Southeast Asia

A Topic Paper Submitted for the NFHS 2026 Topic Selection Meeting

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Two Page Summary: Southeast Asia

Proposed Resolutions

1. The United States federal government should substantially increase its economic and/or diplomatic engagement toward one or more mainland Southeast Asian countries.
2. The United States federal government should substantially increase its economic and/or diplomatic engagement toward Vietnam, Thailand, Laos and/or Myanmar.
3. The United States federal government should substantially increase its economic engagement toward one or more mainland Southeast Asian countries.
4. The United States federal government should substantially increase its economic engagement toward Vietnam, Thailand, Laos and/or Myanmar.

Affirmative Case Types

Under these resolutions, affirmatives would defend an increase in regional economic engagement, namely through promotion of regional and bilateral trade agreements, waylaying tariffs, renewable energy investment, workforce development, and mineral supply chains. Scenarios under these affirmatives are likely to include soft-power-, climate change-, free trade-, and conflict-based scenarios. Affirmatives may propose plans that seek engagement with one country or a multitude of countries in an economic or diplomatic way, though the latter is more likely with respect to multi-country engagement strategies.

Negative Strategies

Negative teams on this topic have a plethora of disadvantage, counterplan, and critique ground. As affirmatives must commit themselves to sub-ASEAN engagement, a common negative argument is likely to be the consult ASEAN counterplan with a centrality—the concept of a unified region through ASEAN instead of fragmented internal governance—net-benefit. This presents a germane opportunity cost. Negative teams also have access to military engagement, promoting hard-power competition to China. With respect to critical argument, substantial literature engages with representations of China, free trade, and combatting climate change, offering ample ground for negative teams.

Commentary on the Debatability of the Topic

This topic is exceptionally balanced and debatable. Substantial literature identifies a multitude of harms in the current U.S. engagement strategy. Namely, the U.S. is currently taking an overly transactional approach that blends uncertainty with self-interest. Both risk ceding the region to China, giving affirmative teams great ground that is unlikely to change over the course of the year. This, combined with the small number of countries in the proposed resolution(s) (4-

6) ensures that negative teams will not be overburdened with respect to preparation as generic disadvantages and counterplans that challenge the justifications of the affirmative are plentiful.

Topic Paragraph

Southeast Asia is an extremely consequential region but has been consistently mishandled by American foreign policy. Existing engagement strategies have prioritized an overly transactional approach that risks ceding the region to China. Existing solutions are unlikely to be synthesized during Trump's term due to a myriad of factors from legal barriers such as tariffs and attitudinal barriers of Trump administration foreign policy experts. This all comes at a time when a survey of Southeast Asian residents suggests that, if forced to choose between China and the U.S., they would pick China. The only way to redress this is re-engagement, either economically or diplomatically. As with many other regions, presence is power, and whether that is soft or hard power, changes need to occur. A resolution centered around increasing U.S. engagement, particularly economic engagement, offers rich affirmative ground and plentiful negative arguments designed to captivate the newest and oldest debaters. This topic is vast, but manageable, creating a beautiful mix of breadth and depth.

History and Background

Southeast Asia (hereafter "SEAsia") is bounded by China to the north, the Indian Subcontinent to the west, the Indian Ocean to the South and the Pacific Ocean to the east. This region contains the countries of Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The region is further subdivided into a maritime (island) region and a peninsular (mainland) region (Sugiono 2016). Cambodia, Burma, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam are considered "peninsular."

A Brief Note on Recent Historical Engagement

Despite some renewed engagement under Trump's second administration, recent historical engagement has been lackluster. Under the Obama administration, U.S. engagement towards Southeast Asia was "unprecedented" (Stepanov, 2023). Notably, in 2009, the U.S. and ASEAN signed a 'Treaty of Friendship,' sent an ambassador to ASEAN, attended the East Asia summit, among other diplomatic initiatives. Obama was also the first U.S. president to visit Laos. All of this suggests that during Obama's first terms, Southeast Asia was the focal point of his 'Asia pivot.' During Obama's second term, however, Southeast Asian countries began to question the U.S.'s real commitment (Stepanov, 2023). Under the first Trump administration, a significant ambivalence is observed. To wit, diplomatics were not always present at events and cooperation was structurally sporadic. Equally concerning to Southeast Asian countries was Trump's 'America first' mantra that signaled a renewed semi-isolationist stance. A 2019 poll found that a supermajority of ASEAN countries believed that foreign involvement in Southeast Asian affairs decline during the first Trump administration (Stepanov, 2023). Biden's administration features a renewal of theoretical engagement (theoretical because the engagement was a supposed goal of foreign policy strategy, but not clearly executed). Vietnam, in particular, was mentioned in American doctrinal documents (Stepanov, 2023). Unfortunately, however, the Biden administration did not show much interest in multilateral economic engagement, which researchers predicted would "lose its former positions in the economic structure of the Asia–Pacific region" (Stepanov, 2023). This prediction has come true.

Existing Harms/Relevant Issues

While the U.S. signaled a renewed 'pivot to Asia' in the early days of the Trump administration, engagement towards Southeast Asia has been lacking. Specifically, the Trump administration's National Security Strategy, released in November 2025, mentions Southeast Asia exactly twice. What little emphasis this strategy does give to Southeast Asia is contextualized to the maritime region and to countering China (Trump, 2025). This framing is particularly unnerving towards Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members in the region, given that the U.S. is an inconsistent partner (Grossman, 2026). Said policy inconsistency marks a major challenge with respect to U.S. engagement within the region. This is amplified

because of reciprocal tariffs toward Southeast Asian countries started under the Trump administration. Grossman contextualizes that what achievements have been made "have been significantly offset by the long shadow of Trump's highly unpopular tariffs on the region's exports to the United States" (2026).

The Supreme Court's overturning of tariffs does little to curtail regional concerns. First, while the emergency tariffs have been overturned, Trump has introduced a new tariff of fifteen percent, designed to bridge U.S. trade deficits (Rajah 2026). Second, the primary danger of tariffs lies in how countries perceive them. China clout is gaining in Southeast Asia because of its sustained economic role (Kuok, 2025). Specifically, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its application to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) portray Beijing as firmly committed to regional trade. The U.S., however, is falling behind due to its inconsistent and weak economic engagement (Kuok, 2025). This manifests in regional doubts about U.S. reliability (Kuok, 2025; Grossman, 2026) and external actions towards regional hedging (i.e. covering the state's bases with both China and the U.S.). To this extent, a recent survey of residents shows that if forced to pick a side, most Southeast Asian countries would choose China over the U.S. (Leo, 2026).

Beyond tariffs, U.S. aid withdrawal from the region has further diminished U.S. credibility. It has, specifically, enabled China to readily increase its soft power projection in the region (Hale, 2025). Contextualized to Southeast Asia, aid withdrawal is creating a regional humanitarian crisis (Tyler and Trinh, 2025). A specific program, the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI), designed to provide professional development to future leaders in the region and promote cross-border cooperation, was cut in 2025. The decision calculus for cuts seems to be whether the program "make[s] America safer," "stronger," or "more prosperous" (Yeo, 2026). This purely transactional approach risks eroding U.S. diplomatic and economic influence. As it stands, regional partners such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have approached Turkey for arms sales. This is disconcerting and creates a substantial harm that an increase in U.S. engagement could redress.

Compounding each issue, recent analysis suggests that policy unpredictability is one of the drivers of falling U.S. engagement in the region. In fact, Trump's leadership is the most pressing geopolitical issue for Southeast Asian states (Lin, 2026). This concern is not insurmountable; however, as most Southeast Asian countries are not particularly fond of China, either. At the same time, multiple Southeast Asian countries are facing internal crises that ASEAN is not able to redress due to a lack of internal cohesion and uneven internal capacity (Lin, 2026). U.S. engagement towards the region is a ripe, effective tool to help bridge the gap.

Existing engagement and policy failures have not occurred in a vacuum. Indeed, as the U.S. withdraws from the region, China increases its engagement. Strategic competition with China is one of the timeliest and most pressing foreign policy issues. Most scenarios under this topic will feature a debate about whether strategic competition with China is worthwhile and how best to achieve it. This is not to say there are no alternative scenarios; USAID programs need not be seen as a means to an end. Summarily, it is important to recognize the need for

further U.S. engagement as a method of countering China as well as countering faltering U.S. commitment to global progress. The case ideas enumerated below will demonstrate the range of possibilities.

Existing Solutions

Brazen foreign policy decisions by the Trump administration have created a power vacuum in Southeast Asia that is quickly being addressed by peer adversaries. This is not to suggest that the administration has not tried to stop Southeast Asian hedging, however. In July 2025, Trump met with the Philippine president Bongbong Marcos, to strengthen maritime security cooperation (Grossman, 2026). Trump has also shown interest in Myanmar's rare earth minerals.

These "solutions" are limited examples of U.S. engagement that are necessary but not sufficient to redress the harms outlined previously. Thus, most new affirmative initiatives will have strong inherency stories. First, the major difference between China and the U.S., historically, is reassurance. Southeast Asian leaders expect China to act with a self-described pragmatic approach to engagement marked by ostensibly transactional relationships (Grossman, 2026). Prior engagement, while imperfect, differentiated the U.S. from China through durable and predictable commitments designed to portray the U.S. as the preferrable great power.

Domestic Southeast Asian politics are also likely to shift the balance of power towards China, barring an increase in U.S. regional engagement. Cambodia, in particular, has viewed the U.S. with distaste, noting it as "a threat to its security" (Khong and Liow, 2026). Other countries, however, care about the ability to lock-in strong economic performance. This highlights the importance of foreign direct investment which has been curtailed by the current administration at a time when China is utilizing the BRI to deliver strong results. Geographic influences on the region cannot be ignored, either. All these factors converge to make Beijing the preferred alternative to the U.S. irrespective of status-quo engagement strategies.

This is to say that existing solutions are imperfect, creating vast quantities of literature to sustain a year of debate. Moreover, these imperfect solutions are likely to continue, and absent unprecedented shifts in foreign policy, this topic will remain perfectly timely.

