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Strategic Changes in US-ASEAN Relations Under President Joe Biden's Administration (2021-2025)

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Abstract

The US-ASEAN relationship was officially established in 1977 and has since experienced many memorable milestones: ASEAN and the US established an Enhanced Partnership in 2005; in 2010, the US established a permanent representative mission to ASEAN; in 2015, ASEAN and the US built a strategic partnership; and in November 2022, ASEAN and the US upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership. This is creating beneficial changes for both the US and ASEAN. For the US, it means maintaining its position in the region. In contrast, for ASEAN, it means ensuring peace and security in the area and increasing its standing on the international stage. This article will outline strategic shifts in US-ASEAN relations, examine recent steps to strengthen them under President Joe Biden's administration (2021-2025), and offer observations on practical cooperation to maintain the stability and prosperity of countries in the region.

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1. Introduction

As a gateway connecting the two largest oceans in the world, Southeast Asia is considered a gateway for Asian powers to reach out to the world. Currently, Southeast Asia is known not only as a potential economic market with rapid and stable development. With its abundant natural resources, young and tech-savvy population, and its crucial role in maintaining global peace and stability, Southeast Asia is expected to become a new engine of growth, especially amid a global economy teetering on the brink of recession. Thus, it can be said that whichever power controls Southeast Asia will gain a geostrategic advantage to consolidate its hegemonic ambitions in the 21st century. In this context, tensions in US-China relations over the past few years have enhanced Southeast Asia's position. To counter China's increasing influence in the region, the US has also strengthened diplomatic, military, and economic ties with regional countries. The Biden administration is continuing the policies of previous administrations to promote US interests and relationships with countries in the region. The results show that the level of engagement and shared interests between the US and ASEAN is becoming increasingly comprehensive and has a significant impact on peace, stability, cooperation, and development in the region and the world.

2. Content

2.1. The Central Role of ASEAN in the Asia-Pacific Regional Structure

Southeast Asia is where vital maritime transport and communication routes run, serving as a bridge from East to West (the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean) and from North to South (Northeast Asia to South Asia). First and foremost is the Malacca Strait – strategically located along the vital energy transport route from the Middle East to Japan, China, and many other countries. Alongside this is the South China Sea, through which 5 out of 10 major global shipping lanes pass. Given this strategic position on the international political chessboard, major powers are increasingly competing for interests in this region to gain economic, security, and logistical access, while simultaneously preventing rival powers from gaining a competitive advantage.

In the context of the Cold War, the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) can be seen as a way to protect the region's autonomy from external interference. ASEAN has proven to be an effective organization for regional countries to mitigate the negative impacts of great power competition while still leveraging its positive effects. The region was also a battleground for East-West confrontation during the height of the Cold War.

In the 21st century, great power competition has taken on new forms, and the regional and internal situations of Southeast Asian countries have also changed significantly, impacting ASEAN differently than before. Accordingly, ASEAN's central role has become a new focus in the approach of Southeast Asian countries. ASEAN's central role demonstrates its ability to promote stability, peace, and prosperity in the region. This is shown in the establishment of regional security cooperation mechanisms through initiating, connecting, and attracting the involvement of major powers in efforts to resolve regional issues, prevent and manage conflicts in the region, specifically as follows:

Firstly, ASEAN is an indispensable partner in the cooperation mechanisms of major countries and economic organizations in the Asia-Pacific region. The United States has always valued and supported ASEAN's central role in the East Asian and Asia-Pacific structure, committing to continue supporting ASEAN in building the Community, affirming ASEAN as an important economic partner of the US, and continuing to implement the ASEAN-US Connectivity Initiative. For China, ASEAN is an important region for implementing its strategy of balancing with the US in the Asia-Pacific. In addition, ASEAN is currently attracting the attention of other countries, such as Japan, China, South Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand, Russia, Canada, and two regional and international organizations: the EU and the United Nations. To date, ASEAN's relations with most of these "+1" partners have been elevated to the framework of strategic/comprehensive partnerships. At the same time, ASEAN has established partnerships at various levels with many global and regional organizations, such as the WTO, WB, IMF, and ADB.

