

# THE *SOUTHEAST ASIA STRATEGY ACT*

Representatives Ann Wagner and Joaquin Castro

Reps. Ann Wagner and Joaquin Castro, co-chairs and co-founders of the Congressional U.S.-ASEAN Caucus, introduced the *Southeast Asia Strategy Act* to enhance U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia and assure critical partners in the region of the United States' strong support.

## THE PROBLEM

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries straddle a critical stretch of ocean joining the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the Pacific. As such, they have been the target of an increasingly aggressive Chinese push to assert dominance in the region. Moreover, ASEAN member states are vital to the prosperity of the U.S. economy, and collectively generate over 500,000 U.S. jobs and invest more in the U.S. economy than China and India combined. The United States and ASEAN have celebrated more than four decades of friendship and established a new strategic partnership that will enhance cooperation across the economic, political-security, and people-to-people pillars of the relationship.

While ASEAN countries have expressed support for Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, which promotes cooperation with India, Japan, and Australia to contain China, many also worry that the new focus on the peripheral waters of Asia will leave Southeast Asian states to fend off China on their own. The U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership further stoked fears that the United States is no longer interested in the region.

ASEAN countries are looking for reassurance that the United States has their back as they try to maintain economic independence from China and defend their territorial claims in the South China Sea. To date, the U.S. has never articulated a comprehensive strategy for the region. ASEAN diplomats and U.S. think tanks are eager for the U.S. to be on the record about its plans to engage with ASEAN; this bill will require the Administration to do just that.

## THE *SOUTHEAST ASIA STRATEGY ACT*

The *Southeast Asia Strategy Act* will deepen U.S. engagement with Southeast Asian partners by developing a coherent and clearly communicated regional strategy that addresses all aspects of the relationship, from trade and humanitarian goals to diplomatic and security arrangements. This bill would:

- State that it is the policy of the United States to coordinate closely with ASEAN and its member states in the interest of promoting peace, security, and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.
- Instruct the Secretary of State to develop and communicate a comprehensive strategy for engagement with Southeast Asia and ASEAN, including information on alliances and partnerships, trade, investment, development and human rights initiatives, security cooperation, energy security, and capacity building on enforcing international law and sanctions and creating more open, reliable routes for trade.