Application of the NFHS Criteria

Timeliness and Durability

Southeast Asia is an extremely timely topic. As the existing solutions section illustrates, there is an extreme apathetic in the second Trump administration with respect to economic

engagement with Southeast Asian countries. This comes at a time where China is actively increasing its engagement within the region. While this topic is not meant to be an indict of Chinese foreign policy, it is clear that, at least domestically, Southeast Asian countries prefer U.S. engagement to Chinese engagement. This creates a window of opportunity for policy debate to capitalize on a shifting Southeast Asian tide. This is not to say the topic will be too viable, however; our foreign policy has remained perfectly stable. There is a potential, foreseeable shift on reciprocal tariffs, but this is unlikely alone to have a significant impact on Southeast Asian countries. Even if minor shifts to individual suggested plan texts occur, there is sufficient breadth to the topic to mitigate any impact this might have on the debatability of the topic. If Trump will continue his transactionalist approach, and all signs suggest he will, there will be a topic sufficient to sustain a year of debate.

Accessibility and Material

Research material on Southeast Asia and U.S. foreign policy toward it is plentiful and appears in scholarly journals, government documents, popular news media, and a variety of web resources. The material is accessible to students of varying reading levels. Because of ongoing conflicts in the region, US tariff policy, and the increasing role of China in the region, there is a steady supply of current writing on the topic.

Student Interest and Engagement

Sitting at the crossroads of the Indian subcontinent, China, and the major trading routes of the Indo-Pacific, this topic has the benefit of creating logical connections that extend beyond the immediate region. Yet, even if the scenarios in debates are confined mostly to the SE Asian region, there is plenty to debate on a range of issues and with several countries. Participants should encounter a sufficient variety of topics to remain engaged throughout the year. SE Asian immigrant communities are also plentiful in the United States, meaning that there is a high probability that students, coaches, and judges with personal ties to these nations, or who know people with such ties, will be engaged with this topic.

Educational Quality

Southeast Asia is a region of significant importance in recent American history. While the Vietnam War is far removed from the current generation of students, the significance of that conflict on the region are enduring – impacting not only Vietnam, but also Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. The civil war in Myanmar is fierce and ongoing. America and Europe's colonial history in the region is also significant. This is a region students will encounter studying both American and world history and it is probable that students have relatives who lived through this era of conflict or who served in the Armed Forces. The scope of subject matter also transcends issues in economics, security, and good governance – meaning students will be able to learn about

issues as wide ranging as trade, economics, development assistance, great power competition, and interesting insights into differing systems of governance, such as Vietnam's unique blend of Marxism and capitalism. As Southeast Asia is also a major supplier of consumer goods to the American market, students have an opportunity to learn about the supply chains that directly impact the clothes they wear and many of the other goods they consume.

Balance

As covered elsewhere in this paper, the proposed topic wordings allow for a wide variety of affirmative advocacies and provide significant room for a healthy range of negative off-case strategies. There are a variety of perspectives on how the United States should approach its relations with the region, which will afford students ample access to case-specific argumentation on the negative. Other significant regional actors provide ample counterplan ground and the nature of the proposed engagement and the history of the United States in the region point to intuitive critical territory.

Ground

Affirmative Cases and Ground

This topic supplies significant diversity in case structure and scenarios. The prominent scenario will be U.S.-China competition, solved indirectly by increasing economic engagement. However, there are a multitude of other plausible scenarios. Each is contained below in paragraph form, but carded advocates will appear in Appendix A.

Mineral Supply Chains (Weisel, 2025). Affirmative teams could advocate an increase in mineral supply chains. This would be done through the pursuit of mineral agreements with specific countries (Weisel, 2025). Myanmar offers significant deposits of dysprosium, terbium, and others which are important for everything from electric vehicles to military defense readiness (Hill, 2026). It would also offer Myanmar a viable alternative to China and cascade to better diplomatic engagement (Hill, 2026).

Plurilateral Digital Trade Agreement (PDTA) (Weisel, 2025). Affirmative teams could advocate for establishment of a PDTA with multiple Southeast Asian countries. This would enable the U.S. to set digital trade rules, aiding U.S. innovation and economic growth (Weisel, 2025). This type of agreement would "extend bilateral commitments to establish common rules across the region," enabling "U.S. firms to compete regionally and would support U.S. efforts to counter China's model of digital authoritarianism" (Weisel, 2025). More than securing U.S. benefits, a PDTA would lead to broader digital integration.

Establish a Regional Trade Agreement (RTA) (Weisel, 2025). Affirmatives teams could advocate for a regionalized trade agreement, consolidating existing ASEAN commitments and screening out non-parties from benefiting. Another plank of these affirmatives could be to gradually reduce existing tariff burdens (Weisel, 2025). This would have the effect of eliminating regional hedging strategies.

Renewable Energy Financing & Investment (The Asia Foundation, 2024). Affirmative teams could advocate for grants and low-cost loans directed at Southeast Asian countries with the goal of building robust renewable energy systems. Specifically, the U.S. could meet commitments through the Just Energy Transition Partnerships in Vietnam and Indonesia (The Asia Foundation, 2024b). Other mechanisms in this area could include **championing sustainable mining practices** (The Asia Foundation, 2024b).

Financing Nature-based solutions (NbS) (The Asia Foundation, 2024b). Affirmatives could advocate for NbS designed to "protect, manage, and restore ecosystems and build resilience against disasters while limiting further negative impacts of development on key ecosystems" (The Asia Foundation, 2024b). This would also help combat the growing impacts of

climate change in the region, which is home to approximately 693 million people, approximately 60% of which would be affected by sea-level rise by 2100.

Technical Assistance for Sustainable Agriculture (The Asia Foundation, 2024b). Affirmatives could advocate for increased funding for USAID programs designed specifically to build capacity for climate-smart agriculture. This funding and assistance can be utilized in other locations and reversible in that lessons learned from Southeast Asian projects can be applied to the United States (The Asia Foundation, 2024b).

Support Resistance to the Myanmar Junta (The Asia Foundation, 2024b). Diplomatic engagement could include supporting initiatives that fight back against the Junta in control of Myanmar. This could be done through engagement with resistance groups in the region and broader regional partners, and even China. The U.S. could also engage ASEAN in an attempt to emphasize internal solutions to problems.

Vietnamese Workforce Development (Murphy and Denamiel, 2023). Affirmatives could advocate for an increase in funding and effort with respect to Vietnam's workforce development in both the energy and manufacturing sectors. This was attempted under Biden, but funding was never granted. Should the U.S. be able to successfully aid in workforce development, it could secure a supply of semiconductors necessarily to resolve concerns about supply chains.

Addressing Vietnamese War Legacies (An, 2023). Affirmatives could advocate that the U.S. diplomatically engage with Vietnam by resolving legacies of the Vietnam war, including removal of explosives and dioxins (An, 2023). Such an action would be sufficient to build institutional trust which would enable other diplomatic measures.

Trade Corridor Investment (Rattanakit, 2025). Affirmatives could advocate for a departure from the Indo-Pacific Framework for Economic Prosperity (IPEF) and increase trade projects in multiple Southeast Asian economic corridors Specifically, the U.S. could increase its investment in digital innovation, sustainable supply chain infrastructure, clean energy solutions, public-private partnerships, and advanced manufacturing. The U.S. could also create a bilateral trade agreement and increase foreign direct investment through the Development Finance Corporation (Rattanakit, 2025).

Restore YSEALI (Yeo, 2025). Affirmatives could advocate for reversal of a cut to the Young Southeast Asia Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) housed under USAID. This program was essential to build regional partnerships, enabling robust energy and mineral supply chains, high-end manufacturing, and digital governance (Yeo, 2025). Beyond that, YSEALI is crucial for building soft-power necessary to constrain Chinese foreign ambitions and direct investment.

LNG Partnerships (Mai, 2025). Affirmative teams could advocate for an increase in LNG to facilitate Southeast Asian countries' transitions to renewable energy and net-zero. In addition, affirmatives could champion foreign-based energy investment initiatives. While

focused on regional energy security, these types of affirmatives are a phenomenal way to combat Chinese initiatives and restore U.S. soft-power to the region.

Negative Advocacy Ground

Disadvantages

China Soft Power. The U.S., by ceding economic and diplomatic engagement with Southeast Asian countries is hemorrhaging soft power (Vu, 2026). It is logical, then, that a substantial increase in economic engagement, especially one sufficient to combat Chinese soft power in the region, would crowd-out/reduce Chinese soft power. This is magnified by hedging strategies whereby states do not choose either China or the U.S. Said strategies create a soft-power vacuum that pushes the region to the brink with respect to soft power.

Diplomatic Capital. Engagement with Southeast Asian countries has historically increased the U.S.'s diplomatic capital (Amador, 2025). This forces a tradeoff given that diplomatic capital is zero-sum, and there is only so much to go around. Specifically, trying to compete with China expends diplomatic capital, forcing affirmatives to grapple with a dual-tradeoff and providing substantial disadvantage ground (Townshend et al., 2021).

Forced Balancing/Hedging. Most Southeast Asian countries utilize a strategy of hedging, whereby they do not choose sides between the U.S. or China. Increasing engagement, however, will likely foreclose that opportunity. This is particularly dangerous because Southeast Asian countries do not want to choose (Spelman, 2012). A recent survey of Southeast Asian residents suggests that, if forced to choose, China would be a priority, likely making engagement ineffective (Leo, 2026; Ivre and O'Donnell, 2026).

Labor Standards. Foreign direct investment and other forms of economic engagement, which the affirmative must defend, historically have lowered labor standards because countries wish to seem attractive by offering cheap labor (Olney, 2013). This is particularly concerning in Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar and Cambodia offer little-to-no labor protections. Many affirmatives on this topic are likely to defend policies that encourage an increase in manufacturing or extraction, offering negative teams focused on human rights/economic issues ample ground.

