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CHAPTER 06

ASEAN-US Relations during Joe Biden's Presidency: Prospects and Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

In its early days, ASEAN was viewed with scepticism by the United States, which perceived the bloc as weak and divided due to its consensus-based decision-making mechanism and diplomatic pomp and circumstance. However, Washington's attitude towards ASEAN began to evolve due to factors such as the rise of China, growing transnational threats, and regional economic growth. On its part, ASEAN needs an enduring American presence in the region to maintain peace and stability. As the 2022 Chairman of ASEAN, Cambodia will have an opportunity to shape the agenda and lead the discussion on some of the most pressing issues in the region, such as the simmering US-China rivalry, the COVID-19 pandemic, the political crisis in Myanmar, the South China Sea maritime conflict, and transnational security threats like the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), cyberattacks, and terrorism. At the same time, it will be under immense pressure from both Washington and Beijing, the mutual tensions of which have escalated into a multi-pronged strategic competition encompassing the economic, technological, military, and geopolitical domains.

This chapter consists of four sections. First, it examines the evolution of ASEAN-US relations since 1977. Second, it looks at Joe Biden's foreign policy towards ASEAN. Third, it analyzes the major challenges facing Cambodia's 2022 Chairmanship and offers policy recommendations for a successful tenure. Last, it ends with a conclusion.

OVERVIEW OF ASEAN-US RELATIONS (1977–TODAY)

Although the US has long enjoyed bilateral ties with respective ASEAN Member States going back to at least the 19th century, its official relations with the grouping only formally began in 1977 when it became an ASEAN dialogue partner. Although the relationship began as merely a political dialogue, it gradually morphed into a wide range of cooperation in different areas, including trade, political, security, and people-to-people ties. Between 1980 and 2001, ASEAN and the US held 16 rounds of joint dialogue (US Mission to ASEAN n.d.). In 2005, they released the Joint Vision Statement on the ASEAN-US Enhanced Partnership to develop a Plan of Action guiding their bilateral ties. In the first Plan of Action (2006–2011), both sides agreed to explore the possibility of convening a leader-level summit and continuing the existing consultation mechanisms, such as the ASEAN-US Dialogue Relations framework and the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference (PMC+1) Session, with the United States (ASEAN 2005). They also agreed to tighten their cooperation in public health, ICT, human resources, and the environment. Since then, both sides have adopted a new Plan of Action every five years to track progress and identify areas for future collaboration.

In 2008, the US became the first dialogue partner to nominate an ambassador to ASEAN, signalling its solidified commitment to the region. After President Barack Obama took office in 2009, Washington acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), one of ASEAN's core documents, which paved the way for the US's participation in key ASEAN-led security and strategic fora, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). One year later, Obama established a permanent diplomatic mission to ASEAN and nominated David Lee Carden as the first resident ambassador, reinforcing his "pivot to Asia" strategic policy reorientation with a greater political and economic presence. In 2015, the two sides elevated their ties to a strategic partnership. Moreover, before leaving office, Obama cemented his foreign policy legacy towards Southeast Asia by hosting all of the ten ASEAN leaders in the first stand-alone ASEAN-US Summit in Sunnylands, California, on 15–16 February 2016. However, after significant progress under President Obama's two terms in office, ASEAN-US relations experienced a period of uncertainty from 2017 to 2020 under President Donald J. Trump due to his highly unpredictable personality, trade war with China, transactional views of US foreign policy, and apparent lack of interest in Southeast Asia.

Today, US ties with ASEAN concentrate on five key areas: economic integration, maritime cooperation, emerging leaders, women's empowerment, and transnational security issues, which can be grouped into economic, political, security, and socio-cultural ties. In the following sections, this paper examines how each sector has progressed since 1977.

ECONOMIC TIES

With more than 650 million people, ASEAN is the third-largest economy in the Asia-Pacific and fifth largest in the world (East-West Center 2019). It is also the fourth-largest export destination for US goods, creating over 500,000 jobs and supporting local communities across all the 50 US states. Moreover, ASEAN is a destination of high potential for US investments due to its robust GDP growth, young population, and vast infrastructure investment opportunities.

