

Reengaging with Southeast Asia, Steering the Momentum: Factors Leading to Active American Foreign Policy towards Southeast Asia During the First Obama Administration and the Role of President Obama in the Reengagement Policy Process

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Abstract

This article sets out to further an understanding of the factors leading to active foreign policy of the US towards Southeast Asia during the first Obama administration and of a role played by President Obama in the reengagement policy process. While the rise of China is considered a major factor leading to the US reengagement in Southeast Asia, the structure of Southeast Asian multilateralism, a call for American reengagement from Southeast Asian leaders, and a need to conclude the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), are mutually reinforcing. In terms of the making and the execution of the reengagement policy, while President Obama was a follower in the policy-making process by having his peer, played a greater role in policy initiations in office, he was an "active" type of follower who kept tracking a progress of the policy and played a prominent role as an "energetic executor" in the policy-implementing process.

Keywords: American Foreign Policy; Reengagement Policy; The Obama Administration; US - Southeast Asia Relation

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความฉบับนี้เน้นอธิบายปัจจัยที่มีผลต่อนโยบายต่างประเทศของสหรัฐอเมริกาต่อภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ภายใต้การนำของประธานาธิบดีบารัค โอบามา ระหว่างปี ค.ศ. 2008 - 2012 และพิจารณาบทบาทของประธานาธิบดีโอบามาในกระบวนการนโยบายดังกล่าว บทความฉบับนี้ชี้ให้เห็นว่า การขึ้นมามีอำนาจและการสร้างอิทธิพลของจีนในภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ไม่ได้เป็นเพียงปัจจัยเดียวที่ส่งผลให้สหรัฐอเมริกามาพัวพันกับภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้อย่างเข้มข้น แต่ปัจจัยอื่นๆ อันหมายรวมถึง 1) โครงสร้างสถาปัตยกรรมระดับภูมิภาคในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ 2) ข้อเรียกร้องของผู้นำชาติในภูมิภาคให้สหรัฐอเมริกามาพัวพันกับภูมิภาค และ 3) ความปรารถนาของรัฐบาลสหรัฐอเมริกาที่จะบรรลุความตกลงหุ้นส่วนยุทธศาสตร์เศรษฐกิจเอเชีย-แปซิฟิกก็มีความสำคัญและมีผลต่อการกลับมาพัวพันของสหรัฐอเมริกายิ่งเช่นกัน ขณะเดียวกันบทความชิ้นนี้ยังแสดงให้เห็นว่าประธานาธิบดีบารัค โอบามาไม่ได้มีบทบาทเป็นผู้นำในกระบวนการกำหนดนโยบายต่างประเทศต่อภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ หากเป็นเพียง "ผู้ตามที่มีความกระตือรือร้น" ในการติดตามกระบวนการดังกล่าว อย่างไรก็ตาม ประธานาธิบดีโอบามาก็มีบทบาทที่แข็งขันในการนำนโยบายไปสู่การปฏิบัติ

คำสำคัญ: นโยบายต่างประเทศของสหรัฐอเมริกา; บารัค โอบามา; ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างสหรัฐอเมริกาและภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้

Introduction

Southeast Asia is a region that consists of eleven countries, ten of which are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and one non-ASEAN country, Timor-Leste. It is located at a strategic crossroads between two rising powers, China and India, and is a hub for some of the world's most dynamic economies. Despite its strategic importance, Washington had systematically neglected the region since the end of Vietnam War (Ba, 2009). The US only had a close cooperation with certain allies, including Thailand and the Philippines (Ba, 2009). However, a series of robust American reengagements with the region, including regular high-level visits to demonstrate a strong commitment to reengagement, an active participation in Southeast Asian regional architectures and a launching of trade initiatives, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), have begun with the Obama administration's vision, "Pivot to Asia". Accordingly, it is important to understand what factors have led the US to having an active foreign policy towards Southeast Asia during the Obama administration and what role President Obama plays in making and executing these policies.

I argue that although the rise of China is a major factor leading to the US reengagement in Southeast Asia, this cause alone is not sufficient to explain the US foreign policy behaviors because the structure of Southeast Asian multilateralism, a call for American reengagement from Southeast Asian leaders, and a need to conclude the TPP, are mutually reinforcing. When discussing the making and the execution of the reengagement policy, I contend that although President Obama was a follower in the policy-making process by having his peer, especially Hillary Clinton, played a greater role in policy initiations during his first term in office, he was an "active" type of follower who kept tracking a progress of the policy. Furthermore, he also played a prominent role as an "energetic executor" in the policy-implementing process.