Environment. Economic engagement, particularly through foreign direction investment, is associated with a negative environmental impact. In particular, the 'pollution heaven' hypothesis suggests that companies often seek countries with poor environmental regulations when determining where to place manufacturing centers abroad. Manocha (2019) confirms this hypothesis by analyzing Asian economies. Importantly, affirmative teams will be required to defend practices that may be environmentally suspect, creating ample room for negative ground.

A note. The author acknowledge that the first three disadvantages and the last two are distinct in their link structure—the former being perception-based links, the latter being implementation-based links. This is deliberate to highlight how diverse, but relatively predictable, negative disadvantage ground on this topic is. The author understand that not every affirmative will necessarily increase foreign direct investment or expand manufacturing activity. Rather, the last two disadvantages demonstrate that a substantial subset of plausible affirmative would rely on these implementation mechanisms. In many cases, normal means would require the federal government to contract with, finance, or otherwise incentive private firms to carry out the plan. It is considerably more plausible that economic engagement initiatives would be implemented through private-sector investment and commercial activity than through direct federal operation of manufacturing, mining, or industrial enterprising. Accordingly, these disadvantages represent legitimate, though-affirmative dependent, negative ground.

Counterplans

Consult ASEAN. Engagement with one or a limit set of Southeast Asian countries will, invariably, degrade the regional "centrality" of ASEAN, limiting its already weak effectiveness. However, prior consultation with ASEAN likely redresses this issue. (Ngamyingsanga, 2026).

Conditions. The conditions counterplan affirms the need for economic engagement, but conditions said engagement on another goal/action by the target country. This is particularly potent with countries such as Myanmar with clear human rights abuses.

Military Engagement. Another viable counterplan on the topic is the military engagement counterplan. This counterplan takes the stance that the best way to counter China is through hard power instead of soft power (Nguyen, 2025; Irby, 2025).

India. Though the viability of foreign-actor fiat is contested, negative teams have access to alternative actors such as India. Recent reports suggest that India is currently transitioning to an “institutionalized framework of cooperation” (Gururaj, 2026). Beyond increasing Indian soft power, this counterplan likely avoids common arguments such as the hedging disadvantage identified prior in this paper, for current Indian engagement structures do “not demand alignment” or “create structural dependency” (Gururaj, 2026). India is already implementing some form of limited cooperation, suggesting that solvency is entirely feasible.

Australia. Similar to the India counterplan, negative teams could endorse engagement by Australia. Analysis suggests that while Australia has undertaken some amount of engagement, especially with the ASEAN organization, “Australia’s engagement with Southeast Asia, especially in the economic domain, has not been as robust as might be expected” (Paik and Poling, 2025). This suggests that the time is ripe for Australian intervention, providing another strong alternative actor counterplan for negative teams to harness.

Critical Arguments

Capitalism. The capitalism critique is likely to be a mainstay on the topic given that economic engagement reifies and entrenches specific capitalist ideals (Essex, 2008). Beyond epistemology, there is a substantial portion of literature critiquing transitions to renewable energy and free trade (Ruggero, 2009; Sakellaropoulos and Sotiris, 2008).

Security/China Threat. Given that much of this topic paper and likely affirmatives will paint China as a threat, securitization and China threat literature are directly applicable. Specifically, it is important to recognize that our relations with China and our view of them as a competitor is a deliberate, often critiqued policy choice (Turner, 2013).

Ecomanageralism. Finally, renewable energy and efforts to combat climate change are classic examples of policy designed to manage the environment (Luke, 1999).

Novice Packet Options

The author recommends that, at a minimum, the novice packet include an affirmative targeting each of the preferred countries (Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar). The author believes that this is sufficient to maximize topic-specific education while giving novices substantial variation. Given the plethora of options for each country, there should be no shortage of literature, enabling well-developed affirmatives with robust mechanisms.

For the negative, the author recommends that the novice packet include a combination of the following: the conditions counterplan, the India/Australia counterplan, or the consult ASEAN counterplan. Each of these counterplans emphasizes a different portion of the topic and introduces novices to a different mechanism for resolving affirmative harms. Similarly, the author recommends that the novice packet, at a minimum, include the hedging and/or China soft power disadvantages. These are preferable to the implementation disadvantages identified in this paper because perception-based links are more intuitive and enable novices to argue timeframe. Finally, the packet ought to include the China threat kritik as the literature is intuitive and accessible and covers core affirmative representations.

Proposed Resolutions

**In Rank Order*

1. The United States federal government should substantially increase its economic and/or diplomatic engagement with one or more mainland Southeast Asian countries.
2. The United States federal government should substantially increase its economic and/or diplomatic engagement with Vietnam, Thailand, Laos and/or Myanmar.
3. The United States federal government should substantially increase its economic engagement with one of more mainland Southeast Asian countries.
4. The United States federal government should substantially increase its economic engagement with Vietnam, Thailand, Laos and/or Myanmar.

Commentary on Wording Options

The resolutions above are presented in ranked order. As the reader will see, the preference is for economic and/or diplomatic engagement and a geographic focus on mainland Southeast Asia. Further options narrow the topic to only economic engagement and/or swap-in a specific laundry list of nations. The Wording Committee could choose to expand or contract the scope of the resolution by including the entirety of Southeast Asia, or a varied laundry list. However, this risks exploding the possible range of affirmatives. Nonetheless, alternative definitions are provided below. Where a laundry list is provided above, the list excludes Cambodia, Singapore, and the peninsular sections of Maylasia, which would be included in the "mainland Southeast Asia" definition.

It is important to bring to the Wording Committee's attention that Maylasia does present a definitional problem. Definitions of "mainland" Southeast Asia often include the peninsular section of Maylasia, but not all of Maylasia. A portion of Maylasia is "maritime" as a segment of the country is on the island of Borneo, sharing a border with Indonesia and Brunei. This raises the question of whether an affirmative that engaged Maylasia as a "mainland" state would have to confine its activity to only the mainland portion of the country. The laundry list topics exclude that possible debate, but acquire the "words disadvantage" as a tradeoff. It should be noted that Maylasia's capital, Kuala Lumpur, is on the mainland side of the country. Regardless of the topic chosen, the richest debates are likely to occur with engagement of the countries listed in the laundry lists.

Definitions

A note. Each resolution presented mirrors the 2016-2017 policy debate resolution. With such a clear overlap, the author have decided that a majority of definitions introduced in this section ought to be in line with said topic's definitions. Beyond this, a lot of definitions of 'economic engagement' or 'diplomatic engagement,' and the permutation thereof, are not hotly contested (and featured in the 2013-2014 resolution) in academic literature, strengthening the author' orientation towards priorly-vetted definitions. Those interested in this paper's definitional advocacies are encouraged to review camp files from the 2013-2014 and 2016-2017 files.

Economic Engagement

In the context of this paper, the author suggest "economic engagement" means:

> "tangible incentives such as export credits, investment insurance or promotion, access to technology, loans or economic aid. Other equally useful economic incentives involve the removal of penalties such as trade embargoes, investment bans or high tariffs, which have impeded economic relations between the United States and the target country. Facilitated entry into the global economic arena and the institutions that govern it rank among the most potent incentives in today's global market" (Haass and O'Sullivan, 2000).

This would include every affirmative listed under 'affirmative cases and ground,' but screens out other types of engagement such as military engagement. There is also a debate to be had as to whether economic engagement is conditional or not, although there are contextualized definitions that support both. For example, Kahler and Kastner (2006) define 'economic engagement' as "a policy of deliberately expanding economic ties with an adversary in order to change the behavior of the target state and improve bilateral political relations…" This definition suggests that topical affirmatives must adopt a policy with the explicit goal of alternating a Southeast Asian nations' behavior, particularly through the use of sanctions.

This definition has clear issues from a topicality perspective. First, it would limit the number of viable affirmatives unduly. An argument could be made that affirmatives who seek to align Southeast Asian countries with the U.S. instead of China are an example of this, but this is inherently problematic as it mixes the topicality and solvency burdens of the affirmative. Second, it presupposes only one topical mechanism which expands negative ground necessarily. If affirmatives only operate through 'sanctions,' then negative teams are free to roam about with many of the affirmatives this paper has suggested. However, this definition is included to suggest that the term is not as clear-cut

Economic and/or Diplomatic Engagement

'Economic and/or diplomatic engagement' was utilized in the 2016-2017 school year, meaning that there is a plethora of literature on this as a term of art. However, for the purposes of this paper, economic and/or diplomatic engagement:

> "…covers a wide range of programs. Financial incentives are an effective engagement tool since countries usually interact with the US when money is involved. Whether it is obtaining funding for a national program; acquiring materiel, food or medicine; or maintaining Most Favored Nation Status, financial aide has always been a preferred way for the US to affect the behavior of others. Diplomatic engagement ranges from recognition of sovereign states and foreign governments, to presidential visits, to all aspects of the embassy itself. The mere existence of an embassy is an engagement tool. Through official diplomatic ceremonies, informal meetings, and embassy employees living among the locals, the Department of State's presence is engagement in and of itself" (Derreck, 1998, p. 12-13).

The author contend that this definition offers the best mix of affirmative and negative ground. This definition provides a clear list of topical actions that affirmatives can take, providing extremely predictable affirmative ground. Alternatives to this definition cannot sufficiently offer such clarity. Notably, this definition would screen out military actions, a deliberate advocacy to preserve negative counterplan ground.

Mainland Southeast Asian Countries

Southeast Asia is bisected into two regions: the mainland and the maritime. The mainland includes "Myanmar, Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam" (Sugiono, 2016, p. 2). There is not much variation in this definition across literature, though all concerns are covered in the wording commentary sections.

Maritime Southeast Asian Countries

Maritime Southeast Asia is every other country in the region, including "Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Timor-Leste and the Philippines" (Sugiono, 2012, p. 2). Similar to 'mainland Southeast Asian countries' there is little-to-no variability in this definition.

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Notable Organizations and Think Tanks

For a comprehensive list of Asian think tanks covering South/Southeast Asia, the author recommend the University of Pennsylvania's think tank library on the University's library site (The University of Pennsylvania, n.d.). However, the author also acknowledge that the following organizations/think tanks played a prominent role in the drafting of this paper, but also serve as extremely viable sources for season-long research:

1. Center for International and Strategic Studies (CSIS);
2. Foreign Affairs;
3. Asia Foundation;
4. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; and,
5. Council on Foreign Relations

This list is certainly not exhaustive but provides a good starting point.

