

## **US-ASEAN to Further Strengthen Ties**

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**From Jamaluddin Muhammad**

LOS ANGELES, Feb 14 (Bernama) -- In the post-Cold War era, rarely has a United States President mentioned the words "Southeast Asia" in the State of the Union address. However, President Barack Obama did it last month.

It has never happened before for an American president to invite leaders from the small region located some 14,000km away for a meeting with them only.

Obama did it for the first time by inviting Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and the other nine leaders of ASEAN to attend the US-ASEAN Summit in Sunnylands, a two-hour drive from this city.

Obama had said during the US-ASEAN meeting in Kuala Lumpur last November that he had deepened America's cooperation with ASEAN because a united, integrated and effective ASEAN in the centre of Asia will be a force of stability, prosperity and peace.

During the Kuala Lumpur meeting, US-ASEAN has elevated their relationship to a new level - a strategic partnership in strengthening their ties for decades to come.

"I have deepened America's cooperation with ASEAN because a united, integrated and effective ASEAN in the centre of Asia is a force of stability, prosperity and peace.

"ASEAN plays a vital role in advancing a rules-based order for the Asia-Pacific," said Obama at the 3rd US-ASEAN Summit in November in Kuala Lumpur

"Probably Obama had been raised in the Southeast Asia during his childhood and he likes nasi goreng could be contributing factors," said a diplomat from that region (Southeast Asia).

It is more than that.

The US has deepened its engagement with Southeast Asian countries as Washington views the region as one of its key elements in its foreign policy during the Obama Administration.

The US has to be in a partnership with the countries in that region for a shared future.

With rising tensions in the South China Sea, an important passage for international trade worth billions of dollars and freedom of overflight, the uprising of violent terrorism and rebalancing of power in that region have been the contributing factors that may have raised the eyebrows of Uncle Sam on the importance of Southeast Asia.

Malaysian Ambassador to the US Datuk Dr Awang Adek Hussin said the US has a strategic interest

for peace, security, stability and economic prosperity in Southeast Asia.

ASEAN groups Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam with a population of about 600 million people.

ASEAN countries have a combined gross domestic product of US\$2.6 trillion (RM10.9 trillion) as of 2014, and annual economic growth of about 4.6 per cent, and it is estimated that by 2030, ASEAN will become the fourth largest economy in the world.

Najib during the November ASEAN Summit and related summits had said that ASEAN had proved to the world that this bloc of nations could be the Asia-Pacific's most competitive regional grouping and emerging force on the international stage.

The Sunnylands summit would pave way for more strategic partnership between US and ASEAN, said Awang Adek.

During the two-day meeting starting Monday (Tuesday in Malaysia), Obama and the 10 ASEAN leaders are expected to focus on the economic growth of ASEAN through innovation and entrepreneurship as well as counter-terrorism and addressing South China Sea issues.

The fact that the meeting will be held at Sunnylands, a 200-acre estate located in Rancho Mirage, southern California, also dubbed as Camp David of the West, signifies the importance of the US-ASEAN relationship.

Obama used the venue to meet Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 and King Abdullah II of Jordan in 2014.

Awang Adek believes when the Obama administration ends early next year, Washington would continue its policy towards ASEAN as it has a strategic interest in that region.

Eight US presidents -- Dwight D Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Henry Ford, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George H.W Bush, George W. Bush and Obama have all been there (Sunnylands).

Other notable people who have visited the property include Frank Sinatra, Bob Hope, Gregory Peck, Bing Crosby and Sammy Davis Jr.

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