

## FOREIGN POLICY

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# Biden's Half-Hearted Policy Towards Southeast Asia

*Washington has stepped up its game in the region but is constrained by its unwillingness to do trade deals.*

By **Derek Grossman**, a senior defense analyst at the Rand Corp.

Even though Southeast Asia is a strategic region in the emerging U.S.-China standoff, the Biden administration's policy toward it in 2021 left much to be desired. During its first year in office, the Biden team lacked a strategy for the region, was short on ambassadors, and paid little attention to cultivating top-level ties. But in 2022, the administration stepped up its game in the region by showing up in person, clarifying its approach in key strategy documents, and boosting cooperation through initiatives such as the elevated Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the United States and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). But heavy lifting remains: **The administration still has no viable economic strategy, its emphasis on containing China threatens to alienate key countries in the region, and prioritizing a values-based foreign policy is a non-starter in a region of mostly authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states.**

One crucial improvement in 2022 was that the administration made a point of actually showing up. Especially after two years of only virtual engagement due to the pandemic, high-level, face-to-face meetings are a prerequisite for success on issues and policies. Last November, U.S. President Joe Biden personally attended three critical multilaterals: the U.S.-ASEAN and East Asia summits in Cambodia, as well as the G-20 summit in Indonesia. Although Biden did not participate in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Thailand—he was at his granddaughter's wedding at the White House instead—he sent Vice President Kamala Harris to attend in his stead. Other high-level visits included U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's trips to Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines; Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's travels to Cambodia, Indonesia, and Singapore; and Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman's visit to Laos, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

**But showing up in Southeast Asia was not the only way the administration stepped up its engagement.** In May, Biden hosted a historic U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit at the White House, bringing together nearly all ASEAN leaders. (Myanmar's junta leader was not invited, and then-Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte did not attend due to his country's impending presidential election.) Although the outcome was thin on actual policy deliverables, the summit was a signal that the United States still wields significant influence, despite China's growing political, economic, and military clout in the region.

The Biden administration in 2022 also released key strategy documents that clarified its approach to Southeast Asia. Most importantly, the new U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy consciously steered the conversation away from competition with China—a topic that tends to make Southeast Asian countries uncomfortable. Instead, the strategy focuses on building bilateral cooperation to “strengthen health security, address maritime challenges, increase connectivity, and deepen people-to-people ties.” These are some of the most pressing issues for Southeast Asians—and where the United States can deliver more than China. **One obvious problem that**

**remains is that the administration still has no real economic strategy to counter China in the region.**

Another essential document, the Biden administration's National Security Strategy, was released in October and served as an update to the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance from March 2021. In the new strategy, the Biden team notes that it is "deepening our five regional treaty alliances and closest partnerships." This was a good revision. The interim guidance specifically called out Vietnam and Singapore as close partners of the United States; even if that is true to some extent, emphasizing it in the context of a public U.S. strategy made them unnecessarily uncomfortable in their relationships with China. The callout also seemed to sideline others, particularly the Philippines and Thailand, which are both U.S. treaty allies. In the new strategy, the White House says it seeks "deeper bonds with Southeast Asian partners," affirms "the centrality of ASEAN," and pledges to "expand our regional diplomatic, development, and economic engagement, with a particular focus on Southeast Asia." Separately, the administration's new National Defense Strategy states that Washington "will invigorate multilateral approaches to security challenges in the region, to include by promoting the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in addressing regional security issues."

As much as they please Southeast Asian ears, words only go so far. **Deeds matter more.** One concrete deed is the Biden administration's promotion of its Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), a policy that pledges to cooperate with a number of countries on advancing sustainable, competitive, and fair economic growth. Of course, IPEF is also designed to counter China's growing economic influence in the region. Unveiled in May, the Biden team was able to get seven out of the 10 ASEAN countries to sign up. Cambodia and Laos were not invited, probably because the Biden team already believes they are Chinese client states, and neither was Myanmar following the coup there in February 2021.

IPEF is much less ambitious than the multilateral Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a 12-country trade and investment deal including four Southeast Asian states (Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam), from which then-President Donald Trump withdrew in 2017. But IPEF at least carries some promise of U.S.-led economic collaboration with Southeast Asia. And getting seven out of 10 ASEAN members to sign up is no small feat. The main criticism, however, is that IPEF is simply an agreement to negotiate and not an agreement itself. IPEF provides no additional trade access to the United States, which is what Southeast Asian countries want, and there are no prospects for Washington to get back into the TPP (which has since been renamed the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership), likely over doubts about getting a new trade deal through the U.S. Congress and Biden's [desire](#) for stronger protection of American workers