to potential crisis issues under the auspices of the political and security community. First, Vietnam sees ASEAN not so much as the vehicle for directly solving problems as for managing tensions through promoting trust and cooperation. Secondly, ASEAN has played an important role in focusing attention on economic development. And thirdly, ASEAN creates conditions for big powers to interact with each other, something it does better than other regional organizations. Despite those noteworthy achievements, the panelist continued, ASEAN is by no means problem free. How can the political and security community be strengthened? First, there needs to be continued international recognition of ASEAN-led institutions and their contributions to the security architecture and political order in Asia and the Pacific. In this respect, the concept of ASEAN centrality is enjoying greater support, notably from countries outside of the region. Secondly, existing arrangements and mechanisms should be improved, especially in the area of enhancing ASEAN’s ability to set the agenda for regional meetings. This objective, the panelist conceded, may represent a bit of “wishful thinking.” Lastly, ASEAN’s member countries want it to become more outcome-oriented, particularly on issues related to the South China Sea. In addition, the institution should strengthen its internal organs and give greater priority to its participation in the annual East Asia Summit.

Following on that presentation, the next panelist noted that there are many different approaches towards talking about how to manage the South China Sea, but the central question is how the
U.S., ASEAN and China can best interact in that area. We should begin by analyzing the nature of the escalation of the South China Sea dispute since 2009. Issues between the claimant states are driven by an old debate with old arguments revolving around not only territorial disputes but also the legal status of features such as rocks, low tide elevations and actual islands. In addition, there are other long-standing issues such as how to balance maritime rights authorized by the 1982 law of the sea convention and other maritime rights subsumed within general international law. We also see new dimensions in the South China Sea disputes. For instance, we see states using national legislation to consolidate their maritime claims and public campaigns to build international support for those claims. And the U.S., like other external players such as Japan and Australia, has been asserting its legitimate interest in freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. We hear a lot about China being more aggressive and whether it makes more sense for claimant countries to deal with it bilaterally, to rely on ASEAN or to should seek the involvement of international community. China may or may not be trying to divide the ASEAN countries over this issue, but it is clear that there are very different views within ASEAN on how best to move forward. Malaysia takes a low profile, while Vietnam and Philippines favor more direct action. The Philippines has even taken the matter to court and is seeking to sue China over its activities in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, countries like Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand are striving to maintain a balance between China and the U.S. Should we focus on ASEAN’s internal disagreements or on ASEAN playing a centrality role with respect to the South China Sea? Without directly answering that question, the panelist went on to describe divergent views on maritime strategy by the U.S. and China. The first divergence is on maritime interest and strategy. China is focused more on territorial disputes, maritime jurisdictions and safeguarding sea lines communication, with emphasis on exploiting marine resources and safeguarding its maritime rights and interests. On the other hand, the U.S. strategy is focused mainly on freedom of navigation, concerns about China’s growing development of its naval forces and air interdiction capabilities, and further consolidation of its alliances in Southeast Asia. In essence, it wants to maintain its dominant sea power position. The second main divergence is how the two countries interpret particular provisions of the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention. In examining the negotiation history of that convention one sees clearly that coastal states are typically focused on the “Mare Clausum” doctrine while user states are focused on “Mare Liberum.” In the context of the South China Sea, the real issues between China and the U.S. revolve around how to interpret “freedom of navigation.” China always says it supports freedom of navigation, which is obviously important for all stakeholders in the South China Sea, but the core issue is whether military activity is to be included with the concept of freedom of navigation. Moreover, it is clear that different navigation regimes are appropriate for different maritime zones. The third divergence is that the U.S. and China have different legal cultures. What is the most appropriate way to solve maritime disputes – through negotiation, mediation, or third party arbitration. Though some say that China doesn’t like going to court or arbitration panels, it often uses the WTO dispute resolution mechanism. However, when talking about territorial disputes, it is difficult to leave issues to be decided by third party bodies. What is China’s perspective on the U.S. role in relations between China and ASEAN? The U.S. claims it doesn’t take sides on territorial disputes, but it does do just that when it advocates the position claimant states should take in terms of addressing these issues. In this context, what is the future of ASEAN-China-US relations in the South China Sea context? What’s the real obstacle to reaching a solution? The parties need to figure out how to implement a joint development regime and settle on the role of third party forums. For its part, China should share environment impact
assessments with other states. The proper U.S. role is a question for debate, but perhaps it should seriously consider leaving the responsibility for addressing the maritime dispute to the claimant states. For China it is important to find convergence on interests rather than to focus on the divergence of interests. In concluding, the panelist urged all the parties to be more creative and be ready to change their ways of thinking about these issues.

The next panelist began by noting that security in the South China Sea is a multi-dimensional concern. Beyond the specific maritime and territorial disputes, there are other challenges to regional security, such as natural disasters, fishing, illicit trafficking, etc. At present it appears that the region lacks capabilities for maintaining awareness of what is going on in the waters and for sharing information not only among countries but also domestically within its own agencies. No single country can address these challenges alone, so it is important to take a regional approach. ASEAN has demonstrated seriousness in addressing these challenges through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Maritime Forum, and the multilateral ASEAN Regional Forum, which includes countries outside of Southeast Asia like Japan, China, Russia, the U.S., Australia and New Zealand. These activities help countries foster habits of cooperation and develop best practices. On the military side, there is the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus, as well as the Western Pacific Naval Symposium, which involves most ASEAN member states. The U.S. has been a major participant in these types of efforts, which it views as being within the construct of the present-day regional security architecture. In an effort to expand the scope of the ASEAN Maritime Forum, the U.S. has led key initiatives alongside ASEAN partners in the areas of security and safety training. In addition, since 2012 the U.S. has co-chaired the Annual Maritime Security Meeting at the ASEAN Regional Forum. Those sessions take an inter-agency approach to security challenges in the region, with considerable attention given to non-traditional security issues. Also, under the ASEAN Regional Forum, at the August Foreign Ministers meeting in Kuala Lumpur a landmark statement on marine conservation was signed by 27 countries, further demonstrating that such environmental concerns are intrinsically linked to security issues. All these activities give strong evidence that despite some tensions in the South China Sea, the region is also taking important strides forward in the area of security-related cooperation. With so many initiatives and projects taking place, there have been instances of a lack of proper coordination or of avoidance of repeating what has already been done. Thus, the panelist stressed, it is essential that ASEAN show leadership in helping streamline and establish priorities for what is most important for the region. Malaysia is in a unique position and has the potential to fill this above role, as does Indonesia.

