

PERSPECTIVE

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The Biden Administration and Southeast Asia: One Year in Review

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The Biden's Administration record in Southeast Asia has been mixed, though generally positive. Picture: Taken on 4 February 2022 by Saul Loeb, AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Biden administration's engagement with Southeast Asia in 2021 was slow to start but picked up momentum in the second half of the year with a series of high-level meetings and visits to the region by senior US officials.
- President Biden did not call or hold formal in-person meetings with any Southeast Asian leader, and his administration's lack of a positive economic framework for the region was seen as a major shortcoming.
- Biden's Southeast Asia policy is designed to attain two mutually-reinforcing objectives: strengthening alliances and partnerships, and addressing the challenges posed by China. To attain those goals, the administration has pursued both multilateralism and unilateral initiatives.
- The Biden administration has tried to allay Southeast Asian fears over escalating US-China rivalry and promoted a positive agenda centred on the delivery of public goods, especially COVID-19 vaccines.
- In 2022, the Biden administration's engagement with Southeast Asia will be assessed on the value of its Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, a clearer articulation of its Indo-Pacific strategy, its efforts to upgrade relations with ASEAN, its filling of vacant diplomatic posts and opportunities for in-person meetings with the President.

INTRODUCTION

During President Joe Biden's first year in the White House, Southeast Asia was not one of his administration's top priorities. After President Donald Trump's idiosyncratic and transactional approach to foreign relations, Biden's focus was on restoring confidence in US leadership and renewing its commitment to alliances and multilateral institutions, especially in the Euro-Atlantic region.

His record so far is mixed. America's relations with the EU and NATO are much improved, but its chaotic withdrawal from Kabul in August 2021 will be remembered as the worst US foreign policy debacle in a generation. And although Biden tried to stabilise relations with the country's two main rivals, China and Russia, by the end of his first year, Sino-US ties were no less contentious and relations with Russia had hit a post-Cold War low due to Moscow's military intimidation of Ukraine.

The Biden administration's record in Southeast Asia was also mixed, though generally positive. Due to the above-mentioned priorities, Washington's engagement with the region was slow to start, causing much frustration in Southeast Asian capitals. In the second half of the year, however, momentum picked up as a flurry of senior officials visited the region, and culminated in a virtual US-ASEAN Summit and an American president's full attendance at the East Asia Summit for the first time since President Barack Obama in 2016.

By the end of his first year in office, Southeast Asians could feel relatively satisfied with the Biden administration's approach to the region. That satisfaction was, however, tempered by their expectations of what was required of America in 2022, including the need for a more detailed Indo-Pacific strategy and especially a proactive economic blueprint for the region. This *Perspective* reviews the Biden administration's engagement with Southeast Asia in 2021 and assesses the prospects for a more forward-looking agenda in 2022 and beyond.

BIDEN IN CATCH-UP MODE

Kurt Campbell, the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Coordinator, noted in July 2021 that "For an effective Asia strategy, for an effective Indo-Pacific approach, you must do more in Southeast Asia."¹ This statement was borne out in the second half of 2021, with a series of US high-level visits, virtual meetings and policy speeches reiterating the importance of Southeast Asia to America's Indo-Pacific strategy and articulating ways and means for Washington to reclaim its influence and engagement with the region. Table 1 shows US cabinet members' engagements with Southeast Asian countries, both virtual and in-person. As Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi remarked, "[T]he US commitment was very noticeable."²

**Table 1
US High-Level Engagements with Southeast Asia in 2021**

US Official	Venue	Event
Secretary of State Antony Blinken	Virtual	Special ASEAN-US Foreign Ministers Meeting, 14 July
Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman	Indonesia Cambodia Thailand	Bilateral meetings, 29 May-4 June
Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin	Singapore Vietnam Philippines	Fullerton Lecture and bilateral meetings, 26-29 July
Secretary of State Antony Blinken	Virtual	Mekong-US Partnership, Friends of the Mekong Ministerial Meeting, US-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers Meeting, ASEAN Regional Forum, 2-6 August
Vice-President Kamala Harris	Singapore Vietnam	Bilateral meetings, 22-26 August
President Joe Biden	Virtual	ASEAN-US Summit, East Asia Summit, 26 October
Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo	Singapore Malaysia	Bilateral meetings, 16-18 November
Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin	Manama Dialogue	Bilateral meeting with Indonesian Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto, 20 November
Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Daniel Kritenbrink	Indonesia Malaysia Singapore Thailand	Bilateral meetings, 27 November-4 December
Secretary of State Antony Blinken	Indonesia Malaysia [Thailand leg cancelled due to Covid-19 contact]	Bilateral meetings, 13-16 December