This paper consists of two major parts; first, I investigate factors leading to an active US foreign policy towards Southeast Asia and demonstrate the relationships among all these factors. Second, I examine the role of President Obama in making and executing the reengagement policy.

Is the Rise of China the Only Factor Leading the US to Reengage with Southeast Asia?

Several commentators often simply argue that the rise of China is the only factor leading to the reengagement of the US in Southeast Asia (Ba, 2009; Kuik, Idris, and MdNor, 2012). Although this conventional argument is sound and stands firmly, I dispute that the rise of China alone is not sufficient to explain an active foreign policy of the US towards Southeast Asia during the first Obama administration. I assert that other factors, including the structure of Southeast Asian multilateralism, a call for American reengagement from Southeast Asian leaders, and a need to conclude the TPP, are also mutually reinforcing leading the US to reengage with the region. This contention also goes in line with statement made by Sutter, Brown, and Adamson, with Mochizuki and Ollapally (2013) that "US policymakers are certainly aware of China's economic rise and its growing military power, but the rebalance has been driven by a much broader set of strategic, economic, and political considerations" (p.1).

The rise of China is the major reason leading to the US reengagement in Southeast Asia and broader Asia-Pacific region. This phenomenon has widely been discussed since 1990s when the Chinese economy was booming and experienced double-digit growth in GDP annually (Kaplan, 2010). The industrialization and the liberalization of the Chinese economy are thought to be engines of economic growth. To maintain a satisfactory level of progress, Robert Kaplan (2010) argues that China needs to expand its international markets, needs to secure energy, metals and strategic minerals, and needs to secure port access throughout the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. To achieve all these goals, China sees the importance of its involvement in Southeast Asia because the region is long regarded as China's backyard, rich in resources and strategically located. However, Beijing has recognized that negative perceptions towards China have still been prevailing in Southeast Asia since the Cold War. Thus, China has sought to engage with Southeast Asia peacefully and constructively through the development of closer economic and diplomatic relations to override its negative images (Vaughn and Morrison, 2006; Kaplan, 2010).

The reluctance of the US to support Southeast Asian countries during the 1997 Economic Crisis resulted in a vacuum of power in the region, which Beijing took advantage of to build trust and influence countries in Southeast Asia. Initially, China strongly advocated for the ASEAN plus three (ASEAN plus China, Japan and South Korea) frameworks and endorsed the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI), a regional foreign exchange liquidity support mechanism (Jacques, 2009). In 2002, China and ASEAN countries agreed on the ASEAN-China free trade agreement (ACFTA) that has been effective since 2010. The ACFTA is up-to-date known to be the largest free trade area in the world with 1,700 million people and involves over \$500 billion in trade (ASEAN Secretariat, 2012). Furthermore, the Chinese government has also provided financial support for several development projects in Southeast Asia (Tong and Chong, 2010; Aslam, 2012). During the 12th ASEAN-China Summit, for example, China established a \$15 billion credit facility, including \$1.7 billion in preferential loans and \$10 billion ASEAN-China Investment Cooperation Fund to sponsor the projects under the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (ASEAN Secretariat, 2012). On the security front, Beijing signed the ASEAN Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in 2002 in order to ease tension and to launch a constructive dialogue with four ASEAN claimants in the South China Sea (ASEAN Secretariat, 2012). More importantly, China was one of the two first countries to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), a peace treaty among Southeast Asian countries, in 2003.

Responses to the rise of China from Southeast Asian countries are mixed. Several countries, especially Cambodia, Indonesia and Thailand, have welcomed an active engagement of China in the region. In the case of Thailand, for instance, the former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra expressed a need for Thailand to develop close relations with China. He visited China five times during his five years in office and broadened cooperation between the two countries beyond political and economic activities (Chinwanno, 2009). Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia also welcomed a strong presence of China in the region. In one of his meetings with the President of China, he expressed "Cambodia will continue to support China on issues concerning its core interests and major concerns" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, 2013). The Phnom Penh Incident in

2012 that Foreign Ministers of ASEAN countries failed to issue a joint communiqué? reaffirmed a commitment of Cambodia towards China and also demonstrated China's influence over Cambodia (Chongkittavorn, 2012). A continuation of China's aggressiveness in the South China Sea, thus, resulted in ambiguous positions towards the Middle Kingdom among some countries like the Philippines and Vietnam. The Philippines, for instance, has attempted to internationalize the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and to get ASEAN to take a position against the expansion of China (Sutter et al., 2013) despite Manila's enhancing trade relations with Beijing.