Comments, questions and answers

The first question was spurred by the comment of one panelist who said that ASEAN is not a vehicle for reaching solutions in difficult areas such as the South China Sea, but rather a body primarily useful for building trust through creating a favorable context for claimants to talk to each other. In response, one speaker said an enhanced regional response is clearly needed, but added that, despite ASEAN’s past contributions to confidence building, it may currently lack the capacity to deal with those issues. For example, Malaysia does not want to have a military incident with China, and recognizes that should one occur, its forces are currently ill prepared to handle such a situation. ASEAN would be needed as a vehicle of some sort. Another panelist agreed that ASEAN members are so different from one another, so it is difficult to find a single
unified solution on this issue. Any expectation that ASEAN should act like some kind of super body is unrealistic, given its composition and competing interests. In this respect it needs prudently to keep its feet on the ground.

The next area for discussion dealt with what China seeks from ASEAN in the context of the South China Sea. The panelist most concerned with this question said that China essentially wants to resolve the problems directly with the claimant states, with ASEAN serving as a confidence building vehicle that facilitates solutions to be reached in their own fashion by ASEAN and China. Is there a role for the U.S., the chair asked? One panelist responded by saying that the U.S. has a clear right to express its opinions about how oceans are managed and about actions taken in the region that may be contrary to international law. Another panelist added that although the U.S. Senate has not ratified the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), U.S. naval forces operate according to its provisions. Yet another panelist commented that China has its own unique way of interpreting UNCLOS and tends to announce policies affecting Southeast Asia – such as the AIIB and the One Belt One Road initiative – unilaterally and outside existing regional mechanisms. These actions suggest that China is not really supportive of the concept of ASEAN centrality and therefore raise questions as to how much it can be trusted.

A member of the audience asked a three-part question: where the name “Mischief Reef” came from; if it was true that when visiting the White House Xi Jinping said China would not make military use of its features in the Spratlys; what paramilitary use could China make of its huge armed fishing boats? Focusing mainly on the second question, the panelist who had been directly queried said there is currently a heated debate about what the capabilities of these features are, as well as about the broader question of militarization. China has continued to say that it will place military assets in the area only for defensive purposes and that we shouldn’t expect to see fighter jets or bombers on these features. However, just the fact that the potential is there should be noted, and there is great worry that the situation could escalate into conflict. Among the ASEAN countries, only the Vietnamese have the capacity to operate in the Spratlys. Another panelist commented that a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson has said that Chinese activities in the South China Sea are a public service related to environmental protection and search and rescue, and that unless it fears it is threatened or insecure in the area, it won’t militarize.

Another questioner asked if the U.S. can be expected to increase the number of maritime security drills with ASEAN countries, as it has done with Japan and India, as a way of sending a message to China. A panelist responded by saying that there is already a great deal of military training involving Southeast Asian countries, with major naval exercises such as the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise scheduled for next summer, focused on improving cooperation to avoid incidents at sea. Another panelist said that while the U.S. has a large role to play in terms of enhancing maritime security capabilities, China has increasing concerns about “negative legal implications” in the responses of other countries to its land reclamation activities in the South China Sea. Regarding the last point, another panelist asserted that the U.S. policy of supporting the basic principles of UNCLOS is very much in line with that followed by the ASEAN member countries.
The above exchange led into a lively discussion of China’s U-shaped “9 dash line,” the historical map basis for its claim in the South China Sea. Reflecting the Chinese official position one panelist said that within the U-shaped line China claims sovereignty only over features according to general principles of international law and based on its historical fishing presence. Another panelist, referring to the court filing of the Philippines protesting China’s actions in areas to which it is a claimant, said that among the many specific claims in its suit the most important one is against the legality of the 9-dash line. Assuming a favorable decision on the 9-dash line, the panelist continued, ASEAN will gain more confidence in responding to Chinese provocations. Whether or not that outcome would bring ASEAN closer together is a big question, but it’s a real possibility. A panelist asserted that the 9-dash line is unacceptable to ASEAN claimant states, the U.S. and other regional actors, such as Japan and Australia, because of the fundamental challenge it poses to UNCLOS. The notion that the 9-dash line is just about the islands and the adjacent waters, and that beyond the line China is only claiming traditional fishing rights, has been shown to be simply not true. The heart of the matter lies in clarifying the meaning and status of the 9-dash line. The panelist in this discussion repeated the point that China wants to see the issues resolved bilaterally – without involving outside actors and “international stakeholders” – through negotiated compromises in talks with Vietnam and other claimant countries.

Luncheon Keynote Address

The symposium’s keynote address was presented by a senior State Department official. He began by commenting that forums hosted by American University like this one play an important role in Washington’s policy dialogue.

Expressing the U.S. Government’s gratitude for Malaysia’s “phenomenal job” thus far in serving as ASEAN Chair, he commented that during this important year for the institution it will inaugurate the ASEAN Economic Community, which will have a real-world, tangible impact on businesses in the U.S. and other countries. 2015 also marks a new phase for ASEAN, as it charts its vision for the years ahead. In addition, this is the 10th anniversary of the East Asia Summit, a young organization still deciding on its future directions.