Carded Evidence Appendix

Affirmative Solvency Advocates

Burmese Mineral Agreements

The U.S. should increase economic engagement with Myanmar over critical minerals.

Weisel, B. (20**25**, June 10). Building Bridges, Countering Rivals: Strengthening U.S.-ASEAN Ties to Combat Chinese Influence. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2025/06/building-bridges-countering-rivals-strengthening-us-asean-ties-to-combat-chinese-influence.

1. Build critical minerals supply chains

Even as it seeks to build its own critical minerals production capabilities, the United States should promote development of Southeast Asian critical minerals extraction and processing and U.S.-ASEAN critical minerals supply chains. Over the past several years, the United States has pursued various initiatives to promote development of these supply chains, including through cooperation on mapping, transparency, and information sharing, but progress has been slow.

The United States should pursue critical minerals agreements with select Southeast Asian countries. These agreements should establish criteria for trusted critical minerals supply chains and guaranteed supplies of critical mineral resources for U.S. industry. They should also include traditional trade commitments, including elimination of tariffs and non-tariff barriers, and investment protection to decrease political risk for U.S. companies.

A key obstacle to accelerating this work is financing. In this regard, Japanese government policy may be a model. While the Development Finance Corporation has financed some critical minerals projects, Japan's approach allowed it to reduce its reliance on rare earths from China from 90 percent 2008 to 60 percent in 2023.[15] Japan's Organization for Metals and Energy Security (JOGMEC) -- a Japanese government administrative agency charged with securing stable and affordable energy and mineral resources to strengthen Japan's industrial base and economic prosperity – has played a central role in this effort[16]. Together with the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, JOGMEC is building critical minerals stockpiles and helping Japanese companies secure critical minerals, including dedicated supply chains to meet their critical minerals demands.

Myanmar is key and re-engagement is critical to combatting human rights abuses.

Hill, W. A. (20**26**, February 10). *New U.S. Minerals Stockpile Creates Opportunities in Myanmar*. *Forbes*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/wesleyhill/2026/02/10/new-us-minerals-stockpile-creates-opportunities-in-myanmar.

The Trump Administration's effort to build a national strategic stockpile of critical minerals represents far more than a procurement initiative. It is an attempt to revise the global \macroeconomic balance for rare earths and strategic mineral refining. These metals are used in defense, aerospace, computing, and green technology. The stockpile is intended to establish a sustainable economic basis for the administration's many mineral-centric geopolitical initiatives. It marks a shift in how the United States understands its own economic security and geopolitical leverage. The world is now competing for these minerals the way it competed for hydrocarbons in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The new minerals race compels Washington to seek new partnerships and even rethink relationships with states that have long fallen outside the traditional lanes of American engagement. There are many examples, but Myanmar stands out as particularly consequential.

Myanmar's Mineral Bonanza and Its Limitations

Myanmar is one of the world's leading sources of heavy rare-earth elements. The country has substantial reserves of dysprosium, terbium, and other heavy rare-earth elements, which are essential for electric vehicles, high-performance magnets, advanced defense systems, and next-generation electronics. Few countries beyond Myanmar are capable of filling America's new strategic minerals reserve.

The entire Irrawaddy River Basin in Myanmar is strewn with critical mineral deposits. Many of these are currently being mined by non-state actors, such as rebel groups and gangs, using pre-industrial methods. This presents a rare growth opportunity in an industry that typically takes decades from the time sufficient concentrations of a mineral to warrant mining are identified until the deposit is exhausted. An infusion of capital and advanced American mining equipment could drastically scale up and industrialize production while helping build the U.S. strategic supply. It would also massively improve prevailing conditions in the mines. A win-win proposition.

If the United States wants a diversified and resilient supply chain, it must be willing to buy strategic minerals from countries like Myanmar under conditions that promote stability, transparency, and lawful conduct.

Myanmar's Strategic Position

For decades, American policy toward Myanmar has vacillated between idealistic pressure and punitive isolation. That approach failed to produce durable political reforms, but it did allow America's adversaries to consolidate their influence across Myanmar's extractive sectors.

Myanmar has just concluded the final stage of its 2026 election cycle, and while the elections were far from perfect, they demonstrate institutional functionality, an active, albeit embattled, civil society, and public participation at a time when many assumed the political environment within Myanmar had closed entirely.

The United States has traditionally responded to Burmese political transitions with a combination of sanctions, public criticism, and diplomatic distancing. That posture intensified in 2021 when the Biden administration issued Executive Order 14014. The order declared a national emergency, froze nearly $1 billion in Burmese sovereign assets held in New York, and authorized sweeping sanctions against Burmese officials, state-linked companies, and any entities deemed supportive of the military. The rationale behind the order was understandable, but the practical result was a dramatic contraction of U.S. influence. American oil and gas firms withdrew. Financial constraints severely limited cooperation. China became, in effect, Myanmar's only political and economic lifeline.

The Trump Administration renewed Executive Order 14014 last week, albeit slightly. This means it remains in effect at least until February 10, 2027, unless terminated earlier by either a new presidential act or an act of Congress. This was not without controversy, as Congressman Dave Brat noted in the Washington Times. Meanwhile, the utility of engaging with Burma remains pressing and is likely to grow more acute as demand for critical minerals rises.

A New Path Forward with Myanmar

Continuing the same approach towards Myanmar will further isolate the United States from a region it claims to prioritize. It's not America First. There is a more productive option: maintain targeted accountability while replacing blanket isolation with structured engagement. Revising the executive order, once again, could retain sanctions on individuals involved in human rights abuses or illicit finance while establishing clear conditions for phased geopolitical and

economic partnership between our countries. Those conditions could involve cooperation on shutting down transnational scam centers, which have proliferated along Myanmar's borders and victimized thousands of Americans. These measures could also include environmental and transparency benchmarks for mineral extraction, processing, and export.

Myanmar has begun taking action in some of these areas, including establishing a task force to dismantle scam operations and deporting thousands of foreign nationals linked to criminal networks. At the moment, these are baby steps, but they are in the right direction, and Washington would be remiss to ignore them by continuing the same old failed policies of the past that have handed China an advance in Myanmar.

Economic engagement, however, will require more than just regulatory adjustments. It will also require incentives. This is where the critical minerals stockpile becomes a strategic asset rather than a simple logistical program.

A structured U.S.–Myanmar minerals framework would accomplish several goals simultaneously. It would give Myanmar a commercial alternative to China. It would enable the United States to secure minerals needed for its stockpile and its manufacturing base. It would also create a shared economic foundation for diplomatic engagement at a time when Myanmar is reassessing its international relationships. Most importantly, it would transform the minerals trade into a tool to incentivize compliance with international norms rather than reinforcing the status quo. These dynamics have long been recognized, as reported by Nikkei Asia, and are gaining supporters across Myanmar's political spectrum.

The frozen Burmese funds in New York offer another potential lever. Instead of allowing nearly a billion dollars to sit idle, Washington could authorize a portion of those funds to be used exclusively for the purchase of U.S.-manufactured goods for advanced mining. This approach would support American industries, channel investment into equipment and technologies that strengthen Myanmar's governance and environmental capacity, and reduce China's dominance in sectors where it has used financing and infrastructure to gain long-term leverage. All of this can be done at no cost to U.S. taxpayers, making the policy not only strategically sound but also fiscally responsible.

Signs of momentum already exist despite the renewal of Executive Order 14014. Since President Trump returned to office, Washington and Naypyidaw have exchanged diplomatic correspondence that has been warmly received on both sides. The Treasury has quietly removed several Burmese individuals and companies from sanctions lists. ASEAN refrained from isolating Myanmar at its 2025 summit. U.S. officials have even acknowledged that a policy recalibration may be underway. These developments are early and ongoing, but they demonstrate that both sides are testing the waters of renewed engagement.

Critics will argue that any re-engagement risks legitimizing the Burmese military or undermining democratic activists. That concern deserves respect, but it must be weighed against the consequences of the current approach. Isolation has not produced political liberalization. It has not weakened Chinese influence. It has not reduced conflict along and inside Myanmar's borders. If anything, it has amplified all three problems. Engagement does not require endorsement. It requires a willingness to shape outcomes rather than observe them from the sidelines.

PDTAs

The United States federal government should negotiate a plurilateral digital trade agreement.

Weisel, B. (20**25**, June 10). Building Bridges, Countering Rivals: Strengthening U.S.-ASEAN Ties to Combat Chinese Influence. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2025/06/building-bridges-countering-rivals-strengthening-us-asean-ties-to-combat-chinese-influence.

2. Conclude plurilateral digital trade agreement

The United States should negotiate a plurilateral digital trade agreement with Southeast Asian countries, drawing from commitments the U.S. government reportedly is pursuing in its bilateral agreements with ASEAN countries. Maintaining U.S. leadership in setting digital trade rules is vital given this sector's role in U.S. innovation and economic growth, and to ensuring the U.S. remains at the forefront of the artificial intelligence (AI) revolution. A plurilateral agreement would extend bilateral commitments to establish common rules across the region. Doing so would prevent fragmented regulation that would make it more difficult for U.S. firms to compete regionally and would support U.S. efforts to counter China's model of digital authoritarianism.

Pursuing a plurilateral agreement would signal U.S. interest in partnering with ASEAN on a priority issue to both. In addition to regionalizing the U.S.-ASEAN bilateral commitments, such an agreement could build upon them, including on AI and AI safety, where Singapore is playing a prominent role.[17] It also could create channels for U.S.-ASEAN private sector cooperation and promote U.S. digital and technology goods and services.

