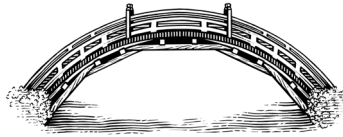


ROUNDTABLE

Can America Come Back?  
Prospects for U.S.–Southeast Asia Relations under  
the Biden Administration



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**NOTE:** *This roundtable is the result of the project “Southeast Asia Views America: Perceptions, Policies and Prospects,” organized and edited by Ann Marie Murphy and based on virtual workshops with the participating authors held this year. The project team is extremely grateful to the Center for Foreign Policy Studies at Seton Hall University, the Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University, and the New York Southeast Asia Network for financial and logistical support. Longer versions of these essays will be published as chapters in an edited volume, Southeast Asia Views America: Perceptions, Policies and Prospects, in 2022.*

## America Is Back? Opportunities and Obstacles to Restoring U.S. Credibility in Southeast Asia

*Ann Marie Murphy*

U.S. president Joe Biden has announced that “America is back,” and in contrast to his predecessor’s unilateral and transactional “America first” policy, he has sought to assure world leaders of the U.S. commitment to multilateralism and renewed engagement with allies and partners. The Biden administration, however, has taken office at a time when Southeast Asian perceptions of U.S. power have declined dramatically. According to the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute’s “State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report,” 49% of Southeast Asian elites view China as the region’s most influential political and strategic power compared to only 30% for the United States, a marked shift from a decade ago.<sup>1</sup> Rising Southeast Asian concerns about China’s growing economic and strategic influence, combined with a desire for assistance in overcoming the Covid-19 health and economic crises, create opportunities for the Biden administration to enhance ties in the region. At the same time, long-standing concerns about U.S. commitment to the region and a fear that the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry will pressure Southeast Asian states to choose sides are key obstacles to strengthening ties. China is the largest trading partner of most Southeast Asian states and a leading source of investment across the region. Leaders seeking to maintain their strategic autonomy in an increasingly complex external environment may welcome the Biden administration’s pledge of renewed attention and support for allies and partners, but no state wants to be forced into a binary choice between Washington and Beijing.

This essay analyzes the opportunities and obstacles facing the Biden administration as it seeks to strengthen ties with Southeast Asian states as part of its broader Indo-Pacific strategy. The essay begins by briefly outlining the trajectory of U.S. policy toward Southeast Asia over the past decade, tracing the shift from the Obama administration’s “rebalance”

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Seah et al., “The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report,” ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, February 2021 ≈ <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2021-survey-report>.

policy to the Trump administration’s “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy to illustrate which aspects of each policy were welcome in Southeast Asia and why. It then outlines the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific policy, Southeast Asia’s place within it, and U.S. diplomatic efforts toward the region to date. The Biden administration got off to a slow start engaging Southeast Asia, and there is a distinct perception that the Quad rather than the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is the preferred vehicle for engagement. At a time when promoting health security and economic recovery are Southeast Asia’s key interests, vaccine diplomacy provides an opportunity for the United States, while the lack of a trade strategy is an obstacle. Southeast Asian countries are mostly keen to enhance ties with the United States but also do not wish to be seen as joining a U.S.-sponsored anti-China containment policy.

### *U.S. Policy Shifts Generate Southeast Asian Concerns about U.S. Commitment*

Southeast Asian states have long perceived their relationship with the United States as one of ambivalent engagement because U.S. policy toward the region has undergone dramatic shifts over time, raising concerns regarding Washington’s commitment. The Obama administration’s rebalance policy was designed to address these fears by refocusing foreign policy away from the Middle East and toward Asia. The rebalance policy was multifaceted: it had a security component that called for increasing the U.S. naval presence in the region; an economic component, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP); and a multilateral component that embraced regional ASEAN-led architecture. Southeast Asian countries largely welcomed the rebalance because it appeared to illustrate Washington’s commitment to play its traditional offshore balancing role, increase economic cooperation, and enhance ASEAN centrality, all of which help maintain an overall power balance in Asia and give smaller states more economic and strategic options. In the end, many contend that the rebalance failed to deliver because of the Obama administration’s reluctance to respond to China’s assertive actions, such as its 2012 seizure of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines and construction and militarization of artificial islands in the South China Sea.

The Trump administration’s America-first foreign policy jettisoned the economic and multilateral aspects of the rebalance policy that had been most embraced in Southeast Asia. President Donald Trump’s withdrawal from the TPP dealt a huge blow to economic reformers in places such as

Vietnam and Malaysia, which had invested significant political capital in getting it passed at home. Trump's unilateral trade war with China was also unwelcome because it disrupted supply chains. The administration took an aggressive stance on other economic issues as well: it removed Thailand from the generalized system of preferences program, threatened to do the same with Indonesia, and labeled Vietnam a currency manipulator. Under President Barack Obama, the United States engaged the region through Southeast Asian mechanisms: it signed ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, joined the East Asia Summit, and appointed the first resident ambassador to ASEAN. Obama attended ASEAN's annual meetings in seven of his eight years in office. In contrast, Trump only attended once, and his administration never appointed an ambassador to ASEAN. In a region where showing up matters, the Trump administration's downgrading of ASEAN not only raised questions about the U.S. commitment to Southeast Asia but also created space for China to expand its influence.

Trump's declaration of a free and open Indo-Pacific strategy was viewed as a reaction to China's Belt and Road Initiative and maritime assertiveness. Southeast Asia's small, mostly trade-dependent countries largely support the values of freedom of navigation, free trade, and a rules-based international order espoused in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. Following on Washington's designation of China as a peer competitor, the announcement of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy led ASEAN members to view it as a mechanism to contain China, something that has both increased Sino-U.S. tensions and added unwanted pressure on Southeast Asian countries to choose sides. In contrast to the Obama administration's disinclination to confront China, the Trump administration made competition with China a defining foreign policy feature. States like Vietnam that had been targets of Chinese assertiveness appreciated the more confrontational approach toward China, but others did not.

Biden's status as Obama's vice president and the appointment of many Obama administration veterans to senior positions led to predictions of a "rebalance 2.0." Biden's government has signaled the importance it places on the Indo-Pacific in numerous ways: its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance states that U.S. presence will be "most robust" in the Indo-Pacific and Europe; the Indo-Pacific Directorate is the largest at the National Security Council; and Admiral John Aquilino, the newly installed head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, has argued that "the Indo-Pacific is the most consequential region for America's future, hosts our greatest

security challenge, and remains the priority theater for the United States.”<sup>2</sup> The administration has, however, continued Trump’s competitive stance against China.

Given Southeast Asia’s geostrategic location, one would assume that its prominence on the U.S. foreign policy agenda would rise in tandem with that of the Indo-Pacific, but this only appears to be happening for select states, not the region as a whole. In the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance document, which stresses the importance of allies and partners, the region’s two formal treaty allies, Thailand and the Philippines, are not mentioned at all. Singapore and Vietnam are mentioned by name, but other regional states are lumped together as ASEAN member states—even Indonesia, ASEAN’s de facto leader.

### *The South China Sea*

The key U.S. interest in Southeast Asia is freedom of navigation through the region’s strategic sea lines of communication. This priority is threatened by China’s claim to approximately 90% of the South China Sea as well as its construction and militarization of artificial islands that strengthen its capacity to adopt an anti-access/area-denial strategy. Under Trump, U.S. policy focused primarily on asserting the right to fly, sail, and operate anywhere that international law allowed through verbal support for the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and through freedom of navigation operations. In July, ahead of the fifth anniversary of the UNCLOS arbitral award that declared most of China’s claims illegal, Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that “nowhere is the rules-based maritime order under greater threat than in the South China Sea.”<sup>3</sup> Some states with territorial disputes with China have appreciated these naval operations but others are wary because they raise tensions and risk unwanted conflict escalation with China without protecting territorial integrity or sovereign rights. Southeast Asian states have welcomed the Biden administration’s increasing condemnation of China’s interference

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<sup>2</sup> On the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, see Joseph R. Biden Jr., *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, D.C., March 2021) [~](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf) <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>. For Aguilino’s speech, see Joseph Aguilino, “INDOPACOM Change of Command Ceremony,” U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, April 30, 2021 [~](https://www.pacom.mil/Media/Speeches-Testimony/Article/2587015/indopacom-change-of-command-ceremony) <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/Speeches-Testimony/Article/2587015/indopacom-change-of-command-ceremony>.

<sup>3</sup> “Biden Backs Trump Rejection of China’s South China Sea Claim,” Associated Press, July 11, 2021, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/11/biden-south-china-sea-trump-499245>.

with Southeast Asian efforts to extract resources in their own exclusive economic zones.

As Bonnie Glaser and Greg Poling have recently argued, much of Southeast Asia judges the U.S. commitment to the region by whether the United States helps defend maritime rights, particularly against China's increasingly assertive gray-zone activities.<sup>4</sup> These activities have been aimed at convincing Southeast Asian states and international partners that resource exploitation in the sea is too risky and that there is little choice but to capitulate to China. To date, the United States has lacked an effective strategy to counter China, in part because Southeast Asian states themselves have been reluctant to push back against Beijing. The new U.S.-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement, for example, represents a significant shift away from Duterte's appeasement policy toward China and creates an opportunity for a more concerted U.S.-Southeast Asian effort to promote a rules-based maritime order, but it will face significant headwinds given China's first-mover advantage in the South China Sea.

### *The Quad versus ASEAN*

The Quad, rather than ASEAN, has seemingly emerged as the Biden administration's regional mechanism of choice. Only weeks after his inauguration, Biden hosted the first-ever (virtual) Quad leaders' summit to much fanfare. Although the summit's final communique did not mention China by name, it is clear that the mechanism, which held its first joint naval exercise in 2020, is intended to contain China.<sup>5</sup> Partly because the Quad's anti-China focus raises tensions, partly because it militarizes the region, and partly because it is perceived as a threat to ASEAN centrality, some Southeast Asian countries are wary of the Quad.

Beyond what Southeast Asian leaders (outside of Vietnam and Singapore) perceive as a relative lack of attention under Biden's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, they have also been miffed at the slow pace of diplomatic engagement. Secretary of State Blinken missed his first formal meeting with his ASEAN counterparts in May due to technical

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<sup>4</sup> Bonnie S. Glaser and Gregory Poling, "China's Power Grab in the South China Sea," *Foreign Affairs*, August 20, 2021 ~ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-08-20/chinas-power-grab-south-china-sea>.

<sup>5</sup> David Wainer, "Biden Wants the 'Quad' to Counter China, but Unity Will Be a Test," *Bloomberg*, March 25, 2021 ~ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-25/biden-leans-into-quad-nations-alliance-to-confront-china>.

glitches, rankling some ASEAN foreign ministers.<sup>6</sup> Blinken’s failure to show was perceived as a political slight, and the fact that the technical glitches arose because the secretary had made an unplanned emergency visit to the Middle East only underscored Southeast Asian perceptions that the region was being sidelined by more critical interests elsewhere. At that time, Biden had yet to have an official phone conversation with any ASEAN leader, which also reinforced the perception that the administration was failing to back its rhetoric with action.

However, U.S. diplomatic engagement with Southeast Asia picked up following Blinken’s ill-fated video meeting. Deputy Security of State Wendy Sherman visited Indonesia, Thailand, and Cambodia in late May and early June; Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin traveled to Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines in July; Secretary of State Blinken participated in virtual multiday talks with ASEAN foreign ministers in August; and Vice President Kamala Harris visited Singapore and Vietnam in late August. The decision for Harris to make these official trips only a month following Austin’s trips to the same two countries rankled some states left off the agenda. One *Jakarta Post* editorial entitled “Snubbed again, Joe?” questioned whether Indonesia’s omission from Harris’s and Austin’s itineraries was a signal that the United States was returning to the Bush administration’s “with us or against us” policy in the context of rising Sino-U.S. rivalry.<sup>7</sup>

On his trip, Austin sought to reassure regional leaders that the United States still supported ASEAN. In response to whether Washington was prioritizing the Quad over ASEAN, he stated that the United States viewed the two institutions as complementary rather than competitive, with each playing a role to build greater stability and peace in the region.<sup>8</sup> According to this view, the Quad plays an important hard-power balancing role in the region while ASEAN plays an important soft-power diplomatic role. In Singapore, while Harris underscored U.S. support for what she termed “longstanding institutions, like ASEAN, which remains central to the region’s architecture,” she also endorsed “new, results-oriented groups,

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<sup>6</sup> Colum Lynch, Jack Detsch, and Robbie Gramer, “The Glitch That Ruined Blinken’s ASEAN Debut,” *Foreign Policy*, May 27, 2021 ~ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/27/blinken-asean-meeting-pivot-asia-middle-east>.

<sup>7</sup> “Snubbed Again, Joe?” *Jakarta Post*, August 3, 2021 ~ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2021/08/02/snubbed-again-joe.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Lloyd J. Austin III, “The Imperative of Partnership” (Fullerton lecture, IISS-Asia, Singapore, July 27, 2021) ~ <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/podcast/2021/07/40th-fullerton-lecture-us-secretary-of-defense-austin>.

like the Quad and the U.S.-Mekong Partnership,” which clearly illustrated that ASEAN is often viewed as little more than a talk shop by U.S. officials.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Myanmar Coup and Its Challenge to ASEAN*

Engaging ASEAN may be a way to signal U.S. commitment to Southeast Asia, but whether it is an effective mechanism to solve regional problems is highly debatable, as illustrated by its ineffective response to the Myanmar coup d'état on February 1, 2021. The coup overthrew a government elected with an overwhelming majority months earlier; triggered a civil disobedience movement; led to the creation of the opposition National Unity Government; caused the collapse of the country's bureaucratic and governing structure; and fueled a massive humanitarian crisis as Covid-19 ravages a country with a collapsed healthcare system. The Myanmar coup violated cardinal ASEAN norms, and with some predicting that Myanmar could become a failed state like Syria, it also poses a great threat to regional stability—ASEAN's core *raison d'être*. In March, ASEAN reached a five-point consensus with the Myanmar junta that, among other things, called for an immediate cessation of violence, the initiation of mediation, and the provision of humanitarian assistance.<sup>10</sup> The junta has backtracked on those commitments, and ASEAN has no enforcement mechanism. The United States supports ASEAN's five-point consensus and has imposed sanctions on key coup leaders and military enterprises, but the junta's ability to secure support from China and Russia reduces U.S. and ASEAN leverage.

The United States has an interest in a united, cohesive ASEAN that promotes regional order. The Myanmar coup increasingly appears to be an existential threat to ASEAN because it magnifies the organization's divisions. Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia took the lead to pressure the junta into conflict resolution, while Thailand's military government, Vietnam's Communist government, the Philippines' populist government, and the Brunei sultanate were reluctant to condemn the generals. If ASEAN cannot overcome its internal divisions, then it is increasingly difficult to envision the organization constructively promoting regional order. And a less cohesive ASEAN makes the organization more susceptible to Sino-U.S. competition, something that favors China given ASEAN's

<sup>9</sup> Kamala Harris, “Remarks by Vice President Harris on the Indo-Pacific Region,” White House, August 24, 2021 ≈ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/24/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-on-the-indo-pacific-region>.

<sup>10</sup> “ASEAN Leaders Agree 5-Point Plan for Myanmar,” *Bangkok Post*, April 25, 2021 ≈ <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2104915/asean-leaders-agree-5-point-plan-for-myanmar>.



consensus-decision rulemaking and Beijing's influence over countries like Laos and Cambodia. The chairmanship of ASEAN rotates annually, and since the chair has agenda-setting powers, the issues that the organization chooses to address and the effectiveness with which it does so vary. Over the next three years, the Biden administration will work with an ASEAN chaired by Cambodia, Indonesia, and Laos, which may pose obstacles for U.S. engagement in two of the next three years.

### *Biden's Democracy Agenda*

The Myanmar coup and the unwillingness of many ASEAN countries to condemn it illustrate the obstacles facing the Biden administration's values-based agenda. Biden has repeatedly emphasized the importance of democracy as a component of U.S. policy, calling for a summit of democracies and claiming that "democracy holds the key to freedom, prosperity, peace, and dignity."<sup>11</sup> These sentiments are not widely shared by Southeast Asian elites, although many citizens may embrace these values. The abandonment of values-diplomacy by the Trump administration was arguably the most welcome part of its Southeast Asia policy because a source of tension with many countries was removed. Under Obama, the United States raised tensions with its formal allies by sanctioning Thailand following the 2014 military coup and by criticizing Duterte's war on drugs and the extrajudicial killings it produced. In contrast, Trump hosted Thailand's prime minister Prayuth, the leader of the coup, at the White House and likewise invited Philippine president Duterte there.<sup>12</sup>

Democracy has been in retreat for years in Southeast Asia, and the Asian Barometer surveys have consistently found that Southeast Asian respondents place greater importance on good governance than democratic values as a source of regime legitimacy.<sup>13</sup> As former Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa has observed, there is an "acute and very intense suspicion" of democracy promotion in Southeast Asia, which is seen as something externally imposed and threatening to the noninterference

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<sup>11</sup> Biden, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*.

<sup>12</sup> Kristine Phillips and Jenna Johnson, "Trump Should Condemn Duterte's Bloody War, Not Invite Him to the White House, Critics Say," *Washington Post*, April 30, 2017 ~ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/04/30/trump-invites-controversial-philippine-leader-duterte-to-the-white-house>.

<sup>13</sup> Yun-han Chu, Alex Chang, and Bridget Welsh "Southeast Asia: Sources of Regime Support," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 2 (2013): 162. This article draws on their work for the Asian Barometer Survey.

principle ASEAN holds sacrosanct.<sup>14</sup> This wariness has increased since both the Trump and Biden administrations have framed Sino-U.S. competition as a values one between democratic and authoritarian models of governance.

