

**THE FIRST ASEAN-US STANDALONE
SUMMIT: CHINA'S REACTIONS
AND IMPLICATIONS FOR
CHINA-ASEAN TIES**

LYE Liang Fook

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Executive Summary

1. US President Barack Obama hosted his ASEAN counterparts to a first ever standalone ASEAN-US Summit from 15 to 16 February, elevating their relationship following the establishment of a strategic partnership just a few months ago.
2. The summit had an economic and security thrust designed to show that US commitment to Asia and to ASEAN in particular remains strong, enduring and comprehensive.
3. A joint statement after the summit outlined principles to guide their cooperation in areas like promoting democracy and economic growth, respecting ASEAN centrality, fighting climate change, terrorism and violent extremism, and promoting people-to-people connectivity.
4. Despite tensions in the South China Sea (SCS), the statement did not mention China or the SCS. Instead, it stressed principles such as a “rules-based regional and international order”, “peaceful resolution of disputes”, “freedom of navigation and overflight” and “non-militarisation and self-restraint”.
5. In light of this, Chinese official media channels highlighted how the summit had fallen short of its expectations. Chinese official reaction was more nuanced. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson stated that China welcomed the development of ASEAN-US relations as long as this was not mutually exclusive.
6. Officially, there is a view that ASEAN-US ties are not as substantive as ASEAN-China relationship. For instance, China was the first dialogue partner to establish a strategic partnership with ASEAN in 2003 and that China has been ASEAN’s largest trading partner since 2009.
7. The principles in the joint statement only gained resonance when news leaked that China had deployed surface-to-air missiles to Woody Island, part of the Paracel

Islands in the SCS. The United States immediately accused China of increasing the militarisation of the SCS.

8. China's rejoinder was that such deployment was within its sovereign rights and accused the foreign media of playing up the issue. It further said it would observe whether ASEAN and the United States would implement their commitment to non-militarisation and self-restraint.
9. Other than the SCS issue, China did not take issue with the other areas of cooperation outlined by ASEAN and the United States in their joint statement which were non-controversial.
10. China's economic ties with ASEAN are strong and set to grow further. There is palpable confidence that its presence can outlast and outgrow America's presence in Asia.
11. It will be closely watching whether the next US president after Obama will be as committed to strengthening US-ASEAN ties. An indication of this will be whether such standalone ASEAN-US summits will continue and the frequency of such summits.