The United States should push forward on this digital trade initiative as soon as possible. ASEAN is negotiating its own Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), which it hopes to finish later this year. DEFA's core elements include policy issues important to U.S. interests, including digital trade, cross border data flows, data protection, cross-border e-commerce, digital payments, and cybersecurity. Meanwhile, the inclusion of digital economy issues in ASEAN's upgraded China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement gives China opportunities to influence digital regulation and connectivity in Southeast Asia in ways that could be counter to U.S. interests.

Regional Trade Agreements

The U.S. should regionalize existing trade agreements.

Weisel, B. (20**25**, June 10). Building Bridges, Countering Rivals: Strengthening U.S.-ASEAN Ties to Combat Chinese Influence. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2025/06/building-bridges-countering-rivals-strengthening-us-asean-ties-to-combat-chinese-influence.

5. Regionalize trade commitments

The United States should consider regionalizing the trade commitments it has negotiated bilaterally with ASEAN countries, building these trade agreements into a regional agreement. Such an agreement should be open to countries willing to meet U.S. requirements, as several Southeast Asian countries have demonstrated their ability to do.

The agreement should consolidate and expand bilateral ASEAN commitments to eliminate tariff and nontariff barriers in goods and services across the region. It should include tight rules of origin that limit non-parties from benefitting from the agreement. It also should require new commitments on customs and trade remedies. The agreement should include rules in areas critical to U.S. competitiveness, including intellectual property, investment, competition policy, labor, and environment, as well as economic security measures.

In exchange, the United States should gradually eliminate tariffs on imports from Southeast Asian parties to the agreement. Doing so would incentivize Southeast Asian countries to commit to U.S. standards and to alter supply chains in ways that can promote U.S. manufacturing and exports. It also would have the broader benefit of strengthening ASEAN's position regionally, supporting U.S. broader strategic interests.

Renewable Energy Financing & Grants

The United States federal government should finance climate mitigation measures.

The **Asia Foundation**. (20**24**b). *Critical Issues for the United States in Southeast Asia in 2025*. https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Critical-Issues-for-the-United-States-in-Southeast-Asia-in-2025.pdf.

What can the United States do?

The United States and likeminded partners should robustly fund new climate finance, including both grants and low-cost loans. The region's infrastructure investment gap is significant enough that it cannot be addressed by any single donor—filling that gap requires collaboration and multiple new sources of investment. The United States and its partners should fully meet commitments made through the Just Energy Transition Partnerships in Indonesia and Vietnam and provide additional climate finance to ensure sustainable longterm energy supply for manufacturing and other priority sectors for global supply chains.

Support the technical and regulatory capacity needed for advanced baseload energy technologies with key partners in Southeast Asia. Technologies that allow for baseload power—such as advanced geothermal energy and modern and innovative nuclear energy like small modular reactors—will be a crucial complement to solar and wind. Equally important is energy storage, such as pumped-storage hydropower and large-scale battery storage. The United States has expertise in all of these areas, through private-sector companies bringing advanced technologies to market, U.S. Department of Energy Earthshot investments to rapidly reduce costs for breakthrough technologies, and extensive technical and policy expertise across the national energy labs.

Financing Nature-based Solutions

The United States federal government should finance Nature-based Solutions.

The **Asia Foundation**. (20**24**b). *Critical Issues for the United States in Southeast Asia in 2025*. https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Critical-Issues-for-the-United-States-in-Southeast-Asia-in-2025.pdf.

What can the United States do?

• Share lessons learned, build capacity, and support pilot projects in Southeast Asia, drawing on the United States' ample experience with designing, socializing, and adopting nature-based solutions (NbS) for infrastructure. Nature-based solutions protect, manage, and restore ecosystems and build resilience against disasters while limiting further negative impacts of development on key ecosystems. These include physical or procedural interventions such as restoring mangroves to mitigate sea level rise and storm surge or protecting wetlands as sponges for intense rainfall.

• U.S. financing institutions and investors should include targets and standards for NbS and clean energy technologies when determining funding priorities. This can benefit U.S. companies interested in exporting expertise in these sectors, as well as prove U.S. commitment to ongoing initiatives such as the Just Energy Transition Partnerships in Indonesia and Vietnam.

Technical Assistance for Sustainable Agriculture

The United States federal government should increase its technical assistance for sustainable agriculture.

The **Asia Foundation**. (20**24**b). *Critical Issues for the United States in Southeast Asia in 2025*. https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Critical-Issues-for-the-United-States-in-Southeast-Asia-in-2025.pdf.

The United States should scale up technical assistance and capacity building for sustainable agriculture. The U.S. engages in various technical and capacity building projects related to climate-smart agriculture, such as a $48 million USAID project on climate resilient agriculture in the Mekong Delta, which began in 2023. Lessons learned should be applied to programming elsewhere with similar vulnerabilities, and successful interventions should be scaled up. Expanding sustainable agriculture is a shared challenge, and such engagements in Southeast Asia can identify interventions valuable for farming communities inside the United States, where farmers are similarly challenged with managing scarce resources amid proliferating heatwaves and other extreme weather events

Vietnamese Workforce Development

The United States federal government should increase its Vietnamese workforce development in the area of semiconductor manufacturing.

Murphy, E. L., **and Denamiel**, T. (20**23**, September 15). *Vietnam: Biden Anoints a New Trusted Tech Partner*. https://www.csis.org/analysis/vietnam-biden-anoints-new-trusted-tech-partner.

Building a Trusted Network

Vietnam's ability to scale its manufacturing capacity, educated workforce, tepid relationship with China (due to disputed territorial claims in the South China Sea), and desire to lessen its economic dependence on the People's Republic of China (PRC) make it an ideal partner for building a more trusted supply chain for semiconductors. The PRC is dominant in semiconductor assembly, packaging, and testing, holding almost 40 percent of the global market share against the United States' 5 percent. When it comes to wafer fabrication, it is also the world's largest producer, having the equivalent of twice the U.S. capacity.

According to Technavio, the semiconductors market in Vietnam is estimated to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 6.12 percent between 2022–2027, or $1.65 billion. Vietnam has a young and educated workforce at a lower cost than its neighbors and is increasingly viewed as an alternative for companies relocating from China. Moreover, its industry has been boosted by significant investments from large multinational companies. As CSIS has previously written, the Vietnamese government offers incentives for high-tech projects, such as reductions in corporate taxes. When some technology firms exited China at the pandemic's outset, the Vietnamese government created a working group to attract tech investments through customized incentive offers to foreign investors. Tech giants including Dell, Google, Microsoft, and Apple have all shifted parts of their supply chains to Vietnam in recent years.

Semiconductor manufacturers have followed suit. Intel started operations in 2006 and has a $1.5 billion factory, the biggest in its global network, with plans to expand in southern Vietnam for assembling, packaging and testing chips. Samsung Electronics Co. Ltd. in 2022 announced a total investment plan of $2.27 billion to expand its next-generation semiconductor substrate business into Vietnam. South Korea's Hanmi Semiconductor, a global leader in semiconductor manufacturing equipment, announced in May that its branch in the northern province of Bac Ninh was officially operating. Infineon Technologies AG, Germany's largest company specializing in power and internet of things systems, announced in June the expansion of its operation in Vietnam and a chip development team based in Hanoi. Also in June, SKC Co., a South Korean manufacturer of advanced materials, signed a preliminary agreement with Vietnam's Hai Phong City to explore investment in advanced materials for semiconductors, secondary batteries, and other green sectors. The White House announced Amkor Technology, a packaging and testing services provider headquartered in Arizona, has so far invested $1.6 billion and is preparing to open its factory in Vietnam at the end of this year.

Obstacles Could Undermine Goals

Nevertheless, Vietnam's semiconductor industry is facing challenges, chief among them a chronic shortage of engineers. The country of 100 million has only 5,000 to 6,000 trained hardware engineers for the chip sector, against expected demand of 20,000 in five years and 50,000 in a decade, according to head of the US-ASEAN Business Council's Vietnam office Vu Tu Thanh. Likewise, there is a risk of an inadequate supply of trained chip software engineers.

Vietnam has mostly specialized in the assembly, testing, and packaging stage of the semiconductor production process, indicating that it will still require additional capacity building through capital investments, enhanced R&D capabilities, and more specialized production equipment to meet demand outlined in the leaders' joint statement.

Another important issue is power generation. The country has struggled to upgrade its grids to support stable and consistent electricity for both its population and the manufacturers operating there. Climate-related issues such as heat waves and lack of rain, as well as increased usage, have compounded the problem. According to a Reuters interview with Hong Sun, chairman of the Korean Chamber of Commerce in Vietnam, regular, severe power cuts have cause multiple factories to suspend production. "This is a very serious problem for South Korean companies operating in Vietnam," he said.

U.S. Offers Minimal Solutions

Building up its workforce, addressing energy woes, and convincing the private sector to shift manufacturing to the country will take a lot of time and money, two items in short supply. Congress has not allocated or appropriated new funding to support these announcements, meaning most of the funding is coming from current budgets and programming that are likely stretched thin.

As announced by the leaders, the United States will utilize funding from the International Technology Security and Innovation (ITSI) Fund, a CHIPS Act allocation totaling $500 million, or $100 million annually over five years, to further develop Vietnam's current semiconductor ecosystem, regulatory framework, and workforce and infrastructure needs. For something like ITSI to work, it needs to focus on select countries, such as Vietnam, or specific pieces of the ICT sectors, to be effective. The demand pull for ITSI Fund money is immense (as is its mandate to protect, promote, and secure digital networks and semiconductor supply chains), meaning there will not be adequate funding to address those key issues.

There also appears to be an overreliance on the private sector's ability to effectively mobilize capital into the country. The United States announced that the $2 million provided to launch the workforce development initiatives was "seed funding," suggesting that Vietnam or companies will be expected to pony up any additional funding. Also, language around "partnering" and "work together" stops short of words like "commitment" and "allocated funding" that would give confidence that these initiatives will be undertaken.

The United States has been working on Vietnam's energy security, primarily in the renewable energy and battery storage spaces and regulatory framework. This is not enough to address the power generation issues, meaning that Vietnam will have to rely on coal usage to effectively support its manufacturers, which both undermines its climate and energy transition efforts and does not adequately address the necessary grid upgrade and regulatory framework needs.