### *Economic Engagement*

Southeast Asia's trade-dependent states had hoped that Biden's commitment to multilateralism would lead to the revocation of Trump-era tariffs. These hopes have been disappointed as Washington has reportedly found the tariffs "useful."<sup>15</sup> The Biden administration has taken some steps, however, to redress what Southeast Asians viewed as punitive economic policies, such as threatening sanctions on Indonesia due to its trade surplus with the United States and designating Vietnam a currency manipulator.<sup>16</sup>

All the Southeast Asian countries have suffered economically during the pandemic and restoring economic growth ranks as a top national interest across the region. U.S. assistance in promoting economic recovery would go a long way toward reassuring the region that the United States is back, but whether it will materialize remains an open question. Washington lacks a multilateral vehicle through which to engage the region and help promote a rules-based order in the economic domain. The TPP was appreciated by many Asian reformers not only because it promised greater access to markets like the United States but also because it set standards, norms, and rules that would help these states move up the industrial curve, rein in corruption, and reduce dependence on China. In theory the new iteration, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, remains open to U.S. ascension. In practice, however, trade reform remains a contentious domestic political issue. The Biden administration's worker-centric trade policy, emphasis on "Buy American," and desire to relocate supply chains closer to home represent obstacles to enhancing trade and investment. At a time when many Southeast Asian states fear that their economic dependence on China makes them vulnerable

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<sup>14</sup> Marty Natalegawa, "Pivotal Player: Marty Natalegawa and U.S.-Indonesia Relations," interview with Michael Green, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Asia Chessboard ~ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/pivotal-player-marty-natalegawa-and-us-indonesia-relations>.

<sup>15</sup> Henry Olson, "Joe Biden Hasn't Lifted Trump's Tariffs on China. Good." *Washington Post*, March 29, 2021 ~ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/03/29/joe-biden-hasnt-lifted-trumps-tariffs-china-good>.

<sup>16</sup> Sebastian Strangio, "Vietnam, U.S. Reach Accord on Alleged Currency Manipulation," *Diplomat*, July 20, 2021 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/vietnam-us-reach-accord-on-alleged-currency-manipulation>.

to potential economic coercion, a comprehensive trade program is a key regional interest.

### *Pandemic Assistance and Vaccine Diplomacy*

Overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic is the current challenge facing all Southeast Asian countries. The extent to which Washington can support them may be a critical factor influencing whether Southeast Asian states believe the United States is back as a partner in a time of great need.

During the pandemic's first year, most Southeast Asian countries performed well, and some—such as Vietnam, Singapore, and Thailand—ranked among the world's most effective in their responses. During this period, China emerged as the leading health assistance provider, with 44.2% of Southeast Asians surveyed ranking China as the leading assistance source, versus 9.8% for the United States. China's success in containing the virus, provision of personal protective equipment, and contributions to the World Health Organization (WHO), as well as Chinese president Xi Jinping's pledge that Chinese vaccines would be "global public goods," created an impression of China as a global provider of public health goods in much of Southeast Asia.<sup>17</sup>

By contrast, the Trump administration's chaotic and ineffective handling of the virus and withdrawal from the WHO during a global health emergency stunned Southeast Asians, and Trump's insistence on labeling Covid-19 the "China virus" made the pandemic another unwanted axis of Sino-U.S. competition. The Biden administration's more effective Covid-19 response, decision to rejoin the WHO, and provision of vaccines have repaired some of this damage.

Southeast Asia's more recent emergence as an epicenter of Covid-19's Delta variant and growing skepticism toward Chinese vaccines' effectiveness against this variant provide an opportunity for the United States to use vaccine diplomacy to demonstrate its commitment to Southeast Asia. U.S.-made mRNA vaccines are widely viewed as among the world's most effective and demand for them is high around the globe. In Indonesia, 10% of healthcare workers who had been fully vaccinated with Chinese vaccines became infected with Covid-19, leading the government to announce that

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<sup>17</sup> For an insightful discussion of China's pandemic diplomacy, see Nadège Rolland, "China's Pandemic Power Play," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (2021): 25–38 ~ <https://journalofdemocracy.org/articles/chinas-pandemic-power-play-2>.

the Pfizer vaccine will be used as a booster shot.<sup>18</sup> Malaysia has decided to stop administering Sinovac once its supply ends as well.<sup>19</sup> Vietnam has also largely avoided Chinese Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines.

Secretary of Defense Austin stated that the United States had contributed 40 million doses with “no strings attached,” an allusion to China’s imposition of conditions with its vaccine provisions. Vice President Harris also framed her discussion of vaccines by making distinctions with China, stating, “And it is important to note that these are donations, free of charge, with no strings attached—because, for us, this is about saving lives and because, of course, that is the right thing to do.”<sup>20</sup> Whether the United States continues to donate vaccines in sufficient quantity to build perceptions of the country as a provider of public goods or whether domestic demand for booster shots will slow vaccine diplomacy remains unclear.

### *Conclusion*

Is the United States back? Recent official visits clearly illustrate that the United States is attempting to signal its renewed commitment to Southeast Asia, build support to counter China’s assertiveness, and assist Southeast Asian efforts to combat Covid-19. China’s own belligerence has helped create an opportunity for the United States by reminding Southeast Asians that their room for maneuver is greatest when Washington plays its traditional role as an offshore balancer. Nevertheless, past experience with shifting U.S. priorities means that most Southeast Asian states still question whether the United States is back for good. ♦

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<sup>18</sup> Sui-Lee Wee and Steven Lee Myers, “As Chinese Vaccines Stumble, U.S. Finds New Opening in Asia,” *New York Times*, August 20, 2021 ≈ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/20/business/economy/china-vaccine-us-covid-diplomacy.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

<sup>19</sup> Rozanna Latiff and Joseph Sipalan, “Malaysia to Stop Using Sinovac Vaccine after Supply Ends—Minister,” Reuters, July 15, 2021 ≈ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/malaysia-stop-using-sinovac-vaccine-after-supply-ends-minister-2021-07-15>.

<sup>20</sup> Harris, “Remarks by Vice President Harris on the Indo-Pacific Region.”

## (Still) Supporting the Indispensable Power: Singapore's Relations with the United States from Trump to Biden

*See Seng Tan*

Singapore regards the United States as an indispensable power whose global might, purpose, and reach Singaporeans have long viewed as invaluable to the stability, security, and prosperity of Asia. The United States has evolved from an unlikely collaborator and patron of Singapore following the 1971 British withdrawal east of the Suez Canal to being the city-state's invaluable partner today. As with other U.S. allies and partners, Singapore's relations with the United States were tested during the presidency of Donald Trump, who effectively recused his nation from the traditional role of global leadership it had played since the end of World War II. Yet Singapore chose to stay the course of its pragmatic encouragement and facilitation of the U.S. forward presence in Asia. The transition to the Biden administration, which presumably aims to walk back Trump's "America first" policy without easing up on China, has not changed Singapore's perspective on and policy toward the United States. It remains in Singapore's interest to continue welcoming, facilitating, and—in the face of growing Chinese objection to U.S. strategic dominance in the region—justifying the United States' place and role in Asia.

That said, Singapore's view of U.S. indispensability does not mean it will take Washington's side on every international issue and dispute, especially where Singapore's interests and the general well-being of the Asian region are thought to be at risk. Singapore is a consummate hedger that has long sought "to be a friend to all, but an enemy of none."<sup>1</sup> Its contemporary support of the United States has risked souring relations with China,

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<sup>1</sup> "Transcript of Remarks by Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan at the MFA Townhall on 17 July 2017," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Singapore), July 17, 2017 ~ <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2017/07/Transcript-of-Remarks-by-Minister-for-Foreign-Affairs-Dr-Vivian-Balakrishnan-at-the-MFA-Townhall-on>.

Singapore's top trading partner in 2021.<sup>2</sup> Thus understood, Singapore's qualified belief in U.S. leadership presupposes a United States that accepts not only its long-standing role as a world leader but equally the obligation to be a force for Asia's peace, prosperity, and security—a responsibility that, in Singapore's view, is better shared than hogged at a time when Beijing's strategic ambitions have risen concomitantly with China's growing military power and global influence. How the United States and its partners can work with China while balancing Chinese power and influence without causing regional discord is the key challenge. It is on that basis that Singapore will do what it can to help the United States restore its post-Trump credibility in Asia while seeking to ensure that U.S.-China tensions do not irreparably damage the region.

This essay contends that Singapore will continue to support the United States' forward presence in Asia while encouraging Washington and Beijing to accommodate one another and seek ways to cooperate amid their competitive relationship. Beginning with a short reflection on the city-state's propensity to hedge against the great powers, the essay then explores Singapore's ties with the United States from the Trump to the Biden administration.

### *Incorrigible Hedger*

Historically, Southeast Asian states have relied on hedging and shifting limited alignments, and Singapore is no exception.<sup>3</sup> Hedging is the inclination to adopt the *via media* between aligning with great powers and balancing them. States hedge to minimize risks and deny larger powers their ability to dominate without having to balance directly against them.<sup>4</sup> Neither passive neutralists nor fence-sitters, hedgers seek to engage multiple powers without becoming reliant on any single power. Short of the U.S.-China rivalry intensifying to Thucydidean proportions, it is not unreasonable to assume that Singapore will persist in hedging to create

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<sup>2</sup> Li Wenlong and Zhang Shimin, "Singapore's Prominent Role in China's Trade Strategy," ThinkChina, February 3, 2021 ≈ <https://www.thinkchina.sg/singapores-prominent-role-chinas-trade-strategy>.

<sup>3</sup> See John D. Ciorciari, *The Limits of Alignment: Southeast Asia and the Great Powers Since 1975* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010); and Darren J. Lim and Zack Cooper, "Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Alignment in East Asia," *Security Studies* 24, no. 4 (2015): 696–727.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Bloomfield, "To Balance or to Bandwagon? Adjusting to China's Rise During Australia's Rudd–Gillard Era," *Pacific Review* 29, no. 2 (2016): 259.

strategic space and flexibility for itself as long as there is no undue pressure to take sides.<sup>5</sup>

Singapore has been described as having pursued a “balanced” foreign policy that assiduously avoids the impression that it is seeking to balance others—a difficult act made more necessary at a time when the city-state is caught in the middle of the U.S.-China competition.<sup>6</sup> Like the proverbial bird on a wire, Singapore’s perceived vulnerability as a small state in a rough neighborhood leaves it with few options but to make as many friends as possible.<sup>7</sup> As a former official once mused, Singaporeans are “perpetual worriers” who take nothing for granted and whose “constant restlessness...to stay relevant to the world” fosters in them an imaginativeness and inventiveness beyond the limits of their nation’s physical size.<sup>8</sup> That so-called inventiveness is finely (if at times, crassly) played out in classic hedging conduct: for example, less than a month after Prime Minister Lee signed the renewed defense memorandum of understanding over U.S. use of facilities in Singapore with President Trump in New York in September 2019, his defense minister signed an enhanced defense agreement with China in Beijing. That said, Singapore does not behave uniformly toward the two major powers. Its hedging continues to be informed by a general preference for the United States as the strategic guarantor, in concert with like-minded powers and regional countries, of regional order and security in Asia—a responsibility that Singaporean security planners do not believe China (or any nation other than the United States) is ready to take up in the foreseeable future. Yet Singapore’s leaders have always taken pains to insist that their preference for U.S. leadership does and should not be misconstrued as an unqualified, enduring endorsement of the United States at the expense of other great powers.

### *Supporting U.S. Engagement*

Arguably, Singapore has been the United States’ most enthusiastic and reliable security partner in Southeast Asia. Although it houses no

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<sup>5</sup> See David Shambaugh, “U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia: Power Shift or Competitive Coexistence?” *International Security* 42, no. 4 (2018): 85–127; and See Seng Tan, “Consigned to Hedge: Southeast Asia and America’s ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ Strategy,” *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020): 131–48.

<sup>6</sup> Ankit Panda, “Singapore: A Small Asian Heavyweight,” Council on Foreign Relations, April 16, 2020  <https://www.cfr.org/background/singapore-small-asian-heavyweight>.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Leifer, *Singapore’s Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Lim, “Foreword,” in *The Little Red Dot: Reflections by Singapore’s Diplomats*, ed. Tommy Koh and Chang Li Lin (Singapore: World Scientific, 2005), vii–viii.

U.S. military bases, the State Department has acknowledged that “the access, basing, and overflight privileges granted by Singapore advance U.S. government and allied efforts to bolster a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.”<sup>9</sup> Since 1991, Singapore has hosted Task Force 73/Commander, Logistics Group Western Pacific, which provides combat-ready logistics for the Seventh Fleet, and, since 2013 and 2016 respectively, has hosted rotational deployments of U.S. Navy littoral combat ships and P-8A surveillance aircraft. In the post–September 11 era, Singapore participated in the U.S.-led war coalitions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it has played a key role in U.S. counterpiracy efforts (including taking command of the Gulf of Aden counterpiracy Combined Task Force 151 on no less than five occasions between 2009 and 2021). Singapore was the first country in Southeast Asia to join the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS and security arrangements like the Proliferation Security Initiative, the Container Security Initiative, and the Megaports Initiative. Both countries participate regularly in bilateral military exercises, such as Pacific Griffin and Tiger Balm, and in multilateral exercises, such as the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) and Red Flag, among others. Over a thousand Singaporean military personnel currently participate in training, exercises, and professional military education in the United States in places like Luke Air Force Base and Silverbell Army Heliport in Arizona and Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho, where Singaporean F-16, AH-64D, and F-15SG crews train alongside their American counterparts.

In 2003, President George W. Bush reportedly invited Singapore to become a major non-NATO ally, which Singapore declined owing to the political sensitivities with its Muslim neighbors Indonesia and Malaysia that any such acceptance might have provoked. Instead, the 2005 Strategic Framework Agreement named Singapore as a “major security cooperation partner” of the United States, while the State Department has referred to Singapore as one of the United States’ “strongest bilateral partners in Southeast Asia [that] plays an indispensable role in supporting the region’s security and economic framework.”<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding some unforeseen hiccups in the Biden administration’s engagement of the region,<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “U.S. Security Cooperation with Singapore,” U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, January 20, 2021 ≈ <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-singapore>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Singapore, for example, canceled the 2021 World Economic Forum and Shangri-La Dialogue due to the pandemic, and technical glitches prevented a video conference from taking place between Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Southeast Asian counterparts in May.



Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin’s in-person visit to Singapore in July 2021 underscored the strength of the two countries’ partnership. In particular, several “high-end” initiatives were jointly announced at the meeting, such as the hosting of Singapore’s future F-35B fighter aircraft detachment at Ebbing Air National Guard Base in Arkansas, the establishment of a Singaporean fighter training detachment in Guam, and participation in the multilateral Counter-Terrorism Information Facility in Singapore and the multinational Artificial Intelligence Partnership for Defense hosted by the U.S. Department of Defense.

Granted, the bilateral partnership has had rough patches over the years. For example, Singapore’s pragmatic view of security collaboration with the United States led the State Department to accuse Singapore of adopting an inconsistent, selective, and transactional approach to counterterrorism cooperation.<sup>12</sup> Nor has Singapore evaded the State Department’s customary citation of alleged human rights abuses via its annual country reports. Yet these are mere speedbumps in an otherwise robust and perdurable relationship.

### *Managing U.S. Petulance*

Singapore’s partnership with the United States was tested during the Trump years as the impact of the America-first policy took hold in Asia, including the withdrawal of the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (an agreement Singapore strongly supported), pressure on U.S. allies and partners to step up their financial and strategic commitments, sweeping accusations that Asian states (including Singapore) were cheating in trade against the United States, and an anti-China slant in the “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy. Despite proclaiming the death of Barack Obama’s “rebalance to Asia,” Trump’s policy gutted the rebalance of its economic and multilateral dimensions while reinforcing its military dimension: in contrast with the Obama administration’s 5 freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, the Trump administration conducted 27—4 in 2017, 6 in 2018, 8 in 2019, and 9 in 2020.<sup>13</sup> Compared with larger and more protectionist-minded neighbors such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, Singapore has been more adversely affected economically by the combined impact of the U.S.-China trade war and the

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2012* (Washington, D.C., 2013), 53.

<sup>13</sup> Jeff M. Smith, “Biden Must Keep Challenging China on Freedom of Navigation,” *Foreign Policy*, February 16, 2021  <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/16/biden-south-china-sea-spratlys>.

pandemic.<sup>14</sup> Singapore nonetheless persisted in its long-standing mission to facilitate and support the forward U.S. presence in the region.

It was against this backdrop that Prime Minister Lee issued a warning at the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue against what he felt was unhelpful U.S. talk of “containing China”<sup>15</sup> that reportedly left the U.S. officials fuming and their Chinese counterparts cheering. In a 2020 reflection in *Foreign Affairs* on the impact that evolving U.S.-China ties could have on Asia, Lee contended that Washington and Beijing “must work out a *modus vivendi* that will be competitive in some areas without allowing rivalry to poison cooperation in others.”<sup>16</sup> Lee’s concern had to do with the potential—and, in Singapore’s view, undesirable—formation of rival blocs to manage China’s rise; in response, he proposed that the Quad should evolve into “an inclusive and open regional architecture.”<sup>17</sup> This is not to imply that Singapore prefers to let China necessarily have its way. Singapore’s support for the 2016 arbitral tribunal decision to deny Chinese claims to much of the South China Sea, for example, severely complicated its relations with China. Its persistent support for Taiwan has also provoked Beijing’s ire on several occasions, and it has been at the receiving end of Chinese influence operations, including cyberattacks. In the long shadow cast by China across Asia, where Beijing’s proprietary interests and sense of ownership loom large, the line between doing what Singapore can and suffering what it must is a fine one. Singapore’s success depends on whether it can persuade both big powers to ease off their respective throttles and dial back the tensions that have hitherto defined and framed their strategic rivalry. This strategy will likely require a mutual rediscovery and renewal of their grand bargain—the search for a “*modus vivendi*,” in Lee’s words—that will allow for a healthy level of collaboration to be restored between the two powers amid their competition.

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<sup>14</sup> “Singapore, Malaysia Could Be Most Exposed to U.S.-China Trade War: OCBC,” *Business Times*, January 7, 2021 ~ <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/asean-business/singapore-malaysia-could-be-most-exposed-to-us-china-trade-war-ocbc-0>.

<sup>15</sup> Lee Hsien Loong (keynote address at the International Institute for Strategic Studies Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, May 31, 2019) ~ <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-at-the-IISS-Shangri-La-Dialogue-2019>.

<sup>16</sup> Lee Hsien Loong, “The Endangered Asian Century: America, China, and the Perils of Confrontation,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020 ~ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2020-06-04/lee-hsien-loong-endangered-asian-century>.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Tan, “Consigned to Hedge,” 141.

