

# PERSPECTIVE

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**Singapore** | 23 February 2022

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## **Southeast Asia Holds Mixed Perceptions of the Biden Administration**

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*Southeast Asia occupies an important place in the Biden administration's Asia policy, as reflected in the latest iteration of its Indo-Pacific Strategy released in February 2022. Photo taken on 18 February 2022 by Jim Watson, AFP.*

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- The State of Southeast Asia 2022 indicates that Southeast Asians have put more trust in the US under the Biden administration but that the level of trust is uneven among different countries.
- While Southeast Asians positively acknowledge the Biden administration's efforts to reinvigorate American leadership in global governance, they are more demanding and critical about US engagement with their respective countries and the whole region.
- Southeast Asians look forward to more substantive and impactful actions by the US that should go beyond diplomatic visits or policy statements, especially in deepening economic relations and delivering solutions to the region's pressing challenges.
- There is a correlation between the Biden administration's differentiated approach to Southeast Asian countries and their respective trust in the US – the more Washington invests in a bilateral relationship, the more American influence tends to be welcomed and trusted by that particular country.
- While US prioritisation of some major Southeast Asian states makes sense from a 'return on investment' point of view, its neglect of smaller states on the region threatens to leave Southeast Asia even more strategically incoherent and ASEAN more divided.

**INTRODUCTION**

Southeast Asia occupies an important place in the Biden administration’s Asia policy, as reflected in the latest iteration of its Indo-Pacific Strategy released in February 2022.<sup>1</sup> After a lull in the first six months of 2021, the US has actively re-engaged the region with a series of high-level visits as well as virtual summits and policy speeches on the region, substantial vaccine donations and a standing invitation to an ASEAN-US special summit in Washington D.C.<sup>2</sup> Have these diplomatic efforts paid off in terms of Southeast Asian states’ recognition of and trust in America and its regional commitments? The 2022 State of Southeast Asia (SSEA) survey – a barometer of Southeast Asian foreign policy elites’ strategic thinking – shows mixed results.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on the survey findings, this article examines the change and continuity in Southeast Asians’ perceptions of the US, and how the Biden administration’s engagement with Southeast Asia in its first year has interacted with and influenced such perceptions.

**MIXED PERCEPTIONS OF THE US**

*Downbeat about US regional engagement*

Many Southeast Asians were already hopeful about the Biden administration even before it took office. In the 2021 SSEA survey – which was conducted after Biden’s victory in the 2020 US presidential election – 60.3% of the respondents indicated that their confidence in Washington as a strategic partner and regional security provider would improve if there was a change in US leadership. The 2022 survey results, however, indicate that such enthusiasm has since tapered off and the positive trajectory of the ‘Biden effect’ is not completely linear in Southeast Asia. Despite a flurry of US diplomatic activities in the latter half of 2021, Southeast Asians are not fully convinced that the US is really back in the region. The share of respondents who think that US engagement with the region under Biden has increased dropped sharply from last year’s 70.6% to 45.8%. Meanwhile, 21.7% of the respondents are sceptical about the level of US engagement with the region in Biden’s first year, a considerable increase from 5.9% in 2021. Only in Vietnam is there increased optimism about US regional engagement (52.8%, up from last year’s 42.9%).

<i>The level of US engagement with the region under the Biden administration has...</i>			
	<b>Decreased</b>	<b>Remained unchanged</b>	<b>Increased</b>
<b>2021</b>	5.9%	23.5%	70.6%
<b>2022</b>	21.7%	32.5%	45.8%

Likewise, the number of respondents having little/no confidence in the US as a strategic partner and regional security provider has increased from last year’s 25.2% to 32.8%; only 42.6% still registered their confidence, down from last year’s 54.7%. The country that exhibits the least confidence is Brunei (49.1%), followed by Laos (38.7%), Cambodia (37.1%), Indonesia (36.6%) and Thailand (35.1%). Surprisingly, Myanmar respondents (61.2%) are the most confident in the US as the region’s security guarantor, a sentiment that is heavily influenced by their frustration with Myanmar’s ongoing political crisis. This

prevailing anti-China and pro-Western sentiment among Myanmar respondents is also reflected in other survey answers, breaking from their usual ambivalence in previous surveys. The significant increase in America’s favourability among Myanmar respondents – and the dramatic drop in China’s favourability accordingly – helped offset US losses in other countries. The US’ overall trust ratings (the average number of all ten ASEAN member states) therefore benefitted from the ‘Myanmar factor’ in this year’s survey.