Source: Compiled from Statements and Releases from the White House Briefing Room, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/>

That being said, US engagement with Southeast Asia in 2021 was in catch-up mode – to make up for diplomatic influence lost during the Trump administration amid China’s intensive neighbourhood diplomacy – rather than heralding a breakthrough investment in the region. This is understandable given the demanding foreign policy agenda of the new administration, with various regions and issue-areas competing for finite resources and attention. It also reflects the fact that Southeast Asian countries queue behind European and Northeast Asian allies and major partners such as India in the hierarchy of US foreign policy

interests. It is noteworthy that President Biden has not made bilateral phone calls to any Southeast Asian leader since entering the White House (Table 2). He has however made trips to Europe for the G-7, G-20 and COP26 UN Climate Change summits, and welcomed leaders of the Quad countries, individually or collectively, in Washington D.C. He has only engaged with Southeast Asian leaders through the virtual ASEAN summit meetings in November 2021, and met Vietnam’s Prime Minister on the sidelines of the COP26 Summit.

Table 2
President Biden’s Bilateral Phone Calls with World Leaders in 2021

Region	Number of Phone Calls
Europe (including Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, NATO and the European Commission)	31
Middle East	18
Northeast Asia	6
North America	6
Oceania	3
South Asia	2
Central and South America	2
Africa	1
Southeast Asia	0

Source: Compiled from Statements and Releases from the White House Briefing Room, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/>

The following section analyses some broad contours of America’s Southeast Asia policy that started to take shape in the first year of the Biden administration.

First, the US approach to Southeast Asia is conceived and operationalised in the broader context of its Indo-Pacific strategy which centres on two mutually reinforcing objectives, namely: (i) rebuilding US alliances, partnerships and multilateral engagements in the Indo-Pacific, and (ii) addressing the systemic challenges from China as the key strategic competitor to Washington. As such, US-China competition – more than ever – is a key operating principle that underlies the conceptualisation and framing of US initiatives and messaging aimed at Southeast Asia. In the latest articulation of America’s Indo-Pacific strategy in December 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken explained “a free and open Indo-Pacific” at three levels: at the individual level for people to be free in their daily lives in open societies; at the state level to enable countries to choose their own path and partners; and at the regional level so that goods, ideas and people can flow freely across land, cyberspace and open seas.³ At all three levels, Southeast Asia is both the object and conduit of Washington’s broader geopolitical goals vis-à-vis China in the Indo-Pacific.

Second, despite the above, the Biden administration has been calibrated in its strategic messaging to allay the concerns by Southeast Asian states vis-à-vis US-China strategic rivalry.⁴ Three key policy speeches, by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, Vice President Kamala Harris and Blinken all sought to reassure Southeast Asian audiences that (i) the US is not going to force regional states to choose sides between Washington and Beijing; and

(ii) the US is seeking to stabilise its strategic competition with China through necessary ‘guardrails’ to prevent escalation to open armed conflicts.⁵ Washington and Beijing have indeed made efforts at the latter through high-level dialogues, especially the November 2021 Xi-Biden virtual summit.⁶ However, as strategic competition has become the new paradigm of US-China relations, the sense of the inevitability of the binary choice may have increased among Southeast Asians.

Third, the US has fostered a positive agenda on the delivery of public goods to the region in the areas of climate change, sustainable development and especially COVID-19 vaccines. As remarked by Ryan Hass, “US-China competition is occurring against a backdrop of rising global challenges [...]. These challenges will shape the contours of US-China competition. They may also present opportunities for Washington and/or Beijing to flex global leadership muscle by demonstrating capacity to deliver solutions.”⁷ Southeast Asia was the prime target of both Chinese and American vaccine diplomacy in 2021. Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam were among the top five recipients of US vaccine donations, each receiving around 25 million shots.⁸ Through its earmarked donations to the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access Facility (COVAX), the US has made Southeast Asia a priority region for its vaccine offerings. Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, the Philippines, Timor-Leste and Vietnam together received 25 per cent of America’s total dose donations to COVAX in 2021 although they account for only 7 per cent of the world’s population.⁹ Washington also fostered collaboration with its allies/partners towards this end. For example, the virtual Quad summit in March 2021 broadened its remit beyond the maritime security focus to include collaboration on global issues such as climate change, critical technologies and COVID-19 vaccines. In a December 2021 interview, Kurt Campbell remarked: “The Quad has to be relevant, and seen as value-added, particularly by Southeast Asia, by ASEAN.”¹⁰