### *Urging Mutual Restraint*

Joe Biden's electoral victory was greeted with cautious optimism in Singapore. While his promise to restore the United States to its traditional involvement in collaborative international leadership was welcomed, Singapore continues to view with concern the bipartisan American consensus on "getting tough" with China.<sup>18</sup> Arguing that the insistence on treating China as a threat—and the tit-for-tat dynamics it has engendered between the two major powers—bodes ill for the world, Singapore's leaders believe the quest for mutual moderation by the major powers is of utmost importance to building stability and predictability in U.S.-China ties.<sup>19</sup> Even Singapore's realpolitik-minded leaders insist that the region's stability and security stem from states' voluntary restraint and moderation as much as the equilibrating effects of structural forces.<sup>20</sup> Against the growing animus shaping U.S.-China relations, Singapore seeks to remind both major powers that the making and conduct of foreign policy ought to be driven by prudence, not passion; by moderation, not maximalism.<sup>21</sup>

The appeal to mutual moderation has at least two auxiliary pleas. Firstly, accepting the likely "new normal" of big-power rivalry, Singapore hopes that the United States and China can and should nonetheless find common cause and seize opportunities to collaborate. "It is natural for big powers to compete," Prime Minister Lee observed, "but it is their capacity for cooperation that is the true test of statecraft."<sup>22</sup> For his part, Goh Chok Tong, a former prime minister of Singapore, has urged Asian nations to "encourage the U.S. and China towards [the] scenario of competition and cooperation, and reiterate the position that the Pacific, and certainly the world, is large enough for these two superpowers to work together."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020 ~ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

<sup>19</sup> David A. Wemer, "Singapore's Prime Minister Has a Message for the U.S.: Don't Choose China Confrontation or Asia Withdrawal," Atlantic Council, New Atlanticist, July 28, 2020 ~ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/singapores-prime-minister-has-a-message-for-the-us-dont-choose-china-confrontation-or-asia-withdrawal>.

<sup>20</sup> Graham Allison and Robert D. Blackwill, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Minnie Chan and Catherine Wong, "Singapore Prime Minister Urges China and U.S. Not to Pressure Small Nations to Take Sides during Shangri-La Dialogue," *South China Morning Post*, June 1, 2019 ~ <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3012690/singapore-prime-minister-urges-china-and-us-not-pressure-small>.

<sup>22</sup> Lee, "The Endangered Asian Century."

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Chang May Choon, "Asia Can Be the Moderate Voice in U.S.-China Clash: Goh Chok Tong," *Straits Times*, May 15, 2019 ~ <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/asia-can-be-the-moderate-voice-in-us-china-clash>.

While those entreaties seem sensible, where might they even begin? Realistically, one cannot expect U.S.-China cooperation in the post-Trump era to immediately go from zero to sixty, as underscored by tense high-level meetings in Anchorage in March and Tianjin in July. According to Thomas Wright, U.S.-China diplomacy goals should initially be modest to avoid unintentional provocations and to facilitate transactional cooperation on shared interests.<sup>24</sup> While mention of transactional cooperation may conjure the disquieting memory of Trump's transactional foreign policy, it is an acknowledgment that countries that differ sharply in values, as in the case of the United States and China, may need to start where the fruit hangs low and where expectation levels are manageable.

Secondly, Singapore urges that the United States share power with China and that China accept the United States' rightful place and role in Asia. Singaporean leaders believe the effort to accommodate China's aspirations within the current system of international rules and norms is well worth making as it creates a safer and stabler environment for both cooperation and competition to coexist. That said, power-sharing and mutual recognition between contesting leviathans is a challenging proposition. Having dispensed with Deng Xiaoping's dictum to "hide our strength, bide our time," the China of Xi Jinping no longer seems willing to countenance giving the United States a continued say in Asia's regional security.<sup>25</sup> But it takes two to tango. "A larger and more powerful China should not only respect global rules and norms but also take on greater responsibility for upholding and updating the international order under which it has prospered so spectacularly," Lee urged. "Where the existing rules and norms are no longer fit for purpose, China should collaborate with the United States and other countries to work out revised arrangements that all can live with."<sup>26</sup>

## *Conclusion*


Helping the United States regain its footing and credibility in Asia after Trump and amid its strategic rivalry with China—and doing so

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Wright, "The U.S. and China Finally Get Real with Each Other," Brookings Institution, March 22, 2021 ~ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/03/22/the-us-and-china-finally-get-real-with-each-other>.

<sup>25</sup> See "Full Text: Keynote Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Opening Ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2021," Xinhua, April 20, 2021 ~ [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/20/c\\_139893137.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/20/c_139893137.htm).

<sup>26</sup> Lee, "The Endangered Asian Century."

while maintaining a balancing act between them—could ultimately prove a fool’s errand for Singapore, as a former top Singapore diplomat has admitted.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, neither passivity nor taking sides is feasible, as either could leave Singapore and the region susceptible to intimidation by or overreliance on great powers. In his IISS-Fullerton Lecture in Singapore, Secretary Austin, referencing Lee’s appeal, reassured his regional audience that Washington does not expect Singapore or any other country to choose the United States over China—even as the U.S. president promises the world a billion vaccines gratis for Covid-19 and, together with the G-7 leaders, an alternative to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. To Singaporean ears, those initiatives are among the likely telltale signs that the United States is back. 

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<sup>27</sup> Bilahari Kausikan, “No Sweet Spot for Singapore in U.S.-China Tensions,” *Straits Times*, May 30, 2019  <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/no-sweet-spot-for-spore-in-us-china-tensions>.

## Malaysia's Resilient (but Ambiguous) Partnership with the United States: The Dilemmas of Smaller States in the Indo-Pacific Era

*Cheng-Chwee Kuik and Abdul Razak Ahmad*

Though Malaysia is not a treaty ally of the United States, the two countries have had long-standing, institutionalized, and broad-based cooperation in areas ranging from defense and security, economics, and trade to education, technology, and sociocultural ties, among others. Elevated to a comprehensive partnership in April 2014 during President Barack Obama's historic visit to Malaysia, the bilateral relationship has been a vibrant alignment underpinned by converging interests, albeit also colored by enduring ambiguities. This essay argues that the ambiguities are attributable to historical, domestic, and structural factors, which are likely to continue during the Biden administration and beyond.

These dynamics, which are not entirely unique to Malaysia, reflect the dilemmas faced by smaller states, especially at a time when the growing U.S.-China rivalry generates increasing uncertainty in Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region. These dilemmas are already deepening in both military and nonmilitary domains as great-power competition intensifies along both high and low politics, presenting opportunities but also challenges. To ensure a sustainable, mutually beneficial partnership between Malaysia and United States, sources of ambiguity must be acknowledged and addressed, not ignored. The essay concludes by contending that maintaining Malaysia's and other smaller states' strategic autonomy is imperative both bilaterally and regionally. A neutral Southeast Asian region is key to preserving long-term stability and prosperity in Asia, which is in the interest of the United States and other powers.

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**NOTE** ~ The authors are grateful to Ann Marie Murphy, Elina Noor, Sahipulhijaiman Sulaiman, Fong Chin Wei, Jessica Keough, and Zakaria Haji Ahmad for their valuable feedback on an earlier draft of this essay. They also thank Fikry A. Rahman for superb research assistantship. The usual caveats apply.

*Malaysia-U.S. Partnership: A Resilient Alignment*

Malaysia's partnership with the United States is an alignment in key attributes. Although this bilateral cooperation is not a formal alliance (i.e., military partnership with mutual defense obligations), it is an interstate partnership driven by converging strategic interests and continuously developed by institutionalized cooperative mechanisms (as opposed to ad hoc arrangements), high-level consultative processes (as opposed to low-level, ceremonial exchanges), and extensive collaboration with aggregated benefits spilling into multiple domains (as opposed to single-domain interactions). These attributes distinguish the partnership from other less institutionalized or less strategic forms of cooperative relations. In May 2002, then Malaysian defense minister Najib Razak—who later became the country's sixth prime minister from 2009 to 2018—described Malaysia-U.S. defense cooperation as an “untold” but “solid success story.”<sup>1</sup>

The Malaysia-U.S. alignment is characterized not only by substantial collaboration in numerous defense and security areas but also by sustained, sizable economic ties and people-to-people exchanges that have developed since Malaya's independence in 1957 and the formation of the modern state of Malaysia in 1963. After the British withdrawal of troops from Southeast Asia in 1971, Prime Minister Tun Razak replaced his predecessor's pro-West policy with nonalignment and regionalism, approaches continued by all subsequent leaders. This “nonaligned” posture notwithstanding, during Mahathir Mohamad's first premiership (1981–2003), Malaysia and the United States forged and institutionalized bilateral defense ties through the Bilateral Training and Consultative Group (BITACG) in 1984 and an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) in 1994.<sup>2</sup> Since then, Malaysia has gradually developed a substantive defense partnership with the United States, covering consultative engagement, military education and training (most notably through the U.S.-sponsored International Military Education and Training Program), and military exercises (e.g., the annual Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training and the Pacific Partnership).

In the country's inaugural defense white paper in 2020, Malaysia describes its military-to-military ties with the United States as

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<sup>1</sup> Najib bin Tun Abdul Razak, “U.S.-Malaysia Defense Cooperation: A Solid Success Story” (lecture, Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., May 3, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> J.N. Mak, “Malaysian Defense and Security Cooperation: Coming Out of the Closet,” in *Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation: National Interests and Regional Order*, ed. See Seng Tan and Amitav Acharya (London: Routledge, 2004), 127–53; and Barry Wain, *Malaysian Maverick: Mahathir Mohamad in Turbulent Times* (London: Palgrave, 2009).

“long-standing and comprehensive.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, over the decades, the partnership has expanded to a host of areas: a strategic consultation forum with the Malaysia-U.S. Strategic Talks (MUSST), counterterrorism, maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, cybersecurity, and information sharing, among others. Since 2008, under the Building Partner Capacity Program, which involves the Malaysian Armed Forces and other security agencies, the United States has provided Malaysia with \$218 million for maritime domain awareness (MDA), counterterrorism, and other areas of common concern.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. Maritime Security Initiative has supported the installation of MDA radars in eastern Sabah as well as other activities aimed at enhancing Malaysia’s capability and capacity through gaining assets and expanding training. These include the delivery of 18 ScanEagle unmanned aerial vehicles for maritime surveillance between 2019 and 2022.<sup>5</sup>

The benefits from the progressively expanding cooperation are mutual. Aside from providing valuable training and exercise opportunities to the Malaysian Armed Forces and other agencies, the partnership has also granted the United States access to Malaysian airfields and ports, provided jungle-warfare training sites for the U.S. military, and supported U.S. counterterrorism and other strategic priorities at both bilateral and regional levels. In “Integrated Country Strategy: Malaysia,” the U.S. embassy in Kuala Lumpur notes: “Malaysia’s geographic location makes it strategically significant for U.S. commercial and security interests,” reiterating the position outlined in the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy.<sup>6</sup> The embassy report also highlights the importance of partnering with Malaysia on a wide array of issues, including maritime security, supply chain cooperation, and democratic resilience.<sup>7</sup>

Security cooperation has expanded along with increasing bilateral economic and people-to-people ties. The United States has been one of Malaysia’s top investors and trading partners. Malaysia was the United States’ eleventh top trading partner by total trade from 2003 to 2005, despite

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<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Defence (Malaysia), *Defence White Paper: A Secure, Sovereign, and Prosperous Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur, 2020), 70 ~ <https://www.mod.gov.my/images/mindef/article/kpp/DWP.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> This figure does not include the annual \$1.5 million for training Malaysian military personnel in the United States under the IMET (International Military Education and Training) Program. Authors’ communications with individuals familiar with Malaysian defense, August 2021.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Integrated Country Strategy: Malaysia,” 2018, 6 ~ [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/ICS-Malaysia\\_UNCLASS\\_508.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/ICS-Malaysia_UNCLASS_508.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*



its relatively small economy.<sup>8</sup> The two countries have enjoyed close ties in educational, sociocultural, and tourism exchanges as well.

The Malaysia-U.S. partnership has been resilient. Under successive governments, bilateral security and socioeconomic ties have continued unabated, even when political relations stagnated or suffered setbacks. In the late 1990s, Mahathir viewed U.S. interference as a political threat, and bilateral relations reached rock bottom. But despite political problems, it was business as usual on the defense and economic fronts, an indication of the institutionalized nature of Malaysia-U.S. alignment. From 1966 to 2014, no sitting U.S. president visited Malaysia, but during this period security and functional cooperation took off. The most recent indicator of the partnership's stability occurred during Mahathir's second premiership (2018–20). Even though the outspoken leader openly called U.S. president Donald Trump “totally unpredictable” and criticized Washington's Middle East policy, Malaysia-U.S. cooperation remained intact. Although Malaysian politics remain uncertain after another change in government in August 2021, in addition to the Covid-19 pandemic and economic hardship, the bilateral partnership endures—albeit with signs of mutual neglect.

### *Ambiguities in Alignment*

Persistent resilience notwithstanding, the Malaysia-U.S. alignment has been ambiguous from the very beginning. This ambiguity—which manifests itself in the relationship's deliberately low-profile posture, ambivalent outlook, and selective (even contradictory) policy actions—has heightened in recent decades.

From the beginning, Malaysia has preferred to keep its strategic cooperation with the United States under the radar. The institutionalization of bilateral defense ties in Mahathir's signing of the BITACG in 1984 was not publicized in the local media, nor was his decision to enter the ACSA in 1994.<sup>9</sup> In May 2002 Najib admitted that in spite of a wide range of cooperation, “our bilateral defense relationship seems to be an all too well-kept secret” with “virtually no fanfare or public acknowledgement.”<sup>10</sup> Successive ruling elites have not wanted too much publicity about the

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<sup>8</sup> “United States Trade Balance, Exports, and Imports by Country, 2003–2005,” World Integrated Trade Solution, World Bank  <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/USA/Year/2005/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-country>.

<sup>9</sup> Wain, *Malaysian Maverick*.

<sup>10</sup> Najib, “U.S.-Malaysia Defense Cooperation.”

Malaysia-U.S. defense alignment, opting to keep it low-key in the eyes of the Malaysian populace.

The bilateral partnership has also been constrained by an ambivalent outlook. The smaller state's perception of Washington as a partner has been mixed. Successive Malaysian leaders have viewed the United States as a vital partner but at times also as an annoyance and even a problem. In the 1950s–80s, for example, U.S. actions destabilized the prices of two key commodities that Malaysia exported, fueling frustration that Washington was sabotaging the small country's economy.<sup>11</sup> Irritation increased during Mahathir's first tenure as prime minister when he publicly criticized Washington on an array of bilateral and international issues ranging from Palestine-Israel policy and relations with the Muslim world to U.S. protectionism and double standards on economic regionalism. For instance, the United States advocated the North American Free Trade Agreement and supported the European Union but opposed Malaysia's proposed East Asian Economic Group. Bilateral relations dropped to their lowest point in the wake of U.S. interference during Malaysia's economic and political crisis in the late 1990s. At the same time, however, the relationship strengthened in other areas including defense, trade and investment, and education.

The ambiguity in Malaysia-U.S. alignment is most obvious in the smaller state's selective and seemingly contradictory actions in defense. On the one hand, Malaysia has taken an enthusiastic and active approach in enhancing its security partnership with the United States through collaborating on counterterrorism, taking the initiative to establish MUSST in 2008, upgrading its status in the Cobra Gold exercises from observer to participant, and forging cooperation on MDA. On the other, Malaysia has limited the bilateral defense cooperation to training and capacity-building activities, asset acquisition, and information sharing. It has kept its distance from areas deemed sensitive to sovereignty and other concerns.

The ambiguity also takes the form of seemingly opposite acts. For example, Malaysia has allowed the U.S. Navy to land aircraft on Malaysian airstrips and dock vessels at Malaysian ports. In October 2015, Malaysia permitted the USS *Lassen* to moor at its Sepanggar Naval Base in Kota Kinabalu near the South China Sea for a three-day port visit before the U.S. guided-missile destroyer carried out a freedom of navigation operation near the artificial islands China was building in disputed waters. A month

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<sup>11</sup> Pamela Sodhy, *The U.S.-Malaysian Nexus: Themes in Superpower-Small State Relations* (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 1991); and Shakila Jacob, *The United States and the Malaysian Economy* (London: Routledge, 2008).

later, Malaysia also permitted Chinese ships to stop at the same port. This episode underscores Malaysia's "equidistance" approach, intended to avoid giving the impression that it is siding with any one power, especially at a time of growing great-power rivalry. Malaysia has long taken a middle position vis-à-vis the United States and China, preferring to hedge to mitigate multiple risks like many other smaller states in the region.<sup>12</sup> In line with its equidistance policy, Malaysia has been diversifying its defense ties by simultaneously developing strategic partnerships with other powers, including China.<sup>13</sup>

### *Explaining the Ambiguities*

What explains these enduring ambiguities despite ongoing Malaysia-U.S. alignment? The three most important factors are historical experiences and the fear of abandonment, domestic politics, and structural concerns about power asymmetries and power entrapment. Taken together, these factors explain why the bilateral alignment has remained low-profile, ambivalent, and selectively contradictory. Here lies the most valuable yet often overlooked—even taken for granted—significance of the bilateral alignment: that the Malaysia-U.S. partnership has been progressing and expanding, despite multilevel constraints, reflects a persistent small-state pragmatism to keep and enhance cooperative relations. This pragmatic commitment makes the partnership especially valuable for both sides, particularly at a time of increasing uncertainty.

History matters. Malaysia's experience with the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA) from 1957 to 1971 shaped its outlook on the role and the limits of military alignment. This alliance with Britain proved crucial in providing security for the new nation, especially in fending off Indonesian aggression during the Konfrontasi, a low-intensity military campaign against Malaysia from 1963 to 1966. However, the British East of Suez policy and the United States' Nixon Doctrine, in which Washington

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<sup>12</sup> See Seng Tan, "Consigned to Hedge: South-East Asia and America's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Strategy," *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020): 131–48; and Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "How Do Weaker States Hedge? Unpacking ASEAN States' Alignment Behavior towards China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 100 (2016): 500–514.

