

# How the Biden Administration Should Counter China in Southeast Asia

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## Abstract

For years, Southeast Asia has become more reliant on China, striking a Faustian bargain, wherein they accept Chinese investments in return for acquiescence to Chinese hegemony and a commitment not to criticize its central government. In 2021, the Biden administration must take bold diplomatic, messaging, military, and economic actions to curtail Chinese influence and coercion in the region. Many of these actions can begin immediately and will benefit both Southeast Asia and the United States for years to come. Failure to solidify the US role in Southeast Asia will result in China becoming inextricably entrenched in the region and embolden Beijing to take even more aggressive actions against American allies and interests.

## Introduction

Building the US relationship with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member-states must be an immediate priority in the Biden administration. With the recent signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), ASEAN has welcomed more Chinese investment, with all the baggage that entails. In so doing, they have sent a clear signal that if the United States does not act soon to solidify an economic partnership it will be too late. The United States must provide ASEAN member-states with an alternative, lest Chinese power and influence becomes inextricably entrenched in the region.

## Catching China

Before assessing methods for partnering with ASEAN, it is essential to understand the benefits all parties would gain from closer ties. For ASEAN member-states, partnering with the United States would reduce reliance on China and diversify available products and services available for import. For Washington, stronger partnerships in Southeast Asia mean more trade partners and greater ability to roll back and counterprogram China's influence campaigns in the region. Further, since the international system relies on consensus to uphold norms, it is imperative that the United States keep ASEAN member-states from becoming little more than Chinese proxy votes on issues ranging

from human rights to nuclear nonproliferation. The more entrenched China becomes in the region the more levers Beijing will have to manipulate ASEAN governments and populations alike—with negative ramifications for the United States in areas around the globe.

For examples of China's increasing influence in the region and globally, look no further than Beijing's recent success securing a major construction contract for a new Cambodian airport<sup>1</sup> in Phnom Penh, or its assurances that China will supply vaccines for all ASEAN member-states.<sup>2</sup> See the essential *carte blanche* given to Beijing during its crackdown on prodemocracy figures in Hong Kong<sup>3</sup> and internment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. The latest *State of Southeast Asia Survey Report* (2020) shows that ASEAN populations increasingly see China as the most influential actor in the region but are concerned about Beijing's intentions.<sup>4</sup> China's strategic investments build rapport with ASEAN governments and populations alike but come with an expectation of acquiescence to China's ambitions of regional hegemony. China's recent economic assault on Australia has shown Southeast Asian countries the downside of the Faustian bargain China demands of them. The United States can provide ASEAN with an alternative to reduce reliance on China, but quick, decisive actions from the Biden administration will be needed to make up ground.

The Biden administration should take diplomatic, messaging, military, and economic initiatives, many of which can begin in 2021. Additional diplomats should be hired and deployed to ASEAN member-states, and more high-level media events should be focused on the region. The United States should increase foreign exchange opportunities for students and military, initiate an intelligence-sharing agreement with ASEAN, expand joint patrols in the South China Sea, and immediately begin the process of joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

### **Diplomatic and Messaging Initiatives**

The deployment of additional diplomats to ASEAN member-states will help the United States better understand the needs and perspectives of Southeast Asian populations. Emphasis should be on establishing a presence in underdeveloped areas within each country, where the needs of the population greatly differ from the cities and the impact of investment will be greatest. As noted in a 2013 UN report,<sup>5</sup> in many underdeveloped communities more people have access to mobile phones than toilets, a fact I witnessed firsthand in 2019 when I spent a few weeks in a Laotian remote village. It was during this visit that I noted China seemed to be enmeshing itself into the rural Laotian social fabric by supporting Chinese entrepreneurs willing to live in the area.