<i>How confident are you of the US as a strategic partner and provider of regional security?</i>			
	<b>No Confidence</b>	<b>No Comment</b>	<b>Confidence</b>
<b>2021</b>	25.2%	20.1%	54.7%
<b>2022</b>	32.8%	24.6%	42.6%

*Upbeat about US global leadership*

Despite their downbeat mood about US engagement at the regional level, Southeast Asians’ confidence in America’s global leadership to uphold international law and the rules-based order surged from last year’s 24.5% to 36.6%. This optimism also extends to US leadership in championing the global free trade agenda, up from 19.7% to 30.1%, despite the US’ continued absence from the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Biden administration’s lacklustre trade agenda in general. These figures provide cautious reason to believe that Biden’s ‘Build Back Better’ brand that seeks to reassert American leadership on global issues – from pandemic response to climate change – has found strong resonance in the region. With this, the US has recovered from the low base set by the Trump administration’s four-year serial bashing of global multilateral organisations from the World Trade Organisation to the World Health Organisation.

<i>The share of respondents having confidence in the US to ...</i>		
	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>
<b>provide leadership to maintain the rules-based order and uphold international law</b>	24.5%	36.6%
<b>provide leadership in championing the global free trade agenda</b>	19.7%	30.1%

Washington continues to fare well in the survey’s trust-defining question, namely “How confident are you that the US will do the right thing to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance?”. 52.8% of the respondents across the region express confidence in the US in this respect, up from last year’s 47%. With this, the US has taken over the EU to become the second most trusted major power in the region, after only Japan. Again, this is a positive acknowledgement of the Biden administration’s efforts to return to international institutions and reinvigorate its leadership in global governance.

America’s vast economic resources and political will to provide global leadership remains the most important reason for Southeast Asians to put their trust in Washington (45.5%). Meanwhile, the concern that Washington is distracted with its internal affairs and thus cannot focus on global concerns/issues continues to be the prevailing reason for distrust

(36.7%). It appears that American power under Biden is perceived as more benign, compared to the previous surveys which were undertaken during the Trump presidency. There are slight increases in the trust reasons related to American soft power (the US being a responsible stakeholder and champion of international law, compatibility of political culture and worldview, and US culture and civilisation). The share of respondents who are concerned that US economic and military power could be used to threaten their country’s interests and sovereignty has gone down from last year’s 27.6% to 23.5%.

<i>How confident are you that the US will “do the right thing” to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance?</i>			
	<b>No confidence</b>	<b>No Comment</b>	<b>Confidence</b>
<b>2021</b>	31.1%	21.9%	47%
<b>2022</b>	29.6%	17.6%	52.8%

*The binary choice: Still the US, but...*

Washington can also take comfort in the choice by 57% of all Southeast Asian respondents to align with the US rather than China if they were forced to choose. The reservoir of trust in America remains resilient and robust despite perceptions of China’s predominant influence in the region. The majority of Lao and Bruneian respondents keep to their choice of China, as was the case in last year’s survey while the US remains the choice for Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Myanmar and Cambodia are two ‘swing states’ this year as the majority of their respective respondents ‘switch(ed) camps’ in dramatic ways. This year, 92% of Myanmar respondents choose the US while 81.5% of Cambodia choose China. The political turmoil in Myanmar following the February 2021 coup d’état by the military has driven anti-China and pro-US sentiments among the Myanmar people as Beijing is seen as propping up the junta regime. For Cambodia, the strong recognition of Chinese vaccine support – which helped the country successfully contain the pandemic in 2021 – has significantly improved China’s trust ratings among Cambodian respondents. This demonstrates that ‘shock events’ involving domestic politics and foreign intervention/assistance can significantly sway local populations’ perceptions of major powers.

<i>If ASEAN were forced to align itself with one of the two strategic rivals, which should it choose?</i>				
	<b>China</b>		<b>US</b>	
	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>
ASEAN	43.8%	43%	56.2%	57%
Myanmar	51.9%	8.0%	48.1%	92%
Cambodia	46.2%	81.5%	53.8%	18.5%

*The Dichotomy of Economics and Security in US Regional Engagement*

There is a slight increase in the recognition of American economic influence, with 9.8% of the respondents thinking that the US is the most influential economic power in the region.

This is up from last year's 6.6%. This modest increase, however, has had negligible effect on the solid standing of China which is chosen by 76.7% of the respondents as the most influential economic power – an impressive track record that China has maintained since the first survey edition in 2019. The problem is, while Southeast Asia is very welcoming of US economic influence,<sup>4</sup> the Biden administration has not been forthcoming about its economic agenda for the region.

