

Revitalizing U.S.-ASEAN Relations
Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Wednesday, May 17, 2017, 2:30 p.m.
Opening Statement of Chairman Ted Yoho

Good afternoon everyone. Still in the early days of a new administration, at a tumultuous time in international affairs and especially in Asia, we find ourselves at a point of international uncertainty about U.S. policy for engaging with the ten nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

With that in mind, we've convened this hearing to evaluate U.S.-ASEAN policy and form a set of recommendations that we can deliver to the administration for U.S. relations with this important partner.

As 2017 is ASEAN's 50th anniversary and the 40th anniversary of U.S.-ASEAN relations, this is a particularly important year to review our engagement with ASEAN and continue improving the relationship.

ASEAN is Southeast Asia's premier multilateral grouping, made up of Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Collectively, the group makes up the world's 3rd largest population and 5th largest economy. ASEAN is a critical diplomatic, economic, and security partner for the United States.

U.S.-ASEAN engagement has trended upwards for years, remains strong, and has a bright outlook. In 2015, the U.S.-ASEAN relationship was elevated to a strategic partnership, and 2016 marked two important firsts: the first U.S.-ASEAN summit at Sunnylands, and the first ever visit of a sitting U.S. President to Laos.

Our economic connection is also significant, as ASEAN is the 4th largest goods export market for the United States, and we are ASEAN's fourth-largest trading partner. As the second fastest growing economy in Asia, and with a combined economy of \$2.5 billion, the importance of ASEAN as a market for the U.S. is considerable.

As a security partner, ASEAN is also invaluable. The grouping is strategically located astride some of the world's most critical sea lanes, and shares the U.S. pursuit of regional stability through rules, order, and peaceful dispute settlement. ASEAN includes two U.S. treaty allies, Thailand and the Philippines.

Despite the hugely important interests we share, we have come to a period of uncertainty in U.S. relations. Part of this is the natural period of recalculation that comes with any new administration, but has been exacerbated because the Rebalance to Asia was in some respects a one-legged stool.

Our strategy for engaging Asia, particularly Southeast Asia, relied so heavily on the TPP that when the United States withdrew, there was not much of a policy left. Uncertainties have been heightened further by instability in the region, lack of clarity about the administration's "America First" rhetoric, and increasing competition from China and initiatives like its "One Belt, One Road," which challenge U.S. influence in the Asia Pacific.

The administration has done fairly extensive early outreach to many Asian partners, which should be commended, but most of these conversations have revolved around the nuclear menace from North Korea. But our partnership with ASEAN is broader than that, a fact that some promising recent statements have recognized.

Vice President Pence spoke extensively about U.S.-ASEAN security and economic cooperation during a recent visit to the ASEAN secretariat in late April. The Vice President should be applauded for his visit, and the announcement he made that President Trump will attend the East Asia Summit, the U.S.-ASEAN Summit, and the APEC Economic Leaders Meeting. As we'll hear from one witness, "on the diplomatic front in Southeast Asia, 80 percent of success is showing up."

Secretary of State Tillerson also addressed U.S.-ASEAN relations in a recent speech, declaring the intent to "re-solidify" our leadership with ASEAN on a number of security and trade issues and clarifying that "America First" does not mean that our national security and economic prosperity comes at the expense of others.

This leadership has been helpful, but we have yet to hear a complete policy that will give our ASEAN partners a better sense of how the United States will engage going forward. Our influence and interests in Asia are at stake. The nations of ASEAN are walking a tightrope between the power centers of the United States and China. If the United States withdraws from Asia, ASEAN won't be able to stay standing. A monopolar Asia would mean less opportunity for the United States to undertake valuable economic and security cooperation with ASEAN. In short, we need a plan.

To help us work towards this goal, we are privileged to be joined by an expert panel this afternoon. I thank the witnesses for joining us and the members of the Subcommittee for their participation.