What does ASEAN want to achieve? ASEAN was founded on the basis of a common desire to prevent conflict and focus on peace, stability, and economic growth. Since then ASEAN has achieved success beyond its initial goals. It has doubled in size, increased the quality of life for its citizens, and witnessed impressive economic achievements. Now it is moving to a new developmental phase affecting both its internal operations and its role in the region. Beyond focusing on fostering peace and stability in Southeast Asia and allowing its member countries to grow and develop economically, it has become an essential stabilizing factor in the entire Asia-Pacific region. There are many vibrant, inclusive institutions like APEC that promote trade deals, investment and other positive economic outcomes, but the region has long suffered from the lack of a single institution that can bring top leaders together and address security issues. ASEAN is currently playing this role and will continue to play this central role in the coming years.
The East Asia Summit is now an important focus of U.S. attention, and big plans are in place to try to push forward its institutionalization when the meeting is held in Kuala Lumpur in mid-November. The U.S. sees the EAS as allowing the very top leaders of regional countries to get together to discuss strategic issues. There has never been anything of this magnitude to handle political-security issues. And the numbers and importance of such issues are increasing. The countries of the region now need to settle on the specific issues of common concern to which they want to give priority and are prepared to work on together. The list is long, and includes not only the maritime issues now being discussed but also cyber security, global terrorism, trafficking in persons, drugs/narcotics, and wildlife and forestry preservation. The EAS can be an excellent forum for discussing these issues and laying the groundwork for response strategies. We must also find ways to come to agreement on principles and real-world solutions.

The EAS began last year to take on a bigger role when the leaders adopted statements on timely, current issues that have been challenging the world and the region. The threat of foreign terrorist fighters from Iraq and Syria was recognized to be not only a global problem, but also a problem in Southeast Asia. Now the EAS should consider such steps as encouraging the UN Security Council to take actions that counter terrorist threats and adopting a statement on the threat of Ebola raging in West Africa. Wherever possible ASEAN and the EAS – and other regional institutions – should speak with one voice to address global issues and be prepared to share lessons learned among one another.

There have been several good signs of the EAS’s institutional evolution. An example of its incremental progress is seen in the fact that the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting adopted a statement on the Iran Nuclear deal, two weeks after the deal was struck. Additionally, though it was not a publicly highlighted event, ASEAN ambassadors in Jakarta met together to follow up on last year’s EAS statement on foreign terrorist fighters and combatting ISIL and shared with one another what each country is doing to meet its commitments. Significantly, the meeting of ambassadors to ASEAN in the format of EAS demonstrated the slow but steady evolution of EAS and its ability to be flexible in responding to current events. It is essential that the EAS remain nimble and not get bogged down in endless meetings and reports. There are plenty of institutions that do fantastic work, including many within the ASEAN umbrella. The EAS stands out as being a gathering at the leaders’ level, so it must be flexible enough to address the highest-priority concerns of its member countries, such as those related to the South China Sea. In addition, as the premier forum for tackling political and security issues, the EAS can serve as a guide for other regional discussions, such as those of the ADMM Plus.

At the center of all these efforts is ASEAN. Sometimes questions are raised as to where ASEAN’s real focus should be. Everyone recognizes that providing opportunities for growth and economic development is its number one imperative, but whether ASEAN likes it or not, it is also playing a bigger role in the region as a stabilizing factor. This development is good for the region and good for ASEAN. Though new challenges may threaten to pull ASEAN apart from within and create dissent, the U.S. and other outside dialogue partners must make sure all parties remain focused on supporting ASEAN unity and centrality. The more united ASEAN is, the more the other regional institutions are, and that outcome creates peace and stability for the benefit of all.
**Question and answer session**

Q: Will the U.S. take action to confirm that China’s island construction in the South China Sea is not in alignment with UNCLOS by sending ships within 12 nautical miles to assert the right of free navigation there?

A: I can’t comment on specific operations, but freedom of navigation is a universal principle of international law that benefits everyone. China’s ambiguous claims in the South China Sea are one of the main reasons we’ve recently had tensions there. We don’t know what China is claiming, they have not made it clear, though we’ve encouraged them to do so. The U.S. will continue to abide by UNCLOS in our actions and to support international law. We’ve encouraged all claimants to clarify their claims. The parties involved should use the ASEAN summit to push for diplomatic actions related to the South China Sea.

Q: Can you give us any clues as to what the U.S. would like to see happen at the EAS in terms of maritime security?

A: It should be no surprise what the U.S. will be focused on at the EAS. It wants to see a halt to activities, mainly construction in outposts, and the militarization of outposts. The U.S. welcomes the statement by Xi Jinping that China does not need to militarize outposts. The U.S. is focused on behavior. To find diplomatic solutions, there must be a stop to any bad behavior in the South China Sea. This will be our push with China and ASEAN partners. In addition there should be some sort of ongoing institution to deal with regional crises as they come up and a code of conduct should be established. We cannot understand why it should take 13 years to negotiate and push forward such a document, but we’re not expecting a lot. That is part of the reason why the U.S. encourages all nations to stop bad behavior first. We can’t wait until there is a 100% solution on the code of conduct matter in order to agree now on ending bad behavior. We’re working closely with Malaysia and other countries, but it would be premature to outline the details. We look on the EAS as a forum for dialogue and a forum for identifying and prioritizing the most important political and security issues. As we move forward, what are the issues that demand the greatest attention? Maritime security, cyber security, trafficking, others? The other big question involves mechanisms. How can we best use institutions like EAS to forge solutions to difficult regional problems? The EAS needs to establish policy directions and mechanisms that push the process forward without over-bureaucratizing with endless meetings and achieving little progress.

Q: What does the US-ASEAN strategic partnership include and what is left out?

A: The U.S. and ASEAN see it as doing three things. First, codifying efforts that started during the past six and a half years of this administration, in which we joined the EAS, appointed an ambassador for ASEAN, started having annual leaders’ summits, committed to annual meetings and otherwise made good on our commitments. Second, establishing new benchmarks and goals to deepen the relationship and achieve details, programmatic impact, in a manner complementary to ASEAN’s work in looking toward its own post-2015 vision. And third, renegotiating a new 5-year plan for future U.S.-ASEAN cooperation.
Q: What are U.S. strategic interests in the region other than with allies?

