## CHAPTER ONE

# *Ambivalent Engagement?*

**SOUTHEAST ASIA IS A REGION** of considerable economic growth potential. Collectively, the ten states of Southeast Asia possess the third largest workforce behind China and India, command a greater share of global capital flows, are home to a growing middle class and consumer base, and form the world's fourth largest exporting region. In many respects, this economic potential has been captured in the creation of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), announced in December 2015, envisaged to further enhance the economic connectivity of the region.

But the essence of Southeast Asia as a region is characterized by more than its economic dynamism. Since the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement in October 1991, which brought about Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia and ended the Cold War in Southeast Asia, the region has enjoyed a quarter of a century of relative peace and stability. Although periodic social unrest continues to afflict almost every state in the region—with Thailand arguably the most notable and disconcerting—these have not reached the scale of political violence witnessed over the same period in the Middle East, Central Asia, and many parts of South Asia. Moreover, with the exception of a brief border conflagration between Thailand and Cambodia in 2008, interstate peace has prevailed in Southeast Asia since the end of the Cold War. To be sure, mutual mistrust and border disputes between many neighboring regional states still exist, but most important is that they have not given rise to conflicts that can imperil overall regional stability. This fact should not be belittled given that the region was once known in popular parlance as a

"region in revolt" and home to the bloodier of the two "hot wars" that broke out during the Cold War. If anything, it is a mark of how far the region has come in terms of regional security and stability.

On balance then, the political stability and economic growth that has obtained in Southeast Asia since the end of the Cold War ought to render the region of some strategic import to the United States, for Washington would have an interest in preserving this regional stability and partaking in its growth, rather than conceive of its role in the narrow sense of merely a "trouble shooter" that appears only when a crisis materializes. Indeed, if public speeches offer any indication, the economic dynamism and presumed vast economic potential of Southeast Asia is already frequently acknowledged by the American political leadership and foreign policy decisionmaking community. Added to that are several further reasons why the region should command American policy attention. Southeast Asia encompasses waterways that are crucial to international trade, such as the Malacca Straits and the South China Sea; this, too, is a point that has been recognized by consecutive U.S. administrations, although it has only been more recently that this recognition has found expression in concrete policy action with Washington's more proactive position on the South China Sea.

For the U.S. foreign policy establishment, Southeast Asia should possess further strategic and policy appeal. The region is home to large Muslim communities—especially in Indonesia and Malaysia—whose theological and political climes offer potential alternative religio-cultural narratives to those that have seized the Middle East, South Asia, and Central Asia. Southeast Asia, too, can claim a legacy of successful democratization processes that stand in stark contrast to the outcome of the Arab Spring. Setting aside the present regression of democracy in Thailand, few would deny that the outcomes of the "People's Revolution" in the Philippines, *Reformasi* in Indonesia, and, now, the self-initiated withdrawal of the military from politics that is taking place in Myanmar compare favorably to the failed revolutions in Egypt and Libya. These trends speak to the twin themes of democratization and U.S. relations with Muslim societies, which remain signal foreign policy priorities for the United States. There is another less sanguine but no less important strategic character to the region that punctuates consideration of its significance to the United States: it has become increasingly evident in recent years that there is a picture gradually unfolding of Southeast Asia becoming a key arena for Sino–U.S. strategic rivalry and economic com-

petition. Indeed, the point can plausibly be argued that in Southeast Asia today we are witnessing the first signs of a brewing strategic rivalry that will shape global politics in the twenty-first century.

Although the above observations may provide some compelling reasons why Southeast Asia should command considerable attention in American strategic thinking and foreign policymaking, the question that this begs is: does it?