The Achilles heel of the US' Southeast Asia policy, and its Asia policy in general, remains the lack of a robust framework to deepen its economic integration and reclaim its leadership in the regional economic governance. Meanwhile, China's centrality in the regional trade and investment networks continues to take root, especially with the entry into force of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in January 2022 and Beijing's application to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). According to the Asia Power Index 2021, the US' score in terms of 'economic relationships' dropped to 51.1 from 61.8 in 2020, well behind China's 99.<sup>5</sup> As the Biden administration remains aloof from the CPTPP, a majority of respondents (46.8%) believe that China would fill the void left by the US and this would mean a rise in China's regional influence. Almost a quarter of respondents (23.2%) are also concerned that this may lead to rising tensions in the region as the US shifts its focus of engagement from inclusive trade deals to exclusive security pacts such as the Quad and AUKUS.

The above anxiety about Washington's focus on hard balancing through minilateral coalitions, hence its neglect of ASEAN centrality, is palpable as the respondents assess the impact of AUKUS on regional security. Negative perceptions of AUKUS – a combination of three options (i) AUKUS will undermine ASEAN centrality; (ii) AUKUS will undermine the nuclear weapons non-proliferation regime; and (iii) AUKUS will escalate the regional arms race – account for 52.8% of all respondents across the region. Meanwhile, 36.4% think that AUKUS will help counterbalance China's growing military power, while 10.8% do not expect it to affect the regional balance of power. Interestingly, country-specific responses remarkably mirror the disparate and divergent views as officially expressed by their respective governments about the trilateral defence pact.<sup>6</sup> Negative views of AUKUS are most prevalent in Laos (77.3%), followed by Malaysia (62.2%), Indonesia (61.1%) and Brunei, Cambodia and Thailand (approximately 60%). Meanwhile, the expectation that AUKUS will help counterbalance China's growing military power is high among respondents from Myanmar (63.7%),<sup>7</sup> the Philippines (60%), Singapore (50.9%) and Vietnam (46.5%).

Southeast Asians in general welcome and appreciate the Biden administration's focus on providing support to regional countries in addressing global challenges. 58.5% of respondents agree/strongly agree that the emergent positive agenda of the Quad in tangible areas like vaccine security and climate change is positive and reassuring for Southeast Asia. The US's prioritisation of Southeast Asia in its global Covid-19 vaccine support – via both bilateral donations and through the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) facility<sup>8</sup> – is well recognised in the region. In the 2021 survey, Washington was ranked 4<sup>th</sup> among the Dialogue Partners that provided the most Covid-19 response assistance to Southeast Asia. In 2022, it came second, after only China, in terms of Covid-19 vaccine support for

the region. American vaccine brands, namely Pfizer and Moderna, are also the most popular among Southeast Asians, with the approval rating of 54.8%, far ahead of second-placed Chinese-made Sinovac and Sinopharm (18.7%).

<i>Which Dialogue Partner provided the most COVID-19 vaccine support?</i>	<b>China</b>	<b>The US</b>	<b>Australia</b>	<b>Japan</b>
	57.8%	23.2%	4.7%	4.1%
<i>Which vaccine brand do you trust the most?</i>	<b>Sinopharm, Sinovac</b>	<b>Pfizer, Moderna</b>	<b>AstraZeneca</b>	<b>Any vaccine available</b>
	18.7%	54.8%	9.2%	13.7%

### **MIND THE GAPS: AMERICA’S DIFFERENTIATED APPROACH TO SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES**

The US’ 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy lists the Philippines and Thailand among five regional treaty allies, and Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam among leading regional partners, with whom Washington will seek to deepen and strengthen relationships.<sup>9</sup> However, compared to Northeast Asia or Europe, the line between Southeast Asian ‘allies’ and ‘partners’ in terms of their strategic significance to America as well as US strategic investments in respective bilateral ties is much more blurred. There is no common threat perception between America and its Southeast Asian treaty allies, and all Southeast Asian states are hedging – to different degrees – in cultivating their relationships with both Washington and Beijing.

As US-China rivalry intensifies, Southeast Asian states’ strategic value to Washington is largely judged against their degrees of support for American military access to and presence in the region. As noted by Bilahari Kausikan, “the nature of US engagements will be decided on the basis of cold calculations of American national interests more narrowly defined. Allies, partners and friends will be expected to contribute more to the burdens of meeting common challenges, primarily, although not exclusively, with regard to China.”<sup>10</sup> The Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam are perceived to be more forward-leaning in this respect,<sup>11</sup> and they also appear to be on top of the Biden administration’s Southeast Asia agenda in 2021. Early diplomatic outreach activities by the Biden administration towards the region were focused on these countries, especially in the two consecutive months of July and August with the visits by US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin and Vice President Kamala Harris.