Secondly, regional multilateral mechanisms established and led by ASEAN have continuously developed and expanded in scale and the content of cooperation, making practical contributions to promoting collaboration, maintaining peace, stability, and security in the region, and making ASEAN's main principles and norms a key component of the regional structure. ASEAN+3 – a cooperation mechanism between ASEAN and three Northeast Asian countries (China, Japan, and South Korea) - has somewhat met the requirements set for East Asia in particular and the Asia-Pacific in general. (1) *Thirdly*, ASEAN has built a framework to shape the regional security structure, such as: the ASEAN Regional Security Forum (ARF) has attracted the attention and involvement of all major countries in and outside the region, as well as many regional and global organizations and has become an indispensable partner of many countries in the world; The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) is considered an effective cooperation mechanism that makes ASEAN's current role central; the East Asia Summit (EAS) sees ASEAN playing a central role in building a new qualitative relationship between East Asian countries in the direction of friendship, long-term stability, and increasingly close comprehensive cooperation both bilaterally and multilaterally. (2) In addition, ASEAN also focuses on other

regional security mechanisms, such as: Shangri-La Dialogue, Asia-Pacific Security Conference (APSEC), Five-Country Defence Agreement (FPDA), ... Currently, these mechanisms are spread across many levels in the entire region in many different fields such as economics, defense, security, etc. and operate on the principle of "openness" towards the outside (ASEAN + N), contributing to raising ASEAN's position in regional security.

Fourth, ASEAN plays a mediating role, easing disagreements and tensions regarding political and security issues, territorial sovereignty, especially maritime disputes among some members in the region and with China, between China and Japan, and between Japan and South Korea. One of the issues ASEAN is currently facing is the South China Sea dispute – a "hot spot" for security and stability in the Asia-Pacific region; ASEAN also continues to strive to strengthen relations with significant powers and partners in various forms, while seeking to adjust relations with major powers in a way that is most beneficial to ASEAN in particular and Southeast Asia in general; ASEAN also continuously improves its dialogue mechanisms with partners, striving to build a regional structure with ASEAN as the foundation and center for expanding cooperation.

2.2. Strategic Changes in the US Towards ASEAN Under President Joe Biden (2021-2025)

2.2.1. Policies of Previous Presidents

If Southeast Asia – a crucial link in the overall US "pivot" to Asia strategy – were dominated or controlled by any other country, the US's superpower status would be challenged. To maintain that position, the US has made strategic adjustments to its foreign policy, focusing on strategic partners in Asia and Southeast Asia and increasing its presence in many regional issues. This shows that the level of US interest in Southeast Asia is continually adjusted to suit US goals and interests at any given time.

Under former President Obama, the US implemented its "Rebalancing Towards Asia" strategy, launched in 2010. The US established cooperation frameworks with Southeast Asian countries, strengthened political and military cooperation with allies in the Asia-Pacific region, and initiated the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The US highly valued ASEAN's role, viewing it as a forum for ASEAN unity and a counterweight to China's ambitions. In fact, the US and ASEAN upgraded their relationship to a strategic partnership in 2015. President Obama also chaired the US-ASEAN summit. The US conducted numerous military operations related to freedom of navigation (FONOP), and, in particular, the Obama administration encouraged the Philippines to sue China in international court over sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea. The US deployed the Maritime Security Initiative and other measures, thereby supporting the enhancement of capabilities for some Southeast Asian countries to counterbalance China's challenges and ambitions. (3)

In the following period, the Trump administration continued to maintain stable relations with many Southeast Asian countries and participated in ASEAN forums and conferences; however, unilateralism and protectionism still strongly dominated US foreign policy toward the region. Nevertheless, the Donald Trump administration made significant efforts to challenge China's ambitions in Southeast Asia, particularly in the South China Sea, where territorial disputes exist between China and several countries.

The US focused on mobilizing support from the Indo-Pacific region for a comprehensive confrontation with China. To counter China's Belt and Road Initiative, the US implemented its Build America's Infrastructure (BUILD) program, which has been applied across many regions worldwide, with Southeast Asia a key focus.

Despite adjustments and increased involvement in regional issues, Southeast Asia has not yet been a priority region for the US under the administrations of Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump. The difficulties in US relations with Southeast Asia are partly due to the challenges of managing relations with various regions of the world, partly because Southeast Asian countries also pursue pragmatic policies, making it difficult for the US to implement its own directions, and partly because China is implementing aggressive and shrewd policies that both create difficulties for the US and distract many leaders in Southeast Asian countries. (4)

2.2.2. Strategic Adjustments by President Joe Biden

Upon entering the White House on January 21, 2021, President Joe Biden faced the immense challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, President Biden focused on promoting cooperation to address global issues, aiming to restore America's position on the international stage. President Biden's "America Again" policy will differ from former President Donald Trump's "America First" policy. First, President Biden has made adjustments and additions to his approach, adopting a more skillful and systematic approach to mobilize and strengthen collective efforts to address challenges. The U.S. "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy is implemented to protect national interests, freedom, and maritime security, maintain a balance of power, promote diplomatic activities and socio-cultural exchanges in the region, and simultaneously counter the growing power of China. This is a global strategy that determines the prospects for the U.S.'s position and power in the world order and in the Asian region, both now and in the future. In this strategy, Southeast Asia is the focal point connecting the two oceans. In Southeast Asia, the severe pandemic has strained many economies and disrupted supply chains. Along with internal divisions within ASEAN regarding relations with superpowers (the U.S. and China), the military coup in Myanmar in early 2021 has further complicated the region's political environment and created additional challenges for the U.S. in promoting relations with Southeast Asian countries. Through several diplomatic activities and regional engagements under the Biden administration, it's clear that the United States remains engaged with the region. Still, the approach may have new characteristics, specifically:

First, the US considers Southeast Asia an essential part of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, which emphasizes a more substantial presence in the region. (5)

Southeast Asia is seen as an indispensable link in the overall US Asia-Pacific policy, especially the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). This elevates ASEAN's position and role as an influential entity in shaping the security architecture and regional order, while mediating the "game" among major powers, especially the US. Southeast Asia is of paramount importance in connecting and expanding international maritime trade and in fulfilling commitments to build relationships that ensure security and shared prosperity

in the region. Therefore, Southeast Asia is a key area in the Asia-Pacific where the US seeks to continue promoting cooperation across trade, economics, and regional infrastructure, as well as in responding to non-traditional security challenges such as pandemics and climate change.

This deeper interest and engagement with Southeast Asia are reflected in the five objectives of the IPS strategy announced by the White House on February 12, 2022, which aim to restore US "leadership" and restructure the Asia-Pacific regional order, with the hope of containing China in both security and economic terms in the region. US President Joe Biden emphasized that the ASEAN-US relationship is of particular importance to the future of the area, home to over 1 billion people, as well as to the security and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific. Simultaneously, we support ASEAN's central role in efforts to build a regional architecture and a rules-based regional order grounded in the values and principles outlined in ASEAN's Indo-Pacific perspective.

Secondly, promoting the region's economic prosperity through the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF): This is the latest initiative by the US administration under President Joe Biden, aimed at fostering economic cooperation between the US and its regional partners, particularly to counter China's influence in the Asia-Pacific.

Generally, the IPEF is an expression of the IPS in the economic field, seeking to establish more diverse economic connections and cooperation with the Western Pacific region. Within this structure, ASEAN plays a crucial role. Specifically, in the short term, the US and China will engage in a "showdown" centered on ASEAN through the implementation of the IPEF and the Global Development Initiative (GDI). Subsequently, in the long term, this "showdown" will expand across the entire Indo-Pacific region.

Meanwhile, without ASEAN's support, both the IPS and IPEF will face a significant "gap." Therefore, member states, especially the seven ASEAN countries participating in the negotiations, affirm that the IPEF should be based on the principles of openness, inclusiveness, transparency, conformity with international law, support for ASEAN's central role, and complementing existing economic linkages, including the upgraded ASEAN-China FTA. Currently, the seven ASEAN countries are still participating in the IPEF negotiations while simultaneously discussing the upgrading of the ASEAN-China FTA with China and the other three ASEAN countries, as well as negotiating the proposed GDI-China agreement presented to the UN General Assembly (September 2021) to enhance China's global influence – based on their national interests, without establishing a policy of choosing sides.

Third, in its relationship with Southeast Asia, the United States continues to affirm that "the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is central to the Indo-Pacific architecture" and remains committed to "supporting ASEAN as a strong, independent, and leading organization in the region."

For Southeast Asian countries, the Biden administration values the Strategic Partnership with ASEAN, supports ASEAN's central role and its Indo-Pacific Outlook (AOIP),

and promotes enhanced US-ASEAN cooperation and cooperation among ASEAN member states and the “Quad” group of countries to address the challenges they face. The US will closely coordinate its efforts to help maintain peace, security, and stability in the region, including maritime security and safety in the South China Sea. Furthermore, through the ASEAN-US Common Vision, the US actively promoted activities to strengthen cooperation with ASEAN, participating more comprehensively in ASEAN-initiated and led mechanisms, such as: appointing personnel to the position of ambassador to ASEAN after a 5-year vacancy (September 2021); resuming participation in the annual ASEAN summits (October 2021); in 2021, the US was ASEAN's second-largest trading partner and largest foreign direct investor (FDI), accounting for 23% of total FDI into the region; proactively proposing and organizing an extraordinary summit between the US and ASEAN at the White House (May 2022); and upgrading the US-ASEAN relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (October 2022). President Biden announced an additional \$850 million in support for the ASEAN region in 2023 to promote substantive and practical cooperation between the two sides. In 2024, the United States and ASEAN marked 47 years of cooperation, underscoring an increasingly deep and enduring relationship. President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris reaffirmed their commitment to ASEAN's central role and steadfastly supported ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Vision, consistent with U.S. strategic principles in the region. ASEAN is not only central to Washington's Indo-Pacific policy but also a key partner in initiatives to promote economic prosperity and ensure regional stability. Fourth, the United States continues to contribute to ASEAN's regional cooperation mechanisms, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), and the East Asia Summit (EAS). The U.S. actively supports ASEAN's efforts to negotiate a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) with China in accordance with international law. The Biden administration continued to uphold the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982), deeming China's claims “illegal” and supporting Southeast Asian countries. Cooperation programs on trade and investment, human resource development, renewable energy, maritime cooperation, disaster response, climate change, and support for ASEAN's COVID-19 response, among others, were also implemented.