On the face of it, several observations can be offered in response to this question. First, "Southeast Asia," as those more reticent toward an American role in the region frequently remind us, is in Washington policy discourse usually wrapped up in conversations on broader concepts of "the Pacific," "the Asia Pacific," "East Asia," or even "East Asian littoral running from the Sea of Japan to the Bay of Bengal," as described in the 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review*. The portents of this nomenclature should be self-evident—priority tends to still be rendered to American allies in Japan and South Korea, security commitments to Taiwan, and growing interest in India, as compared with Southeast Asia. Indeed, even South Asia appears to command comparatively more attention with its long history of animosity between India and Pakistan, not to mention the threat of terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and chronic instability in Pakistan. In short, American strategic thinking tends to treat Southeast Asia as an extension of a wider geostrategic footprint rather than as a region with its own inherent strategic significance and logic. As one official who served in the Bush and Obama administrations admitted: "It is difficult to focus exclusively on Southeast Asia as an area of strategic priority, although the situation has improved over the last eight years (namely, during the Obama administration)."[1]

Second, if Southeast Asia has featured at all in post–Cold War policy discussions and debate swirling in Washington, D.C., circles, it has for the most part been dominated by specific policy themes: either human rights and democratization (during the Clinton administration), counterterrorism (during the Bush administration), or, increasingly, the South China Sea (during the Obama administration). In other words, the United States has largely been either neglectful or narrow—or both—in its thinking about Southeast Asia.

Finally, this state of affairs belies the fact that there is much at stake for the United States, as suggested above, in terms of what Southeast Asia has to offer, how regional affairs in Southeast Asia unfold, and where the region fits in broader U.S. grand strategy in the coming years.

To the extent that Asia and the Pacific will feature more prominently for American strategic interests, the inescapable reality is that the relationship between the United States and Southeast Asia must be a key element of future policy: for the United States, for Southeast Asia, for U.S.–Asia relations in general, and for the stability of the Asia Pacific region.

## THE GEOSTRATEGIC SETTING

Notwithstanding the fact that regional economies (sans Japan) have generally been trending upward at laudable growth rates in the past two decades since the end of the Cold War (discounting the period of the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, of course), and regional institutions have proliferated, drivers of instability, insecurity, and potential conflict remain. Several flashpoints can easily be identified, where unresolved issues of border demarcation, irredentism, and territorial disputes can easily spill over to conflict if not managed properly.

A major consideration that frames the investigation of U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia undertaken in this book is the fact that the geostrategic patterns and logics in East Asia have been in transition since the end of the Cold War. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States remains the preeminent regional security actor, freed from the inhibitions of having to deal with a global rival with hostile intentions. Even so, few would suggest that regional stability today relies solely on the United States the way it arguably did during the Cold War (at least for noncommunist Southeast Asia until American withdrawal from Vietnam). Certainly, the financial crisis that beset the United States in 2008 not only significantly tempered talk of American power, it in fact prompted discomfiting murmurs of American decline.

For East Asia, the "unipolar moment" very quickly transmogrified into a more uncertain world as putative regional powers and competitors began asserting themselves, with China very much at the head of the pack. Concomitantly, regional order has come to bear some hallmarks of complex multipolarity where economic interdependence sits uncomfortably with strategic rivalry. Indeed, if the logic obtains that power transitions are inherently destabilizing, then it stands to reason that multiple vectors of power transitions taking place at the same time and within the same geopolitical footprint can only further sharpen anxieties. Needless to say, of paramount consequence to this shifting geostrategic logic is the advent of a new regional power (with global potential, it should be added) in the form of a China that is exuding

hegemonic tendencies. Indeed, a recurring theme through much of this book will be the matter of growing Chinese influence assiduously taking place during periods when American engagement of the region is distracted by other considerations or myopically focused on specific issues. More on this will follow in the ensuing chapters. Suffice to say for now that it is already received wisdom that China's economic growth over the last two decades has translated to political and strategic influence—which it has brought to bear on its relations with Southeast Asian states—and it is poised to fundamentally transform the distribution of power and balance of influence in the region.