A: The region’s present peace and stability have benefitted everybody. This reality has been due to many factors, but the U.S. military presence has provided the underpinning for regional stability, freedom of the seas, and the growth of multilateral institutions that have brought progress and improvement in the quality of life for millions across the region. Few have benefitted more than China from the U.S. presence that has brought peace and order in the Asia-Pacific. Our strategy is aimed at continuing that peace and stability and prosperity and being able to adapt to a new world that continues to ensure those outcomes. The rebalance, the TPP, trade agreements such as FTAs and measures to stimulate economic growth are all reshaping the region and advance U.S. as well as regional interests. As East Asia continues its high level of growth and quality of life, it must adapt to new security challenges and changing political dynamics. In short, the U.S. is doubling down on our role in the region.

Q: Though this administration recognizes ASEAN’s importance and has supported it over the past seven years, what can we expect under a new administration and beyond? Will we still be talking about the U.S. rebalancing and engaging ASEAN in a deeper way?

A: The best answer I can offer is to point out that the current rebalance policy has very strong bipartisan support. That support is visible in a variety of areas. On the Hill, Congressmen and Senators across the board have demonstrated increasing interest in Southeast Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific region. There is great attention to fast-changing contemporary facts on the ground in Asia, compelling factors that will continue to ensure a strong U.S. multifaceted role in the region.

Session III: Inaugurating and consolidating the ASEAN Economic Community

To get this session started the chair pointed out that the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) will be consolidated at the end of 2015 and the coming year is expected to see the conclusion of both the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and promised an exploration of how, and with what regional impact, these various developments would evolve and interact with one another.

The first panelist provided a Malaysian perspective on these developments, first commenting that the conclusion of the TPP is a very timely development, because it will connect ASEAN with a very large integrated market. It is also important that in 2007 ASEAN set the forthcoming December 2015 deadline for establishing the AEC. This achievement will enable ASEAN to collectively respond to issues that arise and to deepen regional economic integration through its market-opening provisions. Notably, the region has become open to MNCs, including American companies, whose products and services are particularly popular with Southeast Asia’s younger population. Moreover, significant increases in foreign direct investment (FDI), amounting to $136 billion last year, have been very encouraging. The AEC has already transformed ASEAN into an important global entity. GDP increased to $4000+ in 2013, total trade increased by 50%, and the volume of inter-ASEAN trade also increased significantly. In 2007 the AEC was launched on this journey. We can see changes everywhere. For example, low-cost airlines now employ more than 10,000 people and local banks have branches all over ASEAN. The next 10-
15 years will be critical. ASEAN should plan to keep costs low through systematic economic integration and thereby make it an attractive region for global investment. Regional integration does not come easily, the panelist said, and it is unlikely that we will see 100% achievement of the AEC’s ambitious goals. Over the next ten years ASEAN should continue to encourage member states to avoid protectionist policies, to establish stronger communication processes, to encourage participation by regional partners, to support regional integration, and to pay special attention to micro-medium enterprises. The AEC has allowed ASEAN member countries to engage with regional players like China, Japan, India and Australia, to spearhead the formation of the RCEP and to enhance overall competitiveness. Now that the TPP was signed by the ASEAN nations of Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam on October 5, 2015, we need to look to next steps. Once the TPP is fully ratified and implemented, Malaysia will be able to actively pursue new markets such as in Mexico and Peru. Once the full text of the agreement comes out, there will be much more to say on this subject.

The next panelist began by commenting that unlike the fireworks that celebrated the EU’s watershed establishment of a single European market in 1992, the official implementation of the AEC at midnight on December 31, 2015, will not produce a similar big bang. Instead it will represent the start of an evolutionary process aimed at bringing all ASEAN member tariffs down to zero. Now the major issue on the table is the agenda of AEC post-2015: i.e., market access and the movement of people, services and goods beyond borders. In addition, institutions must strengthen their processes post-2015 and a high-level task force should look toward a future where ASEAN institutions have the capacity to deal with pressing issues. In fact, there are thousands of issues that are supposed to be handled by ASEAN representatives in Jakarta, but the required mechanisms and confidence building measures have yet to be seen. At the ASEAN summit in Kuala Lumpur, the member countries are expected to begin the process of developing an ASEAN integration 5-year plan. Unlike the EU, ASEAN has little money, but it does have an infrastructural support program and the support of donor countries. This process will get under way after the November summit. The outcome of this planning process will be important for Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia, as well as for the membership application of Timor Leste, whose accession talks hopefully will start next year. With Laos set to become chair of ASEAN in 2016, the concern is that it is such a small country, much smaller than Cambodia or Myanmar. However, like in Myanmar’s chairmanship year, the hard issues will be handled by the ASEAN Secretariat. The focus will be on strengthening institutions and less on security, given that Laos, unlike Malaysia, has no maritime access. ASEAN should be concentrating on encouraging wider public interest in matters important to its community. The TPP and RCEP are not the only games in town; in the coming months there will also be the European Union FTA talks with Vietnam and Singapore and rejuvenated FTA talks with ASEAN as a whole. If the elections in Myanmar go right, then region-to-region FTAs will increase. All in all, Vietnam is on a winning streak, poised to benefit from membership in the TPP, RCEP, the AEC and the EU trade agreement. That, the panelist concluded, is ASEAN in a broader perspective.