In 2006, Washington and Jakarta signed the ASEAN-US Trade and Investment Framework Agreement to establish a Joint Council on Trade and Investment and strengthen their economic relations. Since the launch of the ASEAN Economic Blueprint 2025 in 2015, the US has been a key partner in promoting a single integrated market which fosters regional competitiveness, a resilient and inclusive community, clean energy, and equitable growth. In addition, through the US-ASEAN Business Council and the American Chambers of Commerce, both sides engage the private sector to enhance two-way trade and investment. Likewise, the US has assisted in implementing the ASEAN Intellectual Property Rights Strategic Action Plan (2016–2025) to promote public awareness, protection, enforcement, and transparency in IP management.

The total two-way trade in goods between the US and ASEAN has increased more than two-fold from USD 102.1 billion in 1995 to USD 226.8 in 2015 and USD 272 billion three years later (USTR 2019). In 2019, the US exported USD 86.1 billion worth of goods to ASEAN and imported USD 206.3 billion back from the bloc (USTR n.d.). Besides manufactured goods, ASEAN is a major partner in service trade, accounting for USD 55.1 billion of the US's service exports in 2018. In addition to trade, ASEAN is the biggest market for the US's foreign direct investment in the Asia-Pacific. For instance, as of 2019, ASEAN had received nearly USD 329 billion of US FDI, which is more than the amount flowing into China, Japan, India, and South Korea combined during the same period (East-West Center 2019). Over the last decade, US FDI inflows into ASEAN have expanded at an average rate of 10%. Over 4,200 American companies are currently operating in all of the ten ASEAN states.

Since early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically hindered ASEAN's economic performance and growth, shutting down key sectors of the economy such as tourism, services, and manufacturing. As of the 5th of September 2021, ASEAN reported around 232,187 deaths (John Hopkins University n.d.). As a result, the region is expected to experience a 3.8% economic contraction in 2020, its first decline in 22 years (ASEAN 2020a). Moreover, by the end of the first semester of 2020, ASEAN's trade and FDI inflow decreased by 12.4% and 32.9%, respectively, compared to 2019. In response, ASEAN launched the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF) in November 2020 to chart a long-term course towards post-pandemic socio-economic recovery. In support of the ACRF, the US has offered more than USD 87 million to ASEAN members in their fight against COVID-19 (US Mission to ASEAN n.d.). In addition, following the first summit with other Quad leaders, US President Joe Biden pledged to deliver at least one billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines to the Asia-Pacific by 2022 (Widakuswara 2021).

POLITICAL-SECURITY TIES

Shortly after taking office in 2009, President Obama declared that he would be "America's first Pacific President", signalling Washington's increasing engagement with Southeast Asia (Allen 2009). It was no surprise at all to see Obama's embrace of the region in which he spent a significant portion of his childhood. Under his presidency, the US acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and established a permanent diplomatic mission to ASEAN. Then in 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton attended the 5th East Asia Summit for the first time. In addition, Obama visited eight out of ten ASEAN members, including Cambodia when it was the Chair of ASEAN in 2012. In 2013, the first ASEAN-US Summit was hosted in Brunei Darussalam. Two years later, both sides elevated their ties to a strategic partnership, allowing broader cooperation across the board. To cement his legacy in Southeast Asia, Obama hosted the first-ever US-ASEAN Special Leaders' Summit on US soil in February 2016.

The Sunnylands Summit concluded with a joint statement emphasising a shared commitment to promoting ASEAN Centrality, addressing shared transnational security challenges, and upholding a rules-based order, the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and economic openness (The White House 2016). Although the statement was broad in scope, it embedded a subtle concern shared by ASEAN and the US regarding China's activities in the South China Sea, indicating a gradual convergence of strategic priorities.