The rise of China that led to enthusiastic responses from Southeast Asian countries, particularly Thailand, has raised concerns for Washington, which has long neglected the region. The Second Bush Administration officially expressed worries over the rise of China in the National Security Strategy by stating that "China encapsulates Asia's dramatic economic successes ... As China becomes a global player, it must act as a responsible stakeholder that fulfills its obligations" (White House, 2006, p. 41). Nonetheless, no systematic policy to engage with Southeast Asia was taken until Barack Obama held the oval office. In February 2009, an idea to put more emphasis on Southeast Asia was officially announced by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the Asia Society (Clinton, 2009a). The idea was taken more seriously when Clinton visited Indonesia as a part of her first trip overseas after assuming office. During the roundtable with Indonesian journalists, Clinton highlighted "we concluded that in the last several years, we hadn't paid enough attention to many parts of Asia, and certainly to the ASEAN countries ... We know China will assume more and more of a presence in not just Asia, but the world. But that we have long relationships with many countries, and I wanted to demonstrate that" (Clinton, 2009c). More importantly, the National Security Strategy 2010 also clearly exhibits the growing US concern over China and a need to reengage with the Southeast Asian region that "we will monitor China's military modernization program and prepare accordingly to ensure that US interests and allies, regionally and globally, are not negatively affected" (White House, 2010, p. 43). According to this evidence, the rise of China is the first factor leading the US to actively reengage with Southeast Asia.

In addition to the rise of China, the structure of Southeast Asian multilateralism is another factor leading to an active foreign policy of the US towards Southeast Asia. Since 1974, ASEAN countries have expanded their cooperation beyond traditional members. The establishment of the dialogue system was the first official action taken by ASEAN countries to engage external countries. Later on in 1994, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the first regionwide multilateral forum for official consultations on peace and security issues, was established. Amidst the Asian Economic Crisis in 1997, ASEAN plus three was launched as a platform for closer financial and economic cooperation between ASEAN countries, China, Japan and South Korea. Then, two years after ASEAN countries signed the Bali Concord II to establish the ASEAN community, the East Asia Summit (EAS) (originally ASEAN plus six) was first convened in 2005 in Malaysia to enhance closer cooperation among East Asian countries in a wide range of issues. Given the fact that regional powers in Asia-Pacific, including Japan, South Korea, India, and China are among original ARF and EAS members, ASEAN multilateral mechanisms have become the most strategic and significant platforms for the cooperation among and with Asia-Pacific region.

During the press conference with ASEAN Secretary-General SurinPitsuwan, Secretary of State Clinton reiterated the significance of Southeast Asian countries and their regional cooperation that "this region is vital to the future of not only the United States and each of the countries, but to the world's common interests: a significant and trade-oriented regional economy; a critical strategic location; and a set of countries that will be key to any solutions we pursue on climate change, counterterrorism, global health, and so much else" (Clinton, 2009b). Recognizing the importance of ASEAN, Clinton proudly announced the plan for the US to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in order to closely engage with Southeast Asian countries. The US announcement to accede to the TAC was groundbreaking because it is the first step to show serious commitment of the US to participate in ASEAN system. President Obama reiterated the importance of ASEAN mechanism again during his visit to Japan in November 2009 and also expressed the willingness of the US to fully integrate into the ASEAN plus process that "ASEAN will remain a catalyst for Southeast Asian dialogue, cooperation and security, and I look forward to becoming the first American President to meet with all 10 ASEAN leaders. And the United States looks forward to engaging with the East Asia Summit more formally as it plays a role in addressing the challenges of our time" (White House, 2009, November 14). Therefore, this evidence clearly shows that the structure of ASEAN multilateralism is another cause leading the US to pursue an active foreign policy in Southeast Asia.

Thirdly, I argue that a call from Southeast Asia leaders is another reason triggering the US to reengage with Southeast Asia. Southeast Asian leaders have called for American reengagement due to two main reasons: first, the perceived threat from China in the South China Sea; and second, the vital role of the US in the advancement of ASEAN multilateralism.