The next panelist focused on the interplay of the various recent market-opening developments, beginning by pointing out that as a major international trade agreement the TPP can have a strong influence on the dynamics of the AEC process. At the same time countries not in the TPP may say it will have a divisive impact on the region, while the four TPP ASEAN countries will also benefit from the RCEP in what is expected to be a period of slower growth of the global
economy. In that respect, the world is waiting for the Federal Reserve to hike interest rates. These larger issues are not necessarily having a big impact on ASEAN processes, but they have produced an important moment for the World Trade Organization (WTO). Some say that the TPP is almost a death knell for the WTO as we have known it, particularly because the U.S. is no longer supporting the WTO Doha Round as a single undertaking, but is now comfortable with multilateral trade agreements. The 21st century TPP agreement will strengthen linkages for the ASEAN four TPP countries by becoming a catalyst for putting in rules for the next generation of business models, no matter what their origination. Each of the four countries and all members of TPP will still keep on with the nonconforming measures, phase-in periods, and other conditions that they insisted on during the negotiating process. Now, what does the TPP mean for the six non-TPP members? Essentially, it has sparked fear that they will be left out, especially in Indonesia. Indonesia remains the fundamental factor in the success of the AEC process. In post-2015, the ASEAN private sector will take on a greater role in influencing agendas and we can anticipate more government-business interaction for investment and infrastructure connectivity and closing development gaps. One of ASEAN’s priorities should be on building a framework of freer movement of network information. Under the RCEP the Japanese have proposed a chapter on e-commerce that would involve all 10 ASEAN countries. It can be hoped that consensus may be building for supporting previously untapped electronics ecommerce, startups and venture capital communities, the future Googles, the Ubers of the world that are just starting to bubble up in Southeast Asia. External forces can produce positive feedback loops. For example, once the TPP goes into force ASEAN’s single window experience may influence the TPP’s evolution just as the TPP is acting as a catalyst for the AEC evolution process.

The next speaker began with an exposition of what the RCEP has in store for the region, first noting that by including all 10 ASEAN countries plus six FTA partners, it embraces 30% of global trade, compared to 40% for the TPP. Since first proposed it has expanded its scope to include intellectual property rights, e-commerce, rules of origins, customs and standards — all issues already addressed in the TPP. The overall goal of the RCEP is to bring coherence to the different existing FTAs, so that companies operating in and between multiple countries can have seamless movement with respect to supply chains, customs, and ease of doing business. U.S. investors in RCEP companies should see real benefits. When the RCEP negotiators met in August they declared that they would be able to reach final agreement by the end of this year, but that is not credible, as there remains much work to be done. The next round is in February 2016, with perhaps two more to come after that. Comparing the TPP and RCEP, one can see that the RCEP negotiations are slower, as they involve much greater diversification of countries. Singapore moves fast, but India and Indonesia tend to drag their feet. Moreover all 10 ASEAN countries have to agree on positions before they are taken to the other six parties. The range of affected economies runs from Laos to Japan. Meanwhile the talks are overshadowed by political disputes in Northeast Asia and the unfamiliar presence of India in the mix. The Petersen Institute of International Economics has done computer modeling on how much countries will benefit from the TPP and RCEP. Such research could give Indonesia and other countries incentives to move forward faster. According to their findings, Vietnam’s GDP will go up 36% under the TPP over the next 10 years, and if RCEP negotiations are successful, that would bring its total to 45%.
Comments, questions and answers

The first comment concerned the fact that the TPP has an investment component that not only makes it more than just a trade agreement but also sets rules for investment across borders and behind-the-border facets and will set standards for all other agreements. In this respect the heavy lifting of the TPP has opened the way forward for both the RCEP and the AEC. In response one of the panelists commented that the U.S. has been at the forefront of trade modernization via the TPP, while the RCEP represents a consolidation of AEC aspirations. Political issues holding back progress within ASEAN do not relate to democracy so much as to how governments function. Brunei and Vietnam are not democracies, but their governments are efficient. It depends on the competency of the government to pull off what is required to make progress in crossing thresholds and achieving capacity building levels need to meet the TPP’s high bar.

Another panelist pointed out that although the TPP obligations are very demanding and probably well above current capabilities of some ASEAN members, that fact does not imply that the RCEP itself has to follow in the TPP’s footsteps.

A questioner in the audience asked if the TPP would make its members so much more competitive in securing FDI that China might come running to join the TPP or do something else. In response, one of the panelists noted that China’s attitude toward the TPP have changed considerably from four years ago, when they viewed the TPP as a means to contain China. They no longer talk about that, but instead are actively engaging the TPP players. The country pushing hardest for a RCEP statement in August in Kuala Lumpur was China. China recognizes that it will lose to Vietnam in the garment competition, so is expanding operations in Vietnam to take advantage of the changed conditions. The TPP rules of origins will allow China to do this. At the APEC summit, China pushed for the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) agreement, showing that it recognizes the importance of being present at the beginning and does not want to get left behind. China is watching developments carefully and will look for ways to cover its losses, but the same cannot be said for India.

In response to a questioner who asked why the U.S. chose to invest so much in the TPP, when estimates of benefits to it appear to be quite modest, a panelist said that for the U.S. the TPP is much more than a trade agreement. Instead, it is far more a geopolitical agreement to get the U.S. involved in the Asia-Pacific region beyond more than just the security and politics focus. In that respect it serves as the economic leg of the rebalance of Asia strategy.

The next questioner wondered why the next APEC forum, also scheduled for November, has not been mentioned and asked if it is no longer such a big event. A panelist replied that APEC is still very relevant for business communities in the Asia Pacific and they use it to push governments in areas of importance to them, while the chair pointed out that the TPP agreement requires membership in APEC, which as another panelist noted, leaves out India, which still has not made up its mind about the TPP and APEC or even what it might want from the RCEP.

An important question left unanswered from one of the panelists was, if ASEAN countries that join both the TPP and RCEP are going to reap big trading benefits from the fact that China is not in the TPP, what can be done to aid the non-TPP ASEAN countries?
The next questioner asked what domestic problems do Malaysia and Vietnam face in getting the TPP ratified. One panelist commented that probably the Malaysian prime minister would be able to prevail despite all the criticism he has received, while a member of the audience commented that ratification in Vietnam is “reform 2.0” - i.e., definitely in the interest of Vietnam’s textile industry, which will benefit greatly from China-Vietnam joint ventures. To these comments a panelist added that Malaysia and Vietnam should take pains to explain the benefits of the TPP to other ASEAN countries, especially in such areas as services, high tech industries and e-commerce.