Fourth, the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy, and its Southeast Asia policy in particular, is characterised by a dual-track approach to multilateralism and minilateralism. President Biden attended the 2021 ASEAN-US Summit and the East Asia Summit via video-conferencing, and the three US policy speeches to Southeast Asian audiences in 2021 all reaffirm US support for ASEAN centrality. Rhetoric aside, these statements are informed by a pragmatic calculation concerning the strategic value of Southeast Asia in the Indo-Pacific and the need to maintain US access to and influence over regional institutions, diplomacy and narrative through the ASEAN-led multilateral architecture.¹¹ At the same time, the Biden administration has intensified minilateral coalition-building with its Indo-Pacific partners, with the consolidation of the Quad to the summit level and the formation of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) trilateral defence partnership. Compared to ASEAN, these minilaterals with higher levels of strategic convergence and commensurate capabilities among its members are expected to deliver more tangible outcomes in terms of policy coordination and joint response. Hence, the perceptions of their greater utility to Washington in advancing its strategic goals, especially to compete rigorously with China.

Fifth, despite the imperative to promote a robust democracy agenda both at home and abroad, the Biden administration’s normative approach to Southeast Asia “is more pragmatic and calibrated than its moral grandstanding would suggest”.¹² The *coup d’etat* by the Myanmar military on 1 February, and the ensuing political violence, was a seriously

complicating factor in this regard. However, Washington has thus far managed to insulate the issue from its relationship with ASEAN, and expressed support for the grouping's role in mediating the crisis. US cabinet members attended ASEAN-plus ministerial meetings in 2021 despite the (online) presence of the military regime's representatives. ASEAN's decision to invite only a non-political representative to the ASEAN summit meetings in November 2021 was partly driven by the concern that the presence of the Myanmar coup leader Min Aung Hlaing might deter other Dialogue Partner leaders from attending, especially the US president whose attendance was not confirmed until the last moment.¹³ Such "quiet diplomacy" by Washington is appreciated by regional states while public pressure that cornered ASEAN into defensive reaction – as exerted by the West in the 1990s – would only jeopardise America's geopolitical agenda in the region.

The tension between values-based and realpolitik imperatives is always a defining feature of US foreign policy, but democracy has been on the back burner despite all the rhetoric. Biden's flagship Democracy Summit in December 2021 invited only three Southeast Asian states – Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines – but US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Kritenbrink was quick to play down the gravity of non-invitation, saying that it "is not a commentary on the strength" of US relations with its closest partners, including Singapore.¹⁴ Besides, the little care exhibited by most Southeast Asian states about the Democracy Summit as well as its nominal outcomes meant that this event would soon become, if not already, a footnote in the story of US-Southeast Asia relations.

A FORWARD-LOOKING US AGENDA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Addressing the Missing Economic Component

America's friends and critics alike have repeatedly drawn attention to the country's lack of a comprehensive economic plan for the Indo-Pacific as a major shortcoming in its approach to the region.

In January 2017, one of President Trump's first acts was to withdraw the US from the 12-member Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The TPP was resurrected a year later as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) with the hope that the US would rejoin after Trump had left office. The perception was that by its withdrawal, America had ceded economic leadership of the region to China. This perception was reinforced when the ASEAN members and five of its Dialogue Partners (China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand) signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in November 2020, the largest free trade bloc in the world. According to The Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index 2021, the US registered a 10.7-point decline in economic relationships despite its significant gain in diplomatic influence in the first year of the Biden administration. The US score was 51.1 compared to China's 99. The Lowy Institute report rightly pointed out that with the Quad and AUKUS, "America has been more proactive at leveraging its regional networks in service of its military power than it has in service of the regional economic balance of power."¹⁵

For domestic political reasons, the Biden administration has ruled out joining the CPTPP, at least during its first term. However, it is acutely aware that its lack of an alternative to

economic structures such as the CPTPP and RCEP has created a yawning gap in its Indo-Pacific policy. Accordingly, at the EAS in October, President Biden announced that administration officials were working on an Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) that would “define our shared objectives around trade facilitation, standards for the digital economy and technology, supply chain resiliency, decarbonization and clean energy, infrastructure, worker standards”.¹⁶ Details are due to be released in early 2022 and are eagerly anticipated by Southeast Asian states.