The focus on the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam – especially at the time of the above US high-level visits – created some angst among Indonesian, Malaysian and Thai observers and policymakers that their countries were being left out.<sup>12</sup> The December 2021 visit by Secretary of State Antony Blinken (the Thailand leg was cancelled at the last minute due to a Covid-19 case in Blinken’s entourage) was meant to send re-assuring messages to these countries. The 2022 survey, however, suggests that Indonesian, Malaysian and Thai

respondents are not yet convinced of US commitment and credibility. Meanwhile, the US enjoys generally higher trust ratings among Philippine, Singaporean and Vietnamese respondents. For example:

- On the trust-defining question regarding the confidence in the US to do the right thing to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance, the levels of confidence in Indonesia (46.6%), Malaysia (53.3%) and Thailand (53.9%) are lower than those in Singapore (55.4%), the Philippines (66.5%) and Vietnam (72.2%).
- On the binary choice question, while all these six countries remain aligned with the US, Washington enjoys considerably higher percentages in the Philippines (83.5%), Singapore (77.9%) and Vietnam (73.6%) than in Indonesia (55.7%), Malaysia (57%) and Thailand (57.3%).
- On the Covid-19 vaccine support question, the highest levels of recognition of US support are found among respondents from Vietnam (52.8%), the Philippines (40.8%) and Singapore (40.1%). Together with Vietnam and the Philippines, Indonesia is among the top five recipients of US vaccine donations globally, but 80% of its total vaccine supplies are of Chinese-made Sinovac.<sup>13</sup> Recognition of US vaccine support is quite low among Indonesian (13.7%), Malaysian (18.5%) and Thai (25.6%) respondents, which stands in contrast to their high appreciation of Chinese vaccine support, at 68.7%, 64.4% and 64.1% respectively.

At the lower rung of American priorities in Southeast Asia are smaller states, namely Brunei, Cambodia and Laos (the case of Myanmar is different since the US has cut off official engagements with the military regime since the coup). No cabinet member of the Biden government visited Brunei and Cambodia in 2021 despite the two countries being the incumbent and incoming ASEAN Chair.<sup>14</sup> Laos is almost completely under the radar except for the US' donation of a million Covid-19 vaccine doses to the country.<sup>15</sup>

Washington's inattention to these smaller states is matched by the latter's disenchantment with US engagement and their embrace of Chinese influence accordingly. The 2022 survey indicates Cambodia and Laos's growing support for Chinese influence compared to previous years. These two countries registered the highest levels of recognition of Chinese vaccine assistance (91.4% and 77.3%), of alignment with China if a binary choice has to be made (81.5% and 81.8%), of confidence in China to act as a status quo power and to continue to support the existing regional order (25.9% and 20.5%), and of optimism about their respective bilateral relations with China in the next three years (84% and 84.1%). Brunei comes quite close to Cambodia and Laos in terms of alignment with China and its trust in the US has seen a sharp decrease in many questions. For example, Brunei's confidence in the US "as a strategic partner and regional security provider" fell dramatically from last year's 60.6% to 26.4%, and its confidence in the US to 'do the right thing' is at its lowest level (30.2%) since 2019.

Washington's prioritisation of some major Southeast Asian states makes sense from a 'return on investment' point of view. Analyst Derek Grossman perceptively observed that the US may have concluded that "Laos and Cambodia are so firmly entrenched in Beijing's orbit that time and resources would be better spent on countries in the region that are more receptive to and helpful in strategic competition."<sup>16</sup> Adopting this approach, however, is not without strategic cost for the US and the whole region, because the neglect of smaller states will leave Southeast Asia even more incoherent and ASEAN more divided. This imminent reality does not measure up to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy's latest affirmation that Washington "welcomes a strong and independent ASEAN that leads in Southeast Asia".<sup>17</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Biden administration's record in Southeast Asia in its first year has been assessed to be "mixed, though generally positive".<sup>18</sup> On their part, Southeast Asian countries' reception towards the US has also been mixed, though generally positive, as shown by the 2022 survey results. While Southeast Asians well acknowledge the administration's efforts to return to international institutions and reinvigorate American global leadership, they are more demanding and critical when it comes to US engagement with their respective countries and with the whole region. They are looking forward to more substantive and impactful actions by the US that should go beyond diplomatic visits or policy statements to anchor American presence and influence in Southeast Asia, especially in deepening economic relations and delivering solutions to the region's pressing challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> See The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, The White House, February 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>. The word "Southeast Asia" appears ten times and the word "ASEAN" 18 times in the document, more than references to any other sub-regions in the Indo-Pacific.