<sup>13</sup> Chow Bing Ngeow, "Comprehensive Strategic Partners but Prosaic Military Ties: The Development of Malaysia-China Defence Relations 1991–2015," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 37, no. 2 (2015): 269–304; Elina Noor and T.N. Qistina, "Great Power Rivalries, Domestic Politics and Malaysian Foreign Policy," *Asian Security* 13, no. 3 (2017): 200–219; and Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Malaysia between the United States and China: What Do Weaker States Hedge Against?" *Asian Politics & Policy* 8, no. 1 (2016): 155–77.

pledged to uphold its alliance obligations but also expected its allies to be responsible for their own security, highlighted the risk of abandonment for Western-aligned states in the region, Malaysia included. The reduced Western presence and uncertainty in these states' long-term commitments pushed Malaysia in the 1970s to shift its pro-West and alliance-based policies to nonalignment and regionalism.<sup>14</sup> Military partnerships with the United States and other powers are still significant, but in the absence of direct and imminent threats, they are developed in the background, not the forefront.

Domestically, inter-elite dynamics and political legitimation have often constrained the scope and substance of the Malaysia-U.S. partnership. During Tunku Abdul Rahman's years in office (1957–69), despite the leader's pro-West stance and decision to enter the AMDA, he opted not to join the U.S.-led Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. His stance was in part due to domestic opposition from the left and conservative Malay nationalists.<sup>15</sup> During the Mahathir years, the ambivalent, bifurcated relationship between Malaysia and the United States—robust in the economic and security realms but occasionally confrontational in political domains—was primarily a result of the Malaysian elite's efforts to strike a balance across multiple legitimation pathways before their targeted domestic audiences. These pathways include development-based performance legitimation through ensuring sustainable economic growth; identity-based particularistic legitimation through protecting Malay-Bumiputera interests, promoting Muslim causes, and preserving sovereignty and territorial integrity; and democracy-based procedural legitimation through securing public support and winning elections. The performance pathway necessitates growth and external stability, and hence persistent efforts across successive governments to cultivate strong economic and security ties with as many partners as possible. The particularistic pathway demands identity resonance, resulting in recurring attempts to mobilize Malay-Muslim sentiments on particular racial or religious matters (such as the Palestine-Israel conflict and Muslim

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<sup>14</sup> Zakaria Haji Ahmad, "Malaysian Foreign Policy and Domestic Politics: Looking Outward and Moving Inward?" in *Asia and the Major Powers: Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy*, ed. Robert A. Scalapino et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 256–79; and Anthony Milner, "Long-Term Themes in Malaysian Foreign Policy: Hierarchy Diplomacy, Non-Interference, and Moral Balance," *Asian Studies Review* 44, no. 1 (2020): 117–35.

<sup>15</sup> Chandran Jeshurun, *Malaysia: Fifty Years of Diplomacy, 1957–2007* (Kuala Lumpur: Talisman, 2008); and Johan Saravanamuttu, *Malaysia's Foreign Policy: The First Fifty Years* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2010).

Ummah solidarity). The procedural pathway requires an electoral mandate and popular support to govern the multiethnic country of 32 million.

The United States is both boon and bane in these pathways of legitimation. Despite the United States' significant economic and security importance to Malaysia, the superpower's actions—even unintended ones—have often posed challenges to some bases of the Malaysian elite's authority and legitimacy. For instance, the United States curtailed the import of Malaysian palm oil to protect the U.S. soybean industry. Washington's promotion of liberal democracy, human rights, and open markets has been at odds with Malaysia's authoritarian political model.<sup>16</sup> Tensions continued to arise between the two countries such as in the Asian values debate, differences over Mahathir's vision for pan-East Asian integration, and Washington's criticisms of successive Malaysian leaders' treatment of Anwar Ibrahim. Muslim voters' resentment toward U.S. policies in the Islamic world has also led the ruling elite—even during different governments—to be critical of U.S. policies, particularly on the Palestine-Israel conflict.

Structurally, growing uncertainty from increasing great-power rivalries has also compelled Malaysia to avoid aligning all its major policies with a single power.<sup>17</sup> Like other smaller states in the region, Malaysia is worried about China's intentions, as Beijing has turned increasingly assertive in the past decade, most recently deploying Chinese military aircraft toward Malaysian airspace in May 2021. It is also becoming increasingly unsure, however, about the United States' long-term commitment, especially after the Trump years. In the absence of highly reliable long-term allied support, Malaysia and other Southeast Asian states find it necessary to hedge and avoid single-side alignment. While perceived by some observers as being too accommodating and deferential to China, Malaysia has quietly defied it as well, such as by declining Beijing's request to send Uighurs to China, suspending some Beijing-backed infrastructure projects, and pursuing legal hedges to defy China's claims over the South China Sea.

At the regional level, Malaysia has often felt that United States devotes more attention and resources to other Southeast Asian countries. This favoritism is disappointing particularly for Malaysian policy elites who are committed to enhancing the country's partnership with the United States

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<sup>16</sup> Helen E.S. Nesadurai, "Malaysia and the United States: Rejecting Dominance, Embracing Engagement," Institute for Defence and Security Studies, Working Paper, no. 72, December 1, 2004 ~ <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/rsis-pubs/WP72.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Saravanamuttu, *Malaysia's Foreign Policy*; and Elina Noor, "Foreign and Security Policy in the New Malaysia," Lowy Institute, November 7, 2019 ~ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/foreign-and-security-policy-new-malaysia>.

in spite of constraining factors. Malaysia's sense of relative neglect has deepened so far under the Biden administration. Since the administration took office, leading U.S. officials have visited other countries in the region but not Malaysia. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's July 2021 tour and Vice President Kamala Harris's August 2021 trip to the region both skipped the country. When Secretary Austin was in Singapore, his office scheduled a phone conversation with his Malaysian counterpart, but the arrangement was canceled twice.<sup>18</sup>

### *Implications: Smaller States' Deepening Dilemmas amid Growing Uncertainties*

Malaysia's partnership with the United States during the Biden era—even with all the institutionalized features qualifying it as an “alignment”—is likely to function but with ambiguities, especially in light of growing uncertainties at both domestic and international levels. Domestically, Malaysian politics is entering a new, even more volatile phase following the recent appointment of Ismail Sabri as the country's new prime minister—the third in three years. As politicians across parties and coalitions struggle for their survival before the next election (which is expected to be held in 2022), a deepening domestic preoccupation is likely to take hold, particularly given the worsening Covid-19 situation and its economic consequences.

Internationally, as the U.S.-China rivalry intensifies and uncertainty grows, smaller states are pressured to deepen their hedges even while the space to do so is shrinking. While no country wants a great-power conflict, the possibility cannot be dismissed. As Beijing's assertiveness continues, Washington is joining hands with more allies and partners across the Indo-Pacific not only in security but also in nonmilitary domains such as infrastructure, public health, and supply chain cooperation, stepping up efforts to provide developing countries with alternative partnership opportunities to China's Belt and Road Initiative and vaccine diplomacy. These initiatives include the G-7's Build Back Better World initiative, Japan's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, and the EU's Globally Connected Europe strategy.

Smaller states in Southeast Asia, Malaysia included, see both opportunities and risks from these trends. Aside from providing more impetus to limit and constrain China, the increasing great-power competition


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<sup>18</sup> Authors' communications with individuals familiar with the matter, August 2021.

and courtship are enhancing developing countries' capabilities in battling Covid-19. The United States and Japan, respectively, contributed one million doses of the Pfizer vaccine and one million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine to Malaysia, which is also a beneficiary of China's vaccine diplomacy. In the long run, if competing initiatives bring concrete support, they may boost developing countries' capabilities in infrastructure development and economic rebuilding. On the other hand, intensifying power dynamics have also brought risks, such as increasing the dangers of regional polarization, undermining the centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and distracting smaller states from their own domestic governance.

To cope with these dilemmas, Malaysia—like other Southeast Asian states—has instinctively hedged by avoiding taking sides while sticking to its equidistance policy, diversifying its strategic links, and pursuing subtly ambiguous approaches in partnering with different powers. These efforts are pursued with an eye to offset risks and preserve strategic autonomy in light of growing uncertainties—they are small-state self-help mechanisms.

It is true that maintaining autonomy means that Malaysia, again like other smaller states, will have to keep the United States and other powers at arm's length. While it may sound counterintuitive, Washington, Beijing, and other powers should support—rather than sabotage—such an approach. Enabling ASEAN states to keep their strategic autonomy is good not only for the smaller states but also for all regional actors. The strategic autonomy of Southeast Asia helps ensure these states' neutrality, prevents regional polarization, and maintains regional stability, thereby allowing countries of diverse interests to forge inclusive, region-wide cooperation. Conversely, inducing or coercing smaller states to start taking sides would only create unnecessary divides, trigger vicious cycles of action-reaction, heighten tensions, and diminish the existing cooperative platforms.

Malaysia and other ASEAN states' insistence on small-state hedging and strategic autonomy might not be well-liked by any of the competing powers. However, precisely because this is not the best scenario for any of the powers, it is the second-best scenario for all of them. Considering Malaysia's geographic location, diplomatic linkages, and traditional role in bringing countries across regions, civilizations, and developmental tiers together for broad-based partnerships, it is important to engage Malaysia, even and especially as it faces unprecedented challenges on multiple fronts. Neglecting Malaysia would only push it to the other side of the power equation, undoing the strategic dividends that both sides have built for decades. 

## The Push and Pull of the Developing U.S.-Vietnam Defense Partnership

*Huong Le Thu*

U.S. scholarship after 1975 on Southeast Asia's alignment politics has framed this diverse region according to the level of closeness it displays toward the United States and China. One of the more comprehensive attempts to map the ten-country region's alignment preferences was John Ciorciari's 2010 study *The Limits of Alignment: Southeast Asia and the Great Powers since 1975*. He saw Vietnam as “smack in the middle,” walking a fine line between the United States and China—both of which Vietnam fought wars with.<sup>1</sup> This assessment confirmed Hanoi's foreign policy strategy of “equidistance with great powers” with some tendency to lean toward the United States.

Fast forward to 2021, where one of the most recent works on the topic, David Shambaugh's *Where Great Powers Meet: America and China in Southeast Asia*, offers a starkly different picture. In his assessment, Vietnam has become the closest partner to the United States among all the Southeast Asian states, including the United States' five-decades-long treaty allies the Philippines and Thailand and long-standing security partners Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia.<sup>2</sup> While this author views the depth of Vietnam's U.S. ties as still far behind those with other regional partners, Shambaugh is right in recognizing the current trend: Hanoi seems more like-minded with the United States than traditional U.S. partners do, especially in regard to China's threat. Vietnam is also more prepared than its neighbors to express support for the United States' presence in the region while voicing concern about China.

This juxtaposition illustrates the direction of the shift that has occurred in the region over the past fifteen years. Until the mid-2010s the United States had more supporters than China, but the trend has reversed today.

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<sup>1</sup> John Ciorciari, *The Limits of Alignment: Southeast Asia and the Great Powers since 1975* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 189.

<sup>2</sup> David Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet: America and China in Southeast Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 243.



Thus, Vietnam's strengthened ties with the United States are an anomaly compared to its neighbors. If the current great-power competition is compared to the bipolarity of the Cold War, the United States' constellation of Southeast Asian partners is significantly different from that era.

This essay explains the main drivers behind the newfound closeness between the United States and Vietnam and analyzes their efficacy in a longer-term context. Will the current motivations of strategic "like-mindedness" regarding China be sufficient to maintain a foundation for strong U.S.-Vietnam ties? What challenges remain that the current strategic convergence may or may not overcome?

### *Developing Strategic Like-Mindedness*

Diplomatically speaking, Vietnam was relatively successful in engaging the Trump administration. Despite the widespread worry that President Donald Trump would pay little attention to Asia (apart from China and North Korea), he visited Vietnam twice during his term—more than any other Asian partner. Trump's first visit occurred at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in November 2017. The trip not only took place during his first year as president but was historic in being the first time a U.S. president had visited the country since the Vietnam War. The APEC Summit was the only regional diplomatic summit that Trump attended in full; while he made a quick trip to Manila, he left before the East Asia Summit took place. He then skipped all other regional gatherings in Southeast Asia during his term. The second time Trump visited Hanoi was for his second summit with Kim Jong-un in February 2019.<sup>3</sup>

The Trump administration's abrupt exit from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) exposed a major stress point in U.S.-Vietnam relations. Despite some necessary adjustments in regulations, Hanoi lauded the launch of the TPP, which both gave Vietnam better access to Pacific markets and also carried strong geostrategic value. Trump's first decision after taking office was to withdraw the United States from the TPP, a huge disappointment for all its members, not least Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> The TPP decision has since become a symbol of the United States' withdrawal from

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<sup>3</sup> Huong Le Thu, "Second Trump-Kim Summit as Vietnam Both Hosts and Role Models for North Korea," *Straits Times*, February 19, 2019 ~ <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/trump-kim-summit-vietnam-as-both-host-and-role-model-for-north-korea>.

<sup>4</sup> Huong Le Thu, "High Hopes and a Big Let-Down: Vietnam and the TPP," Lowy Institute, Interpreter, November 29, 2016 ~ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/high-hopes-and-big-let-down-vietnam-and-tpp>.

the region as Washington has not put forward an economic alternative, hollowing the United States' economic strategy in Asia. Eleven countries have carried on with the new Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) under Japan's leadership. This episode will continue to reflect poorly in U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relations, as well as demonstrate the limits of U.S. regional engagement. More recently, China, as well as Taiwan and the United Kingdom, have applied to join the CPTPP, which—if successful—will introduce a new dynamic to that trade pact and the regional economic architecture.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these challenges, Vietnam and the United States share some similarities in their views about regional security, in particular their threat perceptions of China. It was at the 2017 APEC Summit in Da Nang in 2017 that Trump first spoke about the “Indo-Pacific” in a prelude to the administration's “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy.<sup>6</sup> His remarks, which referred to Vietnam's proud history of independence and sovereignty in an allusion to its dispute with China over competing territorial maritime claims, were well-received. Many of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's speeches also detailed the U.S. vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific that alluded to competing with China.<sup>7</sup> This theme of denying China's coercive behavior in the South China Sea and supporting other claimants became a major guiding principle of U.S. policy under Trump, and in the first year of the Biden administration.

Trump's term was less disruptive for Vietnam than other Southeast Asian states. During this time, Vietnam emerged as a valued partner in the wake of great-power competition. This change is likely to persist: the first security policy pronouncement of the Biden administration—the Interim Security Strategic Guidelines, published in March 2021—singled out Vietnam along with Singapore (but not treaty allies Thailand and the Philippines) as partners with which the new administration would seek to deepen relations.<sup>8</sup> Despite traditional dissonance in their respective norms,

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<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey J. Scott, “China's CPTPP Bid Puts Biden on the Spot,” Peterson Institute for International Economics, September 23, 2021 ~ <https://www.piie.com/blogs/trade-and-investment-policy-watch/chinas-cptpp-bid-puts-biden-spot>.

<sup>6</sup> Donald J. Trump (remarks at APEC CEO Summit, Da Nang, Vietnam, November 10, 2017) ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-apec-ceo-summit-da-nang-vietnam>.

<sup>7</sup> Lesley Wroughton and David Brunnstrom, “Wary of China's Rise, Pompeo Announces U.S. Initiatives in Emerging Asia,” Reuters, July 30, 2018 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trade/wary-of-chinas-rise-pompeo-announces-u-s-initiatives-in-emerging-asia-idUSKBN1KK0V5>

<sup>8</sup> Joseph R. Biden Jr., *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, D.C., March 2021) ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

values, political systems, and economic “alignment,” the United States and Vietnam have become more like-minded, with the convergence of security interests remaining the strongest bilateral anchor.

Under Trump, the United States underwent a drastic attitude shift toward Beijing, characterizing China as a peer competitor and vowing to address many of its behaviors, including intellectual property theft, unfair trade, debts, and coercive practices. In the last six months of the Trump presidency, Washington—which had previously maintained neutrality in the South China Sea disputes—issued statements explicitly rejecting China’s claims, condemning its coercive actions toward Vietnam, and affirming Vietnam’s sovereign rights to exploit natural resources within its exclusive economic zone.<sup>9</sup> This support, while only on the diplomatic level, was greatly appreciated in Hanoi. Washington’s willingness to acknowledge Beijing’s coercive tactics, gray-zone operations, and regional military buildup is in line with Hanoi’s strategy of internationalizing the South China Sea dispute and China’s attempts to assert control there.<sup>10</sup> Given their shared interests and strategies, Vietnam and the United States have become important partners in this domain.

China’s threat to Vietnam is not limited to the South China Sea or “hard security” issues more generally though. The United States also recognizes that China has leverage over its southern neighbors through natural resource manipulation, including the politicization of the Mekong River. The Mekong (called Lancang in Chinese) begins in China and flows through Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Based at the Mekong’s estuary, Vietnam suffers the most from the detrimental effects and impact of excessive dam construction on the upper sections of the river. Dams change the course of the Mekong and its tributaries and intervene with the river’s natural flow, fisheries, and sediment distribution. They also worsen the impact of drought and the effect of water salination in the lower parts of the Mekong subregion.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, China has

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<sup>9</sup> Michael R. Pompeo, “U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea,” U.S. State Department, Press Statement, July 13, 2020 ~ <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/index.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Huong Le Thu, “Vietnam Should Update Its South China Sea Strategy,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, December 6, 2018 ~ <https://amti.csis.org/vietnam-should-update-south-china-sea-strategy>.

<sup>11</sup> Huong Le Thu, “Securing the Mekong Subregion’s Future through Transitioning to Renewable Energy,” National Bureau of Asian Research, Asia EDGE Project, July 10, 2021 ~ <https://www.nbr.org/publication/securing-the-mekong-subregions-future-through-transitioning-to-renewable-energy>.

been usurping water data and controlling data access according to its political calculations.<sup>12</sup>

Vietnam thus considers the Mekong as another strategic leverage point in Beijing's possession that can be used in disputes. The United States increased attention to issues surrounding the Mekong under the Obama administration when the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) was established in 2009. The LMI comprises Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, the United States, and Myanmar. Through annual dialogues and workshops, the LMI has been at the forefront of U.S. subregional cooperation efforts over the past decade, with funding devoted to improving education, environmental management, health, and infrastructure throughout the Mekong area. In 2020 the LMI was transformed into the U.S.-Mekong Partnership, which the Biden administration has embraced, pledging to develop greater support and cooperation between the United States and the Mekong states. The attention to the Mekong's sustainability and climate change mitigation will greatly benefit Vietnam, which is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Hanoi is also a strong partner for the United States and other powers by advocating for greater international involvement and cooperation in natural resource management and governance (and potentially in resistance to China's dominance in the region).