A first call was mainly made by the Philippines and Vietnam that have territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. Although China and ASEAN countries signed the DOC as a first step to peacefully resolve the territorial dispute in 2002, China still acts aggressively against other claimants. From 2002 to present, there were at least 5 incidents leading to the military standoff between China and ASEAN claimants especially the Philippines. In a speech during the visit of President Gloria Arroyo of the Philippines to the White House, she welcomed the assistance of the US in the Philippines and also called for strong commitment of Washington to engage with Southeast Asia. She stated, "we thank the Obama administration for the new engagement in our part of the world, and we look forward to a stronger relationship between the US and ASEAN" (White House, 2009a). More importantly, during the visit to Washington, DC in 2010, the new elected President Aquino of the Philippines also invited the US to stand up for its maritime interests in Southeast Asia (Aquino III, 2010).

A second call for an active engagement of the US was from Australia and Indonesia. Although ASEAN multilateral mechanisms, especially the EAS, have made progress during the beginning of the new millennium, leaders of ASEAN and other Asia-Pacific countries expressed their concern that these regional architectures could not have serious development without the US engagement. Thus, they called for the involvement of the US in the ASEAN process. The Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd echoed, "the organization [the EAS] could not develop into a serious and constructive player on political and security issues if the United States stayed outside"

(Bader, 2012, p. 96). At the same time, President Yudhoyono of Indonesia reiterated Rudd's rhetoric again during his unofficial meeting with President Obama at the G-20 meeting in Canada (Bader, 2012).

A call from Southeast Asian nations was consistently referred to in speeches of both the President and the Secretary of State. In the remark with ASEAN Secretary-General in February 2009, Clinton stated "[a]nd we have listened to our friends in ASEAN. They have expressed their concern that the United States has not been fully engaged in the region at a time when we should be expanding our partnerships to address the wide range of challenges confronting us" (Clinton, 2009b). At the Suntory Hall in Japan in 2009, President Obama also mentioned a call for US reengagement from Asian leaders and reaffirmed the US commitment to reengage the region by referring to the US as a "Pacific nation" (White House, 2009b). Accordingly, a call from Southeast Asian nations is another important factor leading to an active engagement of the US in Southeast Asia.

To reengage with Southeast Asian countries, the US has prioritized both bilateral and multilateral relations and has tried to avoid a direct confrontation with China in the region. For example, despite a call from the Philippines for the US to step up in the territorial disputes in South China Sea, President Obama has pursued a moderate path in the conflict by not officially taking side and called for all parties to respect international norms and rules governing maritime disputes (Sutter, et al., 2013). More importantly, the US has prioritized the use of diplomatic and economic tools, especially the TPP, in engaging with Southeast Asian countries. Thus, I argue that a need to conclude the TPP is the last but not least factor leading the US to have active foreign policy towards Southeast Asia.

The TPP is a proposed regional free trade agreement (FTA) being negotiated among 11 Pacific countries, including, Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam and the US. The TPP is often described to be a "constructive and high standard FTA" with intent to liberalize trade in almost all of goods and services. More significantly, this agreement is thought to be a tool to shape the economic architecture of Asia-Pacific region by "harmonizing existing agreements with US FTA partners, attracting new participants, and establishing regional rules on new policy issues facing the global economy" (Ferguson, Cooper, Jurenas and Williams, 2013, Summary). Manyin, et al. (2012) further argue that the TPP also serves to bring tremendous economic benefits to the US, including an access to the growing Asian markets, helping stimulate the growth in US exports, generating export-related jobs, fostering an economic recovery, enhancing the protection of US intellectual property rights, and ensuring that American companies are competing in more fair and unbiased regional market. Thus, if realized, the TPP will clearly become a strategic tool for the US to gain influence in Southeast Asia and in broader Asia-Pacific as well as become a measure to protect and advance American interests in the region. Given a strong push by the US for the TPP, several commentators contend that this agreement also serves as a mechanism to economically contain China (Wen, 2012). However, President Obama denied this contention and claimed that the US is willing to have China join the TPP and that this agreement "will require China to rethink some of its approaches to trade, just as every other country that's been involved in the consultations for the TPP have had to think through" (White House, 2011a).

