

FOREIGN POLICY
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Biden Needs a Southeast Asia Policy to Counter China's Pull

Despite a welcome flurry of diplomacy, Washington still has no clear strategy for the region.

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As the Biden administration's first year comes to a close, how is the United States faring in Southeast Asia, a region critical to winning the strategic competition against China in the Indo-Pacific? The returns are mixed, and there are worrying trends. Despite one year of honing an Indo-Pacific strategy, Washington is still no closer to a clear trade agenda that might counteract some of China's massive economic pull on the region. And as critical as it is to defend democracy at home and abroad, U.S. President Joe Biden's emphasis on values and democracy promotion will make it difficult to engage a region dominated by autocracies and near-autocracies in the quest to outcompete China.

First, the good news: Biden's overarching goal to place allies and partners at the center of its foreign policy is clearly visible in Southeast Asia. A flurry of senior U.S. officials have already visited the region, including Vice President Kamala Harris (Singapore and Vietnam), Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin (Singapore, the Philippines, and Vietnam), Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman (Indonesia, Cambodia, and Thailand), newly minted Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Daniel Kritenbrink (Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand), and Secretary of State Antony Blinken (Indonesia and Malaysia—Thailand was cancelled due to a COVID-19 case in Blinken's circle) just this week.

Blinken has also met virtually with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) foreign ministers, and both Blinken and Austin have hosted some of their Southeast Asian counterparts in Washington. Sherman last week likewise met with all 10 ASEAN ambassadors to the United States. Perhaps most crucially, Biden virtually attended the U.S.-ASEAN summit and the East Asia summit—reversing years of lower-level U.S. participation that had offended regional leaders.

Apart from showing up—which itself is an essential ingredient to success—the Biden administration also has dialed back some of its tough language on competition with China. In February, Biden said Washington was in “extreme competition” with Beijing. But before Sherman traveled to China in July, she said she was seeking out potential areas of cooperation and called for “guard rails” in U.S.-Chinese relations to avoid unnecessarily escalations by either side. That shift in tone was welcomed throughout Southeast Asia. Even the nations that would most benefit from a hardline U.S. stance on China, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, do not want war in their region.

Relatedly, the Biden team has made clear that no Southeast Asian country is required to align with the United States. Rather, Washington argues that the region should prioritize maintaining a rules-based order and “free and open” Indo-Pacific—parenthetically suggesting that Beijing seeks the opposite. That plays well in Southeast Asia, where countries certainly do

not want to be pressured into alignment with either Washington or Beijing, which could result in retaliation from the other.

The Biden administration has focused on upholding international law in the South China Sea as well. Specifically, Blinken in July reiterated the Trump administration's policy to recognize maritime exclusive economic zones (EEZs) claimed by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. That stance takes direct aim at China's so-called nine-dash line claim, which would gobble up approximately 90 percent of the South China Sea based on what Beijing says are its historical rights instead of sharing the sea according to international law. Blinken's announcement was also meant as a tangible sign that the U.S. can be counted on—this time. Southeast Asian interlocutors routinely point to U.S. inaction when discussing China's annexation of the Scarborough Shoal, located inside the Philippines' recognized EEZ, in 2012. The event fundamentally shook faith in the United States' security commitments.

Another positive trend is that U.S.-Southeast Asian relations under Biden have been about more than China. The administration has a broad international agenda that includes climate change, global supply chains, and pandemic recovery, among many other points. In Singapore, Austin smartly couched U.S. policy in the context of empowering average Southeast Asians, highlighting hot-button topics in the region like fishing rights and underwater oil and gas deposits "afforded them by international law." This approach will likely have greater impact than focusing just on China's bad behavior, which tends to be more politically divisive.

The Biden administration has also made strides on another Southeast Asian challenge not directly related to China: post-coup Myanmar. Washington has consistently criticized the Tatmadaw and called for a restoration of civilian control—echoing the position of many, if not most, of Myanmar's fellow ASEAN members.