### *Technology Issues*

The "China threat" is not limited to geography. One of the key domains of the U.S. competition with China is in technology. Trump declared that "the race to 5G is a race America must win," and soon after announced a U.S. ban on Huawei in supplying 5G technology to the U.S. market.<sup>13</sup> The United States naturally expected support from its partners and allies worldwide. In Southeast Asia, however, this blacklisting was a hard sell.<sup>14</sup> Across almost the entire region, Huawei's presence has prevailed. In 2019 the government of Thailand launched a test of 5G technology that includes equipment from Huawei and is promoting telecommunication

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<sup>12</sup> "Mekong Policy Project," Stimson Center ~ <https://www.stimson.org/project/mekong-policy-project>.

<sup>13</sup> Todd Haselton, "President Trump Announces New 5G Initiatives: It's a Race 'America Must Win,'" CNBC, April 12, 2019 ~ <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/04/12/trump-on-5g-initiatives-a-race-america-must-win.html>.

<sup>14</sup> This section draws on Huong Le Thu, "A Collision of Cybersecurity and Geopolitics: Why Southeast Asia Is Wary of a Huawei Ban," *Global Asia* 14, no. 3 (2019) ~ [https://www.globalasia.org/v14no3/cover/a-collision-of-cybersecurity-and-geopolitics-why-southeast-asia-is-wary-of-a-huawei-ban\\_huong-le-thu](https://www.globalasia.org/v14no3/cover/a-collision-of-cybersecurity-and-geopolitics-why-southeast-asia-is-wary-of-a-huawei-ban_huong-le-thu).

infrastructure investment within its planned Eastern Economic Corridor. Meanwhile, Globe Telecom in the Philippines confirmed a partnership with Huawei. With the help of Huawei and ZTE, Cambodia is also pursuing 5G connectivity. To be fair, Huawei has had over twenty years of presence in Southeast Asia, with strategic partnerships in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. Its presence goes beyond wireless communications.

Although it did not implement an explicit ban, Vietnam was the first (and for a while, the only) country in Southeast Asia that avoided Huawei. In cooperation with Sweden's Ericsson, state-owned telecom Viettel developed a network with plans to launch it in 2021. Nevertheless, Chinese state companies have had access to Vietnamese telecoms before. In fact, ZTE previously partnered with Viettel to develop 3G, although Viettel relied on its own base stations to develop 4G. Vietnam's plans for wireless communications are not based solely on rejecting Huawei but are also an integral part of the country's national strategy for succeeding in the fourth industrial revolution—a key focus of President Nguyen Xuan Phuc. Hanoi's decision had little to do with the U.S. blacklisting but rather comes from a long-term strategic awareness of security challenges emanating from its northern neighbor.<sup>15</sup>

While U.S.-Vietnam relations are stronger than ever, continuous challenges threaten efforts to deepen and cement relationships beyond the utilitarian level. External concerns seem to be bringing the former foes closer, but persistent factors—primarily domestic—still limit the partnership.

### *Domestic Politics*

Early 2021 saw leadership changes for both the United States and Vietnam. In addition to Biden's electoral win over Trump amid internal division and controversy, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) named new figures for top leadership positions, including the party secretary general and cabinet heads, at the 13th National Party Congress.<sup>16</sup> Though in Vietnam the change of key positions usually does not mean major changes in policy direction, the personalities of leaders are often critical to policy implementation.

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<sup>15</sup> Le Thu, "A Collision of Cybersecurity and Geopolitics."

<sup>16</sup> Huong Le Thu, "Vietnam Picks Control over Reform at 13th National Party Congress," *Foreign Policy*, February 10, 2021 ~ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/10/vietnam-communist-party-congress-reform-coronavirus-economy>.

The 13th Party Congress re-elected General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong (age 77) for a third term, even though Trong exceeded the age maximum and his election violated the traditional two-term limit. The results of the 13th Party Congress suggest a conservative turn in Vietnamese domestic politics. The two main factions within the CPV are centered on the party and the state. Appointments for the 2021–26 period suggest that party interests prevailed. Trong continues to install party apparatchiks in key positions rather than promote capable government officials.

As a result, the top echelons of Vietnam's government are now filled with more conservative policymakers than progressive or pragmatic technocrats. How, and if, that presence in numbers will translate to Vietnam's international engagement strategy—including with the United States—is yet to be seen. However, Trong's third term promises to continue his anticorruption and political dissident crackdowns. This authoritarian impulse may become an issue with a U.S. government that emphasizes liberal democratic values, especially as Biden seeks to host the Summit for Democracy to promote global solidarity based on democratic principles.<sup>17</sup>

Since the early days of his presidency, Biden has touted a foreign policy that serves first and foremost the American people, particularly the middle class. What this policy means practically though is still unclear. Biden's rhetoric has been interpreted as not too distinct from Trump's "America first" policy. The United States' middle class has perceived globalization and the country's global contribution to security as hurting its interests, so addressing their concerns first leads to protectionist impulses. While this policy trend may make sense to a highly divided American public, internationally it invokes a concern that the United States under Biden will still display isolationist tendencies.

For Vietnam in particular—a relatively new partner that may not understand the United States' domestic politics as well as longer-term and closer partners—this trend is also a worry. Should the Biden administration be overwhelmingly preoccupied with domestic prerogatives at the expense of global engagement, the region may lose Washington's attention and commitment; Vietnam and its South China Sea agenda could drop further in the priority list. As it is still only speculative, Biden's foreign policy for the

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<sup>17</sup> James Traub, "What Biden Really Thinks About Democracy Promotion," *Foreign Policy*, July 31, 2021  
 ~> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/31/what-biden-really-thinks-about-democracy-promotion>.

U.S. middle class needs further explanation and communication not only with domestic audiences but also with international ones.<sup>18</sup>

The United States' newfound commitment to address the legacies of the Vietnam War speaks in part to Washington's intention to overcome the obstacles that keep Hanoi's defense elites hesitant. In a new memorandum of understanding that Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin signed during his July visit to Vietnam, the United States promised to assist in finding Vietnamese missing in action (MIAs), as Vietnam previously assisted with the repatriation of American MIAs and their remains.<sup>19</sup> Until as recently as 2018, the United States was reluctant to address issues of unexploded landmines and the cleaning-up of Agent Orange, which contaminated the land and health of Vietnamese civilians, including causing genetic mutations. The gesture suggests a new chapter in bilateral relations, with the United States understanding the importance of reconciliation to advance future security cooperation.<sup>20</sup>

Within a month of Austin's visit, Vice President Kamala Harris made her first visit to Asia (and her second international trip) in late August 2021 to Singapore and Vietnam. While many more traditional partners in the region, including Thailand, the Philippines, and even Indonesia—the largest state in Southeast Asia which had been previously snubbed by Washington—found the visit perplexing, the gesture was received in Vietnam as signaling that the new administration was serious about upgrading the relationship. The Harris trip, however, happened in the unfortunate context of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan that led to the Taliban's rapid takeover of Kabul.<sup>21</sup> The fallout from the humanitarian crisis and the uncoordinated U.S. exit from Afghanistan created a damaging image of the United States as not being in control. While ending the “forever war” and refocusing on the Indo-Pacific is generally a welcome goal in Southeast Asia, this pullout raised questions globally about the United States' commitment to its allies and partners. The chaotic scenes from

<sup>18</sup> Dan Baer, “Tracking Biden's Progress on a Foreign Policy for the Middle Class,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 6, 2021 ~ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/04/06/tracking-biden-s-progress-on-foreign-policy-for-middle-class-pub-84236>.

<sup>19</sup> “U.S. Defense Secretary Visits Vietnam, Vows Support for Region,” Associated Press, July 28, 2021, available at <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/07/28/us-defense-secretary-visits-vietnam-vows-support-region.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Huong Le Thu, “Reconciling the Past for a Stronger Partnership: Shaping U.S.-Vietnam Relations under the Biden Administration,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Commentary, August 4, 2021 ~ <https://t.co/HU1fB16vDF?amp=1>.

<sup>21</sup> Shibani Mahtani, “U.S. Is Still a ‘Global Leader,’ Harris Says on Asia Trip, as Allies Fret over China, Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, August 23, 2021 ~ <https://t.co/uP9i5bNtBC?amp=1>.

Kabul were frequently compared to the fall of Saigon, which did not sit well with the Communist government in Hanoi. Of course, the issue was barely discussed within Vietnamese media. During her visit as the first sitting U.S. vice president to visit Vietnam, Harris discussed further elevating the comprehensive partnership to a strategic partnership. She also inaugurated a new regional office for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Southeast Asia headquartered in Vietnam.<sup>22</sup> That, paired with the plan to launch a new U.S. embassy complex in Hanoi costing \$1.2 billion (the most expensive U.S. foreign office to date), suggests that Washington is investing in long-term and closer relations with Vietnam.

### *Conclusion*

Although it is too soon to make predictions for U.S.-Vietnam relations under the Biden administration, it is fair to say that bilateral relations have great potential. Currently, the relationship is at its best and has a real opportunity to progress to the next level. Nevertheless, the relationship continues to face several challenges.

In the long-term, the convergence of strategic interests and threat perceptions, especially from China, is not necessarily a strong foundation for a lasting relationship between the two powers. Should there be a shift in U.S.-China relations (akin to the ping-pong diplomacy of the 1970s), the basis for the current U.S.-Vietnam alignment could be shaken. A combination of taking an overly utilitarian approach focused on alignment issues and forgoing divergent views may risk a relationship developing that is mostly based on threat perceptions of China.

Having acknowledged the domestic “pulls” that are likely to remain for the foreseeable future, it is important to note that bilateral rapprochement has been facilitated primarily by an external “push”—China. If Beijing’s “wolf warrior diplomacy” continues, it is likely that the United States and Vietnam will find ways around the limitations in their bilateral relationship to further accelerate cooperation. The common interest between them, after all, is responding to China’s coercion. The pulls alone, while significant, are not the main determinants of the relationship; rather, it would be a mix of compromises between push factors with remaining constraints. If the United States and Vietnam do not work on other

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<sup>22</sup> “Vice President Kamala Harris Opens New CDC Southeast Asia Regional Office in Vietnam,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Press Release, August 25, 2021 ≈ <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2021/p0825-new-cdc-office.html>.



aspects of their relationship and do not deepen mutual understanding, they are likely to remain aligned on China's challenge but on few other issues. Importantly, the two sides need to build durable foundations for the relationship aside from a common China threat. ◆

## A Fragile Fulcrum: Indonesia-U.S. Military Relations in the Age of Great-Power Competition

*Evan A. Laksmana*

Can the United States change Indonesia's strategic alignment in the ongoing great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific? More than a few analysts and policymakers in Washington and Jakarta might think so. For some, the people-to-people, economic, and security ties that have been built over seven decades of engagement should be stronger than Indonesia's ties with China, which only restarted in 1990. But for others, given the scale of Indonesia's economic engagement with China in recent years, the United States might have no choice but to rely on its relationship with the Indonesian military, the Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI), to stay close to the island nation.<sup>1</sup> In the areas of military education and training, joint exercises, and arms transfers, Indonesia's relationship with the United States far outstrips the one it has with China.

At the moment, the security element seems stronger in the relationship than the others. For one, the Trump administration ignored the strategic partnership framework and focused instead on counterterrorism, military ties, and maritime security premised on the need to counter China.<sup>2</sup> For another, the United States can hardly compete with China's growing economic profile in the country. Indonesia-China economic ties soared under President Joko Widodo, whose "developmentalist" outlook favored infrastructure, trade, and foreign investment. By 2019, Chinese imports totaled \$44.9 billion (26.3% of total imports) and non-oil and gas exports to China were Indonesia's largest share of exports (16.7% of total exports).<sup>3</sup> In the same year, China became Indonesia's biggest source of FDI, surpassing Japan. According to Indonesian figures, private and state-backed investment

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<sup>1</sup> The Indonesian military has adopted different names since 1945. This essay uses TNI for shorthand purposes, even though the name was only officially reinstated in 1999 following the end of the New Order era (which for the most part used the name Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia, or ABRI).

<sup>2</sup> See Francis Chan, "U.S. to Work with Indonesia on Maritime Security, Counter-terrorism," *Straits Times*, January 23, 2018 ~ <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/us-to-work-with-indonesia-on-maritime-security-counter-terrorism>.

<sup>3</sup> See Greta Nabbs-Keller, "The Contending Domestic and International Imperatives of Indonesia's China Challenge," *Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2020): 194.

by Chinese firms increased from \$600 million in 2015 to \$4.74 billion in 2019—equivalent to 23.1% of total FDI inflows—and helped fund over two thousand projects across Indonesia.<sup>4</sup>

The United States may thus have little choice but to rely on military ties if it wants to pull Indonesia’s strategic alignment closer toward itself. Despite a brief pause in the late 1990s and early 2000s, 12,000 Indonesian participants went through various U.S. military education and training programs between 1969 and 2018. In the past two decades alone, over 7,300 Indonesian students trained in more than two hundred such programs. In close to that same time frame, Indonesia carried out more than a hundred major military exercises with the United States and imported close to \$1 billion in U.S. arms and equipment.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the TNI has struggled to send a dozen officers each year to Chinese professional military schools and programs. Over the past two decades, Indonesia only imported around \$363 million of arms and equipment from China and held about half a dozen major exercises with it. In 2015, Jakarta even suspended the Indonesia-China Sharp Knife counterterrorism exercise due to recurrent crises with China in the waters around the Natuna Islands.<sup>6</sup>

Though “military-to-military relations are clearly a strong link in the U.S.-Indonesia relationship, this essay argues against over-relying on them. The defense establishment is not as dominant in Indonesia’s strategic policymaking as it once was in the authoritarian New Order period (1966–98).<sup>7</sup> The notion that bilateral military ties are sufficient to sway Indonesia’s strategic alignment assumes a spillover effect—from defense to broader strategic policy—that no longer holds. Indonesia’s strategic policymaking still remains incoherent, and its defense transformation process has stagnated. There are also significant limitations to military ties when considered in their historical and organizational contexts. Washington has already won the military race; Beijing is unlikely to become Jakarta’s preferred defense partner anytime soon. There is no need then

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<sup>4</sup> Nabbs-Keller, “The Contending Domestic and International Imperatives of Indonesia’s China Challenge,” 194.

<sup>5</sup> Arms transfer figures and values throughout the essay are from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), SIPRI Arms Transfer Database ~ <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>. Education and training figures are from the author’s original dataset based on the published records of the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, U.S. State Department, and other secondary sources.

<sup>6</sup> See Frega Wenas Inkiriwang, “‘Garuda Shield’ vs ‘Sharp Knife’: Operationalising Indonesia’s Defence Diplomacy,” *Pacific Review* (2020): 15.

<sup>7</sup> By strategic policymaking, I mean the process of formulating and executing the integration of multi- and cross-domain policies—from economic to diplomatic and defense—to respond to, shape, and address strategic challenges.

to overemphasize, overestimate, or overleverage military ties when other elements of the strategic partnership still require work and attention.

Further, to seek to bend Indonesia's alignment ignores deeper foundations of the country's foreign policy. Indonesia does not believe one great power is inherently better, whether economically, militarily, or morally. After all, throughout history, every great power has undermined Indonesia's domestic order or acted contrary to its strategic interests. As such, Indonesia's foreign policy is fixed on maintaining legitimacy at home, seeking strategic autonomy, and denying any great power hegemony over the region.<sup>8</sup> The United States should therefore keep the focus on deepening the existing strategic partnership and sustaining existing military ties without pushing them too much in an effort to pry Indonesia away from China. The following sections elaborate on these arguments by examining the evolution of bilateral military relations as well as their promises and pitfalls in reorienting Indonesia's strategic alignment.

### *Indonesia-U.S. Military Relations: Brief Historical Context*

Going back even as far as the late 1940s, Indonesia-U.S. defense ties have been historically based less on technological cooperation or joint warfighting experience and more on shared professional military education and training. The United States invested in training and educating the best and brightest from the Indonesian military as a bulwark against Communism, although most of the military's actual leaders since the 1970s were trained domestically. Furthermore, Indonesian military leaders at the time were convinced of the need to play the United States and the Soviet Union against one another to avoid becoming overly dependent on either one, which would have empowered the army's domestic enemies, including the Indonesian Communist Party.<sup>9</sup>

Military ties significantly jumped under the New Order, which saw President Suharto's government crush Communist forces following an alleged attempted coup in September 1965. For much of Suharto's rule until his regime collapsed in 1998, the military was one of the most powerful institutions in the country, permeating all sectors of society and strategic policymaking. The United States' investment in educating and training

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<sup>8</sup> Evan A. Laksmana, "Indonesia Unprepared as Great Powers Clash in Indo-Pacific," *Foreign Policy*, August 26, 2021 ~ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/26/indonesia-china-us-geopolitics>.

<sup>9</sup> For details of this history, see Rudolf Mrázek, *The United States and the Indonesian Military, 1945–1965: A Study of an Intervention* (Prague: Oriental Institute in Academia, 1978).

army officers paid handsomely during this period. While professing to have an “independent and active” foreign policy, Indonesia was quietly aligned—some would say in a “de facto alliance”—with the United States for much of the New Order era.<sup>10</sup> This trend persisted despite the gradual decline in Indonesian students enrolled in various professional U.S. military schools and programs by the late 1970s.<sup>11</sup>

After 1975 Indonesia’s invasion and occupation of East Timor started to draw public scrutiny to the military’s operational conduct and human rights record. The United States eventually suspended military education and training programs and even imposed an arms embargo on Indonesia following military violence in East Timor and Papua in the 1990s and early 2000s. For better or for worse, human rights issues have continued to shape U.S.-Indonesia military relations until today.<sup>12</sup> The embargo and suspension left a searing reminder in the minds of Indonesian policymakers of the danger of over-relying on a single country for security provisions, propelling them to diversify Indonesia’s security relations, particularly in arms supply, following the democratic transition in 1998. This policy essentially traded off strategic autonomy with interoperability and capability development costs (e.g., training, maintenance, and repair).