**Session IV: Building a People-Centered ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community**

The first panelist began his remarks by commenting that civil society institutions throughout Southeast Asia have long complained that ASEAN is an elite-driven, top-down institution that pays little attention to the attitudes and desires of the general public. Consequently, he went on, not many people are excited about it, and you cannot talk about it if there is no interest. People have to buy-in for the communities to work. This socio-cultural pillar offers a good statement, but it raises worries. Being people-centered is not natural to ASEAN. What is being people-centered? Admitting to being government-led, people-centered ASEAN would probably be a better idea. From the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the idea really was “people, community, and vision.” But nobody knows what that means. On the ground, most people feel they should be told how to be led, but the government says it wants the people to play a role. From the perspective of civil society in ASEAN that has always wanted more public involvement, people are confused as to what this new rhetoric actually means. It is important for people to be part of the process and have a buy-in, or it will be difficult to achieve ASEAN’s objectives. Yes, bring the conversation to the community and people level. The issues discussed so far today do not relate to people at all. Events in the South China Sea do not have a direct impact on the lives of the people. You affect people by creating more jobs and better their lives. ASEAN has a combined GDP of $2.7 trillion, but half of the population is below 30 years old. Yes, there’s a consumer boom and a communications boom. The prospects of job employment are great. Micro and SMEs constitute about 88% of enterprises in ASEAN, employment is 52-97% across the region, output is 23-58% of ASEAN GDP, 10-30% are exports. These figures suggest economic benefits to a lot of people in ASEAN, but there are still many underperforming sectors. The big guys can easily cross borders, but the small guys still cannot do so. ASEAN has done little to help the small guys, but those people will have a direct impact on ASEAN. Security-political issues, like the South China Sea, do not affect the majority of the population, but peace processes affect people. Individuals in the ASEAN countries are starting to get together to address these issues. If ASEAN wants to involve people on issues, then it should push its people-centered agenda forward and not just address the other two pillars.

The next panelist began by asserting that in the year since the last symposium in this series, it seems that while this socio-cultural pillar has taken many steps backward, it shouldn’t be treated as an ASEAN Community stepchild. Yes, everything said so far at the symposium has been that ASEAN remains in the hands of the elites and doesn’t affect the people. What’s the role of ASEAN on the issue of migration and refugees? Where’s ASEAN in the plight of the Rohingyas? What about human security, social justice and human rights? What we need to do more of is honestly look at what has been happening throughout the year and where does
ASEAN fall within it. What does ASEAN do for me? We have failed to answer that very important question to the people of Southeast Asia. ASEAN is a great venue for meetings and spreading the word, but what is ASEAN doing about questions coming from public? Those are usually answered with a statement that such concerns will be discussed at the next meeting, but no actions will be taken. There is a confusion of “our people, our community, our vision.” Which people, what community, which vision? Who is ours? What is going to happen at the next summit? Will you still have a government? Indonesia is the “leader” of ASEAN, wait, we are? Under Jokowi, is ASEAN a cornerstone, or the cornerstone? There’s a failure to address some of the issues under all of the pillars that impact people most. We are told that if the U.S. and ASEAN will work together, there will be a positive impact on people, but we need more open discussion on these issues. If we can’t be frank about the problems, how are we going to come up with solutions? If migration and the haze issue are too sensitive to talk about, then why should we care? Even though South China Sea issues are important, we've been tackling them for years, with still no light at the end of the tunnel.

The following panelist asked if 2015 has been a good year for ASEAN, answering the question by stating that from the perspective of those choking on the ground from the haze and other problems, it really has not been a good year for the socio-cultural community. The speaker went on to contextualize some of the realities facing those who make up the socio-cultural community. We cannot talk about migration (economics, labor, or human right aspects) or the trans-boundary haze problem because those are “political and security” issues. Under the socio-cultural pillar, the priorities are articulated in national plans or the national development agenda of ASEAN member states. According to one measure ASEAN country performance on the human development index has risen steadily in the last 10 years. The best record is by Singapore at #9, with Myanmar coming in at #150. The rest of the members are in the mid to lower levels. We need to highlight the widening gap between the highest and lowest performers. National governments should to implement what has been agreed to by involving people in participatory talks on the sources of such problems. In other words, to put people-centered initiatives to work, the ASCC necessitates engagement with people beyond the elite echelons. In a diplomatic ASEAN, emphasis is put on explaining ASEAN to the publics, while in a participatory, cosmopolitan ASEAN people should be able to express their own opinions on what is being done to their lives. ASEAN needs most resources for capacity building. It’s a national responsibility for all member states.

The next panelist suggested that the search for a truly people-centered ASEAN is futile, because the governments would never take such a goal seriously. The argument was presented along these lines: This notion of a people-centered ASEAN sounds nice, even refreshing, but it’s not realizable. People-centered implies several assumptions, such as that sovereignty resides with the people or that ASEAN must take positions that affect the livelihoods of people. To conceptualize this, ASEAN must accept people’s sovereignty, let the people decide on the exercise of power even to the point of having a say over centralized power. The assumption is that in the end it is the people, not the government, that know what is good for them. This perspective suggests a bottom-up approach, with civil society playing an important role. On the other hand, ASEAN governments want to be able to make binding decisions and don’t want to delegate powers to supranational bodies. Only binding decisions will affect the livelihoods of people and those making the decisions that benefit the people’s interests must have binding authority. There is no
hope for a people-centered community, because ASEAN will not go in that direction. Put simply, the concept would have to be conceptualized and operationalized in a certain way, but the governments don’t want to concede power. Another problem is this idea of “community.” Is ASEAN a community? ASEAN is not a community, but an inter-governmental organization. “ASEAN community” is just a hype. The strength of ASEAN lies in the inter-governmental association; it provides diplomatic efforts and economic frameworks, and preserves the peace. These can all be done without it being a community. In the ASEAN blueprint, nowhere does it say what it means to be a community. Nobody really knows what an ASEAN Community means. Most countries are in the process of forming national communities, but they are not successful. Malaysia, after 50 years of independence, still has many issues. It has centralized power and does not want to delegate its power. This posture is not conducive to forming a community. Still, we have to recognize that ASEAN has done certain things well, but only as inter-governmental organization, not as a community. ASEAN is a useful cow, but it is not a horse. The more we think of it as a horse, the more we will be disappointed. It doesn’t have to be a community to be successful. We should let it do well what it can do and not trap it in its troubles.

