

America must improve economic links with Southeast Asia – or lose out to China

Submitted by: BlueSky Public Relations Ltd

Tuesday, 14 April 2020

China's increasing efforts to strengthen ties in Southeast Asia are challenging America's influence in the region, reveals new report from LSE IDEAS, no.1 ranked university affiliated think tank in the world.

According to Charles Dunst, Associate at LSE IDEAS, China has upped its efforts in Southeast Asia to expand its sphere of influence. Through mechanisms like the Belt and Road Initiative that are designed to bring the region closer economically, as well as supporting neighbouring governments and offering material support for development projects in return for geopolitical goods, Beijing continues to weaken the US' standing in the east.

The report states that this is made worse by increasing Southeast Asian doubts around American leadership, with 60% of US sceptics in the region saying their confidence in Washington would increase if Trump was no longer President.

The US has offered no alternative to the Chinese financing of Southeast Asian development initiatives. Moreover, the President's anti-Muslim rhetoric has done little to win the hearts of countries such as Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore – homes to most of the region's Muslim population.

However, according to Dunst, the US still retains a wide sphere of influence in Southeast Asia, with public opinion towards the US in countries like the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand being extremely positive, with at least 85% of their people 'holding strongly positive views'.

And, despite Beijing's efforts, anti-Chinese sentiment is rising in nations such Cambodia, Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia, providing the US an opening to win back the region, says Dunst.

According to Charles Dunst:

"For now, Southeast Asians aren't ready to abandon the US for China, despite President Trump's disquieting leadership. But Washington needs to up its efforts. If the US doesn't pivot back to Asia, China could emerge dominant in the region by default—even as Beijing's popularity sags."

"The US, rather than focus militarily, should instead shift its resources to promoting economic development in the region as a means of capitalizing on extant pro-America sentiment. If they take these steps, Washington is likely to secure its preeminent status in Southeast Asia. But the clock is ticking and the US cannot afford to let Southeast Asia languish in Beijing's orbit much longer—for soon, the region is likely to see China as its only option."

Charles Dunst is an Associate at LSE IDEAS and a journalist who has written for The New York Times, The Atlantic, The Washington Post, Foreign Policy, and BBC News. He was previously based in Cambodia and has travelled extensively throughout Southeast Asia.

For more information, see the full report here:

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/publications/updates/battleground-southeast-asia>

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