Nonetheless, ASEAN-US political relations became increasingly uncertain with the emergence of Donald Trump's presidency, characterized by unpredictability and rising geopolitical tension between Beijing and Washington. Almost one year into office, the Trump Administration released its first national security strategy accusing China of being a "revisionist power" that attempts to replace the US as the predominant power and reshape the post-WWII international order (The White House 2017). Washington's adversarial tone towards Beijing put ASEAN and its member states in a highly uncomfortable position for two reasons. First, China was and still is ASEAN's biggest trade partner, with two-way trade amounting to USD 731 billion in 2020 despite the COVID-19 pandemic (Global Times 2021). Although the US is also a key trade partner of ASEAN, accounting for USD 185 billion worth of exports in 2018, China still wields greater economic clout over the bloc (USTR 2019). Second, Trump's zero-sum approach towards China fuelled geopolitical and military tension, putting pressure on ASEAN to choose sides.

Compared to his predecessor, Trump appeared not to possess much interest in Southeast Asia and its diplomatic fora, such as the ASEAN-US Summit, EAS, and ARF. For example, he attended the ASEAN-US Summit only once in 2017 during his entire four-year term. While there, he left Manila early without joining the EAS and its subsequent iterations. Then in 2018 and 2019, he sent Vice President Mike Pence and his National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien to join on his behalf, respectively. Noticeably, during the 2019 Summit in Thailand, seven out of ten ASEAN leaders symbolically snubbed the meeting with O'Brien to air their displeasure about Trump's no-show for two consecutive years and their concern about his poor engagement with Southeast Asia. Although Trump later sent invitations to ASEAN leaders for a special summit in the US in early 2020, the meeting never happened due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Once COVID-19 began to spread in early 2020, Trump did an egregious job of containing the disease and resorted to stirring anti-Asian resentment among Americans, using terms such as the "Chinese virus" and "Kung flu" to try to blame Beijing for the disease. Consequently, cases of anti-Asian hate crime in America increased by 150% in 2020 over 2019, the victims of which included those of Southeast Asian descent (Hart 2021). Moreover, after four tumultuous years, public perception towards the US in ASEAN declined precipitously.

For instance, according to a 2020 survey, 47% of the respondents had “little or no confidence” in the US as a strategic partner, while 77% said that US engagement with Southeast Asia had significantly dropped under Trump compared to Obama’s presidency (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute 2020). Meanwhile, 52.2% saw China as the most influential power in the region.

That said, as Chheang (2017) noted, there were signs of assurance for ASEAN from the Trump Administration. For instance, in 2017, Vice President Pence visited the ASEAN Secretariat. He spoke highly of the strategic and mutually beneficial ASEAN-US partnership and touted a commitment to addressing shared economic and security challenges. Moreover, the US hosted ASEAN foreign ministers in Washington in May of the same year to reaffirm their ties and commemorate the 40th anniversary of their dialogue relations. Furthermore, speaking during the 6th ASEAN-US Summit in 2018, Pence regarded ASEAN as the US’s “indispensable and irreplaceable strategic partner” whose interests and visions are closely intertwined (US Mission to ASEAN 2018).

In addition to political relationships, ASEAN and the US also share solid engagements in the security realm. During the Global War on Terror in the early 2000s, the US referred to Southeast Asia as the “second front” after Afghanistan that could be a base for regional Al-Qaeda affiliates such as Jemaah Islamiah (JI) (Gershman 2002). The US overture towards ASEAN became more urgent following the 2002 bombing in Bali, killing 202 people. In response to the event, ASEAN signed the US-ASEAN Joint Declaration on Combating Terrorism to foster “exchange and flow information, intelligence and capacity-building”, signalling its increasingly welcoming attitude towards the US’s security presence (Ashley and Hayat 2021). Bilaterally, ASEAN members such as Malaysia responded favourably by supporting Bush’s War on Terror, while Cambodia worked with the US to step up its border control and destroy 233 Soviet-made surface-to-air missiles to prevent them from falling into terrorists’ hands in 2004. It also arrested four JI associates and closed a Saudi-funded Islamic school teaching Wahabism (Lum 2007; Stern 2009). Every year, ASEAN and the US regularly hold the ASEAN Plus the United States of America Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC + US) Consultation to jointly address other transnational crimes such as piracy, money laundering, cybercrime, and the smuggling of arms, drugs, and people.

