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Duckworth challenges Hegseth on ASEAN knowledge during Senate Hearing



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BANGKOK— During a Senate confirmation hearing, Sen. Tammy Duckworth pressed Pete Hegseth, President-elect Donald Trump’s nominee for defense secretary, on his understanding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Duckworth questioned Hegseth’s ability to lead international negotiations, asking him to name an ASEAN member, describe U.S. agreements with the bloc, and specify how many nations comprise it.

Hegseth admitted he couldn’t provide an exact number of ASEAN countries, instead referencing U.S. alliances in AUKUS with South Korea, Japan, and Australia. Duckworth corrected him, pointing out that none of these nations belong to ASEAN and advised him to “do a little homework.”

ASEAN includes 10 countries: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, with East Timor set to join soon. Established in 1967, ASEAN promotes regional economic and security cooperation, representing over 650 million people and a GDP exceeding \$3 trillion.

ASEAN is pivotal in addressing regional tensions, particularly with China, whose territorial claims in the South China Sea affect several ASEAN members, including Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia.

The U.S. maintains defense treaties with ASEAN members Thailand and the Philippines and considers ASEAN central to its Indo-Pacific strategy. President Joe Biden has emphasized ASEAN's importance in countering China's growing influence and fostering a "free and open" region. ASEAN regularly hosts high-level meetings, attended by U.S. defense and state secretaries, and its annual summit often includes the U.S. president. The bloc's unique diplomatic framework enables discussions on major geopolitical issues, further underscoring its strategic importance to the U.S.