Turning to the small and medium-sized states of Southeast Asia, beneficiaries of the economic rise of the greater East Asian region but also inherently vulnerable to its geopolitical shifts, this state of affairs poses interesting, and potentially grave, security challenges and implications. All the more so as Southeast Asia is situated geographically at the intersection of these competing forces. In retrospect, these circumstances are, at least to some extent, not entirely new. Alert to the pitfalls of centrifugal pulls as well as the danger of external power intervention as early as the late 1960s in the wake of decolonization and at the height of the Cold War, efforts were made to grasp the nettle by stressing the neutrality of the region. These efforts culminated in the futile declaration of Southeast Asia's aspiration to be recognized as a Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), freed from external power interference, in 1971. Somewhat similar great power dynamics obtain today, although, as this discussion will later demonstrate, the response of regional states has been to enmesh, rather than exclude, major powers in a regional order centered on ASEAN.[2]

In the face of the element of unpredictability and strategic uncertainty occasioned by competitive and potentially adversarial relationships among otherwise interdependent major powers, the Southeast Asian gaze remains transfixed on the United States to contribute to stability as an active and committed actor in regional affairs, perforce, on grounds that it has historically been a "benign, stabilizing force" in the region.[3] The late Lee Kuan Yew, one of the staunchest Southeast Asian supporters of the U.S. presence in the region, offered the following insight to accent the import of American engagement:

> Why should the United States stay engaged to help East Asia's combined gross national product to exceed that of North America? Why not disengage and abort this process? Because this process is

> not easily aborted. No alternative balance can be as comfortable as the present one, with the United States as a major player. The geopolitical balance without the United States as a principal force will be very different from that which it now is or can be if the United States remains a central player. My generation of Asians, which experienced the last war, its horrors and miseries, and which remembers the U.S. role in the phoenix-like rise from the ashes of that war to prosperity of Japan, the newly industrializing economies, and ASEAN will feel a keen sense of regret that the world will become so vastly different because the United States becomes a less central player in the new balance.[4]

Reinforcing sentiments toward the role that Southeast Asian states have ascribed to the United States in regional affairs, especially on security issues, Truong Tan Sang, the conservative Vietnamese president, opined on the occasion of his visit to Washington that the United States had "an important role and responsibility in dealing with hotspots in the region such as the South China Sea and such global issues as energy security, food security, transnational crime, climate change, and so on. This has become ever more imperative."[5] Needless to say, coming from Vietnam, such a view is all the more significant for obvious reasons.

Notwithstanding the generally positive reception that the United States receives in the region today, an element of ambiguity and ambivalence nevertheless obtains in regard to how the U.S. role is perceived by and received in Southeast Asia. Indeed, it is hardly axiomatic that expectations for the United States to express commitment to regional order betray any intent on the part of Southeast Asia to align strategically with Washington or to offer blanket support for any and all displays of American presence and interest in the region. On the contrary, even as Southeast Asian states articulate a desire for the United States to enhance its engagement, not a few have also made clear, in subtle but sometimes also not-so-subtle ways, their intention to retain more than a modicum of national and regional autonomy. This is evident, for instance, in the constant refrain across the region of decisionmakers not wanting to be in a position where they are forced to "choose sides" in relation to the United States and China. At the same time, given the role that Southeast Asia is prepared to accord to the United States, this also begs the question of whether, and how, regional expectations dovetail with American strategic interests and objectives, and the degree to which Southeast

Asia demonstrates a collective will in their reception of American intent in the region. This question will be pursued in greater detail in the next chapter.