ASEAN and the US also have multilateral defence relations through the ARF, EAS, and ADMM-Plus mechanisms. Created in 1994, the ARF consists of 26 Asia-Pacific countries plus the European Union and serves as a platform for engaging in political and security dialogues and promoting preventive diplomacy and confidence-building. Likewise, the EAS is a smaller platform, consisting of ten ASEAN members, China, India, Australia, Japan, Russia, the US, South Korea, and New Zealand, which brings leaders together to discuss “broad strategic, political and economic issues of common interest” and promote peace and stability (East Asia Summit n.d.). Meanwhile, the ADMM-Plus brings defence ministers of the EAS countries to address shared traditional and non-traditional security challenges and foster military exchange and exercises.

Together, EAS, ARF, and ADMM-Plus put ASEAN in the driver's seat as a facilitator and a contributor in terms of fostering a stable and rules-based regional security architecture.

In addition to ASEAN-led fora, the US shares enduring military ties with individual ASEAN members. For example, Thailand and the Philippines are major non-NATO allies, while Singapore is a close security partner of Washington. Meanwhile, Cambodia conducted at least six iterations of the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) with the US Navy between 2010 and 2016 to strengthen "force readiness and interoperability" (US Embassy in Cambodia 2016). Other military exercises such as RIMPAC and Cobra Gold are held annually between the US and various ASEAN members. In September 2019, the US and the ten ASEAN members conducted their first joint naval exercise known as AUMX, in which they sailed from the Gulf of Thailand through the South China Sea before reaching Singapore. The exercise is ASEAN's concerted effort to ensure a continued security engagement with the US, improve maritime domain awareness, and combat transnational threats.

SOCIO-CULTURAL TIES

Social-cultural ties play equally crucial roles in ASEAN-US relations. The first area of cooperation is through educational and cultural exchanges. In 2013, President Obama created the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) as an exchange programme to strengthen leadership capacity among regional youths and serve as a bridge connecting US and Southeast Asian local communities and civil society groups working on various issues like the environment, entrepreneurship, civic engagement, and economic development. As of 2020, YSEALI had around 5,000 alumni and 150,000 members as part of its network, many of whom are Southeast Asians 30 years old or younger (US Mission to ASEAN 2019). Another major educational exchange is the J. William Fulbright scholarship programme, which gives ASEAN students opportunities to pursue graduate education at US universities and sends American students back to ASEAN countries for research every year. Since 1949, 12,000 ASEAN scholars have participated in the Fulbright programme, including 527 Cambodians, while 5,500 American Fulbright scholars have conducted research in ASEAN countries (East-West Center 2019).

Sustainable development is another practical area of cooperation in ASEAN-US relations. After the 2016 Sunnylands Summit, President Obama released the ASEAN-US Connect as a new strategic framework to enhance the US's social engagement with the bloc. The new initiative consists of four pillars. The first element, Business Connect, links ASEAN and American companies in sectors such as ICT and infrastructure that aim to serve the ASEAN Economic Community vision. The second element, Energy Connect, equips ASEAN with necessary tools to enhance its energy security, regional connectivity and green innovation, aligning with the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2015 (US Embassy & Consulate in Vietnam 2016).

Meanwhile, the third element, Innovation Connect, fosters a conducive entrepreneurial ecosystem among ASEAN business leaders. The fourth element, Policy Connect, provides capacity-building and technical support to the bloc. In addition, to foster resilient, sustainable, and innovative urbanization, the US-ASEAN Smart Cities Partnership was revealed in 2018 with a USD 10 million fund to connect major ASEAN and US cities and facilitate collaboration on resource management, transportation, and health systems (USASCP n.d.).