Following September 11, the United States sought to restore its relationship with the TNI in the hope of blocking al Qaeda’s inroads into Southeast Asia, and military-to-military relations were gradually restored. Even if fully reinstating ties with the Indonesian Army Special Forces (Kopassus) was perhaps more challenging, Washington’s growing competition with Beijing helped push the effort along. Indeed, since the late stage of the Trump administration and now under the Biden administration, security-centric activities seem to dominate bilateral engagement. There was a flurry of high-level engagement following the visit of Indonesian minister of defense Prabowo Subianto to Washington in October 2020 after he was

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<sup>10</sup> Juwono Sudarsono, “Indonesia and the United States, 1966–75: An Inquiry into a De Facto Alliance Relationship” (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> This decline is likely because of the growing confidence of Indonesian military leaders in their own military education programs by then. For details, see Evan A. Laksmana, Iis Gindarsah, and Curie Maharani, *75 tahun TNI: Evolusi ekonomi pertahanan, operasi, dan organisasi militer Indonesia, 1945–2020* [The 75-Year Evolution of the Indonesian Armed Forces: Defense Economics, Military Operations, and Personnel Infrastructure] (Jakarta: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2020), chap. 6.

<sup>12</sup> For details on the debate on the centrality of human rights considerations in shaping U.S. military engagement with Indonesia, see Anja Jetschke, *Human Rights and State Security: Indonesia and the Philippines* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); and Charles Comer, “Leahy in Indonesia: Damned If You Do (and Even If You Don’t),” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 37, no. 2 (2010): 53–70.

initially barred from entering the country due to alleged past human rights violations. This paved the way for subsequent high-level U.S. officials to visit Jakarta, including the acting secretary of defense in December 2020. High-level security engagements have continued since then, culminating in the latest and largest iteration of the Garuda Shield joint army exercise in August 2021. The specter of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which had threatened to impose sanctions over Indonesia's planned acquisitions of Russian arms, seems to be in the rearview mirror. Also in August, Indonesian foreign minister Retno Marsudi met U.S. secretary of state Antony Blinken in Washington to launch a "strategic dialogue," resuscitating the 2015 U.S.-Indonesia strategic partnership. This revival is a welcome development, given that this framework represents the most comprehensive bilateral engagement and covers a wide range of issues, including defense, maritime security, economic relations, and people-to-people ties.

Overall, bilateral military relations have experienced ups and downs over the past seven decades, most of which correspond to political and strategic challenges to the relationship, from Communism to human rights to great-power politics. Put differently, the needs and interests of the broader bilateral ties have driven military-to-military engagement. The centrality of military ties, however, carries with it an inherent paradox: they may be necessary, given the military's supposed central domestic role, but they are also susceptible to the ebbs and flows of political and strategic interests between the two countries and are therefore fragile. Because they serve a broader set of bilateral goals and interests, their quality, scope, and durability will always be subject to wider pressures. This has led then to inconsistent and incoherent military-to-military engagements. Military ties alone are not a consistent strategic ballast for a holistic partnership.

### *Indonesia-U.S. Military Relations: Organizational Context*

Viewed through the organizational context of the TNI, military engagement carries policy promises and pitfalls. On the one hand, maintaining a wide variety of military education and training programs, joint exercises, and arms transfers gives Washington and Jakarta some solid communication channels. The United States has also facilitated the development and improvement of some of the TNI's operational and tactical capabilities (e.g., counterinsurgency and air assault). Theoretically this allows the TNI to maintain some degree of operational readiness it

could not have obtained otherwise. Participating in U.S. education and training programs additionally gives Indonesian officers a glimpse of the latest developments in military affairs, defense policy, and equipment.

On the other hand, the organizational benefits of U.S. military education and training programs and arms transfers are doubtful. For one, the sheer diversity of Indonesia's foreign arms suppliers—about 33 over the past two decades—means that no single country, including the United States, dominates the country's military technology (although the TNI remains heavily dependent on arms, equipment, and systems of Western origin). For another, the organizational effects of professional U.S. military education and training have been diluted by the TNI's under-institutionalized and haphazard personnel management policies. Over time, the lack of merit-based and transparent promotion policies has sustained patronage in determining who rises through the ranks. One of the consequences has been that U.S.-trained officers by and large do not become the TNI's top leaders. By one account, out of the 677 TNI generals who graduated from the academy between 1950 and 1990, less than 16% were trained in one of the U.S. programs.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, there are mismatches between the TNI's daily operational tasks and challenges (such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing and internal security) and what U.S. education, training, and arms can support. The TNI has developed a range of its own education and training institutions for such tasks, and the United States, or any other country for that matter, is unlikely to offer programs that could supersede these domestic schools. Additionally, backing Subianto's procurement-centric defense policy neglects other defense transformation challenges such as personnel management.

But most importantly, military policy rarely spills over any longer into wider strategic policymaking since the democratic transition in 1998. The foreign ministry has since demilitarized the diplomatic system.<sup>14</sup> Influential civilian business groups and senior political party officials now dominate the economic sector, while military-controlled businesses have been either sold off or taken over by the government since the early 2010s. National strategic policy remains incoherent—Indonesia does not have an equivalent

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<sup>13</sup> Evan A. Laksmana, "Are Military Assistance Programs Important for U.S.-Indonesia Ties?" *East Asia Forum*, April 18, 2018 ~ <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/04/18/are-military-assistance-programs-important-for-us-indonesia-ties>.

<sup>14</sup> See Greta Nabbs-Keller, "Reforming Indonesia's Foreign Ministry: Ideas, Organization and Leadership," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 35, no. 1 (2013): 56–82.

to a National Security Council under the president to integrate various strategic policies, and the government's coordinating ministry system remains disjointed and underdeveloped. The TNI, therefore, while still an important and influential domestic institution, is no longer the primary centerpiece of the government's domestic legitimacy. It is no longer realistic then to expect that closer military-to-military ties would reshape Indonesia's strategic policymaking or reorient its strategic alignment.

### *Conclusion and Recommendations*

This brief survey of Indonesia-U.S. military relations offers several broader conclusions about Indonesia's foreign policy and strategic alignment in the age of great-power competition. First, the United States and other major powers should resist an attempt to leverage military ties into reorienting Indonesia's strategic alignment. Indonesia remains equally distrustful of all great powers—the United States and China alike, if for different reasons and historical concerns. The idea of leveraging military ties to shape Indonesia's broader strategic policymaking is also based on assumptions of a positive spillover into other policy realms that is no longer relevant today, given the country's chaotic policymaking system and the declining role of the military within it.

Perhaps more importantly, the diversity of key domestic groups deemed crucial for the Indonesian president's legitimacy—including powerful oligarchs, religious groups, and the security sector—suggests that Indonesia's strategic policy is likely to stay incoherent, haphazard, and subject to domestic contestation. The growth in Indonesia-China economic ties over the past decade has helped sustain, if not entrench, powerful business groups and party oligarchs that are considerably more salient for the president's domestic legitimacy on a daily basis than the TNI as an institution. Recently, China has deepened its engagement with various Indonesian business groups and state-owned enterprises over the provision of pandemic-related health goods such as vaccines, masks, and other personal protective equipment. Meanwhile, the United States is lagging in providing pandemic support, even though it has expanded ties with the TNI. We might thus be witnessing the amplification of a “division of labor” between the United States and China, where Jakarta is wedded to the latter for prosperity (backed by political-economic interest groups) and to the former for security (backed by the TNI). But as different domestic groups—of which the TNI is only but one—continue to exercise varying



degrees of influence over strategic policymaking, Indonesia's strategic alignment is likely to remain incoherent.

Additionally, given the TNI's problematic human rights record—an issue subject to periodic reappearance between the United States and Indonesia—an over-reliance on military ties is unsustainable. Indonesian analysts have been concerned that under Biden's Democratic administration, human rights will feature more prominently in bilateral engagement.<sup>15</sup> For the time being, however, China-driven regional concerns, pandemic management, and defense ties seem to be higher on the agenda. The revival of the strategic partnership framework could mitigate some of the potential drawbacks if and when human rights concerns arise. There is, moreover, no need to be especially concerned about Indonesia-China defense ties as there is no serious competition there. The United States should therefore keep focusing on its working-level engagement with the TNI without overleveraging the relationship.

Finally, both Jakarta and Washington should consider broader nonmilitary forms of security engagement (e.g., maritime law enforcement or civilian defense community empowerment) to complement the growth in the military relationship. The Indonesian defense ministry's narrow procurement-centric approach should be counterbalanced by boosting the long-term strategic counterparts of the TNI in the civilian defense community. The United States had a history of doing so in the early days of Indonesia's post-authoritarian military reform.<sup>16</sup> Washington could also support Indonesia's larger defense transformation by increasing support for professionalizing strategic planning and personnel management systems as well as for improving the TNI's operational proficiency in non-kinetic “military operations other than war” such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Bilateral or regional mechanisms to support industrial collaboration with Indonesia's underdeveloped domestic defense companies would also benefit the two states' relationship. The overall goal of these engagements would be to gradually improve the TNI's operational proficiency and Indonesia's strategic autonomy.

Taken together, the Biden administration should (1) consider the different domestic constituencies crucial for any Indonesian president in

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<sup>15</sup> See “Joe Biden Win May Shift Relations towards Human Rights, Analysts Say,” *Tempo*, November 9, 2020. ~ <https://en.tempo.co/read/1403597/joe-biden-win-may-shift-relations-towards-human-rights-analysts-say>.

<sup>16</sup> See Fabio Scarpello, “Stifled Development: The SSR—Civil Society Organizations Community in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia,” in *Security Sector Reform in Southeast Asia*, ed. Felix Heiduk (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 131–58.

the post-authoritarian era and not try to pry the country away from China, (2) deepen the strategic partnership framework rather than overleverage military ties, and (3) formulate both military and nonmilitary options to boost Indonesia's long-term strategic autonomy. These goals correspond to the key features of Indonesia's foreign policy ambitions: to maintain strategic autonomy and avoid any power assuming regional hegemony. Ultimately, a productive engagement strategy for Indonesia in the age of great-power competition is to boost Jakarta's ability to chart its own path, rather than following one laid out by Washington. ◆

## The Philippines' Hedging between the United States and China: Can the Biden Administration Tip the Balance?

*Renato Cruz De Castro*

In February 2021, President Rodrigo Duterte admitted the necessity of the Philippines' alliance with the United States and stated that Manila would renegotiate the 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement with Washington. His grudging acknowledgment of the value of the Philippine-U.S. alliance reflects a gradual shift in Philippine foreign policy. At the start of his presidency, Duterte aimed to transform the Philippines' South China Sea policy from being one of confrontation to one of conciliation through dialogue with China,<sup>1</sup> and his administration endeavored to foster closer Philippines-China diplomatic and economic relations. In the process, he adopted a more nuanced stance toward Philippine security relations with the United States and tipped the balance toward China.

The institutional relationship between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the U.S. armed services, however, withstood the Duterte administration's efforts to disparage the alliance while strengthening ties with China. And after five years of pursuing a policy of appeasement toward China, the Philippines is tipping back toward the United States and incrementally consolidating its U.S. security ties to constrain China's revisionist agenda in the South China Sea.

This essay examines two interrelated questions: what is the state of the Duterte administration's appeasement policy on China, and why is the Philippines cautiously returning to stabilizing its alliance with the United States? It then looks at what the Biden administration should do to make the Philippines give up its appeasement policy and strengthen security ties with the United States for a 21st-century alliance.

### *The Duterte Administration's Policy of Appeasement*

From 2011 to 2016, then president Benigno Aquino III pursued a balancing policy toward China and favored closer security relations with

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<sup>1</sup> The National Institute for Defense Studies, *East Asian Strategic Review 2017* (Tokyo: Japan Times, 2017), 134.

the United States, including an unequivocal security guarantee from the United States under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT). Upon taking office, however, President Rodrigo Duterte reversed Aquino's strategy toward China's South China Sea claims and focused on appeasing China with the hopes that the Philippines would benefit from closer relations with the emerging global economic power. This policy, in turn, triggered a crisis in Philippines-U.S. relations.

In October 2016, Duterte vowed to expel U.S. Special Forces who were supporting the AFP's antiterrorism and counterinsurgency operations in Mindanao and to chart an independent foreign policy. He also canceled the 2017 Balikatan exercise and suspended the joint Philippines-U.S. naval patrols in the South China Sea. At the same time, Duterte pursued a rapprochement with China to promote bilateral ties and secure economic assistance.<sup>2</sup> Beijing and Manila opened formal lines of communication, which paved the way for resuming bilateral consultations on trade, infrastructure development, and tourism, as well as cooperation in science, technology, and health. Duterte announced that the United States had "lost" because of the Philippines' military and economic separation.<sup>3</sup> The Philippines' distancing from the United States was immediately seen as a serious setback for Washington and a diplomatic victory for Beijing, one that could even influence other states to be pulled into China's orbit.<sup>4</sup>

However, Duterte's approach alienated the Philippine military, which still considers its links with the U.S. armed forces crucial to its operations.<sup>5</sup> U.S. forces have provided technical assistance in combating Muslim militants in the southern Philippines, many AFP officers were trained in the United States, and the two militaries have been staging joint military exercises for 70 years. Furthermore, the Philippine military greatly appreciates defense articles channeled through the U.S. government's foreign military sales program.

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<sup>2</sup> National Institute for Defense Studies, *NIDS China Security Report 2019: China's Strategy for Reshaping the Asian Order and Its Ramifications* (Tokyo: Japan Times, 2019), 33.

<sup>3</sup> Katie Hunt, Matt Rivers, and Catherine E. Shoichet, "In China, Duterte Announces Split with U.S.: 'America Has Lost,'" CNN, October 20, 2016 ~> <https://www.cnn.com/2016/10/20/asia/china-philippines-duterte-visit/index.html>; and Lowell Bautista, "The Philippines and the Arbitral Tribunal Award: A Sombre Victory and Uncertain Times Ahead," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 3 (2016): 350–51.

<sup>4</sup> Neil Morales and Karen Lema, "The Philippines Is Preparing a Major Pivot toward China amid Tension with the U.S.," *Business Insider*, October 11, 2016. See also Renato Cruz De Castro, "The Duterte Administration's Foreign Policy: Unravelling the Aquino Administration's Balancing Agenda on an Emergent China," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2016): 139–59.

<sup>5</sup> Richard C. Padlock, "Philippines President Pushes Break with U.S.—Most Filipinos Hold Favorable View of U.S.," *Jane Defense Weekly*, October 27, 2016. See also Renato Cruz De Castro, "The Duterte Administration's Appeasement Policy on China and the Crisis in the Philippine-U.S. Alliance," *Philippine Political Science Journal* 38, no. 2 (2017): 1–23.

The program involves a “total package approach,” which means the recipient country receives all the support articles and services required to operate and maintain the equipment to ensure their continued use long into the future.<sup>6</sup> The quality and amount of U.S. military assistance since the Obama administration has fostered support for the U.S. military presence in the country and the alliance from both the AFP and the general population.<sup>7</sup>

### *The Trump Administration’s Policy of Strategic Patience*

Notwithstanding Duterte’s sharp rhetoric against the United States, President Donald Trump phoned his Philippine counterpart in April 2017 to affirm Washington’s commitment to the terms of the MDT and to express his interest in developing a warm working relationship.<sup>8</sup> Trump’s promise to support Duterte was tested during the siege of Marawi City from May to October 2017. In late May an estimated one thousand militants affiliated with ISIS and led by the Maute group seized Marawi’s central business district.<sup>9</sup> The ISIS leadership declared Marawi to be an “Islamic state” and called on supporters to launch additional attacks outside the city to expose vulnerabilities in the Philippines’ security forces.<sup>10</sup>

Immediately after extremists seized the city, Washington extended its military assistance to Manila, including actionable intelligence to the Philippine combat units. All in all, the U.S. government spent \$15 million in technical assistance and deployed an additional hundred combat personnel.<sup>11</sup> This figure does not include the initial military assistance of \$13.5 million worth of weapons and equipment dispatched in late May 2017, followed by 20 combat rubber raiding craft and 30 outboard motors for the AFP’s riverine operations against the militants. The siege revealed the Philippine military’s weaknesses, especially in urban warfare, causing

<sup>6</sup> Padlock, “Philippines President Pushes Break with U.S.,” 172.

<sup>7</sup> Sheldon Simon and Carl Baker, “Philippine Follies,” *Comparative Connections* 18, no. 3 (2017): 36   
 ~ [http://cc.pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/1603\\_us\\_sea.pdf](http://cc.pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/1603_us_sea.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, “The Trump Administration and the Management of the Philippine-U.S. Alliance,” *Business World*, November 3, 2020   
 ~ <https://www.bworldonline.com/the-trump-administration-and-the-management-of-the-philippine-us-alliance>.

<sup>9</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the siege of Marawi, see Quinton Temby, “Cells, Factions and Suicide Operatives: The Fragmentation of Militant Islamism in the Philippines Post-Marawi,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 1 (2019): 114–37.

<sup>10</sup> Rohan Gunaratna, “The Siege of Marawi: A Game Changer in Terrorism in Asia,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 9, no. 7 (2017): 4   
 ~ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26351533>.

<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Sioson, “Experimenting with the Art of Mission Command,” *Army*, March 2019, 28.

the country to turn back to the United States rather than further into China's embrace.<sup>12</sup>

Stabilizing the alliance is a high priority for Washington as the Philippines remains a linchpin for U.S. regional strategy. Further deterioration of U.S.-Philippines security relations would not only undermine the United States' strategic position in Southeast Asia but also give China political-diplomatic leverage in the two great powers' strategic competition in the region. With Duterte keeping his options open in maintaining the alliance, the United States found it expedient to stabilize its security relationship with the Philippines to preserve the status quo in the South China Sea and, more significantly, to prevent ISIS from gaining a foothold in Southeast Asia. The South China Sea dispute and the growing threat of ISIS in Mindanao posed two key security issues for the U.S.-Philippines alliance.

