

A Confused Biden Team Risks Losing Southeast Asia

If the region continues to drift toward China, Washington has only itself to blame.

By **James Crabtree**, a columnist at Foreign Policy and the executive director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies-Asia.

May 25 was hardly a bravura day for U.S. diplomacy in Southeast Asia. Foreign ministers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) gathered for their first virtual meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Having waited the best part of an hour, they learned a technical snafu would stop Blinken from participating in the call, which he had been due to join from his airplane as he flew off to the Middle East. A few weeks later, the same group of ASEAN ministers flew off to enjoy red carpet treatment and a productive, snafu-free, in-person meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. The contrast between the two episodes was not hard to spot.

Southeast Asia is an important front line in a new era of geopolitical competition between China and the United States. U.S. President Joe Biden took office with plenty of goodwill across the region. Its leaders hoped Biden would be less erratic than former U.S. President Donald Trump and more willing to commit time to economic and diplomatic engagement. Yet six months into Biden's tenure, and that goodwill is ebbing away. In its place, a sense of disappointment is taking hold amid talk about a lack of U.S. focus and confused objectives. If Biden cannot soon find that focus again, Washington risks damage to its credibility in the region—and further creeping Chinese influence.

The region should matter in Washington. It contains two U.S. allies: the Philippines and Thailand. There are other major partners too, including Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam. Yet economic ties in all these countries have shifted toward China as of late. Closer diplomatic ties are likely to follow in many cases, absent concerted U.S. action. Few regional policymakers relish a possible future under China's sway and mostly want to maintain a balance between the two superpowers—which means they want the United States to stay closely engaged in regional affairs. But it is for precisely this reason that Southeast Asia is so attuned to signs of distraction or muddled thinking in Washington.

Blinken's technical snafu hardly helped. Beyond the show of sheer incompetence, **the fact that Blinken couldn't participate in the ASEAN meeting as he was heading to Israel only acted as a reminder that U.S. commitments elsewhere distract attention from Asia.** Despite more talk of a new focus on the Indo-Pacific, the U.S. Defense Department also moved its only aircraft carrier in the western Pacific region last month back to support U.S. troops leaving Afghanistan, sending an equally confusing signal. Individual countries have similar stories, including Indonesia, the region's largest economy. Its foreign minister, Retno Marsudi, recently headed to the United States for a United Nations meeting on Palestine. While there, she failed to secure a meeting with Blinken, causing embarrassment in Jakarta.

Biden's problems are not all of his own making. Southeast Asia is littered with U.S. ambassadorial postings that have been unfilled since the Trump years. Pandemic restrictions also mean there are few big diplomatic gatherings U.S. leaders can actually attend in person to

demonstrate their commitment to the region. U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin had planned to lead a large delegation in June to the annual Shangri-La Dialogue convened by the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Singapore (which I helped organize)—until the resurgent COVID-19 pandemic forced its cancellation.

Other problems, however, are self-inflicted. Biden has put little effort into calling Southeast Asian leaders. Those empty ambassadorial posts are not being filled in any hurry. There have been other opportunities to show leadership too—for instance, after the coup in Myanmar. But the U.S. response to the Myanmar crisis has been muted, with Washington playing a relatively minor diplomatic role. At a wider regional level, there has been nothing close to Washington’s demonstration of its commitment to Europe at the recent G-7, NATO, and U.S.-European Union summits.

U.S. strategists are not blind to these problems. In the absence of visits from more senior figures, the administration dispatched U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman to visit Jakarta, Bangkok, and Phnom Penh in late May and early June—a low-profile trip that seemed to go well enough. Elsewhere, the confirmation of Daniel Kritenbrink as the State Department’s top official for East Asia should help improve policy coordination, not least given Kritenbrink’s background as a recent ambassador to Vietnam.

Yet these efforts look insubstantial compared to China’s more energetic regional courtship. On June 7, Wang hosted a “Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers’ Meeting” in Chongqing, China, where the agenda was focused on hot-button issues like vaccine diplomacy and post-pandemic economic recovery. Wang upgraded relations with ASEAN to “comprehensive strategic partnership”—a largely symbolic move but one that nonetheless accords the bloc the same status as the European Union. Beijing’s ties with individual ASEAN members are improving as well. A few days earlier in June, China and Indonesia had started a new “high-level dialogue cooperation mechanism” with a friendly meeting between Wang and Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, an influential businessman-turned-politician who is often described as the country’s “minister of everything.”