JOE BIDEN'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS ASEAN: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

After what had happened under Trump, Biden inherited the incredible burden of having to reassure partners and allies that he could simultaneously re-engage with the world, deliver his "Build Back Better World (B3W)" vision, compete with China, deal with the pandemic, launch an ambitious vaccine rollout, nurture a domestic economic recovery, and win in a legislative tug of war in the US Congress. Unfortunately, since January, Biden's foreign policy towards ASEAN has been packed with rhetoric but still lacks concrete policy substance and manifestation at the time of writing for several reasons.

First, the US does not have resident ambassadors in Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, the Philippines, and the ASEAN Secretariat. Second, although Biden has personally met Japanese and South Korean leaders, he has not yet made physical or virtual contact with any ASEAN leaders. Third, Biden's push for ASEAN to take a hard stance against the military junta in Myanmar does not resonate well with the bloc's subtle and non-confrontational manner of diplomacy. Fourth, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's botched virtual meeting with ASEAN top diplomats on 25th May created a poor impression and reinforced the notion that, like previous administrations, Biden's America is preoccupied with the Middle East and puts Southeast Asia on the back burner. Blinken's blunder stands in stark contrast to the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting which took place physically on 7th June in Chongqing. In this meeting, China was praised for its "very effective" cooperation and "essential" provision of medical supplies like vaccines (Law 2021). While the US could not manage to conduct a single virtual call with ASEAN chief diplomats, China had all ten of them fly to Chongqing amidst the surging pandemic in their respective countries. That said, Blinken made it up to his counterparts by later spending five consecutive days, from 2nd to 6th August, joining the annual ASEAN Summit and other related meetings. He reportedly demonstrated the US's commitment to ASEAN, its centrality, and the Southeast Asian region. Fifth, Thailand and the Philippines, both major non-NATO allies, were left out of Biden's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (NSSG) altogether, indicating tension between human rights and democratic values on the one hand and geopolitical interests on the other (Grossman 2021).

Sixth, although the recent visits to Southeast Asia by the Biden administration's top officials, such as Vice President Kamala Harris, sent a reinforcing message of the US's commitment to the region, they came at an unfortunate time when the US began its botched military withdrawal from Afghanistan, creating a publicity crisis for US diplomacy and its 20-year state-building project in the so-called "graveyard of empires". Moreover, as Li and Chen (2021) note, even though Harris' visit produced a few major initiatives between the US and Singapore on issues such as health security, climate change, supply chains, and cybersecurity, the question remains as to how these developments will benefit and possibly be expanded to other Southeast Asian countries that do not share the same intensity of bilateral ties with Washington. Likewise, Harris offered tough rhetoric on China and emphasised the Quad's role in safeguarding the so-called rules-based international order and responding to Beijing's activities in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, she did not lay out a clear vision of how the Quad compliments, instead of challenges, ASEAN's centrality, especially given that Biden appears to be much more personally engaged with his Quad counterparts than the ASEAN leaders to whom he has not spoken since taking office. Worse still, the Biden administration has yet to unveil a serious economic strategy that aims to deepen Washington's economic cooperation with and investment in ASEAN states (Patton and Townshend 2021).

Based on the recent policies, speeches, legislative agenda, and actions of the Biden administration, it is now possible to start dissecting its approach towards ASEAN, which comprises three main elements: (1) ASEAN as part of the competition with China, (2) the return of principles-based foreign policy, and (3) a return to multilateralism.

THE FIRST ELEMENT: ASEAN AS PART OF THE COMPETITION WITH CHINA

In the first component, Biden's foreign policy towards ASEAN is closely intertwined with, if not an extension of, its policy towards China. Biden has made it clear that competition with China is here to stay, and so are elements of Trump's policies, such as the freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea; the race to develop emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI), quantum computing, biotechnology, and 5G networks; infrastructure development projects; and condemnation against the alleged human rights violations in Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

In his first speech to a joint session of US Congress, Biden described China's President Xi Jinping as "deadly earnest" in his desire to replace America as the predominant player. However, he added that Washington welcomes competition, but not conflict (The White House 2021). Compared to Trump, Biden's tone is less hostile and implicitly indicates that there is room for Beijing-Washington cooperation in areas such as climate change and North Korea's nuclear programme.