A word must be said about the factor of geography. An evident feature of enduring significance that informs the strategy of any given power must surely be political geography. Geographical forces influence human and state behavior in predictable ways and, as some have argued, provide a compelling explanation for the economic and political power that some states wield.[6] Geography, as the historical record attests, has also been one of the most rampant causes of wars between states. For its part, the factor of geography plays a crucial role in influencing strategic thinking and strategic culture as well. As Colin Gray noted, "national strategic culture is very much the product of geographical conditioning."[7]

For the United States, the factor of geography has historically had a significant impact on the shaping of grand strategy and application of national power. Its role was evident in the imperative to prevent the emergence of powers from either its Pacific or Atlantic flanks that could undermine the security of the mainland. Geography also featured as the fundamental premise to the Monroe Doctrine, articulated in 1823, that was predicated on the idea that the Western Hemisphere was the immediate geographic sphere of influence for the United States. According to this logic, the response to Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and Soviet attempts to locate medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Cuba in 1962 demonstrated the imperative of meeting the threat posed by other powers seeking to assert a presence in the U.S. sphere of influence.

Geography also informs American commitments to friends and allies. In keeping with this premise, it is inherently more difficult for the United States to make credible grand strategic commitments to allies and friends in Southeast Asia because of geography, where the arid reality remains that the United States is far away from the region and therefore less proximate to the threats that either emanate from or confront it. Further to that, since the United States is congenitally more secure than its partners and allies in Southeast Asia, it has to send more costly signals of its commitment to their security, especially given constraints of finite resources and the need for accountability to its population.[8] More important, the question of how much of this cost the United States is prepared to bear in order to maintain the confidence of regional partners and friends in American resolve continues to be asked, and remains unanswered, or

at least not satisfactorily answered, even among Americans themselves. This is especially so given the U.S. domestic climate, which has witnessed stalemates over defense spending, entitlements, the civilian budget, and taxation policy, as well as heated debates over burden sharing on the part of regional allies. On the other side of the coin, the partners and allies in question will be more acutely sensitive to perceived fluctuations in American commitment because of their close proximity—ergo, vulnerability—to more localized threats.[9]

This ambivalence was captured in what appeared a rhetorical question posed by an American politician during a discussion on how the United States should respond to Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea: "Why would it be detrimental to our [U.S.] interests if we ceded influence in the South China Sea to China? Why should the United States risk entanglement and possibly war with China over a few rocks situated far away and of minimal strategic consequence?"[10] The fact is that this view echoes those of naysayers who, though not proponents of isolationism per se, nevertheless caution against American overstretch into areas geographically too distant to pose any remote existential threat to the survival of the United States and its people. Indeed, such statements are to Southeast Asian decisionmakers the cause of as much anxiety as hawkish demands for the United States to do more militarily to push back against China or to engage in a trade war with Beijing.

A further point to register is the fact that a strategic logic of fundamental power asymmetry obtains between the United States and Southeast Asia. According to this line of reasoning, American power far outweighs the collective capabilities of all Southeast Asian states, let alone any individual state. Given this discrepancy in the distribution of power, it is perhaps understandable that Southeast Asia is likely to be overly sensitive to the United States whereas the United States would tend to be negligent toward the region.[11] In other words, it is an unequal relationship, and this inequality is reflected in expectations and perceptions of obligations.

A corollary to this is the matter of the weight of Southeast Asia compared with other regions of the world in terms of American priorities writ large. Received wisdom dictates that, relative to other regions, Southeast Asia may pale in comparison in terms of its importance to the United States. On the surface of it, this appears to be the picture if we consider that Latin America is at the doorstep of the United States and hence in its immediate and incontrovertible sphere of influence, Europe

shares deep historical and cultural ties to the United States (ties that have also been cemented with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization), the Middle East has long been of great strategic value because of energy security and the relationship with Israel but also of potential threat with the presence of the Islamic State terrorist group, and Central Asia has in the last decade and a half emerged as a direct threat to the United States owing to the presence of al Qaeda in that region and the fact that it remains the only foreign enemy to have successfully launched an attack on the American mainland for a long time. Yet, although this logic may have held for a large part of the post–World War II era, the policy discourse and practice of the administration of President Barack Obama appeared to indicate that at least some measure of strategic reprioritization has been taking place.

