

## **Biden revives U.S. focus on ASEAN, but can it last?**

**Diplomatic success may depend on outcome of U.S. midterm elections**

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TOKYO -- U.S. President Joe Biden met with the leaders of Japan, South Korea, India and Australia during his short visit to Asia last month. The latest round of face-to-face meetings was aimed at rebuilding the U.S.-led order in Asia to counter Chinese and Russian attempts to dominate the region.

As a prologue to this diplomatic push, Biden held a summit with leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in Washington on May 12 and 13, the second such meeting held in the U.S. The first U.S.-ASEAN summit was hosted six years ago by the previous Democratic president, Barack Obama.

In a show of commitment to the region, Biden offered ASEAN leaders the opportunity to meet many of his top officials, including Vice President Kamala Harris, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

The heads of eight of the 10 ASEAN nations attended the summit. The exceptions were the Philippines, which is changing administrations following its presidential election, and military-ruled Myanmar. The leaders must have been impressed with the Biden administration's effort to make them feel welcome.

At the summit, Biden pledged to invest \$150 million in the region and named an ambassador to ASEAN. The Jakarta-based post had remained vacant since 2017. The two sides also agreed to upgrade their relationship to a "comprehensive strategic partnership." Biden called ASEAN "the very heart of my administration's strategy," adding that "the great deal of history of our world in the next 50 years is going to be written" as a result of U.S.-ASEAN relations.

**Observers are divided on what the shift in U.S. policy means for Southeast Asia.**

"From now on, ASEAN-U.S. relations will no longer be on autopilot mode, as has been the case for the past six years," said Kavi Chongkittavorn, a senior fellow at Thailand's Chulalongkorn University, who praised Biden's commitment to the region. But Endy Bayuni, a senior editor at the Jakarta Post, questions the U.S. effort to exclude China and wrote: "While ASEAN and the U.S. are on the same page on the Indo-Pacific, they are not necessarily in the same boat."

**Although Biden welcomed the ASEAN leaders with open arms, he did not hold any one-on-one meetings with his guests. And the announced financial assistance was also only a tenth as large as Chinese President Xi Jinping promised at his summit with ASEAN leaders last November.**

"In the end, the summit went well. But context matters, and overall, the U.S. continues to lose influence to China in Southeast Asia," said Susannah Patton, a research fellow at Australia's Lowy Institute, voicing a widely held view among experts, "The so-so outcomes suggest that the U.S. underestimates just how fast it is losing this competition."

The summit may not have produced much in the way of tangible results, but it certainly was a step forward in U.S.-ASEAN relations, given their recent rocky history.

After the Cold War ended, the U.S. lost interest in ASEAN, a group once seen as a bastion against communism. Obama revived U.S. focus on the region under his "Rebalance to Asia" policy. The U.S. took part in the ASEAN-led East Asia Summit in 2011, and later invited ASEAN leaders to the California resort of Sunnylands to hold their first U.S. summit in February 2016.

However, relations cooled again after Donald Trump took office in January 2017. During his four years as president, Trump held a summit with ASEAN leaders only once, during a visit to Manila in November 2017. He then went home without attending the East Asia Summit, which was held soon after in the same city, skipping what many see as a key annual diplomatic event in Asia.

Things came to a head in November 2019, when Trump sent his national security adviser, Robert O'Brien, to the East Asia Summit in Bangkok as his envoy. This was the only time in the 16 summits held through 2021 that a person below foreign ministerial rank represented a country. In protest, seven of the 10 ASEAN members sent foreign ministers, rather than heads of government, to a "summit" with the U.S. that year.

Surprised by ASEAN's reaction to what the group called "O'Brien shock," the Trump administration announced plans to invite ASEAN leaders to a special summit in March 2020. But the ASEAN side was not pleased with the choice of Las Vegas as the venue. In the end the meeting did not take place due to the coronavirus pandemic, and Trump did not bother to propose an online summit or another alternative.

Biden defeated Trump, replacing him as president in January 2021. The following October he fully participated in virtual ASEAN meetings, proposing a face-to-face summit in early 2022. But his administration botched the schedule: The U.S. announced summit dates, March 28 and 29, without ASEAN's prior consent, forcing a postponement.

Despite being occupied with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the administration managed to set up a summit for mid-May, just before Biden's first visit to Asia. Although it failed to produce major achievements, the special summit showed ASEAN Biden's eagerness to strengthen ties with the group.

Although the U.S. has blown hot and cold over ASEAN in recent years, the U.S. State and Defense departments have never made light of relations with the region. If Trump's diplomatic bungling is any guide, the biggest lesson for American policymakers is the importance of face-to-face talks at the highest level. Biden, who served as vice president and head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, is surely as aware of this as anyone.

The real test for Biden will come in November, when a series of summits is scheduled in Southeast Asia. Cambodia will host an ASEAN summit and related meetings from Nov. 11 to 13. This will be followed by G-20 talks in Indonesia on Nov. 15 and 16 and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Thailand on Nov. 18 and 19. If Biden were to attend all these meetings, he would have to stay in the region for 10 days or so, a long trip for any U.S. president, let alone for Biden, who will turn 80 on Nov. 20.

But Biden may have little choice but to attend. He must hold a summit with ASEAN leaders to sign the comprehensive strategic partnership agreed earlier this year. The U.S. will also have

to attend the APEC meeting as the forum's next host country. It will also need to be at the G-20 summit after pushing Indonesia, the current chair, to invite Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

ASEAN is also in a bind. The group may want to return the hospitality shown by the Biden administration at the special summit in May, but ASEAN has an unwritten rule that limits the number of formal summits with nonmember states to one a year, a diplomatic source said.

ASEAN held two summits with the U.S. in 2016, and did the same with Japan in 2013 to mark the 40th anniversary of cooperative partnership. But these were exceptions. When ASEAN held special summits with Australia and India in 2018, it called their regular summits in the fall "informal breakfast get-togethers." ASEAN held two summits with China last year, but both were online.

The East Asia Summit consists of the 10 ASEAN members and eight other countries, including the U.S., China, Japan, South Korea and India. With some nonmembers, namely Washington and Beijing, locking horns, ASEAN wants to remain neutral by sticking to the once-a-year principle. If ASEAN puts aside the rule and makes its November meeting with the U.S. the second formal summit for the year, it would draw attention to ASEAN's eagerness to bring U.S. attention back to the region.

Biden launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) on May 23 during his visit to Tokyo. Seven of the 10 ASEAN nations are among its founding members, a much higher number than initially expected. That may be because the IPEF offers neither carrots -- in the form of greater access to the U.S. market -- nor the stick of U.S. pressure for reciprocal U.S. access to ASEAN. Regional leaders may have concluded it is better to respond favorably to the U.S. initiative, although its benefits are unclear.

One further wild card is the U.S. midterm elections on Nov. 8, which take place just before Biden's planned visit to Southeast Asia. If the Democrats lose their majorities in the House of Representatives and the Senate, Biden could become a lame duck, which would raise questions about the prospects for Biden to win reelection or have another Democrat succeed him. ASEAN is watching closely whether Biden will be able to attend the autumn summits as the leader of the superpower, both in name and substance.