That said, if we look at the major legislation his administration has pushed, we come to a different conclusion. For instance, in June of this year, the US Innovation and Competition Act of 2021 earmarked USD 250 billion to counter China's technological catch up through investments in the semiconductor and robotics industries. Likewise, the US's Meeting the China Challenge Act of 2021 underscores the use of existing sanctions against China in response to cyberattacks and IP theft. Finally, on the 3rd of June, Biden signed an executive order expanding Trump's previous ban on US investment in and trade with Chinese companies linked to Beijing. All of these measures are purposefully designed to contain China's expanding global power.

Given Southeast Asia's geographical location at the heart of the Asia-Pacific, Biden's level of engagement with ASEAN will depend significantly on his strategy towards Beijing. Take the COVID-19 vaccine as an example. Although the US has manufactured effective vaccines, such as Moderna and Pfizer, earlier than most countries, those shots have been distributed internally to the US population and externally to major US allies. In contrast, as of June 2021, China has donated 7.3 million doses to ASEAN countries and promised to deliver at least 203 million additional doses to the bloc (Zaini 2021). It was not long after the first Quad Summit in May that the US entered the vaccine diplomacy arena, promising at least 1 billion doses to Southeast Asia by 2022 (Widakuswara 2021). Whether or not the promise will be fulfilled remains to be seen, as the US has just begun its vaccine shipment to ASEAN countries.

Infrastructure development is another area where the US engages ASEAN primarily through the lens of its competition with China. To contest China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Biden promotes the Trump-era Blue Dot Network (BDN) as a public-private partnership project to ensure transparency and environmental sustainability in major infrastructure development works across Southeast Asia. In addition, after his first meeting with Japanese leader Yoshihide Suga in April, Biden unveiled a USD 4.5 billion fund called the Competitiveness and Resilience (CoRe) Partnership, aiming to help build "secure and reliable" regional digital infrastructure (Heydarian 2021).

THE SECOND ELEMENT: THE RETURN OF PRINCIPLES-BASED FOREIGN POLICY

Although it is no surprise that the term "democracy" appeared 23 times in Biden's 24-page Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, its repeated appearance sheds light on the second cornerstone of his foreign policy regarding ASEAN and, to a broader extent, the Asia-Pacific region, democracy and human rights. Biden seems to view the US-China competition as a race to secure a world in which democracy can flourish and prove that US democracy is a more durable system than China's authoritarian one. Although both tough on China, the key difference between Biden and Trump is that Biden adopts a less hostile and explicit tone.

Before the presidential election in 2020, Biden (2020) declared that the US must “get tough” with China and called for a global summit to defend democracy from Beijing’s model of authoritarian governance. He also spoke of the “contest with autocrats” to secure “another era of democratic dominance” (Brands 2021). He claimed that the US would lead the world not by the example of its power but by the power of its example, referring to building a vibrant democracy at home that serves as a political model worldwide.

Aside from these signs, there are other indications that democracy and human rights principles are at the forefront of Biden’s policy towards ASEAN. For instance, the Quad Summit statement, Biden’s NSSG and his speech to US Congress all emphasize a collective effort, on behalf of the US and its allies such as Australia, India, and Japan, to advance democracy at home and promote democratic principles abroad over those of China’s authoritarian model. In addition, during her first trip to Thailand and Cambodia, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman reportedly urged her counterparts to uphold human rights and ensure democratic space in their countries. Likewise, Secretary Blinken raised human rights issues in his phone call with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son.