## UNPACKING SOUTHEAST ASIA FOR U.S. POLICY

In considering American regional engagement, there is, of course, the obvious fundamental question of whether U.S. policymakers should consider Southeast Asia as a single unit, which may imply the existence of a common or even coherent outlook and attitude among regional states. Indeed, the use of the term "Southeast Asia" here is not intended to suggest existence of such a common or even coherent outlook and attitude toward the role of the United States at any given time, let alone across the decades since the end of the Cold War. In point of fact, this will be a recurrent theme through the course of this book. Southeast Asia is a collection of ten countries (eleven, if one wishes to include Timor-Leste, which obtained its independence from Indonesia in 2002). Southeast Asian states have embarked on different trajectories of political evolution and are at different stages of political and economic development. They range from open political systems and liberal democracies to single-party communist and socialist regimes, not to mention an absolute monarchy as well. Some have openly embraced free market principles, while others have centrally planned (albeit gradually liberalizing) economies. Still others are given to periodic tendencies toward protectionism and economic nationalism. From a cultural and anthropological vantage, Southeast Asia is also home to diverse religions, languages, and cultural practices and worldviews.

In geopolitical terms, this diversity and plurality that defines Southeast Asia as a region suggests the difficulty of identifying a singular

perspective, a uniform, collective position on foreign policy, or even a shared outlook toward, and perception of, security threats and challenges. In fact, these perspectives, positions, outlooks, and perceptions among regional states more often than not stand at odds with each other. Equally salient, this innate diversity of the region does not lend itself easily to the creation of an integrated sense of regional identity and community, even though this has been articulated by ASEAN, the regional organization that purportedly binds Southeast Asian states together, to be its signal objective. By the same token, it is difficult—in fact, impossible—to speak or think of an ASEAN or Southeast Asian foreign policy, the absence of which continues to be cause for lament on the part of those who insist on understanding the organization's prospects through a path-dependent lens informed by the European Union experience, a view that is as misguided as it is orientalist. A further regrettable downside of this diversity has been the persistence of strains in the relationships between Southeast Asian states that continues to find expression in bilateral rivalries, competition, and, on occasion, open, if controlled, hostilities, and the challenges ASEAN faces in fulfilling its self-assumed obligation of regional order management.

Pertinent for present purposes is the fact that the diversity of Southeast Asian viewpoints on regional security has historically found expression in divergent outlooks and attitudes toward the role and involvement of the United States in the region. During the Cold War, regional perceptions coincided with ideological blocs and patterns of contending alignments. Corresponding to the ideological imperatives of the Indochina communist states of Vietnam and Laos, a list to which Myanmar (Burma) can be added as well, the United States was clearly an existential threat, whereas for the noncommunist founding members of ASEAN, Washington provided a crucial security umbrella under which stability and the necessary conditions for economic development were created even if, in some cases, the United States played a less than constructive role in internal affairs of certain states. After the end of the Cold War, some Southeast Asian states nursed fears for how a potential American withdrawal could create an unhealthy strategic vacuum. Others continued to harbor deep-seated suspicions born of their own encounters with the United States during the Cold War years (for instance, U.S. complicity in political turmoil in Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, or the American carpet bombing of Cambodia) but also Washington's eagerness to criticize their political systems after the end of the Cold War. Concomi-

tantly, their respective governments frequently fulminated against Washington in the state-controlled media, not least because of American foreign policy imperatives of democratization and human rights, which gathered swift momentum after the end of the Cold War and which were construed in these states as unwarranted interference and a threat to regime survival and legitimacy. All this is to say that, as subsequent chapters will show, even though broad agreement obtains among Southeast Asian states that the United States should remain an engaged actor in the regional security architecture, different perspectives in response to how America has played, and should play, this role are still discernible.