Conclusion

Vietnam has the right building blocks to meet the United States and partners' needs to add new links to the semiconductor supply chain. However, the United States will have to step up in terms of dedicated and consistent funding as well as personnel to appropriately augment Vietnam's workforce and manufacturing capabilities. The United States should also look to the enabling environment to achieve its capacity-building goals, including its regulatory and investment framework that attracts foreign direct investment and boosts domestic capacity, especially in the tax and electricity sectors.

Addressing Vietnam War Legacies

The United States federal government should increase its diplomatic engagement toward Vietnam by redressing Vietnamese war legacies.

An, K. C. X. (20**23**). *US-Southeast Asia Ties: Reality is More Complex*. RSIS, IDSS Paper No. 053. https://rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/IP23053.pdf.

What Can Washington Do?

Between these lower and upper limits, Southeast Asian countries would prefer to be engaged on their merits and not as chess pieces. Washington ostensibly understands this concern, with the 2022 National Security Strategy stating that Washington will "avoid the temptation to see the world solely through the prism of strategic competition". Nonetheless, there are other steps that Washington should take to build its relationships and influence.

Pragmatically, Southeast Asian countries want Washington to offer support for their respective developmental needs. In Vietnam, addressing war legacies is a key relationship pillar, including the removal of explosives and cancer-causing dioxins. Indonesia and the Philippines, which face challenging energy transitions, value cooperation with the United States on nuclear energy. These cooperative efforts will help to build mutual trust and relationships at multiple levels, from grassroots to governments.

Trade Corridor Investment

The United States should substantially increase its investment into Southeast Asian economic corridors.

Rattanakit, N. (20**25**, February 10). *Economic Corridors: One Way Forward for US Engagement in Southeast Asia*. The Diplomat. https://thediplomat.com/2025/02/economic-corridors-one-way-forward-for-us-engagement-in-southeast-asia.

Economic Corridors: A Strategic Opportunity

If the United States shifts away from IPEF, it must still deliver a viable economic strategy for Southeast Asia. Economic corridors – regions designated for intensive infrastructure and industrial development – offer one practical solution. These corridors are already transforming Southeast Asia's economic landscape by enhancing connectivity, attracting investment, and bolstering regional trade. For the United States, investing in these corridors represents an opportunity to strengthen supply chains and reassert its economic presence in the region.

The Philippines' Luzon Economic Corridor is the first Indo-Pacific project proposed under the Group of Seven (G-7)'s Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), an initiative launched in 2022 as a strategic response to China's BRI. PGII coordinates financial resources to identify infrastructure projects and foster partnerships that attract private capital, promoting strategic and sustainable development aligned with private sector and national interests. To date, the United States has secured over $60 billion in investments through PGII from both public and private sources, with the G-7 collectively targeting $600 billion by 2027.

As the latest economic corridor in the region and the only one with direct U.S. involvement, the Luzon corridor is strategically important. With its concentration of economic activities, logistics hubs, and access to raw materials, Luzon is a prime location for development initiatives. The focus is for the Philippines to enhance Luzon's infrastructure around key areas such as Bulacan Airport, Clark, and the highways connecting Subic Bay and the CALABARZON region, also referred to as the Philippines' "Silicon Valley."

Projects under the Luzon corridor offer opportunities to strengthen value chains, especially for semiconductor companies engaged in intermediate components and research and development. CALABARZON is poised to benefit key sectors such as information technology and business process outsourcing, agriculture, and natural resources, with potential for expansion into the Visayas and Mindanao regions. The Luzon Economic Corridor was facilitated by the PGII under the Biden administration. As a result, the United States' financial resources for the initiative risk being scrapped under the second Trump administration.

There are two further corridors that the United States could invest in: Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor and Indonesia's Nusantara Ring Corridor. Washington could support the Eastern Economic Corridor by sharing expertise in advanced manufacturing, partnering on digital innovation projects, and investing in sustainable supply chain infrastructure to enhance the corridor's appeal to international investors. For Indonesia's Nusantara Ring Corridor, the United States could contribute by providing clean energy solutions, supporting urban planning for the green smart capital, and facilitating public-private partnerships to ensure the corridor achieves its sustainability and equality goals.

Fund YSEALI

The U.S. should fund the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative.

Yeo, K. (20**25**, October 30). *The Strategic Costs of U.S. Exchange Program Cuts in Southeast Asia*. Center for Strategic & International Studies. https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/strategic-costs-us-exchange-program-cuts-southeast-asia.

In August, the Trump administration cut $100 million of Fiscal Year 2025 funds for over 20 State Department educational and cultural exchange programs. The list includes the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI), which has brought thousands of Southeast Asian youths to the United States since 2013. Many of the funds, already congressionally approved, had been frozen since February.

According to Secretary of State Marco Rubio, every aspect of U.S. decision-making must be guided by the answer to one of three questions: "Does it make America safer? Does it make America stronger? Or does it make America more prosperous?"

YSEALI fulfils all three. Amid cuts to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), high tariffs, and U.S. support for Israel, Southeast Asian youths are growing distrustful of the United States. Programs like YSEALI are a cost-effective way to bolster U.S. credibility in the region. YSEALI alumni have gone on to hold prominent leadership positions in their countries, shaping foreign policy relevant to the United States. Cutting YSEALI ultimately risks weakening U.S. relationships in a region central to global commerce, supply chains, and digital governance, and where the contest for influence with China is only intensifying.

What is YSEALI?

Launched in 2013 by then-president Barack Obama, YSEALI seeks to "strengthen people-to-people ties between the United States and young leaders across [Southeast Asia]." YSEALI fellows are selected through a competitive process based on demonstrated leadership in their home communities. They then spend five weeks in the United States engaging in work placements, academic residency, and community service activities. Fellows specialize in themes like civic engagement, governance, environmental issues, and social entrepreneurship.

This analysis centers YSEALI given its specific focus on Southeast Asia. However, YSEALI is not the only State Department exchange program relevant to the region threatened by funding cuts. The Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study Program, for instance, funds U.S. high school students to spend a year in one of 12 countries, three of which are in Southeast Asia.

Exchange programs have long enjoyed bipartisan support in the United States. Following the recent funding cuts, Senators Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Susan Collins (R-ME) publicly urged the Office of Management and Budget to reverse its decision. President Donald Trump himself has positively referenced YSEALI in multiple joint statements with Southeast Asian leaders, including with Singapore's then-prime minister Lee Hsien Loong and Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte in 2017. In 2018, Trump signed into law the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, which authorized $25 million annually from FY2019 through FY2023 for YSEALI and similar programs.

Trump's second administration has demonstrated a deep skepticism of soft power. An early draft of the President's FY26 discretionary budget recommends decreasing funds earmarked for educational and cultural exchanges by $691 million, or about 93 percent, citing "inefficient, wasteful programming at the expense of U.S. taxpayers." Yet even by the yardsticks of a safer, stronger, and more prosperous United States, programs like YSEALI have a pivotal role to play.

How YSEALI benefits the United States

Exchange programs are "one of the best returns on investment in the federal budget," according to the D.C.-based non-profit Alliance for International Exchange. At $741 million in FY24, funding for international exchange programs constitutes a mere 0.0006 percent of the federal budget—of which, 90 percent is spent on Americans or within the United States.

Exchange programs can also offer a more nuanced view of the United States to international participants. At a time when trust in the United States is waning among young Southeast Asians, direct people-to-people engagement can effectively counter quick headlines and social media echo chambers to bridge understanding. Washington is far from a perfect reflection of the American public. Through attending courses at U.S. universities, speaking with politicians from both sides of the aisle, and engaging with local communities, YSEALI fellows gain exposure to the country's cultural and ideological diversity. Conversely, these interactions can help Americans gain deeper, first-hand insights into a region where U.S. expertise and attention is on the decline.

Opportunities for cross-border engagement are increasingly critical against a backdrop of falling international student enrolment in U.S. schools. In August 2025, student arrivals in the United States from Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam saw year-on-year declines of 24, 21, and 17 percent, respectively.

Crucially, YSEALI is specifically designed for those with minimal prior study or travel experience in the United States, underscoring the necessity of U.S. funding in opening doors for Southeast Asian youth. In an interview with the author, an academic fellow from YSEALI's 2024 cohort expressed that "YSEALI was one of the best things that ever happened to me. And made me realize that the [United States] can actually put its funding to good and change lives."

Finally, beyond strengthening the United States' global credibility, YSEALI can influence future U.S.-Southeast Asia foreign policy. Program alumni have gone on to hold positions of power in their respective countries, including former Malaysian youth and sports minister Syed Saddiq and former Singapore parliamentarian Carrie Tan.

Disadvantage Links

Note to reader: Some of the links to disadvantages are implied by the fact that the affirmative must necessarily defend certain things. The two links included here serve to demonstrate the viability of at least two core topic disadvantages, each with access to arguments about turning specific advantages. The author have omitted links for the last three disadvantages as the link for each is likely to be contextualized to each affirmative, proving better debate, but presenting a challenge for finding demonstrative link evidence.

China Soft Power

The United States is hemorrhaging soft power due to ambivalence, but Chinese soft power is on the rise because of our decline – logically, a tradeoff must occur post-Aff.

Vu, L. D. (2026, **April 10**). *US Isn't Losing Soft Power in SE Asia — It's Ceding It To China*. Asia Times. https://asiatimes.com/2026/04/us-isnt-losing-soft-power-in-se-asia-its-ceding-it-to-china.

Commentators increasingly warn that the United States is losing its soft power – and the data backs them up. The Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index 2026 ranked the US as the steepest decliner among the 193 countries surveyed, with China now less than 1.5 points behind.

Richard Stengel, undersecretary of state for public diplomacy in the Obama administration, recently likened Trump's America to post-war Britain – an imperial hegemon shrinking into "Little America." The analogy is vivid, though slightly misleading. And it risks obscuring a more consequential story playing out, at least in Southeast Asia.

The Britain comparison has real limits. Post-war British decline was structural and largely irreversible: the empire was economically unsustainable, decolonization had its own momentum, and the United States was actively displacing British influence.