Although Biden’s principles-based foreign policy may rally major European allies, the approach may not resonate well with ASEAN members for three reasons. First, as Djalal (2021) points out, though ASEAN is concerned about China’s activities in the South China Sea, it does not necessarily see Beijing as an ideological nemesis trying to impose its political system onto others. Framing the US’s relations with China as an ideological race would lead to greater regional tension and pressure the bloc to choose sides, both of which ASEAN has been trying to avoid. Second, an emphasis on democracy and human rights may be interpreted as interference in the internal affairs of ASEAN where anti-imperial sentiment runs high and stability and development are often prioritized over civil liberties. Moreover, due to their significant economic clout, ASEAN needs China and the US to realize its own regional vision. Having to choose Washington over Beijing would contradict that very objective. Third, maintaining good relations with all powers is at the core of the principle of ASEAN Centrality, a concept requiring that ASEAN take a leadership role in regional affairs by enmeshing all major players with its own norms and various fora such as the ARF, EAS, and ADMM-Plus. Therefore, by splintering the world between democracy and authoritarian camps, which Washington has publicly supported, Biden risks alienating ASEAN and undermining its centrality. Last, a focus on human rights would backfire on the US by exposing the double political standard it applies towards an ally like Thailand on the one hand and a non-ally like Cambodia on the other hand.

THE THIRD ELEMENT: A RETURN TO MULTILATERALISM

The last element of Biden’s policy towards ASEAN is the US’s revitalization of its engagement with multilateral regional organizations.

Recognizing ASEAN's pre-eminence in the Asia-Pacific economic and security realms, the Biden administration has given agency to the bloc by officially supporting its centrality and continuing to engage it through diplomatic channels, despite the fact that such still remains inadequate. For example, the Quad Summit statement and Biden's interim NSSG mention the US's support for ASEAN and Biden also supports the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which is less hostile towards China and more strategically inclusive than the US's own "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)" framing. The AOIP underscores ASEAN's norms and mechanisms, enhances the bloc's central position in fostering peace and stability for ASEAN Community building, and reasserts ASEAN's role as a "regional consensus-builder" (Acharya 2019). The 2021–2025 ASEAN-US Plan of Action recognizes that the AOIP and FOIP are not necessarily mutually exclusive and notes four potential areas of cooperation, including the maritime domain, connectivity, the UN SDGs 2030, and the economy, all of which Cambodia can capitalize on during its 2022 Chairmanship of ASEAN.

CAMBODIA'S 2022 CHAIRMANSHIP: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As the Chairman of ASEAN in 2022, Cambodia will be uniquely positioned to shape, facilitate, and set the agenda to address pressing issues facing Southeast Asia and the world. Given its geographic location, economic status, and strategic position in the region, the stakes cannot be higher. The country will face five major challenges in dealing with ASEAN-US relations during its tenure.

First, the US-China rivalry is expected to have escalated even further by the time Cambodia becomes the host in 2022. As chair, it is in both ASEAN and Cambodia's interest for the latter to be neutral, pragmatic and not allow the Beijing-Washington tension to torpedo the whole regional agenda. While the Biden administration seems determined to outcompete China in every possible domain, ASEAN and its members will come under increasing pressure from both sides to align with either of the two powers. Therefore, Cambodia should underscore ASEAN Centrality, preventive diplomacy and cooperation among like-minded friends. It should also be pragmatic enough to accommodate the different viewpoints of ASEAN's dialogue partners where possible.

Second, Cambodia's rocky relationship with the US could also negatively impact its ASEAN Chairmanship. Since the 2018 general elections, Cambodia-US relations have deteriorated significantly due to political development in Cambodia and Washington's concerns about Phnom Penh's tilt towards Beijing. The most controversial issue is the allegation that Phnom Penh secretly hosts a Chinese naval base in Ream. Although Cambodia has repeatedly rejected the claim by allowing journalists and US military officials to visit the Ream Naval Base in 2019 and 2021 respectively, Washington appears unsatisfied.