Comments, questions and answers

A participant asked the panel to identify areas where initiatives by outside partners had been helpful in this area of the ASEAN agenda. One panelist said that with political development in Asia currently at a standstill, if not sliding backward, there is little to be done that doesn’t sound like preaching, which can have a negative effect. Another suggested targeted program involving certain groups, such as university undergrads, to raise awareness of ASEAN and the Southeast Asia region more generally. That panelist also pointed to public opinion polling results indicating that while Myanmar respondents view the U.S. as the leader of democracy and human rights, publics in Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia tend to consider it as neo-imperialist and suggested that more research on this subject is needed.

Another member of the audience opined that education is the stepchild of the socio-cultural pillar, even though it serves important economic and political functions, and is the source of community building through the discussion of issues and fostering an inclusive sense of belonging. More emphasis should be placed, the speaker continued, on English-language learning, delivering education to remote regions and other explicit deliverables. One of the panelists responded by saying that this area is where the U.S. can make a useful contribution, adding that more should be done at the local community level to create ASEAN awareness. Another participant pointed out that the State Department YSEALI (Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative) program is aimed at building people-centered relationships through fostering interactions among promising future leaders in ASEAN countries.

A panelist at an earlier session says that debates over terminology like “community” and “association” have their place, but our major concern should be on what is happening in the region – for example, the return of geopolitics, bilateral rivalries, U.S.-China competition, all of which suggest we have entered a new phase after the end of the Cold War. Southeast Asia used to get little attention in Washington, but now it gets a great deal. The concept of “ASEAN
centrality” was coined in Washington, not in ASEAN. This kind of statement is not helpful, because it sets high expectations. ASEAN should be “downsized.”

Other comments from the floor followed. One participant said that one only needs to travel in present day Southeast Asia to conclude that the discussion has been too hard on the socio-cultural community, calling the social progress a remarkable achievement. A panelist who had been critical of this community repeated the point that the major achievements to be attributed to ASEAN itself have been due to actions taken by individual national governments.

Final comments were offered by a panelist who said that China’s emergence on the scene has greatly increased Southeast Asia’s relevance and that it is valuable that symposiums like the current one offer an opportunity to talk about issues within ASEAN that the governments themselves don’t like to address.

**Summary and Wrap-up**

The chair of the final-session summarized highlights of the proceedings by first noting that the U.S. views the EAS as the region’s premier security forum, one that offers rich opportunities for addressing not only South China Sea issues but also trafficking, logging, fishing, and global concerns like terrorism and climate change. It wants the EAS to become institutionalized but also to remain nimble and flexible. The U.S. understands the current strains on ASEAN’s unity, but considers it as its default partner of choice and recognizes its importance as being at the center of meetings and regional organizations. On economics, the TPP will over the long term produce a big disparity between the winners, who join it, and the losers, who do not. The TPP would not have brought along Japan and Vietnam without the rise of China, but no one should underestimate the Chinese just because they are not part of it. Neither should anyone underestimate India’s economic growth potential. Though “socio-cultural community” is simply a term of convenience, it is also clear that ASEAN doesn’t do enough in this area, where progress lags far behind that for the other two pillars.

**Policy recommendations arising from the sessions**

The following policy recommendations emerged explicitly or implicitly from the symposium:

1. The U.S. should encourage ASEAN to develop mechanisms for consulting regularly with all its non-ASEAN partners in the EAS, especially regarding major evolutionary changes in the Asian security eco-system.
2. Because, as the U.S. strongly asserts, active ASEAN involvement is vital for the management of South China Sea issues, ASEAN should step up its efforts to conclude the South China Sea Code of Conduct.
3. The EAS should develop mechanisms to avoid incidents in areas of competing territorial claims in the South China Sea and establish multilateral channels of communication among the concerned parties.
4. ASEAN should accelerate efforts to reach internal consensus regarding major policy issues on the EAS agenda.
5. Although they may not be suitable for the EAS agenda, which should remain focused on a limited number of highest-priority topics, ASEAN should not shy away from addressing sensitive internal issues such as the recurring haze emanating from Indonesia and refugees from Myanmar.

6. To avoid further over-extension, ASEAN should become more selective in the organizations it joins and the initiatives with which it associates itself.

7. Recognizing that ASEAN-initiated economic arrangements will be strongly affected by the advent of China’s AIIB and the U.S.-led TPP, a forum of economics and security officials and experts should be established to set guidelines for ensuring that those new developments do not undermine economic interdependence or engender conflict.

8. Foreign and regional bodies focused on valuable government-to-government and people-to-people exchanges initiatives and support for civil society institutions should understand that rhetoric from ASEAN leaders about a “people-centered ASEAN” does not imply that the elites plan in the near term to share agenda-setting and policy implementation responsibilities with broader publics, though, as with the EU’s evolution, that may well happen in the long term.