That is not where the US is today. American universities still dominate global rankings. The dollar remains the world's top reserve currency. US technology firms still shape how much of the world communicates, works and consumes. These are not exhausted imperial assets.

The declinists also have a poor track record. After Iraq, US favorability ratings plunged across much of the world and stayed low through 2008 – then snapped back to pre-war levels within a year of Obama taking office.

After Trump's first term, the pattern repeated: favorability jumped from 34% to 62% almost overnight when Joe Biden took office. Each time, the institutional infrastructure of US influence remained intact, and American soft power bounced back.

So the real question is not whether the US is indeed becoming "Little England." It is whether the damage is accumulating faster than it can be repaired. The declinist framing, for all its flaws, captures something real about intent.

What is new under Trump is not American decline but American indifference. The gutting of USAID, the 80% funding cut to the US Agency for Global Media, the 17% drop in new international student enrolments – none of this is the byproduct of overstretched resources. These are deliberate choices to withdraw from the infrastructure of influence.

It is not just withdrawal, either. The administration is actively replacing the old soft power brand with something far less exportable.

Trump's embrace of Christian nationalism, the privileging of conservative Christian constituencies in foreign policy and the racial undertones running through the administration's immigration and trade messaging resonate nearly nowhere, especially not in a region as religiously and ethnically diverse as Southeast Asia.

The US once offered itself, however imperfectly, as a pluralist model. What it is projecting now looks more like a civilizational preference – and that does not build coalitions in a region home to the world's largest Muslim-majority country and significant Buddhist, Hindu and Christian populations.

And in Southeast Asia, indifference is functionally equivalent to decline. This matters because the region is where strategic competition with China will actually be decided – not in the Middle East, where the war with Iran has consumed virtually all of Washington's bandwidth since late February.

US soft power in Southeast Asia has not relied on the appeal of liberal democracy or the allure of the "shining city on the hill." It has been built on practical foundations: scholarships and exchange programs that link Southeast Asian elites and talent to American institutions; development partnerships that give Washington a seat at the table on everything from energy security to public health, or military training pipelines that socialize officers into US doctrine.

Regional preferences for the US over China are driven less by admiration for American democracy than by anxiety about Chinese assertiveness in the region and a pragmatic desire for a security counterweight.

That pragmatism might suggest hard power is what matters most. But military presence depends on political access – basing rights, overflight agreements and intelligence sharing – and that access depends on the broader political trust that diplomatic and trade engagement, be it cultural exchange, scholarships, development aid or market penetration, have built over decades.

These pipelines are quiet, unglamorous and easy to cut. They are also extraordinarily difficult to rebuild once severed. The US has spent decades building defense relationships in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand – from officer training through the IMET program to large-scale multilateral exercises like Balikatan and Cobra Gold.

Cut those pipelines, and you reshape the professional networks and influence those officers carry through decades of career advancement. China is already working to build its own version, having funded officer training in Cambodia and expanding military education exchanges across the region.

But Beijing's reach extends well beyond the military. Chinese dramas dominate streaming platforms across Southeast Asia, TikTok shapes how younger Southeast Asians consume information and Chinese brands from Huawei to BYD are becoming part of daily life.

Across the board, Beijing is filling gaps that Washington is voluntarily creating. And despite reservations, the gap is narrowing fast.

The consequences are already visible. The ISEAS 2026 survey, released this week, found that a majority of Southeast Asian respondents would now choose China over the US if forced to align. Trump's leadership was named the region's top geopolitical concern, ahead of global scam centers and tensions in the South China Sea.

The irony is that the Trump administration's own strategic logic demands exactly the kind of soft power investment it is dismantling. The Indo-Pacific Strategy that both parties nominally endorse depends on willing partners – countries that choose alignment with Washington because US institutions and economic engagement make it the more attractive option. Strip that away, and the strategy reduces to military posturing and transactional deal-making.

None of this means the US has lost Southeast Asia to China. The structural advantages remain formidable. But structural advantages are not self-executing. They require the connective tissue of engagement – the scholarships, the training programs, the diplomatic presence – to translate into actual influence.

The structural decline of US soft power, at least for now, is overstated. But the strategic cost of indifference is being understated. In Southeast Asia, the US is not being displaced by a rising power. It is leaving the field voluntarily – and the seats it vacates will not stay empty for long.

Diplomatic Capital

Competition (especially with China) has a trade off– Biden era strategies prove.

Townshend, A, Patton, S., Corben, T., and Warden, T. (20**21**, August 27). *Correcting the course: How the Biden administration should compete for influence in the Indo-Pacific*. United States Studies Centre. https://www.ussc.edu.au/correcting-the-course-how-the-biden-administration-should-compete-for-influence-in-the-indo-pacific.

Second, the administration has spent significant diplomatic capital on globalising strategic competition with China — an agenda that is closely related to its prioritisation of ideological considerations. Speaking at the Munich Security Conference in February, Biden appealed to European partners "to prepare together for a long-term strategic competition with China," contending: "How the United States, Europe, and Asia work together to secure the peace and defend our shared values and advance our prosperity across the Pacific will be among the most consequential efforts we undertake."13

To date, the administration has brought multilateral pressure to bear on Beijing across a range of issues — including China's human rights abuses in Xinjiang, cyber espionage and non-market economic activities — and sought to elevate China as a trans-Atlantic priority within NATO, the G7 and the European Union (EU).14

Even regional security partnerships, such as the Quad, have become more focused on the global aspects of competition since Biden assumed office, working towards common positions on issues such as critical technologies, setting emerging technology standards and multilateral governance reform.15

Counterplan Advocates

Consult ASEAN

ASEAN centrality is on the brink – consulting the consortium of countries restores this.

Ngamyingsanga, B. (2026, **January 9**). *Southeast Asia Global Relations Outlook Part 2: U.S. and China*. Southeast Asia Policy Institute. https://seapublicpolicy.org/part-ii-asean-and-global-horizons.

Implications for ASEAN in 2026

For ASEAN, the cumulative effect of the U.S. approach in 2026 is likely a narrowing—but not elimination—of strategic room for maneuver. Southeast Asian states are not simply reacting to U.S. pressure, nor are they making binary alignment choices. Instead, they are exercising constrained agency, adjusting policies and engagement tactics to manage exposure while preserving flexibility. This has involved carefully sequencing commitments, seeking exemptions or waivers where possible, and avoiding moves that could trigger heightened scrutiny, particularly in sensitive trade and industrial sectors.

A notable adjustment has been the diversification of engagement channels within the United States. ASEAN governments have increasingly invested in outreach beyond the White House, engaging government agencies, Congress, state governments, and non-government stakeholders to navigate a fragmented policymaking environment. While this has enabled tactical gains and issue-specific accommodations, it has also raised transaction costs and underscored the asymmetry of the relationship. Access to the U.S. market and policy space is increasingly negotiated across multiple fronts, favoring actors with greater administrative capacity and political capital.

At the regional level, these dynamics risk weakening ASEAN centrality. The U.S. preference for bilateral engagement, combined with differentiated exposure to tariffs and local content requirements, places uneven pressures on member states and complicates collective positioning. More industrialized economies are better able to adapt, while others face rising risks of marginalization.

For ASEAN as a whole, the challenge in 2026 will be to balance pragmatic adaptation to U.S. leverage with efforts to sustain regional cohesion, diversify external partnerships, and prevent conditional engagement from translating into long-term strategic dependence.

Military Engagement

Hard power is necessarily to resolve Chinese influence regionally.

Irby, C. P. (20**25**, July 15). *From High Seas to Highlands: Framing U.S. Defense Strategy With Southeast Asia's Geography*. National Defense University Press. https://ndupress.ndu.edu/media/news/news-article-view/article/4246636/from-high-seas-to-highlands-framing-us-defense-strategy-with-southeast-asias-ge.

How to Operate in Southeast Asia

Given the rising importance of Southeast Asia globally and the growing diplomatic, economic, and military competition for influence by other powers, the United States must adopt a strategy to conduct the full range of military operations. The geography of the region will influence the viability of any strategy. As such, the United States needs to address the requirement for resilient capabilities, including basing, maneuvering effectively across the region, and becoming more situationally aware of capabilities suited to the environment.

The military principles of mass and security frequently require trade-offs with each other. The massing of capabilities increases the likelihood of victory in battle, but the defeat of a large force leaves an entire military campaign vulnerable to counterattack. Acknowledging this dilemma, the U.S. Air Force developed the Agile Combat Employment concept that seeks to disperse operations to smaller locations that are "defensible, sustainable, and relocatable" while simultaneously maintaining the ability to mass combat effects against the adversary.30

Building Resilient Capabilities. For operations in Southeast Asia, building resilient capabilities requires large numbers of smaller bases close to potential conflict areas. The United States began executing this strategy in 2023, when it secured access to new basing in the Philippines. Despite this success, the Philippines represents one of the easiest locations in Southeast Asia because of the mutual defense treaty between the countries.31 In securing additional required access across the rest of the region, the United States will need to consider other factors.

The diversity across the region and consensus-style decisions associated with ASEAN mean that the United States must deal with each country unilaterally for basing negotiations. The varying political systems across the region mean that some countries (for example, Cambodia) may be completely unwilling to cooperate with the United States, while others (Indonesia) may be willing to grant access, but only under certain conditions.32 Monsoon seasons make some locations unsuitable or unreliable for operations (particularly airborne) during certain times of the year.33 Chinese military capabilities in the South China Sea pose risks that might make some bases nonviable during early stages of conflict.34 Because of these factors, the United States must develop a large and dispersed network of bases across a wide range of countries to maintain capability under a variety of circumstances.

Fortunately, the United States does not require permanent basing, a more complicated and sensitive request, but does require rotational access and access during crises. At a minimum, the United States will need access in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Indochina (most likely Singapore and Thailand) to maintain the dispersal across the region to achieve secure and redundant capabilities.