By the onset of the Bush administration, the impact of regional dissimilarities in strategic outlook on relations between the United States and Southeast Asia would come to be manifested on a new plane. Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, Southeast Asia reemerged on the strategic radar of the United States, only to be cast as yet another arena for the Bush administration's ill-conceived "Global War on Terror." Controversially designated the "Second Front" in this "war," American attention descended on maritime Southeast Asia, home to large Muslim populations and a number of militant and terrorist groups. While mainland Southeast Asia suffered a season of comparative neglect, maritime Southeast Asia bemoaned what it saw for the most part to be the "one issue agenda"—namely, counterterrorism—which Washington repeatedly tabled in interactions with the region.

It was against the background of the war on terror that relations between the United States and the Muslim-majority countries of Indonesia and Malaysia became acutely strained. The tension was most apparent in the anti-Bush sentiments, which quite seamlessly (if inaccurately and unfairly, in light of other more constructive aspects of American engagement in the region) transformed to anti-American sentiments, expressed by Muslim civil society groups and domestic constituencies in these two countries. These groups mobilized to condemn the war on terror as a surreptitious war against their religion, and in the process prevented the governments of both Indonesia and Malaysia from public expressions of support for U.S. policy. Conversely, the governments in Singapore and the Philippines moved to align themselves with the war on terror, despite private misgivings harbored by many of their decisionmakers about how the "war" was actually being conducted. For its part, Washington prioritized the war on terror for understandable domestic and ideological

reasons. Although the context and circumstances were less than auspicious, the fact was that by dint of the Bush administration's prioritization of counterterrorism, Southeast Asia was returning to a more central place in American grand strategy (a shift that was sustained during the Obama administration but over different priorities). Indeed, so overwhelming was the influence of the imperative of counterterrorism as a guiding principle in American foreign and security policies, it overshadowed efforts gradually taking place in economic policy and security planning circles to reconsider U.S. strategy in the Asia Pacific and the place of Southeast Asia in this strategy, particularly during the second term of the Bush administration.[12] In short, American ambivalence toward Southeast Asia and the elusiveness of a coherent Southeast Asian outlook toward the United States are two sides of the same analytical coin.

This was also the perceptual challenge inherited by the presidency of Barack Obama, the first American president to have lived for an extended period in Southeast Asia (he spent many formative years in Indonesia). To its credit, the Obama administration professed, and for the most part carried through, its intent to broaden and deepen its engagement with the region under the rubric of the administration's much discussed "Pivot" or "Rebalance" strategy (to be referred to subsequently as the Pivot as this was the original term used). Under President Obama, the United States signed the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA), a major trade agreement that included several Southeast Asian states and prompted interest on the part of several others, and which was an important demonstration not just of American intent to be a factor in regional economic growth but also of Washington's long-term commitment to the region.[13] Washington joined the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2011 on ASEAN's terms. This involved the signing of the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), a move that surprised many, including officials from ASEAN member states at the time. Notwithstanding reservations toward the Pivot nomenclature, the region collectively embraced this newfound energy, ambition, and purpose behind American engagement in Southeast Asia. Beneath the surface, however, differences still existed with regards to states' individual assessments of the details of the Pivot in terms of the policies that flowed (or should have but did not flow) from it, although regional states have taken care not to allow these differences to bedevil the broader issue of the virtue of an American presence and renewed commitment.

To allay regional fears and convey clarity of intent, the Obama administration responded robustly in both word and deed to Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, a matter that has caused considerable consternation to Southeast Asia, more so in some states than others, it should be added. Even then, the support from Southeast Asia has been less than categoric, with some regional states taking the United States to task for escalating tensions even as they question Washington's ability and commitment to stay the course. Indeed, the surfeit of enthusiasm in response to the Pivot could not conceal an abiding sense of uncertainty in the capitals of Southeast Asia. Since the withdrawal from Vietnam, the reliability and sustainability of American commitment has been a constant theme in relations between Southeast Asia—both as individual states as well as collectively as ASEAN—and the United States.[14] Of paramount concern for regional leaders are the prospects that the United States could be distracted from strategic engagement with Southeast Asia. This has become an all-too-frequent refrain. Numerous political leaders, officials, and diplomats from the region—too many to detail here—have voiced this concern in various settings, both public and private. In so doing, they are questioning not so much the fact that the United States has a desire to be engaged with Southeast Asia at any given point as they are the reliability and sustainability of this desire.