In November 2017 the Philippine and U.S. militaries held heightened joint counterterrorism training, amphibious drills, and live-fire exercises in a sign of warming bilateral relations. Trump and Duterte reaffirmed their commitments to the MDT and the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Manila.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the two allies tacked proposals to support the United States and modernize the AFP, including developing its capability for maritime security, domain awareness, and expeditious humanitarian response.<sup>14</sup>

The Trump administration also addressed the Philippines' concern about the U.S. security guarantee as stipulated in the 1951 MDT. In December 2018, Secretary of Defense Delfin Lorenzana announced the Philippine defense department would review whether the 1951 MDT remained relevant today.<sup>15</sup> He pointed out that it was time for the MDT "to be revisited, given that its provisions were formulated in

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<sup>12</sup> Ely Ratner, "Why Trump Was Right to Invite Duterte to the White House," *Politico*, May 3, 2017 ~ <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/05/03/trump-invite-duterte-white-house-philippines-215095>. See also Renato Cruz De Castro, "From Appeasement to Soft Balancing: The Duterte Administration's Shifting Policy on the South China Sea Imbroglia," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, working paper, November 2019 ~ [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/projekt\\_papiere/BCAS\\_2019\\_CruzDeCastro\\_Duterte.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/projekt_papiere/BCAS_2019_CruzDeCastro_Duterte.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> De Castro, "The Trump Administration and the Management of the Philippine-U.S. Alliance."

<sup>14</sup> "Joint Statement between the United States of America and the Republic of the Philippines," White House, Office of the Press Secretary, November 13, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> "Lorenzana Orders Review of 67-Year-Old U.S.-Ph Military Pact," *Asia News Monitor*, January 2, 2019 ~ <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2161379801?accountid=190474>.

the early 1950s.”<sup>16</sup> In response, the United States affirmed its support of provisions in the MDT. During his March 2019 visit to Manila, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared, “As the South China Sea is part of the Pacific, any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft, or public vessels in the South China Sea will trigger mutual defense obligations under Article 4 of our mutual defense treaty.”<sup>17</sup> He also hinted that the United States would oppose the further building of military installations in the South China Sea. In separate talks with Duterte, Pompeo said: “Our commitments under the treaty are clear. Our obligations are real. The South China Sea is certainly part of an important body of water for freedom of navigation.”<sup>18</sup>

### *Managing the February 2020 Visiting Forces Agreement Crisis*

By 2018, Philippines-U.S. security cooperation was characterized not by a total breakup, which had been a possibility after Duterte threatened to terminate the MDT, but by repeated engagements with a new agenda. By supporting counterterrorism and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief activities, the U.S. military bolstered pro-U.S. elements in Manila and created opportunities for the AFP to mitigate Duterte’s efforts to distance the country from Washington in favor of closer ties with Beijing. The siege of Marawi underscored the need for the alliance to adjust to the operational requirements of current threats confronting the Philippines.<sup>19</sup>

In 2019 the Philippines-U.S. alliance normalized with the resumption of warfighting scenarios that had been last staged in 2016. In April, armed forces from the United States, the Philippines, and Australia participated in the two-week Balikatan exercise to enhance their capabilities in joint combat and humanitarian operations.<sup>20</sup> Training included counterterrorism, amphibious and aviation operations, bilateral planning, subject matter expert exchanges, and civic assistance and humanitarian missions.

<sup>16</sup> “DND Considering Review of Ph-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty,” *Asia Pulse*, December 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Ankit Panda, “In Philippines, Pompeo Offers Major Alliance Assurance on South China Sea,” *Diplomat*, March 4, 2019 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/in-philippines-pompeo-offers-major-alliance-assurance-on-south-china-sea>.

<sup>18</sup> “Lorenzana Says 67-Yr Old MDT Could Become Cause, Not Deterrent, for Chaos,” *Manila Bulletin*, March 5, 2019 ~ <https://mb.com.ph/?s=Lorenzana+Says+67-yr+Old+MDT>.

<sup>19</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, “A Middle Power between Appeasement and Limited Hard Balancing: The Philippines’ Strategic Dilemma in a Changing Indo-Pacific Region” (conference paper for the 2019 U.S. Naval War College and East Asia Security Centre Conference, October 2020) ~ <https://easc.scholasticahq.com/article/17816.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Eve Baker, “AFP, U.S. Forces Conclude Annual Balikatan Exercise,” *Marines*, April 12, 2019.

But the alliance again experienced a major crisis that would require U.S. resilience and patience when Duterte directed the Department of Foreign Affairs in February 2020 to terminate the 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA).<sup>21</sup> Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin submitted the Philippines' notice of termination to the United States on February 11, 2020, giving the agreement 180 days before its termination went into effect. Both Philippine and U.S. diplomats and defense officials desperately tried to salvage the VFA and worried that a security vacuum in the Philippines could create an opening for further Chinese military buildup and expansion in the South China Sea.<sup>22</sup>

However, Chinese naval maneuvers in the South China Sea drove the Philippines to once again shift the balance away from China. On February 17, 2020, a People's Liberation Army Navy corvette aimed its gun control director at the Philippine Navy's antisubmarine corvette BRP *Conrado Yap* near Commodore Reef in the South China Sea. Then, on July 3, Locsin filed a diplomatic protest against Chinese military exercises near the Paracel Islands and warned of the "severest response" if the drills spilled over onto Philippine-held land features in the South China Sea.<sup>23</sup> On December 25, 2020, China flew its largest military transport plane, the Y-20, to Fiery Cross Reef. Manila viewed this move as an indication of China's intention to further militarize this reef, which could place major Philippine cities, ports, and military facilities within striking distance of Chinese airpower.<sup>24</sup>

The tense situation in the South China Sea in 2020 prompted the Philippine government to retract its termination of the VFA. The first suspension of the VFA's revocation in June 2020 was due supposedly to the exigencies of the Covid-19 pandemic. Foreign Secretary Locsin said that the second suspension was "to enable us [the Philippines] to find a more enhanced, mutually beneficial, mutually agreeable, and more effective and lasting arrangement on how to move forward in our mutual defense."<sup>25</sup> In November 2020, Philippine officials extended the VFA for another

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<sup>21</sup> Sofia Tomacruz, "Philippines Sends VFA Notice of Termination to U.S.," Rappler, February 11, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Robert Sutter and Chin-Hao Huang, "China Faces Stronger U.S. Opposition in South China Sea," *Comparative Connections* 22, no. 2 (2020): 65 ~ <http://cc.pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/06-Ch-SEA.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Catharin Dalpino, "Waiting on Washington: Southeast Asia Hopes for a Post-Election Boost in U.S. Relations," *Comparative Connections* 22, no. 3 (2021): 61 ~ <http://cc.pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/05-22-3-US-Southeast-Asia-Relations-1.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Cliff Venzon, "Duterte Extends Philippines' Military Deal with U.S.," *Nikkei Asia*, November 11, 2020 ~ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/South-China-Sea/Duterte-extends-Philippines-military-deal-with-US>.



six months, signifying both efforts to bring security back to the South China Sea and to return the alliance to firmer footing before the U.S. presidential inauguration of Joe Biden.<sup>26</sup> On July 29, 2021, Duterte withdrew the letter of termination for the VFA after meeting with U.S. defense secretary Lloyd Austin during his first official visit to the Philippines. The following day, Secretary Lorenzana announced in a press briefing that the VFA is now in “full force” following a meeting between Duterte and Austin in Malacanang Palace.<sup>27</sup> Austin thanked Duterte for his decision, calling the Philippines a “vital treaty ally,” and declared that the two countries were “looking at new ways to deepen security cooperation.”<sup>28</sup>

### *Can the Biden Administration Tip the Balance?*

When Duterte fostered closer economic and military ties with China and Russia and threatened to sever the Philippines’ long-standing U.S. alliance, the Trump administration, newly in office, adopted a policy of strategic patience toward the Philippines. This policy encouraged the exercise of restraint and a focus on the long-term interest of both countries to keep the alliance intact.<sup>29</sup>

U.S. strategic patience required resolving the preponderant problem of whether to extend U.S. treaty commitments to cover AFP units deployed in the South China Sea. The strategy also demanded maximum tolerance of the Philippines’ gambit of building closer economic and diplomatic relations with China. These unresolved issues prevented the Trump administration from enlisting the Philippines’ direct and full support for the “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy and other cooperative efforts to balance China. Nonetheless, the alliance has persevered despite the swings in Philippine foreign policy and machinations in U.S.-China strategic competition.

President Biden has continued the strategic competition with China and will rely greatly on the support of U.S. allies. His administration may well consider adopting a policy of proactive strategic patience with the Philippines to maintain the alliance beyond the end of Duterte’s term

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<sup>26</sup> “Philippines Delays Decision on Defense Pact with U.S. by Another Six Months,” Asia News Monitor, November 13, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Dziedzic, “President Rodrigo Duterte Abandons Plans to End Crucial Defence Deal between Philippines and the United States,” ABC News (Australia), July 30, 2021 ~ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-30/philippines-defence-deal-biden-visiting-forces-agreement/100338062>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> James J. Przystup and Phillip C. Saunders, “Asia and the Trump Administration: Challenges, Opportunities, and a Road Ahead,” National Defense University, INSS Strategic Perspectives, 2017, 24.

in 2022. More significantly, the United States should be able to tip the delicate balance between appeasement and alliance in favor of the latter, returning the Philippines to again be part of a defense and security system to counter China's expansionist designs in the South China Sea. The Biden administration can take the following measures to pursue a policy of proactive strategic patience.

*Establish a bilateral "4+4" strategic, diplomatic, economic, and public health dialogue mechanism to advance a comprehensive partnership with the Philippines.* Building on the idea of Brent Sadler, a scholar at the Heritage Foundation, this dialogue mechanism would aim to advance a comprehensive U.S. partnership with the Philippines and help prevent China from creating cleavage between the two partners.<sup>30</sup> With yearly meetings, this body could be chaired by defense, state, commerce, and health secretaries in a 4+4 format. Committees would address military access and exercises, economic and infrastructure development, trade and investment, and public health, including a Covid-19 vaccination program for the Philippines. This approach would help bolster the alliance in particular and improve bilateral relations in general after the June 2022 presidential election in the Philippines.

*Provide a new military assistance package to support the AFP's modernization program.* Alongside the renewed VFA, the United States and the Philippines should discuss a new military assistance package to build up the Philippines' antiterrorism and counterinsurgency capabilities and to transition from prioritizing internal security to external defense. Washington should impress upon Manila that the items on its military shopping list can only be obtained on a best-effort basis by the executive branch, since the U.S. Congress has the final say in economic and military assistance dispersals to recipient countries.

*Offer the AFP a vigorous training and education program to support its modernization plan.* The U.S. Department of Defense should engage the AFP in a vigorous training and education program relative to the Philippines' military modernization. Washington can invite large contingents of Philippine troops to jointly exercise in Guam or Hawaii, given that the Duterte administration has invested heavily in the AFP's minimum sea-lift capabilities since 2016. These joint undertakings should aim at developing

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<sup>30</sup> See Brent Sadler, "The Philippines: Economic Statecraft and Security Interests Can Save a Critical Alliance," Heritage Foundation, Issue Brief, April 5, 2021, 5 ~ <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/IB6074.pdf>.

institutional as well as personal relationships between the AFP and U.S. service personnel.

*Convince U.S. allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia to assist in the AFP's modernization program.* Since 2010, Japan, South Korea, and Australia have been donating or selling some arms to the Philippines. The United States could organize its allies into a consortium that will coordinate and systematize these states' military aid to the Philippines alongside its own.

These policies would boost institutional ties between the Philippine and U.S. armed services. They are security measures that should be resorted to without delay, given China's persistence in asserting its maritime claims over the South China Sea. The Philippines has no choice but to constrain Chinese expansion through balancing, international law, multilateralism, or a combination of all these policies. The United States, Japan, South Korea, and Australia should all play a significant role in assisting the Philippines in nurturing the political will and building the necessary military capabilities to stand up against China in the South China Sea imbroglio into the third decade of the 21st century. ◆

## Are Cambodia-U.S. Relations Mendable?

*Thearith Leng and Vannarith Chheang*

The essay analyzes the evolution of U.S.-Cambodia bilateral relations since the turn of the century and explores possible avenues that may help improve bilateral ties. Since 2000 the relationship has been troubled by differences over human rights and democracy, the China factor, and Cambodia's debt to the United States that was incurred during the 1970s. Nevertheless, both countries have an opportunity to promote mutual trust if they embrace the principles of mutual respect, noninterference, and equal sovereignty. The United States and Cambodia can find common ground to expand and deepen cooperation.

### *U.S.-Cambodian Relations since 2000*

On the heels of decades of conflict, instability, and volatile U.S. relations, Phnom Penh's relations with Washington improved significantly after the 2003 national election in Cambodia. The two main political parties, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and FUNCINPEC (Front uni national pour un Cambodge indépendant, neutre, pacifique et coopératif), managed to reach a deal and formed a government solely led by Prime Minister Hun Sen of the CPP. In the eyes of the United States, this move showed that the CPP at least accepted a pluralist government, even if it did not meet U.S. democratic standards. In early March 2006, CPP lawmakers amended the constitution from a two-thirds majority formula to a 50%-plus-one model that allowed the CPP to create a government on its own if it won the majority of votes or parliamentary seats in future elections.

Momentum for restoring bilateral ties grew after Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Cambodia in 2003 and the two countries normalized their relations. The first U.S. Peace Corps volunteers arrived in 2007, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Cambodia in 2010. From 2000 to 2009, the United States provided over \$470 million in aid to improve health

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and education systems, stimulate economic growth, and promote human rights and democracy in Cambodia.

From 2008 to 2010, U.S.-Cambodia defense and security cooperation also expanded considerably as Washington increased financial assistance and its training programs in the country. In 2008 the United States granted \$4 million to assist in demining activities and offered loans and training to build the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces' capacity for participating in UN peacekeeping operations. An annual bilateral defense dialogue, established in 2008, became a foundation for defense and security cooperation, confidence-building measures, and operational topics of mutual concern. Cambodia and the United States created a security cooperation coordination group in September 2009 to discuss operational issues involving theater security cooperation. In the summer of 2010, Phnom Penh was invited to participate in the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) Program and received a port visit by the USS *Tortuga*. Cambodia and the United States also then co-hosted the U.S. Global Peace Operations Initiative capstone exercise Angkor Sentinel, which included around a thousand peacekeeping personnel from over twenty countries.<sup>1</sup>

### *Contemporary Economic Relations*

Cambodia has become steadily dependent on the United States economically since its 1993 elections, after which Washington and its Western allies re-established economic ties with the country, having made democracy and human rights protection preconditions for accessing their markets. The Cambodian government signed a bilateral textile agreement with the United States in 1996, and the two sides have regularly met under their 2006 trade and investment framework agreement.<sup>2</sup> Since 2010 the United States has emerged as a key market for Cambodian exports and one of the kingdom's most important donors. The United States is Cambodia's second-largest export market (around 23.9% of Cambodia's total exports) after the European Union (29.1%).<sup>3</sup> The kingdom is currently the United States' 58th-biggest trading partner, with two-way trade

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<sup>1</sup> Carlyle Thayer, "U.S. Rapprochement with Laos and Cambodia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 32, no. 3 (2010): 442–59; and Carlyle Thayer, "The Tug of War Over Cambodia," USNI News, February 18, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Lum, "U.S.-Cambodia Relations: Issues for the 113th Congress," Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, R43113, July 24, 2013 ~ <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R43113.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Economy and Finance (Cambodia), "Cambodia's Trade Statistics," 2018.

volume nearly tripling between 2010 and 2020 from \$245.46 million to \$690.63 million.<sup>4</sup>

Among its economic priorities, Cambodia has continually sought to retain the general system of preferences (GSP) designation from the United States and actively seeks U.S. investment. For example, in September 2020, the Cambodian ambassador to the United States, Chum Sounry, together with 27 other representatives of GSP-recipient countries, signed a joint letter requesting that the U.S. Congress retain the GSP scheme for Cambodia.<sup>5</sup> On September 21, 2020, Prime Minister Hun Sen met virtually with the U.S.-ASEAN Business Council, where he encouraged U.S. companies to invest more in the kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

U.S. investment in Cambodia has been a positive trend. The accumulated U.S. investment capital to the kingdom from 1994 to 2019 reached \$1.12 billion.<sup>7</sup> In 2019, three investment projects with a total investment of \$7.24 million were approved by the Council for the Development of Cambodia.<sup>8</sup> U.S. investment projects in Cambodia mainly focus on tourism, services, construction, agriculture, textiles, energy, industry, and hotels.

Beyond trade and investment, the United States has become an important partner in providing aid to sectors such as agriculture, health, education, and disaster relief. In January 2019 the U.S. Department of Agriculture provided \$17 million to support aquaculture in Cambodia over five years. In 2020 the United States provided an \$11 million grant to assist the kingdom's response to Covid-19, including \$5 million for economic recovery and \$6 million in health assistance. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have worked closely with the Ministry of Health to respond to the pandemic by shoring up the testing capacity of Institut Pasteur du Cambodge and the Khmer-Soviet Friendship Hospital. In 2020 the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) donated \$700,000 in humanitarian assistance to cope with severe flooding caused by multiple tropical storms, and the CDC and USAID signed an agreement to commit approximately \$128 million in aid to assist Cambodia in the fields of health, education, agriculture, and the environment. In July 2021 the

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Trade in Goods with Cambodia" ~ <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5550.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (Cambodia), "Aide Memoire on Cambodia-U.S. Relations," 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

United States donated one million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine to Cambodia to combat Covid-19.<sup>9</sup>

### *Political-Security Cooperation*

Cambodia-U.S. relations have been strengthened in the political-security realm in several areas, as evidenced by their cooperation on the prisoner of war/missing in action (POW/MIA) issue, MS *Westerdam* cruise ship, and the Angkor Sentinel military exercise.