The United States successfully secured access to the Philippines with recent negotiations, but Indonesia will likely prove trickier. Indonesia seeks to avoid picking sides in a conflict between China and the United States due to deep economic and political ties to China and deep economic and military ties to the United States. Militarily, the United States and Indonesia agreed in May of 2024 to enhance training of Indonesia's maritime security capabilities in light of aggressive Chinese maneuvers in the South China Sea.35 While Indonesia maintains strong military ties with the United States, it routinely feels neglected diplomatically.36 Additionally, the United States faces new challenges in its bilateral relationship due to its support for Israel in the war against Hamas, which puts the United States at odds with Muslim-majority Indonesia.37 Indonesia also maintains robust economic, military, and economic ties with Australia and India.38 If the "Quad" of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States approached Indonesia with offers of cooperation and potentially even an invitation to create a "Quint," it would prove more powerful than a U.S. bilateral offer. It would also create more venues for U.S. engagement with Indonesia, alleviating some of Jakarta's grievances over lack of diplomatic engagement. Additionally, deepening relationships between these countries economically (which is not currently within the scope of the Quad) would provide a more viable counter to China's economic influence across the region.

On the Indochinese Peninsula the most likely partners consist of Singapore and Thailand. Both countries maintain strong military ties with the United States, which has a mutual defense treaty with Thailand and significant basing agreements and military sales with Singapore.39 Like Indonesia, these countries prefer to avoid picking sides between China and the United States largely due to economic considerations.40 In spite of this fact, the United States should continue to conduct more complicated and larger numbers of military exercises such as Cobra Gold in Thailand and Pacific Griffin in Singapore and capitalize on any diplomatic missteps by China to secure agreements contingent on Chinese aggression.41 As an example, the United States should continue to highlight Chinese aggression against the Philippines in the South China Sea, propaganda efforts in Southeast Asia, and declines in the Chinese economy. These efforts increase the likelihood that countries will assist the United States in countering China in the event of a military crisis in the region and increase the resilience of U.S. military presence.

Maneuver. Due to the geography of Southeast Asia, military maneuver becomes particularly challenging but no less necessary for success. Especially with forces dispersed for security, maneuver becomes a requirement for logistics and sustainment as well as for offensive advantage and to generate mass.42 In this context, the Department of Defense requires assets capable of moving personnel, equipment, and combat power quickly and securely to land and maritime basing in a wide range of circumstances, including unfavorable weather and contested by adversaries. While the Navy has invested significantly in the Littoral Combat Ship for this exact purpose, it needs to address the ongoing maintenance issues and criticism of the weapons capabilities to successfully address requirements for high-intensity conflict.43 Australia also debates how to field applicable capabilities to the archipelagic region with the added consideration of integration with foreign partners such as the United States and Japan.44

In addition to the ability to base and sustain in the region, the United States must develop and maintain the ability to maneuver in the South China Sea. While many acknowledge that the United States maintains a significant technological advantage in submarine warfare, many of these advantages become muted in the shallow waters of the South China Sea.45 The development of systems that could effectively operate in shallow waters, under threat from Chinese capabilities in the South China Sea, remains a significant gap. Uncrewed systems maintain significant advantages in this environment but face numerous technical challenges to implementation. Interconnected buoys and small uncrewed vessels could provide the communications network backbone for uncrewed vessels but must survive the challenging ocean conditions of the South China Sea in addition to potential adversary attacks. While not unique to the South China Sea, increasing range, battery life, and interoperability with other systems remain requirements to achieve the full potential of uncrewed vehicles.46

Situational Awareness. A final decisive military capability for the region rests with intelligence. One's ability to detect an adversary's location and capabilities and array them against one's own remains the difference between victory and defeat. Southeast Asia poses numerous challenges to the ability to consistently detect an adversary. Detection of naval ships in open waters remains nearly as challenging as it was in World War II.47 Both land- and space-based sensors would struggle with the challenging atmospheric conditions associated with the tropics. The dense tropical vegetation of rural portions of the region and densely populated urban areas complicate detection capabilities.48

All these challenges come in addition to a broadly increasing technological capability to disrupt technical intelligence collection. The United States must develop sensors and platforms that overcome the environmental challenges of Southeast Asia in addition to any jamming and interference from an adversary. These capabilities must maintain connectivity across the dispersed operating locations and have sufficient mobility to keep up with maneuvering forces. While many of these capabilities exist, the U.S. Government and military currently struggle to build and implement a strategy for acquisition and fielding.

On the policy front, the United States needs to improve intelligence-sharing with key allies and partners in Southeast Asia for maximum situational awareness. Allies and partners could contribute to sensor emplacement and communications. The United States could also benefit from the on-the-ground knowledge and expertise provided by regional partners. These partners would participate only if they also gained from the intelligence collected. Concerns over security of the information and the potential for China to gain access to this information through regional partners, while valid, should be mitigated without preventing sharing of useful intelligence.

India

India has a history of engagement, but it's not as institutionalized as the U.S. Nonetheless, India could feasibly economically engage while benefiting ASEAN centrality and Indian soft power.

Gururaj, R. (2026, **June 25**). *In ASEAN's Balancing Act, India Expands the Middle Ground.* Fair Observer. https://www.fairobserver.com/world-news/india-news/in-aseans-balancing-act-india-expands-the-middle-ground/.

India's engagement with ASEAN has also evolved from a traditional diplomatic outreach into a more institutionalized framework of cooperation. Bilateral trade has expanded significantly over the past decade, while mechanisms such as the ASEAN–India Free Trade Area, the ASEAN–India Plan of Action and regular summit-level consultations have created a structured basis for long-term engagement.

Connectivity initiatives, including the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway and broader efforts under India's Act East Policy, seek to integrate India more closely with Southeast Asian production networks and supply chains. Although implementation delays have affected perceptions of reliability, the strategic intent behind these initiatives reflects India's recognition that sustained relevance in Southeast Asia ultimately depends on deeper economic integration rather than security ties alone.

Aligning with ASEAN's strategic culture

At the strategic level, India's engagement increasingly aligns with ASEAN's preference for inclusive and non-bloc regional architectures. Unlike alliance-driven approaches, India has consistently emphasized ASEAN centrality within the Indo-Pacific. It continues to participate actively in ASEAN-led institutions such as the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus.

This matters because ASEAN's strategic culture prioritizes equilibrium, consultation and multi-alignment over rigid geopolitical camps. India's relatively non-prescriptive approach, therefore, allows it to engage Southeast Asia without generating the dilemmas often associated with major-power competition. In this sense, India's growing role is not merely about balancing China but about reinforcing ASEAN's own preference for strategic autonomy and diversified partnerships.

Yet, these developments cannot be overstated. In the strategic calculus of Southeast Asia, India remains a secondary actor. Its trade and investment footprint is modest compared to China and the US, its project delivery record is uneven and its security role is very limited relative to that of the US.

But to dismiss India as a peripheral power would be equally misleading. India is not seeking to displace existing poles of influence. Instead, it is positioning itself within the layers of ASEAN's strategic landscape by offering capabilities, partnerships and options that complement, rather than compete with, the region's existing alignments.

Australia

Australia is in a similar situation as India.

Polik, K., **and Poling**, G. B. (20**25**, June 9). *Australia Doubles Down on Southeast Asia*. Center for International and Strategic Studies. https://www.csis.org/analysis/australia-doubles-down-southeast-asia.

Expectations Versus Reality

Despite being near neighbors, Australia's engagement with Southeast Asia, especially in the economic domain, has not been as robust as might be expected. Australia's trade and investment ties with Southeast Asia are modest compared to those with Northeast Asian and Western partners, and in fact Australia foreign investment in New Zealand, which has a population of just over 5 million, is significantly more than its investment into Southeast Asia, which has a population of almost 700 million. Australia's total trade in goods with Southeast Asia was $87.3 billion in 2024, compared to the United States, which traded $489 billion with the region that same year. The United States invests more in Southeast Asia than it does in China or India and ranks among the top five sources of foreign direct investment for almost every country in the region; Australia, in most cases, trails far behind not only the United States, China, and Japan, but also several European states.

Annual surveys of elite and public opinion across Southeast Asia show that Australia, while viewed favorably, is not thought of as being in the top tier of strategic partners—the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's State of Southeast Asia 2025 report found that, when asked to rank countries by their strategic importance to ASEAN, Southeast Asian respondents ranked Australia fifth, behind China, United States, Japan, and the European Union.

Bridging the Gap in Australia-ASEAN Relations

As Australia's perceptions of China have evolved, so too has its recognition of Southeast Asia as a linchpin for regional security and prosperity. Since first coming to power, the Albanese government has made "ASEAN centrality" a key component of its foreign policy, and Foreign Minister Penny Wong has since 2023 repeatedly emphasized that "ASEAN's security is Australia's security." Australia's 2023 Defense Strategic Review specifically mentioned the importance of strengthening engagement with Southeast Asian partners, emphasizing that Southeast Asia is "one of the key areas of strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific."

To drive home the focus on the region, Albanese made Jakarta his first overseas destination after his reelection in May, where he and President Prabowo Subianto recommitted to implementing a landmark security agreement reached last year and to deepening economic linkages. After his first election in 2022, Albanese also made Indonesia his first bilateral visit (after a prescheduled Quad meeting in Tokyo).

Much as it has done in the Pacific, Australia has evolved its foreign policy in Southeast Asia to merge development assistance and relationship building with broader national security objectives, recognizing that security and prosperity in Southeast Asia directly relate to Australia's own national security. To help inform the government's efforts to increase ties with Southeast Asian partners, Albanese requested that Nicholas Moore, Australian special envoy for Southeast Asia, lead efforts to develop a strategy specifically aimed at enhancing trade and investment ties with the region. The government adopted the resulting report, which informed much of the follow-on economic engagement.

The framing of this increased engagement has been collaborative—striving to "meet Southeast Asia where it is" to construct a "new strategic equilibrium" in an era of great power competition. Positioning itself as a friendly, nonthreatening partner while simultaneously doubling down on its alliance with the United States has been a delicate dance, but one Australia has pursued by focusing primarily on economic and social sectors.