Also underlying this uncertainty is a perception of disconnect between pronouncement and practice, intent and implementation. Mindful of the vicissitudes of U.S. electoral cycles and the propensity of the political leadership and foreign policy establishment to shift attention to other regions depending on the crisis of the day, Southeast Asian decisionmakers predictably develop anxieties toward the fidelity and sustainability of American professions of interest and engagement in the region, defined as Washington's ability to play an active and constructive role in fostering regional security by leading and shaping strategic interaction among the region's powers and stakeholders.

## MAIN ARGUMENTS

Although much has been written and debated about U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia in both the scholarly as well as the policy analysis communities, there remains a lacuna in the literature and policy discussions on several counts. First, the numerous policy reports and monographs that are currently available on the topic have for the most part been

written from a U.S. perspective, with American interests serving as a point of entry. There is nothing inherently wrong with this approach, but this literature tends to elide, downplay, misunderstand, misrepresent, or altogether ignore regional views and perspectives on what should be the issues of interest to the United States and how these interests can be pursued, as viewed from the vantage of the region (as opposed to Washington, D.C., or Pacific Command). Second, some of this literature at times betrays a quite fundamental misunderstanding of what is realistic in the context of the region's history, the nature of its regional diplomacy, dissimilarities in outlook and perspectives, and character of its regional institutions. As but one example, criticisms of the incapacities of ASEAN, especially its shortcomings in terms of the organization's decisionmaking process and inability to foster much-needed coherence, are certainly warranted. But at the same time, some of the expectations of the organization, couched as "policy recommendations"—for example, that ASEAN should somehow morph into a collective security institution or that it should devise a common foreign policy not unlike that of the European Union—may simply lie beyond the pale at this point. Third, there is not nearly enough attention given to the role of domestic politics in influencing U.S.–Southeast Asia relations. For these reasons, it behooves scholars, analysts, policymakers, and political leaders to consider some of the fundamental drivers and obstacles to relations between the United States and Southeast Asia. It is toward these ends that this book is written.

By dint of the above observations as a point of entry, this book advances the argument that U.S. policy toward Southeast Asia in the post–Cold War era has gone through several phases that coincide with American presidential administrations and, more important, with priority issue areas around which policy agendas were fashioned. During the Clinton administration, immediately after the end of the Cold War, the region was effectively relegated to the backburner as American policy was drawn to focus on the Middle East, the Balkans, and Russia. Thematically, the Clinton administration's emphasis on human rights and democracy set it at odds with several key Southeast Asian states, thereby creating obstacles to deeper engagement. The Bush administration witnessed a shift in the tone of relations with Southeast Asia, where the weighty emphasis on counterterrorism cast a long shadow over American engagement in the region to the detriment of broader, more holistic interests. Finally, the purported attempt by the Obama administration to broaden and

deepen U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia by way of the Pivot was gradually drawn into the familiar pattern of selective issue attentiveness, with the South China Sea this time emerging as the keystone matter at hand. Because of these shifting agendas, American policy attention has fluctuated, with the implications being the existence of gaps in U.S. understanding of Southeast Asia, which in turn spawn deep and abiding concern in the region that the United States will be distracted—by problems either in other parts of the world or within its own borders—and, if not choosing to disengage as a consequence, will downgrade Southeast Asia's importance and attendant demands on American attention. Needless to say, this anxiety is prominent and persistent in the region. In short, irrespective of the momentum gained over the last two decades or so, prospects for deeper and more sustained U.S. engagement with Southeast Asia are still afflicted by obstacles, which give pause and account for residual regional anxieties.

