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Texas Two Step: ASEAN-US relations set to rebound in Crawford

Sim



US President George Bush has alleviated ASEAN's concerns about the US' interest in Southeast Asia through the President's proposed ASEAN-US leadership summit scheduled for early next year at his ranch in Crawford, Texas. The Crawford summit provides the US with a potential tactical diplomatic advantage during the closing days of the Bush Administration. It also gives ASEAN leaders an early indication on the post-Bush era atmospherics in the US.

Earlier this year, President Bush had promised Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong that he would attend an ASEAN-US summit that was to be held in Singapore during the early September run-up to the APEC summit in Australia. Yet after a few months of tentative planning, Bush postponed his attendance indefinitely, citing schedule difficulties among the leaders.

More likely, the Bush Administration felt that its time and resources were better spent on the Iraq debate, and the scheduled September release of the Petraeus report, concerning the Iraq war. The fact that President Bush stopped in Iraq along the way to Sydney for the APEC Summit confirms this analysis.

The postponement of the ASEAN-US summit, along with the no-show of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at this year's ASEAN Regional Forum in Manila (and perhaps even the failure of Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte to perform at the closing "talent show") had predictable results. Murmurs and chattering in ASEAN capitals, along with headlines about the lack of US commitment to the region appeared almost immediately. This is despite the fact that US commercial and security relationships in Southeast Asia currently face no crises, or imminent threats.

By proposing the Crawford summit during the APEC meetings in Sydney, Bush responded adroitly to the nervous chatter. A summit at his personal residence, although not as grand a backdrop as the White House, is an unmistakable public display of support for the region.

Moreover, shifting the summit to Crawford makes the US the host country. This relocation, and the delay until early 2008, gives the US government more tactical leverage to deal with a couple of bilateral issues in Southeast Asia.

First, assuming that the Thai parliamentary elections are held as scheduled in December, the Crawford summit could be among the first international meetings for the newly elected Thai prime minister. Participation in the Crawford summit could be an incentive for Thai politicians to form a government and name a prime minister quickly.

Second, hosting of the summit in Crawford gives the US more say over the attendance of Myanmar. Given the recent comments of Laura Bush and others, it is highly unlikely that any senior Myanmar government leaders will be invited or allowed to attend. On the other hand, not allowing any government participation may cause difficulties with the other ASEAN members. Expect the US to at least allow a less senior Myanmar government representative to attend, but with the Bush Administration making a public display of support for reform in Myanmar by meeting with Myanmar's dissidents and exiles.

For ASEAN, Crawford also represents opportunities. The Crawford summit would give new the ASEAN Secretary General (designate), Surin Pitsuwan his first chance to stretch his diplomatic legs. Unlike previous ASEAN Secretary Generals, Pitsuwan has major political as well as diplomatic experience. Crawford will offer him the opportunity the chance to exercise the ASEAN Secretary General's new authority envisaged by the ASEAN Charter, set to be approved in Singapore later this year.

The delay and the relocation of the summit also inadvertently give the ASEAN leaders an early and first-hand indication of what could follow the Bush Administration. The 2008 primaries to select the Republican and Democratic presidential nominees will be in full swing. Not only will the ASEAN leaders get a full dose of

US-style mass media politics at its best (or worst, some would say), but the nominees may even be known by then. Foreign policy (other than Iraq) most likely will not be on the political agenda, but experiencing the process firsthand will be educational for the ASEAN leadership delegations.

All of the above, are relatively piece-meal, but important benefits resulting from the delay and relocation of the ASEAN-US summit. More critical for the ASEAN countries would be an agreement in the WTO Doha Round, or a leveling-off of the current wave of protectionism within the US Congress. For ASEAN, given that the US political environment is in transition and distracted by the Iraq debate, even the qualified benefits derived through the ASEAN-US relationship should be appreciated and grabbed with both hands.

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