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## The Biden administration's unimpressive scorecard in Southeast Asia

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The most important events in multilateral diplomacy in East Asia in 2023, the ASEAN Summit, the ASEAN+3 Summit, and the East Asia Summit (EAS), have come to a close. US President Joe Biden did not attend the EAS, which could be his last in office, should he lose the 2024 election. Instead, Vice President Kamala Harris filled in. Given the 2024 presidential election, 2023 was effectively the last year for the Biden administration to focus on foreign policy and diplomacy. Unless he is re-elected, it is unlikely that he will attend an ASEAN-related summit in 2024, given the presidential election on November 5.

Despite the hopes that Southeast Asian countries had for the U.S. at the beginning of the Biden administration, Biden's record in Southeast Asia is not very impressive. As the Singapore-based Institute of Southeast Asian Studies' Southeast Asia Survey shows, regional countries' expectations of the Biden administration were especially high after years of the Trump administration's neglect. In surveys conducted during the Trump administration, when asked whether U.S. engagement with Southeast Asia would increase or decrease, 68% (2019) and 77% (2020) of respondents believed it would decrease. Only 13.3% (2019) and 9.9% (2020) thought it would increase. In contrast, only 6.9% of respondents to a survey conducted in the run-up to Biden's inauguration believed U.S. engagement would decrease, while 68.6% believed it would increase. This, an increase of nearly 60 percentage points, was a remarkable reversal from the results of 2020, just one year earlier.

ASEAN countries' expectations for U.S. engagement under the Biden administration can be categorized into two main areas – active engagement in regional multilateral cooperation and US economic leadership. First, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) are the frameworks through which ASEAN centrality, which ASEAN has always advocated, is put into practice. The continued participation of regional states in these multilateral organizations, especially great powers such as the United States and China, will make ASEAN centrality meaningful. The second expectation was U.S. leadership in the regional economic order. Economic stability is important for developing countries in Southeast Asia, where economic growth remains the most pressing national challenge. Moreover, with many Southeast Asian countries heavily dependent on trade, a free trade order in the region and Southeast Asian countries' access to the U.S. market are keys to economic growth.

But the Biden administration has failed to live up to Southeast Asian expectations, both strategically and economically. For all its calls about restoring alliances, the Biden administration has been focused on a small number of traditional partners. The Biden administration further strengthened the Quad, upgrading its mechanisms to include a leader-level summit in March 2021. A communiqué issued at the

May 2022 Quad Summit called for the creation of a Quad Working Group to flesh out concrete cooperation. In September 2021, the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom announced a trilateral security cooperation called AUKUS. The United States pledged to work with the United Kingdom to provide nuclear-powered submarines to Australia and to enhance cooperation in security and defense technology. There has also been a trend toward enhanced trilateral security cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and Japan in 2023. In none of these US strategic moves was ASEAN able to find a place.

The economic pillar of the Biden administration's pivot is the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). To compete economically and technologically with China and to enhance U.S. economic security, the IPEF could be a useful tool for the United States and a means to shape the future regional economic order. However, with the exception of a few technologically advanced U.S. allies in the region, the issues of economic security and supply chains are not an urgent matter of immediate survival and growth. Many developing countries, including most Southeast Asian states, are not important actors in this effort. Rather, the revival of the TPP, U.S. interest in RCEP, and U.S. leadership in the regional economic order in general have taken a backseat. The Biden administration has shown little interest in the revival of TPP, which was expected to be difficult due to domestic circumstances. The RCEP, which includes all ASEAN countries, was also dismissed as a Chinese economic initiative.

As a result, the 2023 poll by the Singapore Institute of Southeast Asian Studies shows that Southeast Asian countries have a low opinion of the Biden administration's engagement with the region. Southeast Asia still favors the U.S. over China, but the percentage of Southeast Asians who see the U.S. as having the strongest leadership on global free trade has dropped from 30.1% in 2022 to 21.9% in 2023, while views on US leadership in the rules-based order and international law dropped from 36.6% to 27.1%.

When asked whether U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia has increased or decreased, 39.4% of Southeast Asian respondents believe that U.S. engagement has increased. However, this is a 6.4 percentage point decrease from the 2022 results. In particular, positive assessments of U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia have declined significantly in Singapore (down from 60.8% to 50.0%) and Vietnam (down from 52.8% to 26.5%), two countries that the U.S. considers its most important partners in Southeast Asia. When asked which side they would choose in a U.S.-China rivalry, the proportion choosing the United States also declined significantly in the Philippines (down from 83.5% to 78.8%) and Singapore (down from 77.9% to 61.6%), both of which are perceived to be close to the United States.

The U.S. strategic competition with China is not just about containing China by mobilizing regional countries. It is also linked to the question of who has the support of more countries in the region and is able to exercise leadership. It is a question of who can win the hearts and minds of regional states and form a larger power bloc. The 10 ASEAN countries are key players in this competition between the United States and China. It is unlikely that China will be more successful than the United States at gaining the trust of regional countries. Nor is it likely that Southeast Asian nations will readily embrace the U.S. vision of the Indo-Pacific if the United States continues its current strategy of focusing on military, security, and strategic cooperation with only a few allies. If the U.S. wants to regain leadership in the region, it should rethink its approach to ASEAN, which at the moment embraces close allies and emphasizes military and security aspects while neglecting economic leadership.

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