



Remarks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies

John D. Negroponte, Deputy Secretary of State
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Thank you, John, very kind of you. Very nice introduction. I appreciate it very much.

I'm delighted to be here this evening and to see so many old friends, both colleagues with whom I've worked over the years here in Washington, as well as foreign government colleagues. In particular it is good to see so many from the various countries of ASEAN -- Rod Severino, who I had the chance to work with when I was Ambassador to the Philippines; Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, who I last met when I was Ambassador to the United Nations; Prince Norodom -- I just visited his country and I had a very, very interesting visit -- and many, many others of you -- Jim Kelly, who was such a close colleague over the years, dealing with East Asia and Pacific matters, and many others.

You say we don't know that much about Southeast Asia. I guess there was a time when we knew too much about Southeast Asia. And I remember Tom Pickering, at one conference I attended, once saying, be careful which United States list you want to be on in terms of the attention you get. So that, of course, was during the Vietnam War era. And I remember as that wound down, and I was one of Dick Holbrooke's deputies in the late 1970s, early 1980s, a study came out from one of the research institutes here, on what Americans thought of Asia. It was quite a well-known, high-profile study at the time. And I remember Dick kind of introducing it to an audience such as this. And the principal conclusion of that study about American perceptions of Asia, at that particular time, was the association with war: World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and so forth.

And then if you fast-forward, I'm thinking of the time that I was Ambassador to the Philippines -- 1993 to 1996 -- I think we were all thinking of these very capable and eloquent leaders of Southeast Asia playing golf on Robert Trent Jones golf courses around Southeast Asia and the Asian Tigers. That was a period of real economic dynamism when the ASEAN group of countries reached a level of becoming our fourth largest trading partner, which I believe remains the fact today, as well.

So the economic element really came to the fore in the early and mid-1990s, and then we had a real setback with the Asian financial crisis of 1997, 1998. The countries of Southeast Asia lost a period of time recovering from that. So it took time to set that right and to get that part of our relationships back on the right footing. Everybody had to put their own houses in order, it delayed some of the more ambitious integrationist policies that were being advocated around the region, and so forth.

Perhaps we're coming to a time when we're going to get this balance just about right. I don't think today, in our country at least, that we associate Southeast Asia with war anymore. Now, I just had a very interesting trip. I hadn't been back to Vietnam since the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in January of 1973. I'd never been to Hanoi. Of course, I had spent a lot of time in Ho Chi Minh City. But in any case, I was really struck by what I found in Vietnam: tremendous prosperity, particularly in the south, although in the north as well; a great -- no rancor, no animosity towards the United States, either towards our people or towards our government; and I think a great interest in increasing the interchanges between our two societies, at all different levels, especially the educational level. I cannot tell you how many people, both in the government and in the private sector, that I met who talked to me getting American universities or American courses to Vietnam. Many would like to have turnkey projects where major American universities would install themselves in one way or another. At a minimum, Vietnam wants U.S.-style curricula will become a part of the regular diet of the Vietnam education system. So I found this extraordinarily encouraging.

I also went to Cambodia, as I mentioned. And Cambodia also is recovering well from the many difficult circumstances that it has faced over the years. Two billion worth of textile exports to the United States every year. I mean, to me, that was a striking figure. I never really expected that. Security also is not the kind of problem that it was even just several years ago. And again, from my point of view, the U.S.-Cambodian relationship is on a very good footing.

These brief remarks are not intended to be a panorama of our relations with each country in Southeast Asia, but if you take the two I've mentioned, Vietnam and Cambodia, and then you take the countries with which we have alliances like the Philippines and Thailand, and the excellent relationships that we of course have with Singapore and the others -- Indonesia, last, but certainly not least, and where I think the relationship has been put on an even stronger footing with the advent of a new president about three years ago -- the horizons for U.S. and Southeast Asian relationships are quite healthy and quite good, indeed. And that's in an overall context of what I consider to be very positive relationships with the East Asia and Pacific region as a whole during the last seven years.

Looking at the rest of East Asia, President Bush has really worked hard to advance understanding and dialogue with the country of China. He's invested a lot personally in establishing the kind of rapport with the Chinese leadership that we need to have with a country that is as dynamic and as growing as it is in economic power and other capabilities.

The Japan relationship is good in the sense that we've revamped the alliance, done some things to streamline and put that alliance relationship on healthy basis.

In addition, we have our very strong and traditional friendship with the country of Australia.

So all in all, John, it may be positive, in a sense, that our relations with the East Asia Pacific region are not on the top of the list. You may not want to be on the same list as Iraq and Afghanistan, which get the front page headlines every day.

But at the same time, let us hope -- and for this, I would congratulate you and CSIS for what you're doing. Let us hope that even though the profile isn't high, that beneath the surface and at the people-to-people level and at the institution-to-institution level, we're doing the kind of exchanges and study of each other's cultures and societies, economies and political systems that will sustain the basis for healthy relationships going forward. And certainly, the countries that I visited all want to do that. If you think of the number of students from China or Thailand or Vietnam or Cambodia who study in the United States and seek to benefit from our educational system -- and I think even the increasing number of Americans who go and live and study in some of these countries, as well -- I think, perhaps, we're slowly getting it right in terms of our relationship with the East Asia Pacific region. And so I'm very optimistic and upbeat about that.

And on that note, I'd be pleased to try and answer any questions or hear any comments that you might wish to make. Thank you.

(Applause.)

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