3. Some observations on US strategic changes toward ASEAN

3.1. The US is ASEAN's second-largest trading partner and most significant source of foreign direct investment (FDI)

The US remains among ASEAN's top trading partners and the largest foreign investor in ASEAN, with over 6,000 US businesses operating in Southeast Asia and total bilateral trade reaching US\$500 billion in 2023. Two-way trade is projected to exceed US\$453 billion in 2024, accounting for 11.8% of ASEAN's total trade turnover. The Washington administration has promoted private-sector participation in ASEAN's economic development, with US private companies investing over US\$1.4 billion over the past three years. The US Development Finance Corporation (DFC) has also invested over US\$341 million in ASEAN markets in the past year. Thus, ASEAN has always been a top investment

destination for the US in the Indo-Pacific region. With total US direct investment (FDI) in this region exceeding \$330 billion, it is even larger than the total US FDI in China, Japan, South Korea, and India combined. ASEAN is also the fourth-largest export market for US goods, helping create nearly half a million jobs. In particular, the US and ASEAN have completed all commitments in the US-ASEAN Cooperation Action Plan for the period 2021-2025 (6), with diverse results in areas such as political-security, combating transnational crime, maritime security, trade, investment, transportation, agriculture, science and technology... showing the US's determination to maintain and develop its partnership with this bloc.

3.2. The US promotes multi-sectoral cooperation, thereby making a positive contribution to peace and stability in Southeast Asia:

The United States strives to strengthen regional security while enhancing the defense capabilities of ASEAN nations to address global security challenges. Specifically, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) extended the ASEAN-U.S. Regional Development Cooperation Agreement until 2029 and launched the ASEAN-USAID Partnership Program in March 2023. The United States supports ASEAN's efforts to maintain Southeast Asia as a nuclear-weapon-free zone and free of all other weapons of mass destruction. In particular, on maritime security, both sides are committed to strengthening cooperation through ASEAN-led mechanisms. The United States and ASEAN emphasized the importance of the full and effective implementation of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), stressing the need to maintain and promote a favorable environment for negotiations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC), to achieve an effective and legally binding COC early, consistent with international law, including UNCLOS 1982.

Through practical actions, the United States committed to further strengthening its Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with ASEAN with a new action plan for the 2026-2030 period, continuing to support ASEAN's central role and a regional architecture with ASEAN at its center, upholding international law and respecting the Association's fundamental principles, and working together to effectively address challenges affecting peace, stability, and prosperity in the region.

3.3. US-ASEAN Relations Still Face Many Challenges and Directions for Cooperation in the New Phase

US-ASEAN relations are becoming increasingly important in the 21st century, and are decisive to the success or failure of the White House's “Indo-Pacific” strategy. Over the past period, alongside achievements, the implementation of US foreign policy in Southeast Asia has also faced several challenges. First, concerns about interference in the internal security of ASEAN countries, as well as the unity and maintenance of ASEAN's consensus principles, are affected by the strategic calculations of member states and the alignment of forces between the US and China. Second, despite changes in the Biden administration's approach, the US generally maintains its long-term stance and continues to seek ASEAN's alignment with its strategic priorities in the Asia-Pacific region, especially in containing China. Meanwhile, ASEAN countries maintain an independent,

multilateral foreign policy, harmonizing relations with major powers. Third, differing views on democracy and human rights, labor rights, and environmental protection persist between Southeast Asian countries and the United States, which could be significant obstacles to cooperation between the two...

At the US-ASEAN Summit and related activities in Kuala Lumpur on October 26, 2025, US President Donald Trump affirmed that ASEAN is central to US policy in the Indo-Pacific and that the US will remain a partner and friend to countries in the region. This affirms a new step in efforts to deepen the US-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership established in 2022 and lays the foundation for expanded economic and security cooperation. (7) For ASEAN countries, cooperation with the US is viewed not only from an economic perspective but also as an opportunity to enhance their position in the global value chain. They reaffirm their commitment to continue implementing commitments, programs, and cooperation initiatives to deepen the ASEAN-US Comprehensive Strategic Partnership further, focusing on strategic cooperation areas such as high-quality trade and investment, finance, infrastructure connectivity, the digital economy, energy, and ensuring a healthy cybersecurity environment for a peaceful, secure, stable, and prosperous region. With recent steps to strengthen relations between the US and ASEAN, this relationship is expected to bring practical benefits to both sides in the future.

Notes

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