SYMPOSIUM PRESENTERS AND PARTICIPANTS

ASEAN MEMBER COUNTRIES

Ms. Rahimah Abdul Rahim (presenter)
Executive Director, Habibie Center, Indonesia

Dr. Zakaria Ahmad (presenter)
Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research), HELP University, Malaysia

Dr. Jay Batongbacal (presenter)
Director, Institute for Maritime Affairs and Law of the Sea, University of the Philippines, Philippines

Mr. Herizal Hazri (presenter)
Deputy Country Representative, The Asia Foundation, Malaysia

Ms. Moe Thuzar (presenter)
Fellow, ASEAN Studies Center, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore

Mr. Nguyen Vu Tung (presenter)
Vice President, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, Vietnam

EMBASSIES (presenters and participants)

Mr. Mohd Mohyiddin Bin Omar
Counselor, Embassy of Malaysia

Mr. Patrick Chuasoto
Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of Philippines
Ms. Catriona Dearn  
First Secretary Political, Embassy of Australia

Mr. Shaiful Anuar Mohammad (opening remarks)  
Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of Malaysia

Ms. Karen Lee  
First Secretary Political, Embassy of Singapore

Ms. Ezira Mahadi  
Head of Chancery/Counselor, Embassy of Malaysia

Ms. Sonia Maia  
Charge d’ affaires, Embassy of Timor Leste

Ms. Mitsue Morita  
First Secretary Public Affairs, Embassy of Japan

Mr. Bounthala Panyavichith  
First Secretary, Embassy of Laos

Ms. Corina Reyes  
Political and Legislative, Embassy of Philippines

Mr. Joel Tan  
First Secretary Political, Embassy of Singapore

Mr. Mai Sayavongs  
Ambassador, Embassy of Laos

Mr. Khen Sombandith  
Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of Laos

Ms. Sheryl Shum  
Counselor Political, Embassy of Singapore

Mr. Hairil Yahri Yaacob (presenter)  
Minister Counselor (Economics), Embassy of Malaysia

Ms. Nadirah Zainudin  
Embassy of Malaysia

UNITED STATES (presenters and participants)

Dr. Amitav Acharya (session chair)  
Professor and Chair, ASEAN Studies Initiative, American University
Dr. Muthiah Alagappa (presenter)
Nonresident Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Mr. Michael Anderson
Malaysia-America Society

Mr. Jack Andre
Principal Associate, Nathan Associates

Ms. Anida Atain
Malay Language Teacher, Foreign Service Institute

Dr. Alice Ba (presenter)
Associate Professor, University of Delaware

Mr. Michael Billington
Executive Intelligence Review, Asia Desk

Mr. Harold Lee Brayman Jr.
FSO, Foreign Service Institute

Mr. Percival Bronson
Contract chair, Foreign Service Institute

Mr. Michael Casey
FSO, Foreign Service Institute

Mr. Alex Chance
Institute for China-America Studies

Ms. Mariel Rebecca Chatman
FSO, Foreign Service Institute

Commander Benjamin Cote (presenter)
Military Advisor, MLA/EAP, State Department

Mr. Brian Cummings
FSO, Foreign Service Institute

Mr. Michael Fuchs (keynote address)
Deputy Assistant Secretary, Strategy and Multilateral Affairs, EAP, Department of State

Ms. Ronna Freiberg
LSI Associates

Dr. James Goldgeier (welcome remarks)
Dean, School of International Service, American University
Mr. Robert Todd Hannah
FSO, Foreign Service Institute

Dr. Pek Koon Heng (session chair)
Assistant Professor and Director, ASEAN Studies Initiative, American University

Mr. Murray Hiebert (presenter)
Deputy Director and Senior Fellow, Sumitro Chair for Southeast Asian Studies, CSIS

Ms. Deborah Hooker
FSO, Foreign Service Institute

Ms. Anne Howes
Malaysia-America Society

Dr. Nong Hong (presenter)
Director, Institute for China-American Studies

Ms. Xin Hu
Institute for China-American Studies

Mr. David Hutchison
FSO, Foreign Service Institute

Ms. Lisa Jacobson
FSO, Foreign Service Institute

Ms. Kathy Kerr
Country Analyst (Philippines), INR, State Department

Ms. Erin Kimsey
ASEAN Affairs Officer, MLA/EAP, Department of State

Mr. Eduardo Lachica
Malaysia-America Society

Dr. Satu Limaye (presenter)
Director, East-West Center in Washington

Mr. Marc Mealy (presenter)
Deputy Director, U.S.-ASEAN Business Council

Ms. Geneve Menscher
FSO, Foreign Service Institute

Mr. Lewis Amin Mesalam
FSO, Foreign Service Institute
Dr. Rahul Mishra
Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs

Mr. Jesse Molinar
FSO, Foreign Service Institute

Dr. Vikram Nehru (session chair)
Bakrie Chair, Southeast Asia Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Mr. Mai Nguyen
Center for Strategic and International Studies

Mr. Khanh Nguyen
Department of State

Ms. Genie Giao Nguyen Le
President, Voice of Vietnamese Americans

Mr. Matthew Palmer (opening remarks)
Director, MLA/EAP, Department of State

Mr. Prashanth Parameswaran
The Diplomat Magazine

Mr. Nitesh Patel
FSO, Foreign Service Institute

Mr. Ei Ei Phyu
Robert R. Nathan Memorial Foundation

Mr. Gregory Poling (presenter)
Director, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), CSIS

Mr. Michael Quinlan
FSO, Foreign Service Institute

Ms. Yasemin Ramadanova
FSO, Foreign Service Institute

Mr. Tom Reckford
President Emeritus, Malaysia-America Society

Ms. Andrea Ricchart
Program Management, EAP, Department of State

Ms. Nicole Roberts
Department of State
Mr. Alexander Rosenblatt  
FSO, Foreign Service Institute  

Dr. Vihanshu Shekhar  
Scholar-in-Residence, American University  

Ms. Niamh Sheridan  
Economist, IMF  

Mr. Clint Shoemake  
FSO, Foreign Service Institute  

Mr. Edmund Sim (presenter)  
Adjunct Professor, National University of Singapore Law School/ Appleton Luff Intl. Lawyers  

Mr. Matthew Smith  
FSO, Foreign Service Institute  

Ms. Tori Stephens  
FSO, Foreign Service Institute  

Mr. Vaidehi Thakore  
FSO, Foreign Service Institute  

Mr. Norris Thigpen  
Program Officer, The Asia Foundation  

Mr. Geoffrey Wessel  
Foreign Affairs Political, INR, Department of State  

Professor William Wise (session chair)  
Associate Director, Southeast Asia Studies Program, SAIS  

Mr. Mark Wuebels  
Foreign Affairs Officer, Department of State  

27 STUDENTS FROM AMERICAN UNIVERSITY AND OTHER D.C.- BASED UNIVERSITIES