

## **ASEAN Leaders Hope Obama's Style of Engagement Will Continue**

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**From Jamaluddin Muhammad**

SUNNYLANDS (California), Feb 15 (Bernama) - ASEAN leaders hope that United States President Barack Obama's attention and priority towards the grouping will be continued and sustained by future US presidents, said Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

He said leaders from all 10 Southeast Asian countries had acknowledged that the US-ASEAN relationship was as important as the bloc with China.

"The fact that President Obama gave up his public holiday (today is the President's Day) and held the US-ASEAN Leaders Summit has shown Washington's recognition towards the importance of ASEAN," Najib told Malaysian journalists Monday (Tuesday in Malaysia) at the end of the first day of the two-day summit here.

Najib said ASEAN with a combined Gross Domestic Products (GDP) of US\$2.4 trillion (RM10 trillion) and a population of more than 600 million with a growing middle class group was an important partner to US.

US, on the other hand, considers its engagement with the region, a strategically important and economically dynamic region at the heart of the Asia-Pacific, is a central pillar of the US rebalance to Asia.

ASEAN groups Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah (Brunei), Hun Sen (Cambodia), Joko Widodo (Indonesia), Choummaly Sayasone (Laos), Benigno Aquino (Philippines), Najib (Malaysia), Lee Hsien Loong (Singapore), Prayut Chan-o-cha (Thailand), Nguyen Tan Dung (Vietnam) and Vice President of Myanmar Nyan Tun attended the meeting with Obama.

Obama has been in office since 2009 and his two-term tenure ends early next year.

According to a statement from the Office of the Press Secretary of the White House, Obama has met ASEAN leaders a total of six times and he has made seven separate visits to the region (including twice to Malaysia in 2014 and 2015). He has attended three of the four US-ASEAN summits.

Since 2010, the Obama Administration has provided US\$4 billion (RM16.8 billion) in development assistance to ASEAN countries, it said.

ASEAN countries are collectively the United States' fourth-largest trading partner and US foreign direct investment totalled US\$226 billion (RM949.2 billion) in that region.

Apart from the economic sector, US-ASEAN relationship also covers education, defense, culture, science and technology.

The statement said ASEAN's leadership is central to building and sustaining a rule-based order in the Asia-Pacific.

Under the Obama Administration, the US has strongly backed ASEAN's central role at the heart of the evolving institutional architecture of the Asia-Pacific region including East Asia Summit (EAS).

EAS comprises the 10 ASEAN members, China, Japan, Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand, United States and Russia.

The United States and ASEAN have elevated their relationship to a strategic partnership during the ASEAN Summit and related summits hosted by Kuala Lumpur in November 2015.

The Sunnylands Summit is the first US-ASEAN standalone summit in the United States and the first summit for the ASEAN Community since its establishment on Dec 31, 2015.

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