This book further contends that, on closer scrutiny, a combination of three factors serves to register the basis of these anxieties. First, despite American interests in the region, it is not clear both at an intellectual and at a policy level how and where Southeast Asia fits into U.S. grand strategy. At times, Southeast Asia appears to come into its own as an area of strategic import while on other occasions it is subsumed into a wider strategic context. There have even been periods when the region has been victim of "benign neglect" and treated as something of an afterthought. Even when American interest and intent is evident, at certain points in time the United States has prioritized bilateralism over multilateralism, while other episodes have witnessed an emphasis on ASEAN. The point to stress here is that against the backdrop of increasingly complex evolving structural realities, the maintenance of American primacy on which U.S. strategy is predicated and the application of American power and influence toward that end have given rise to uncertainties because of the challenge of locating Southeast Asia within these contours of U.S. grand strategy and striking a balance between strategic intent and policy implementation. Second, domestic politics generates additional uncertainties. Domestic exigencies—whether ideological, political, economic, or even idiosyncratic—in both the United States as well as Southeast Asia periodically contrive to obstruct foreign policy decisionmaking; and while domestic factors may not prove decisive ultimately, they have on occasion frustrated attempts at deepening mutual engagement in the post–Cold War era. Third, the region is itself often ambivalent

about the United States. Regional states have different views on the role the United States should play in the region, even as the future of regional cooperation among these states themselves toward the end of regional order management is clouded with uncertainty. This is a crucial point, for the region's diversity contributes to the challenges in formulating a consistent, overarching, systematic strategy on grounds of the inherent strategic significance of the region. Here, a primary concern is that the limits of Southeast Asian regionalism in terms of regional unity and cohesion toward the objective of playing a managerial role in the sustenance of regional order suggest a conspicuous paradox—namely, a continued reliance on the United States playing an active role despite it being an external power and despite the prevalence of different views within the region as to what precisely is the sort of role the United States should play.

## STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The chapters that follow will attempt to elaborate on the arguments outlined above by investigating, illuminating, and understanding the factors of strategic circumstance, policy implementation, domestic politics, and regional disconnects that shape and influence U.S. engagement with Southeast Asia. Following this introductory chapter, chapter 2 elaborates on the three key elements of the argument: the place of Southeast Asia in the conceptualization and implementation of U.S. grand strategy, domestic influences on engagement policy, and the challenges of regional order management. Chapters 3 to 7 will form the empirical bulk of the book. The chapters are divided according to U.S. presidential administrations, but in a way that also coincides with policy themes and preoccupations in U.S.–Southeast Asia relations. Chapter 3 covers the Clinton administration, a period widely known for the relative neglect of Southeast Asia but also its prioritization of issues of human rights and democracy in a manner that obstructed the deepening of relations with key regional states. Chapter 4 explores the "Global War on Terror," which cast a long shadow over much of U.S. engagement during the administration of George W. Bush, while chapter 5 analyzes issues of free trade, regionalism, and the rise of China in the context of Bush administration strategy and foreign policy in Southeast Asia, emphasizing how piecemeal progress was made—but also stymied—in broadening engagement beyond counterterrorism cooperation. Chapter 6 introduces the Pivot strategy of the Obama administration and how the South China

Sea eventually emerged as its signal focal point, while chapter 7 discusses economic and diplomatic elements to the Pivot in terms of advances and obstacles rooted in the respective domestic realms, with specific attention paid to the TPPA and the evolution of U.S. relations with Vietnam and Myanmar, two key Southeast Asian states where American interest and engagement has lagged until recently. The final two chapters will provide concluding observations, discuss policy implications, and suggest ways in which present policies can be continued, recast, or, in the case of arguably more counterproductive policies, scaled back.