Climate Change

In stark contrast to his predecessor, President Biden has made addressing the challenges posed by climate change a top priority of his administration. It is also a priority issue in US-Southeast Asia relations. During their visits to the region, Vice President Harris and Assistant Secretary of State Krittenbrink discussed the issue with Southeast Asian leaders and policy makers.¹⁷ At the virtual US-ASEAN Summit in October, President Biden announced US\$102 million in new funding to strengthen their strategic partnership. From this amount, US\$20.5 million has been earmarked to the US-ASEAN Climate Futures initiatives to support a range of environmental projects in the region, including decarbonisation, sustainable fisheries, clean transport technology and air pollution reduction.¹⁸ As Southeast Asian countries are increasingly being impacted by climate change, including rising sea levels and severe weather events, they welcome cooperation with the United States. However, pressure from Washington on regional states to reduce their carbon emissions and protect their forests could create friction, especially if the Biden administration introduces climate-change related trade tariffs and restrictions.¹⁹

Enhancing Maritime Security

In its first year, the Biden administration doubled down on President Trump’s hard line approach towards China’s activities in the South China Sea. The administration repeatedly rebuked China’s claims and actions as unlawful and a threat to freedom of navigation.²⁰ The US Navy conducted regular presence missions and exercises in the South China Sea, and six freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the Paracels and Spratlys (one more than during Trump’s first year in office).

As US-China tensions rise over the dispute, it is the Southeast Asian claimants that have borne the brunt of China’s grey zone tactics in the South China Sea — actions undertaken by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), China Coast Guard (CCG) and Maritime Militia to press the country’s jurisdictional claims within the so-called nine-dash line. Such tactics have included airspace incursions, harassment of drilling rigs and the deployment of survey ships, CCG vessels and large fishing fleets into their exclusive economic zones (EEZs).²¹ Although the Southeast Asian claimants regularly protest China’s activities, they are unable to deter Beijing due to asymmetries in military capabilities.

Going forward, the US will be providing more assistance to the Southeast Asian claimants to help them better respond to China’s grey zone tactics and protect their sovereign rights in their EEZs. This includes improving their ability to monitor and publicise China’s

military and paramilitary activities and helping their maritime law enforcement agencies tackle illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing. Defence Secretary Austin discussed these issues with his Vietnamese counterpart in July, as did Vice President Kamala who emphasised the importance of US-Vietnam coast guard cooperation (a third US Coast Guard high-endurance cutter is likely to be transferred to Vietnam this year). During Blinken's visit to Indonesia in December, the two countries signed a maritime cooperation agreement which included fisheries management.²² In a speech delivered in Washington D.C. in September, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana specifically called for the 1952 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty to be updated to address China's grey zone tactics in the South China Sea. Talks on revising the treaty to deal with grey zone actions will have to wait until President Rodrigo Duterte's successor takes office in July 2022.²³

OUTLOOK

As the Biden administration enters its second year, its engagement with Southeast Asia will be assessed across five inter-connected issue-areas.

First and foremost will be the unveiling of its IPEF. Southeast Asian states will judge the initiative on whether it signals a willingness by the United States to resume a leadership role in economic rule-making in Asia, embed its economy in the region's increasingly integrated trade networks, and arrest the concerning trend of "America's growing irrelevance in the political economy of Asia".²⁴

Second and related will be the release of the administration's National Security Strategy. Its *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* issued in March 2021 was long on rhetoric and short on details.²⁵ Southeast Asians will want to see a clearer articulation of the administration's Indo-Pacific strategy, a roadmap for stable relations with China and due consideration given to Southeast Asia's strategic interests.

Third, Southeast Asians will expect a higher level of commitment to ASEAN. The White House has already indicated that a US-ASEAN Summit is on the cards, although due to the spread of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 the meeting is likely to be virtual rather than in-person as had been planned. Nevertheless, it will provide a good opportunity to discuss ways to take the relationship forward, including an upgrade to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (as Australia and China did last year).

Fourth, notwithstanding the problems caused by some Republican senators withholding approval of President Biden's ambassadorial nominees, the administration needs to expedite the appointment of US ambassadors to the region. Crucially, US ambassadorships to America's two treaty allies, Thailand and the Philippines, and to ASEAN need to be filled.²⁶ Biden's nominees for Brunei, Singapore and Vietnam were not approved until late 2021, and US ambassadors to Indonesia, Laos and Malaysia are Trump appointees.

Fifth, Southeast Asians will be hopeful that President Biden will travel to the region, if not in May when he will probably attend a summit of the Quad leaders in Japan, then at least

later in the year for the ASEAN summit meetings in Phnom Penh. It would be an opportune occasion to launch the ASEAN-US Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

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