

## **Harris to visit ASEAN in shadow of Afghan exit: 5 things to know**

### **VP's trip to Singapore and Vietnam set to 'reassure' about US commitment to Asia**

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SINGAPORE/HANOI -- Kamala Harris will start her first visit to Asia as U.S. vice president this weekend, with planned stops in Singapore and Vietnam.

She is expected to hold talks with leaders from the two countries on security and economic matters as well as COVID-19 recovery efforts -- all with China's growing regional presence in mind.

The trip comes at a crucial time for President Joe Biden's administration. The Taliban has retaken control of Afghanistan as the U.S. withdraws, sparking heavy criticism in Washington. China continues to assert itself in the South China Sea. And the coronavirus continues to rage across the world, especially in Southeast Asia.

Harris is scheduled to arrive in Singapore on Sunday, before heading for Vietnam next Tuesday. Here are five things to know about her upcoming trip and its implications.

#### **1. Why is Harris visiting Southeast Asia, and why Singapore and Vietnam over other Association of Southeast Asian Nations members?**

Biden has made a point of reestablishing Washington's Asia policy, which had faded during the Donald Trump administration. Since Southeast Asia forms the core of the Indo-Pacific region, the president has dispatched other key officials there in recent months as well -- Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman.

Singapore and Vietnam, in particular, are important for the U.S. economy. Singapore, as a regional financial hub, is home to the Asian headquarters of major U.S. companies including Microsoft and Google. Vietnam is becoming more critical for global supply chains, including that for semiconductors, as more companies move production bases from China.

"Within ASEAN, these two countries are the most stable and most friendly toward the U.S." among the 10 members, said Alan Chong, an associate professor in international relations at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University. He pointed out that "the U.S. wants friendly states along China's territory to take a stronger position in aligning with the U.S."

The White House earlier said in a statement that Harris will discuss topics such as "regional security, the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and our joint efforts to promote a rules-based international order."

In Singapore, she will meet with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Monday, followed by a visit to Changi Naval Base. She will also deliver a speech on Tuesday morning.

On COVID-19, Harris' stay in Vietnam will include a virtual meeting with health ministers from the ASEAN members on Wednesday, launching a regional office of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Hanoi.

## **2. How does the tumultuous U.S. exit from Afghanistan affect Harris' visit?**

When the White House announced the trip last month, it likely did not expect that Afghanistan's government would have fallen shortly before her arrival. Some say America's retreat from the Central Asian country has other nations questioning its will to sustain engagements.

This could add significance to the Southeast Asia visit. Chong said the trip could help "reassure America's allies about America's commitment, notwithstanding the Taliban takeover" in Afghanistan.

He said that the quick U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan had raised "serious questions about the credibility of American defense commitments," but that Harris has a chance to show Asian partners that "the United States will not retreat."

A senior White House official told reporters on Thursday that Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific are strategically and economically important to the U.S., stressing "that hasn't changed with Afghanistan."

"We have been strong security and economic partners of countries in the Indo-Pacific for more than 70 years, and we've been steadfast partners, and we have increasing security partnerships with those countries," the official said. "They want us to increase those security partnerships."

## **3. What will the economic discussions focus on?**

Building a resilient supply chain is likely to be a key theme, given the global shortage of semiconductors as well as the need for coronavirus vaccines and other medical products.

Vietnam's exports to the U.S. accounted for about 30% of its total shipments in April, according to data from CEIC, underscoring its importance to America's Asian supply chain.

Businesses have been investing to expand production capacity in the country. Intel, for example, has sought to enhance its Vietnam assembly and test manufacturing capabilities, as it sees the nation as "an important part of Intel's worldwide manufacturing presence," according to an executive at the U.S. giant's local unit.

"The unprecedented global demand for semiconductor components, with the world going digital due to COVID, has led to an industrywide shortage of critical third-party components, including substrates, which is impacting technology providers across the industry," said Kim Huat Ooi, Intel Products Vietnam's vice president for manufacturing, supply chain and operations, and general manager.

Vietnam's homegrown businesses are eyeing the huge U.S. market as well. Conglomerate Vingroup plans to export its electric vehicles, produced by subsidiary VinFast, to the U.S. to capture growing demand for environmentally friendly automobiles.

Singapore, meanwhile, serves as one of Asia's chip production hubs, where recent moves include GlobalFoundries' \$4 billion investment to expand a wafer plant. The city-state's function as a gateway to the rest of Asia also makes it a crucial supply chain link. While there, Harris will participate in a roundtable discussion with supply chain "thought leaders" on Tuesday.

Expanding exports of manufactured products is increasingly important for Southeast Asian economies looking to accelerate their pandemic recoveries, even as the region remains an epicenter of global infections. Singapore and Vietnam would welcome any measures that help the cause, such as vaccine pledges and travel arrangements.

#### **4. Singapore and Vietnam are members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) trade pact. Will Harris' visit increase the odds of the U.S. rejoining the group?**

The Trump administration pulled out of what was then the 12-member Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2017. The remaining 11 members, which include Singapore, Vietnam, Brunei and Malaysia, later launched the CPTPP.

The Biden administration has reversed some Trump policies, such as those on climate change, but it has done little on the trade front.

Jayant Menon, visiting senior fellow at Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute think tank, believes it is "unlikely" that Harris' trip will result in the U.S. rejoining the CPTPP. He said the pact is a significantly watered-down version of the original agreement, particularly in areas such as intellectual property protection, which U.S. businesses had pushed hard for.

"Rejoining the CPTPP may hold strategic value in re-engaging with the region, but it remains unclear if this alone will be enough when other avenues to do so, such as cooperating on the environment or security, exist," he said. "The CPTPP ship has sailed but new vessels are emerging on the horizon."

Singapore's foreign minister is not counting on any breakthrough during Harris' visit, either. "[Is] there any immediate prospect of America rejoining the CPTPP? I am afraid the answer is no," Vivian Balakrishnan told local media on Monday, according to a transcript his ministry published. Balakrishnan pointed out that U.S. domestic political considerations restrain the White House from proceeding with discussions on the multilateral trade framework.

Rather, the city-state hopes for some progress on digital trade, such as cross-border data flows and e-payments, on which it has already partnered with Australia, New Zealand and some other countries. "We want to see or explore whether the U.S. can be part of these emerging architecture for the digital economy," Balakrishnan said.

#### **5. China has also been strengthening ties with ASEAN. How has Beijing responded to Harris' planned trip?**

For ASEAN member countries, a deeper commitment by the U.S. would help the region maintain more balanced diplomacy, given China's increasing presence. About 76% of policymakers and thought leaders in the 10 states said China is the most influential economic power in Southeast Asia, versus 7% for the U.S., according to the State of Southeast Asia 2021 Survey by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

Chinese state media Global Times rebuffed the notion that the vice president's visit will affect China's existing supply chains in the region. "It won't shake the supply-chain advantage built based on the close cooperation between China and Southeast Asian countries," the publication wrote in an Aug. 4 article.

"Although the U.S. has been emphasizing the [increasingly] important role of Southeast Asian nations such as Vietnam in many global supply chains," it said, "there is no denying that China and Southeast Asia are deeply integrated in terms of industrial infrastructure."