To finalize this agreement with partners in Asia-Pacific and also to attract more participating parties, both the President and the Secretary of State have worked assiduously to accomplish the goals. In most of the meeting with Southeast Asian leaders, President Obama has consistently attempted to persuade his counterparts to take part in the TPP. In a bilateral meeting with Malaysia, for example, President Obama expressed his appreciation to Prime Minister Najib Razak for Malaysia's consideration to join the TPP (White House, 2011b). Similarly, in a meeting with the Thai Prime Minister in Bangkok, President Obama also encouraged Thailand to consider and join the TPP and that the Thai Prime Minister has shown a willingness to initiate the negotiation on this agreement (White House, 2012).

All in all, although Washington's concern over the rise of China remains the major factor leading to an active US foreign policy towards Southeast Asia, this factor alone is not sufficient to explain American policy behaviors in the region. In fact, several other factors, including the structure of Southeast Asian multilateralism, a call for American reengagement from Southeast Asian leaders, and a need to conclude the TPP, are also mutually reinforcing leading the US to reengage with Southeast Asian countries.

What Role does President Obama Play in the Reengagement Policy Process?

While considering the factors leading to an active US foreign policy towards Southeast Asia in the previous section, I also hint at the discussion of the role of the president in the policy process. In this section, I examine and assess the role that President Obama plays in the US reengagement policy process during his first term in office. I contend that although President Obama was a follower in the policy-making process by having his peer, especially Hillary Clinton, played a greater role in policy initiations, he was an "active" type of follower who kept tracking a progress of the policy. Furthermore, he also played a prominent role as an "energetic executor" in the policy-implementing process.

Since his time as a senator, Barack Obama is known not to have much expertise in foreign affairs. Thus, when he ran the presidential campaign, he needed to find an expert on foreign matters to balance a ticket and that he chose Senator Joe Biden who then chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and is familiar with foreign leaders and diplomats around the world to be his running mates (Nagourney and Zeleny, 2008, August 23; Cillizza, 2008, August 23). Before assuming the oval office, Obama made another surprising appointment by selecting his presidential rivalry, Hillary Clinton, to become a Secretary of State. Warren Christopher, a former Secretary of State commented on the selection that "Senator Clinton is a naturally gifted diplomat and would be an inspired choice" (Baker and Cooper, 2008). Accordingly, the appointments of two well international exposed figures to become the Vice President and the Secretary of State had given the President more leverage in dealing with international affairs. At the same time, it also sent a message to American general public and the international community that his administration will prioritize foreign policy as much as domestic policy.

In the foreign policy-making process during the first term of the Obama's administration, Bader's (2012) inside account of Obama's policy towards Asia clearly demonstrates that the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her

staffs from the State Department played vital role in shaping and laying down the foundations. Throughout her presidential primary campaign in 2008, the then Senator Clinton consistently highlighted the importance of engagement with Asian countries, especially China. She recognized that the US was facing the economic crisis and needed support from emerging markets in Asia (Baker and Cooper, 2008). After becoming the Secretary of State, Clinton still carried on her vision to engage with Asia and decided to make her first overseas trip to the continent (Clinton, 2011). One of the major stops during this trip was Indonesia, a country with the largest population of Muslims in the world and a home for the headquarters of ASEAN, where she announced the plan to accede to the TAC and to establish the first ambassadorial post to ASEAN. Behind these backdrops, several interagency meetings were held, and the State Department, led by Clinton and Kurt Campbell, attentively produced written analyses explaining how to accede to the TAC without detriment to US interests (Bader, 2012). Furthermore, before the first participation of the President in the EAS meeting, Bader (2012) also recalled that it was Secretary Clinton again who rearranged her schedule to take part in the meeting in 2010 with difficulty. Thus, the personal account of Jeffrey Bader, a former senior director for Asian affairs on the National Security Council, clearly reveals that Secretary of the State Clinton played a greater role than the President in the formulation of the reengagement policy towards Southeast Asia during the first Obama administration and that President Obama plays a role of the a "follower" in the policy-making process.

