

US-Asean summit got most things right

But both sides still face challenges in elevating ties to 'strategic' level



WASHINGTON: Like any big international meeting, the recent United States-Asean summit in New York had its fair share of hiccups and disappointments.

For starters, the event did not happen in Washington DC, which would have been a more symbolic location. Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, leader of the biggest South-east Asian country, also failed to make it for the event, citing a clash in his official schedule.

And in an embarrassing diplomatic boo-boo by the American host, the Philippine flag was hung upside down during the summit meeting in the Waldorf Astoria hotel.

But despite all that, did the leaders get the big things right in the end?

The answer from analysts here is a qualified "yes".

They said that the US and Asean rightly focused on growing and institutionalising their engagement instead of allowing their meeting to be hijacked by simmering tension with China over the South China Sea territorial dispute.

In a joint statement, the US and South-east Asian leaders agreed to look

into ways to elevate their partnership to a "strategic" level, and were committed to meeting again next year in Jakarta.

"The Asean leaders were quite reassured by President Barack Obama's meeting with them, and Asean leaders viewed the meeting as a valuable one and as an indication that he is indeed interested in the region," said Dr Robert Hathaway, the Asia programme director of the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars.

And it was significant that the two sides "rejected the idea that their relationship is defined by China", wrote Mr Ernest Bower, a South-east Asian expert with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, in a recent research note.

He added: "This point is important because it means the US wants to reinvigorate its relationship with Asean because of the important economic, political, security and socio-economic benefits close ties will bring, not because it needs the relationship to manage an emergent China."

But the glaring lack of the kind of substantive results that Mr Bower was referring to – and the difficulties in achieving them given the limits of Asean and the domestic preoccupations of the Obama administration – means that US-Asean ties would inevitably be dogged by the China factor in the foreseeable future.

The behind-the-scenes drama at this year's summit is a case in point.

In the run-up to the meeting in New York two weeks ago, media attention was almost entirely focused on how the US and Asean would adopt a firm stance on the South China Sea issue – a dispute between several Asean countries and China that goes back decades.

According to the Associated Press, which obtained an early draft of the joint

US-Asean statement, the two sides would declare their opposition to the "use or threat of force by any claimant attempting to enforce disputed claims".

While the draft statement did not say who was using or threatening to use force, few had doubts that it was referring to growing Chinese assertiveness in the dispute over unexploited oil and natural gas fields, as well as fishing grounds, in the South China Sea.

Several South-east Asian countries, however, had reservations about how the draft statement was phrased. They were concerned that it would further antagonise Beijing, which was already unhappy with recent US comments on the South China Sea issue made at an Asean security forum in July.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had declared then that US "national interest" was involved.

These concerns were heightened by the rapid escalation of another territorial dispute in the region, this time sparked by Japan's arrest of a Chinese boat captain near disputed islands in the East China Sea.

Amid growing questions about the wisdom of stirring up further tension in the region, the delegates decided to drop specific mention of the South China Sea issue from the joint US-Asean statement. Instead, the document made only a gener-

ic reference to maritime security.

Said Dr Bridget Welsh, a South-east Asian expert at the Singapore Management University (SMU): "I think a lot of Asean countries saw (the East China Sea row) as a proxy for the South China Sea issue, so they were taking a more cautious response to see how it unfolded. There was a lot of concern that confrontation

would breed a more confrontational response."

The delicate balancing act that Asean had to pull off belied a growing narrative in the Western media that China's growing assertiveness was pushing Asian countries back into the arms of the US.

While Asian countries are warily watching China's recent behaviour, they are also careful not to be seen as ganging up with Washington to exert pressure on Beijing. This caution stems from geographical reasons, as well as inconsistencies in the Obama administration's Asia policy.

For instance, Mr Obama postponed his visit to Indonesia three times to deal with domestic crises despite signalling repeatedly that he wants to court the South-east Asian giant as a major strategic partner.

The fate of a long-stalled free trade agreement with South Korea, another key Asian player in the administration's play-

POSITIVE SIGN

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book, is also uncertain, given the rising protectionist sentiments in the Democratic Party and the likelihood of a major legislative log-jam after the mid-term elections next month.

As Dr Welsh of SMU puts it, there are doubts about whether US policy in Asia is more about speeches, or actual presence and action.

The top advisory council that has been appointed to study how the US and Asean partnership can be taken to a "strategic" level will thus have its work cut out. With a major trade deal unlikely to happen in the short term, the two sides will face challenges in defining and anchoring a strategic relationship.

Mr Douglas Paal, a vice-president with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a veteran Asia hand who has served with several US administrations, suggests that the US and Asean can look at closer cooperation on counter-terrorism and counter-piracy training and operations, as well as joint humanitarian projects.

But not everyone believes that a strategic relationship has to rest solely on tangible deals and benefits.

Professor Amitav Acharya, chair of the American University's Asean Studies Centre, said the heart of it all lies in the US' recognition of Asean's "strategic primacy" in the region and the emerging regional architecture.

"They have a lot of engagements on a lot of different fronts, engaging bilaterally, multilaterally, and in all aspects," he said. "If you look at US-Asean relations three years ago and look at them today, the meaning of 'strategic' becomes very clear."

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