If the Department of State deploys diplomatic and USAID teams to rural Southeast Asia, they can identify needs and orchestrate small infrastructure projects that will significantly improve the lives of millions, while building rapport with the local populations. China has also made inroads with lopsided trade deals<sup>6</sup> and well marketed infrastructure projects, including longstanding investments in power generation<sup>7</sup> dating back to at least 1996. A more sustained and visible presence in Southeast Asia would go a long way toward changing the growing perception that China is overtaking the United States as the dominant regional power.<sup>8</sup>

These Department of State initiatives should be accompanied by more opportunities for education and military foreign exchanges. Student and military exchange programs build connections between countries that enable successful future cooperation, and they have a long history of launching diplomatic careers. These programs create unofficial ambassadors for both nations and develop the bench of future business, diplomatic, and military leaders.<sup>9</sup> More funding should be given to Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs programs at State, like the International Visitor Leadership Program. Additionally, the International Military Education and Training Program, Peace Corps, and other exchange programs should be expanded. Further, institutions like the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies should be grown, enabling them to offer additional programs and host students from even more diverse backgrounds. These diplomatic efforts will be vital to building and sustaining relationships at the local and national level but must be accompanied by economic and military measures that demonstrate a long-term commitment to the region.

### **Economic Initiatives**

The Biden administration should also immediately enter negotiations to join the CPTPP, the successor to the deal originally negotiated by Pres. Barack Obama. This will undoubtedly receive a degree of substantive bipartisan backlash, but as has been noted elsewhere,<sup>10</sup> many in Congress have become more hawkish on the need to counter China's attempted implementation of a pseudo-Monroe Doctrine in Asia.<sup>11</sup> The Biden administration could demand substantive changes before entering but should prioritize reassuring allies shaken by our abrupt abandonment of long sought deals. To do so, the United States could join the deal as is, with the stipulation that Congress put it to a vote again in two years; this will enable substantive changes to be made gradually, while garnering initial support from Congress members that typically eschew multilateral agreements.

Becoming party to the CPTPP will take some time, but while negotiations are in progress, the Biden administration can develop other mechanisms to build a stronger economic relationship with ASEAN partners. The existing Quad

framework (with Australia, Japan, and India) could be used to facilitate deals with ASEAN or its individual members, while working on a broader multilateral arrangement like the CPTPP. The Biden administration could also use the clout that Japan has built in Southeast Asia, especially in countries less disposed to favor the United States, like Laos and Myanmar,<sup>12</sup> to open the door to mutually beneficial bilateral agreements.

### **Military Initiatives**

The United States should initiate an intelligence-sharing agreement with Five Eyes and ASEAN member-states, creating an easy mechanism to help our partners detect and disrupt subversive Chinese Communist Party plans and actions within their countries. If the United States can easily share intelligence with our ASEAN partners, then we can demonstrate how seemingly benign actions and investments are actually serving to make them more dependent on China. These actions are relatively easy to initiate, would show commitment, and demonstrate the value of a US partnership.

The aforementioned recommendations bear little risk of escalation or retaliation from China, but there must also be a concerted effort to dramatically increase US military presence in the South China Sea. If China can control the South China Sea, and particularly access to the Strait of Malacca, Beijing can hold more than a third of world trade hostage, including more than 30 percent of rival India's trade and more than 19 percent of Japan's.<sup>13</sup> Even the possibility of China restricting trade in the South China Sea could serve as deterrent to countries that would otherwise challenge Beijing.

The creation of a new fleet based out of Singapore, as suggested by former Secretary of the Navy Kenneth Braithwaite,<sup>14</sup> would enable the US Navy to focus its efforts in the region and help boost the confidence of our ASEAN partners that the United States is there to stay. Establishing this new fleet within the South China Sea and near the Strait of Malacca would give the United States a more rapid response capability to Chinese provocations and enable a more proximate hub for freedom of navigation operations. A ubiquitous United States in Southeast Asia will also serve as a deterrent to an increasingly belligerent China<sup>15</sup> and its gray-zone operations<sup>16</sup> that have allowed Beijing to expand China's sphere of influence in the region relatively unopposed. Greater US military presence in Southeast Asia will not only inspire confidence from our partners in the region but show China that its implementation of a Monroe-esque Doctrine in Asia will not go unchallenged.

Building the confidence of partners in Southeast Asia is essential to curtailing China's expanding influence in the region. ASEAN member-states need to feel

confident in the US commitment to their security and economic prosperity, otherwise they may acquiesce to China's encroachment out of perceived necessity. Implementing strategic initiatives with long-term benefits will go a long way toward building regional confidence that the United States is there to stay. The Biden administration should immediately take diplomatic, messaging, military, and economic steps to counter China if it hopes to maintain and even build upon US influence and power projection capabilities in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. 🌐

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### **Notes**

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