<sup>2</sup> Hoang Thi Ha and Ian Storey, "The Biden Administration and Southeast Asia: One Year in Review", *ISEAS Perspective*, 2022/11, 11 February 2022, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-11-the-biden-administration-and-southeast-asia-one-year-in-review-by-hoang-thi-ha-and-ian-storey/>.

<sup>3</sup> Seah, S. et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2022* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022), [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/The-State-of-SEA-2022\\_FA\\_Digital-Final.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/The-State-of-SEA-2022_FA_Digital-Final.pdf). In the 2022 edition, the survey authors apply a different methodology that assigns a 10% weighted average to each country's responses to calculate the average figures for ASEAN as a whole. They also apply the same weighted average method to the 2021 data for the questions that require trend analysis so that comparative analysis can be done.

<sup>4</sup> See Question 15 of the 2022 SSEA survey: 68.1% of respondents who choose the US as the most influential economic power welcome American economic influence in the region. In contrast, 64.4% of respondents choosing China as the most influential economic power worry about Chinese economic influence.

<sup>5</sup> Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index 2021, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/countries/united-states/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ian Storey and William Choong, "Southeast Asian Responses to AUKUS: Arms Racing, Non-Proliferation and Regional Stability", *ISEAS Perspective*, 2021/134, 14 October 2021, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-134-southeast-asian->

[responses-to-aukus-arms-racing-non-proliferation-and-regional-stability-by-william-choong-and-ian-storey/](#).

<sup>7</sup> The political turmoil in Myanmar following the February 2021 coup d'état has driven strong anti-China and pro-US sentiments among the Myanmar people, which heavily influenced the choice of the US over China by most Myanmar respondents to many questions in the survey.

<sup>8</sup> Hoang Thi Ha and Ian Storey, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Bilahari Kausikan, "Aukus submarine deal signals new Indo-Pacific balance of power", *The Straits Times*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/aukus-submarine-deal-signals-new-indo-pacific-balance-of-power>.

<sup>11</sup> The Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam's higher strategic comfort with American military presence in the region is demonstrated in their relatively positive responses to AUKUS – compared to Malaysia and Indonesia's publicly negative reactions and Thailand's total silence. The 2022 SSEA survey (Question 21 on the impact of AUKUS on regional security) also suggests that more respondents from the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam appreciate the hard balancing value of AUKUS in constraining China's military power.

<sup>12</sup> See Toru Takahashi, "Subtle threat to ASEAN: US indifference to Indonesia and Thailand", *Nikkei Asia*, 11 August 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Biden-s-Asia-policy/Subtle-threat-to-ASEAN-US-indifference-to-Indonesia-and-Thailand>; Editorial Board, "Snubbed again, Joe?", *The Jakarta Post*, 3 August 2021, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2021/08/02/snubbed-again-joe.html>; Cheng-Chwee Kuik and Abdul Razak Ahmad, "Malaysia's Resilient (but Ambiguous) Partnership with the United States: The Dilemmas of Smaller States in the Indo-Pacific Era", *Asia Policy*, Volume 16, Number 4 (October 2021), pp. 86-95, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/can-america-come-back-prospects-for-u-s-southeast-asia-relations-under-the-biden-administration/>.

<sup>13</sup> See "U.S. International COVID-19 Vaccine Donations Tracker – Updated as of 31 January 2022", *KFF*, 31 January 2022, <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/u-s-international-covid-19-vaccine-donations-tracker/#recipient-country>; "COVID-19 Vaccines Donated by the Chinese Government to the Indonesian Government Arrives in Indonesia", website of the People's Republic of China to the Republic of Indonesia, 27 September 2021, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceindo//eng/sgdt/t1910003.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> The most senior official of the Biden government that has visited Cambodia is Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman (June 2021); and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met Brunei's Second Foreign Minister Dato Erywan Yusof on the sidelines of the G7 Foreign Ministerial in London (May 2021).

<sup>15</sup> "United States Hands Over More than One Million Doses of COVID-19 Vaccines Donated Through the COVAX Facility to Lao PDR", UNICEF website, 19 July 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/laos/press-releases/united-states-hands-over-more-one-million-doses-covid-19-vaccines-donated-through>.

<sup>16</sup> Derek Grossman, "Time for America to Play Offense in China's Backyard", *Foreign Policy*, 12 January 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/12/biden-cambodia-laos-southeast-asia-strategy-geopolitics/>.

<sup>17</sup> The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> Hoang Thi Ha and Ian Storey, op. cit.

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