Being a follower in the foreign policy-making process, however, does not necessarily signify that the President's actions have to be passive. I contend that President Obama is an "active follower". First, according to the 60 minutes interview with Hillary Clinton, President Obama implied his active role as a follower in the foreign-policy making process when answering Kroft's question, "Has she [Secretary of State Clinton] had much influence in this administration?" (Kroft, Obama and Clinton, 2013). President highlighted, "I think one of the things that Hillary did was establish a standard in terms of professionalism and teamwork in our cabinet, in our foreign policy making that said, 'We're going to have an open discussion' ... Once the president makes a decision though we're going to go out there and execute" (Kroft, et al., 2013). Furthermore, during all the visits to ASEAN countries, President Obama also consistently reiterated statement made by Secretary of State Clinton prior to his trip. For example, during his visit to Singapore in 2009, President Obama repeated the significance of ASEAN and reaffirmed the US commitment to reengage with the region that "I reaffirmed to my ASEAN friends that the United States is committed to strengthening its engagement in Southeast Asia both with our individual allies and partners, and with ASEAN as an institution" (White House, 2009c). Second, President Obama is an "active follower" also because he reserved his obligation to make important decision. For example, despite several calls from Southeast Asian leaders and his peers to participate in the EAS, President Obama still took time for several days to consider his option before announcing his final decision to join the meeting through his National Security Advisor, Tom Donilon (Bader, 2012). Moreover, a part of his statement during the 60 minutes interview with Clinton that "[o]nce the president makes a decision though we're going to go out there and execute" (Kroft, et al., 2013) again also confirmed this claim.

More importantly, having a role of follower in the policy-making process does not imply a minimal role in the policy-implementing process. As a chief diplomat, I assert that Obama plays a significant role as an "energetic executor" of the reengagement policy. President Obama recognizes that his presence and commitment are vital for the stature of US foreign policy in Southeast Asia. For example, Clinton (2011) highlights this point in the Foreign Policy's article that "US commitment there is essential ... and it is in our interests as well that they be effective and responsive. That is why President Obama will participate in the East Asia Summit for the first time in November." Throughout his first term in office, he regularly visited the region to take part in summits with Southeast Asian leaders. His visit to Singapore for APEC in 2009 was remarkable in the sense that it was the first time in several decades that the President of the United States met with all ten leaders of ASEAN countries, including Myanmar. At the same time, his landmark stop in Myanmar in 2012 was also historic because Obama becomes the first ever sitting US President to visit the country. At all the stops, the major role of the President was to enforce and reassure the leaders of Southeast Asia and their people of what Secretary of State has promised to be done. For example, at the meeting with all ten ASEAN leaders in 2009, President Obama confirmed the accession of the US to the TAC and the establishment of the ambassadorial post to ASEAN (White House, 2009d).

Furthermore, the role of President as an "energetic executor" of the reengagement policy is more evident from his lead in the negotiation of the TPP. To finalize this agreement, President Obama has to convince the Congress and foreign leaders of how the TPP is significant and beneficial to both the United States and other member countries. Furthermore, he also works hard to persuade several other countries which have not yet agreed to join the TPP to participate in this trade deal. As I have mentioned in the previous section that President Obama once attempted to persuade the leaders of Malaysia and Thailand to consider a participation in the TPP. Moreover, during the recent visit to the US of the President of Vietnam in July 2013, President Obama also expressed his wish to finalize the TPP with Vietnam that "we've also discussed is the ways in which through the Trans-Pacific Partnership both the United States and Vietnam are participating in what will be an extraordinarily ambitious effort to increase trade, commerce and transparency in terms of commercial relationships throughout the Asia Pacific region" (White House, 2013, July 25). Therefore, all this evidence have clearly shown that although President Obama plays a role as an "active follower" in the foreign-policy making process, he is truly an "energetic executor" of the reengagement policy.

Conclusion

Since President Barack Obama assumed office in 2009, a series of US reengagement policies with Southeast Asia have been putting into practice. Washington has consistently shown strong commitments to its involvement in regional affairs by having regular high-level visits, having active participation in Southeast Asian regional architectures and the launching of trade initiatives. Although the rise of China remains the major reasons for the US reengagement in Southeast Asia, other factors, including the structure of Southeast Asian multilateralism, a call for American reengagement from Southeast Asian leaders, and a need to conclude the TPP, are also mutually reinforcing leading to the reengagement of the US in the region. In the making of reengagement policy, although the Secretary of State has a more significant role than that of the President, President Obama still plays a role of an "active follower" in the process by catching up on Secretary of State's achievements and actions, and reserving an obligation to make final decision on significant issues. More importantly, President Obama also plays a prominent role as an "energetic executor" in the policy-implementing process mainly by taking a lead in the negotiation and the conclusion of important agreements especially the TPP. Thus, an "active follower" and an "energetic executor" are two important terms that clearly define the role of President Obama in the reengagement policy process.

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