However, it has not yet presented any concrete evidence to back up the accusation. During her recent visit to Phnom Penh, US Deputy Secretary of State Sherman brought up the issue with Prime Minister Hun Sen, telling the latter to maintain “an independent and balanced foreign policy”, a statement not well received by Phnom Penh (Prak 2021). In any case, Cambodia will likely continue to reiterate its permanent neutrality and non-alignment as stipulated in Article 53 of its 1993 Constitution. In addition, it might unreservedly maintain its three “No-policies” of (1) No defence treaty with a foreign country, (2) No foreign military base on its territory, and (3) No alliance or joint combat operation (Cheunboran 2021). Cambodia might also leverage its position to solicit practical engagements with the US on the four areas stated in the AOIP: addressing shared security challenges (people trafficking, terrorism, the proliferation of WMDs, piracy, and arms control), tackling global climate change, and achieving a post-pandemic recovery in conjunction with the ACRF. The digital economy and cybersecurity are two areas of partnership between ASEAN and the US in which the latter can offer best practices and technical support through mechanisms such as the ASEAN-US Connect and US-ASEAN Smart Cities Partnership. Collaboration with the US on behalf of ASEAN can also help to mend Cambodia’s relations with the US, better allowing the country to hedge against overdependence on any one single external power.

Third, Cambodia’s close ties with China may once again come under regional scrutiny as it takes on the ASEAN Chairmanship. Back in 2012, when ASEAN failed to issue a joint communique for the first time since its founding in 1967, Cambodia was heavily criticized for the debacle known as the “Phnom Penh Fiasco”. However, some accusations levied against Phnom Penh were unfair, as ASEAN was not originally intended to serve as a court adjudicating territorial disputes between its member states or its members and external actors. As Cheunboran (2016) aptly puts it, “At best, ASEAN can be a dispute-avoidance mechanism”. As the Chair of ASEAN in 2012, Cambodia was responsible for protecting the organization’s core principles of non-interference and sovereign rights among member states. Besides, Cambodia is a non-claimant state to the South China Sea maritime dispute. Therefore, allowing its chairmanship to be used by others as a geopolitical tool would bring more harm than good for Cambodia’s foreign policy, national interests, and ASEAN’s collective interests and centrality.

That being said, Phnom Penh still needs to avoid appearing too close to China without prioritizing ASEAN’s collective interests in 2022. As Suy (2021) notes, China may take Cambodia’s 2022 Chairmanship as an opportunity to push for the conclusion of the South China Sea Code of Conduct negotiations on terms favourable to Beijing before the gavel is passed on to Indonesia in 2023. Hence, maintaining a balanced and proactive stance in the face of the South China Sea issue might go a long way for Cambodia’s relations with ASEAN, the US, China, and other stakeholders.

Fourth, the COVID-19 pandemic will likely continue to hamper ASEAN’s economic growth in 2022.

Therefore, as chair, Cambodia should prioritize the implementation of the ACRF through internal cooperation among ASEAN states and the solicitation of financial and medical support from China and the Quad countries.

Lastly, the political crisis in Myanmar will likely be at the top of Cambodia's 2022 agenda. So far, the US and ASEAN are still not on the same page when it comes to dealing with Myanmar's junta leader Gen. Min Aung Hlaing. ASEAN prefers a quiet and non-confrontational approach, whereas the US wants to see the junta gone. As ASEAN Chair, Cambodia should work with fellow members and external players to push for a speedy and full implementation of the Five-Point Consensus agreed during the Jakarta meeting in April. Cambodia can also draw from its past experience dealing with civil war, domestic instability, and post-war national reconciliation to assist Myanmar's return to normalcy.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, ASEAN-US ties have come a long way since 1977. Beginning as a dialogue partner, their relationship has grown into full-fledged cooperation in the economic, political-security, and socio-cultural spheres. During its 2022 Chairmanship of ASEAN, Cambodia will face several challenges, such as the simmering US-China rivalry, the political crisis in Myanmar, the COVID-19 post-pandemic economic recovery, and its deteriorating bilateral ties with the US. A successful tenure will depend on Cambodia's ability to push for dialogue among interested powers both inside and outside of ASEAN, its balanced and flexible approach towards the controversial issues described above, and its willingness to put ASEAN and its own national interests at the forefront.

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