On the POW/MIA issue, 90 American soldiers were missing in Cambodia during the Vietnam War. Between 2000 and 2019, a POW/MIA committee working in cooperation with U.S. officials located the remains of 42 fallen soldiers, leaving 48 still missing. Due to political and diplomatic tensions, Cambodia suspended cooperation in 2017, but it resumed in October 2018 at the request of U.S. senator Doug Erickson and relevant organizations. Cambodia has allowed the United States to continue this humanitarian mission in 2021 using three helicopters with tax and fee exemptions. In March 2019 the chair of the National League of POW/MIA Families expressed sincere gratitude to Cambodia and noted that the kingdom was a “gold standard for cooperation.”<sup>10</sup>

The docking of the MS *Westerdam* cruise ship in Cambodia in February 2020 was another demonstration of improved political ties. After the ship failed to obtain docking permission from various countries given Covid-19 concerns, Cambodian authorities granted permission for the U.S. cruise ship to dock at Sihanoukville. Hun Sen personally greeted the crew and passengers even amid heightening concerns over the spread of the coronavirus. President Donald Trump wrote Hun Sen a letter praising Cambodia’s generous gesture.<sup>11</sup>

Both states have endeavored to promote military cooperation through joint exercises. Cambodia declared its willingness to resume the annual bilateral Angkor Sentinel exercise, which was postponed in 2017 owing to its preoccupation with national and commune elections. As noted above,

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<sup>9</sup> Rudina Vojvoda and Bunly Meas, “United States Donates More Than One Million Johnson & Johnson Single Dose Vaccines to Cambodia’s Fight Against Covid,” UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Press Release, July 30, 2021 ~ <https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/press-releases/united-states-donates-more-1-million-johnson-johnson-single-dose-vaccines-cambodias>.

<sup>10</sup> Ann Mills Griffiths, correspondence with Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (Cambodia), July 17, 2019, available at Fresh News ~ <http://en.freshnewsasia.com/index.php/en/localnews/14955-2019-08-13-09-33-31.html>.

<sup>11</sup> “Cambodia Gets More Praise for Allowing Cruise Ship to Dock,” Associated Press, February 15, 2020.

the exercise centers on training both armies to support peacekeeping operations. Nevertheless, the U.S. decision to end the military academy program for Cambodia in mid-2021 strained the bilateral ties.<sup>12</sup>

Although political-security cooperation has been substantially heightened, trust between the two countries cannot easily be built. The so-called China factor, issues around human rights and democracy, and the debt problem have hampered the trust-building process.

### *The China Factor*

Seeing China as a strategic rival and external threat, Washington has introduced the “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy to strengthen its alliance system and mobilize resources to check the rising influence of a more assertive China. Although many Southeast Asian countries generally welcome a free and open Indo-Pacific, they are not interested in taking sides or partaking in any move that could potentially harm bilateral relations with China. Cambodia is no exception: China is the kingdom’s largest investor, trading partner, and donor. Putting economic interests at the front and center of its foreign policy objectives, Cambodia has embraced China’s regional initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation. The deepened strategic ties between Phnom Penh and Beijing have caused the United States concern as it increasingly views China as the key threat to the U.S.-led liberal international order. Washington is concerned, for example, that Beijing could use Cambodian territory to jeopardize U.S. strategic and security interests in Southeast Asia. On multiple occasions, the United States has accused Cambodia of hosting Chinese naval bases, despite a lack of credible evidence to prove that China’s support for expanding these bases translates into Chinese use.<sup>13</sup>

In response to U.S. concern over the alleged Chinese bases in Cambodia, in July 2019 the authorities permitted 70 national and foreign observers, including Americans, to visit the Ream naval base, which the United States had suspected of hosting the Chinese navy. This goodwill, however, failed to convince Washington. From the U.S. point of view, China has an interest in building naval bases in Cambodia to expand its maritime power projection, especially in the South China Sea. From the Cambodian perspective, there

<sup>12</sup> Prak Chan Thul, “U.S. Ends Military Academy Programme for Cambodia amid Strained Ties,” Reuters, July 1, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Shaun Turton, “U.S. Flags ‘Serious Concerns’ over Cambodia’s China-Backed Navy Base,” *Nikkei Asia* ~ June 1, 2021 ~ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/US-flags-serious-concerns-over-Cambodia-s-China-backed-navy-base>.



is neither the intention nor interest to host foreign military bases, which is against the constitution and strongly opposed by the Cambodian people and Cambodia's neighbors.

Notably, the naval base allegations began after the *Wall Street Journal* published an article in July 2019 suggesting that China and Cambodia had concluded a secret military agreement that allowed China to host a naval base in southwestern Cambodia.<sup>14</sup> Washington became suspicious of the deal because the Chinese state-led corporation Union Development Group had constructed an airport with a long runway (which could accommodate Chinese military operations) in Botum Sakor. Phnom Penh argued that the project was not for military purposes, but Washington was not convinced. Then, the United States made an allegation that Cambodia hosted a Chinese naval base in Ream, where the Cambodian navy was based. To clear the doubt, as mentioned above, Phnom Penh allowed journalists to visit the base in July 2019.

The United States, under President Trump, appeared to partly accept the Cambodian explanation. At the ASEAN-U.S. Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Bangkok in August 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo welcomed Cambodia's "strong defense of its national sovereignty" and encouraged other nations in the region to "follow Cambodia's lead in protecting it."<sup>15</sup> In February 2020, Hun Sen attempted to assuage U.S. ambassador Patrick Murphy's concerns that the presence of a foreign military base in Cambodia was against the constitution, and that had Cambodia hosted a foreign naval base, Vietnam and other Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) members would have reacted strongly. Cambodia would not want to become a pawn of any country. He also reiterated that funding for the base was multilateral, that the port was open to foreign vessels for servicing (not just those from China), and that Cambodia promotes inclusive security cooperation.<sup>16</sup>

The base issue continues to be the most controversial one in bilateral relations under Joe Biden's presidency. During a visit in June 2021, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman expressed serious concerns

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<sup>14</sup> See Jeremy Page, Gordon Lubold and Rob Taylor, "Deal for Naval Outpost in Cambodia Furthers China's Quest for Military Network," *Wall Street Journal*, July 22, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> "Secretary Michael R. Pompeo and Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai at a Press Availability," U.S. Mission to ASEAN, Press Statement, August 2, 2019 ~ <https://asean.usmission.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-and-thai-foreign-minister-don-pramudwinai-at-a-press-availability>.

<sup>16</sup> Hun Sen, "Selected Off-the-Cuff Speech at the Gathering of Civil Servants and Technicians Teams Involved in Building Infrastructures of the Province of Preah Sihanouk [Unofficial Translation]," available at Cambodia New Vision, June 6, 2020 ~ <http://cnv.org.kh/building-infrastructures-province-preah-sihanouk>.

about China's military presence and construction of facilities at the Ream naval base. She sought clarification on the demolition of two U.S.-funded buildings at Ream without notification or explanation and asserted that a Chinese military base in Cambodia would undermine its sovereignty, threaten regional security, and negatively affect U.S.-Cambodia relations.<sup>17</sup> Phnom Penh allowed the U.S. military attaché to visit the port right after Sherman's visit, but again it did not lead to mutual trust building.<sup>18</sup> The U.S. delegates claimed that they had not had full access to the base and were not convinced.<sup>19</sup> The Cambodian authorities responded that the United States did not have good faith and sincerity in promoting mutual trust and cooperation.<sup>20</sup>

### *Human Rights and Democracy*

Another challenge in U.S.-Cambodia relations is related to human rights and democracy. Phnom Penh is not pleased when Washington condemns Cambodia's violation of human rights and democracy or enacts sanctions against the kingdom. For example, Hun Sen has been criticized by the United States and the European Union for his persecution of political opposition, media, and civil society groups. Washington and Brussels have viewed the dismantling of the biggest opposition party—the Cambodian National Rescue Party—and the harsh treatment of its members and human rights activists as a threat to democracy inside the kingdom. Thus, they punished the government for causing “democratic backsliding.” The United States subsequently introduced the Global Magnitsky Act to sanction and punish some senior Cambodian leaders in 2018 and 2019.<sup>21</sup>

Hun Sen has not backed down to U.S. demands and has portrayed those sanctions as unfair treatment and an interference into Cambodia's internal affairs. Tensions over human rights and democracy once again boiled over after Biden took office. On her trip to the kingdom in June, Sherman urged the Cambodian government to drop its political charges against members

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<sup>17</sup> Prak Chan Thul, “U.S. Concerned by China's Presence in Cambodia, Urges ‘Balance’ Policy,” Reuters, June 2, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> “Cambodia Allows U.S. Military Attaché to Visit Ream Port,” Fresh News, June 3, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Prak Chan Thul, “U.S. Says Denied Full Access to Cambodia Naval Base During Visit,” Reuters, June 11, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Chheng Niem, “U.S. Wants ‘Full Access’ to Ream Naval Base,” *Phnom Penh Post*, June 13, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Prak Chan Thul, “U.S. Sanctions Cambodia PM's Top Bodyguard over Rights Abuses,” Reuters, June 13, 2018. See also U.S. Department of Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Corruption and Material Support Networks,” Press Release, December 9, 2019 ~ <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm849>.

of opposition parties, journalists, and activists and to obey its international and national human rights commitments.<sup>22</sup> In late September 2021, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Cambodia Democracy Act of 2021 (HR 4686) aiming to freeze all Cambodian assets in the United States, restrict all financial transactions with the United States, and ban the entry of senior Cambodian government officials deemed as having “directly and substantially undermined democracy in Cambodia.”<sup>23</sup> The government has accused the United States of interfering in Cambodia’s internal affairs under the pretext of human rights and democracy and applying a double standard. In 2018, Cambodia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation issued a position paper to explain the kingdom’s worldview and approach toward human rights and democracy. The paper accuses Western powers of using human rights and democracy to topple leaders who act against Western interests.<sup>24</sup>

### *The Debt Problem*

A debt that Cambodia has owed the United States since the U.S.-backed government of Lon Nol between 1970 and 1975 is a further constraint on bilateral relations. The original debt was \$267 million. With interest, the total now amounts to more than \$600 million. In April 2021 Hun Sen appealed to the Biden administration to convert the debt into development assistance, saying, “I consider the U.S. debt Cambodia owed during the rule of Lon Nol to be a ‘dirty’ debt that forced Cambodia to buy American bombs and drop them on the heads of Cambodians, causing many deaths and injuries. Remembering this story every time, I feel pain for all Cambodians.”<sup>25</sup>

From the Cambodian perspective, the United States caused the destructive war in Cambodia at that time; therefore, it should bear responsibility to assist the country by eliminating the debt. U.S. B-52s dropped approximately 540,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia during the Khmer Republic’s years in power (triple the amount used by the Allied Forces against Japan during World War II), inflicting between 150,000 and

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<sup>22</sup> “Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman’s Visit to Cambodia,” U.S. Department of State, Press Release, June 1, 2021 ~ <https://www.state.gov/deputy-secretary-of-state-wendy-shermans-visit-to-cambodia>.

<sup>23</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, *Cambodia Democracy Act of 2021*, HR 4686, 117th Cong. (2021–22) ~ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/4686>.

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (Cambodia), *Cambodia: Stability and Development* (Phnom Penh, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> David Hutt, “America’s Debt Diplomacy in Cambodia,” *Asia Times*, July 1, 2021.

750,000 casualties.<sup>26</sup> The bombing came to a halt only at the insistence of the U.S. Congress in August 1973.<sup>27</sup> Despite the destruction, the United States has still urged Cambodia to pay back the debt, which has deepened Phnom Penh's grievances toward Washington.

### *Conclusion*

Cambodia-U.S. relations have been on a roller coaster ride since the establishment of diplomatic ties in the 1950s. Despite a promising future of strong economic ties, the bilateral relationship has fluctuated over the years owing namely to three factors: human rights and democracy, China, and the outstanding debt issue. Human rights and democracy have been the most complex issue. The United States has put pressure on the ruling regime in Cambodia when there has been backsliding on human rights and democracy, and Phnom Penh in turn has viewed this as an act of interference in internal affairs that jeopardizes national security and stability.

The United States has sent a clear signal to Cambodia that it should take concrete measures to avoid being trapped in China's orbit. Cambodia, on the other hand, perceives that China provides a strategic buffer against the pressures and unilateral sanctions of the United States. China is largely perceived as a key source of performance legitimacy for the governing elites. Washington's perception of Chinese naval bases in Cambodia will continue to pose a serious obstacle in the bilateral relationship.

Concerning the debt issue, Washington views it as a leverage point on Phnom Penh, while Phnom Penh adopts a moral and historical narrative to defend its position. The gap remains wide. The possible middle point where both countries could meet is to convert the debt into development assistance.

To restore political trust, both sides should adopt common ground rules such as mutual respect, mutual learning, and mutual understanding. Both sides need to better understand each other's interests and concerns, explore areas of practical cooperation, and reduce areas of confrontation. Cambodia has been very supportive of the United States' relationship with ASEAN and the Mekong region. Remarkably, Cambodia pushed to upgrade the Lower Mekong Initiative into the Mekong-U.S. Partnership in 2020. Cambodia also has a keen interest in upgrading the Mekong-U.S. Partnership to a

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<sup>26</sup> John A. Tully, *A Short History of Cambodia: From Empire to Survival* (Crow's Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2006), 167.

<sup>27</sup> David P. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War, and Revolution since 1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 225.

summit level. Washington should thus view Cambodia from a broader vantage point, not just from the myopic “China factor” perspective. Cambodia likewise needs to enlarge its strategic space and develop more choices so that it can maintain its strategic autonomy and exercise its agency. The differences over human rights and democracy can be effectively dealt with once mutual strategic and political trust is enhanced. Having said that, Cambodia must be consistent in words and actions concerning its maintenance of an independent and neutral foreign policy. Respect for human rights and a liberal multiparty political system are enshrined in the constitution. Enforcement of the constitution not only serves the best interests of the Cambodian people but also will help improve relationships with the United States and other countries. ◆

## Burma/Myanmar and the United States: The Dilemma of a Delicate Balance

*Moe Thuzar*

In 2021, in the midst of a “confluence of crises” catalyzed by the Myanmar military’s seizure of state power on February 1, the year 2015 will be viewed as the halfway point in Myanmar’s now interrupted journey of reform and democratic transition.<sup>1</sup> Bilateral relations between Myanmar and the United States, which started to normalize in the almost ten years between April 2011 and January 2021, are now “paused” at best, with Washington imposing and increasing targeted sanctions against the military regime in Myanmar since February.<sup>2</sup>

In 2015 I suggested that Myanmar would be engaged in an “eternal balancing act” between the United States and China.<sup>3</sup> I continue that assessment in this essay, taking a closer look at how this balancing act is underpinned by domestic perceptions that motivate Burmese policymakers and diplomats to continue this policy of a “delicate balance.”<sup>4</sup> Examining the domestic underpinnings to foreign policy takes on heightened relevance in the current geopolitical moment where major-power competition seizes imaginations globally, including in Southeast Asia. The current political moment in Myanmar, where the military coup has catalyzed a contest for foreign policy dominance and legitimacy assertion in the international arena, also calls for this additional lens of assessment. In this essay, I briefly assess Burmese domestic perceptions of the United States and its policy toward Myanmar along three broad themes: perceptions and expectations,

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<sup>1</sup> Johanna Son and Ko Thet Paing, “Covid-19 Disaster Adds to Confluence of Crises in Myanmar,” Reporting ASEAN, July 16, 2021 ~ <https://www.reportingasean.net/covid-19-disaster-adds-to-confluence-of-crises-in-myanmar>.

<sup>2</sup> Murray Hiebert, “Cementing a New Normal in U.S.-Myanmar Relations,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 1, 2016 ~ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/cementing-new-normal-us-myanmar-relations>; and U.S. Department of State, “Burma Sanctions” ~ <https://www.state.gov/burma-sanctions>.

<sup>3</sup> Moe Thuzar, “Engaging Two Giants: Myanmar’s Relations with the U.S. and China in the ASEAN Context,” in *New Dynamics in U.S.-China Relations: Contending for the Asia Pacific*, ed. Mingjiang Li and Kalyan M. Kemburi (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 257–69.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 260. See also Kenton Clymer, *A Delicate Relationship: The United States and Burma/Myanmar since 1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

the importance of legitimacy (to the Burmese), and revealed pragmatic preferences in bilateral interactions.<sup>5</sup>

### *Expectations and Perceptions*

The “dawn” of bilateral relations with the United States dates from a letter sent in February 1857 from King Mindon—the penultimate monarch in Burma’s last dynasty before the country came under British rule—to President James Buchanan, the fifteenth U.S. president.<sup>6</sup> The letter, which does not address the president by name, was originally intended for President Franklin Pierce and expressed the Burmese king’s hope to seek bilateral ties with the United States. In 1856–57, Burma had already fought and lost two wars with the British, ceding territory with each loss. King Mindon’s perception of the United States as a former British colony now independent was probably tinged with an expectation of a possible alliance against the United Kingdom. The alliance did not materialize; the United States was on the brink of the Civil War, and James Buchanan merely sent a cordial but noncommittal reply.

Burma under British occupation had little formal contact with the United States. In the 1930s the general view seemed to be that U.S. interests were more aligned with those of the UK and thus of less use to Burma.<sup>7</sup> Washington’s interests in Southeast Asia—and Burma—increased as a result of U.S. military involvement in the region during World War II and continued after the war in light of the rising tide of Communism. The United States and Burma established diplomatic relations in September 1947 before the latter gained independence from the British in 1948.<sup>8</sup>

Following independence, Burmese decision-makers’ perceptions (and expectations) of the United States became linked to ethnic tensions at home. Burmese senior government officials were suspicious of U.S. intent and motives regarding the separatist movements that had sprung up after independence. Among Prime Minister U Nu’s key advisers, some leaned left, while others nursed grudges against “American-inflicted slights,” and

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<sup>5</sup> The name Burma is used in referring to the country prior to the name change to Myanmar in 1989. Burmese is used to refer to the people of Burma/Myanmar regardless of time period.

<sup>6</sup> “King Mindon’s Letter to President James Buchanan: February 1857,” Embassy of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Washington D.C. <http://www.mewashingtondc.org/content/king-mindons-letter-president-james-buchanan>.

<sup>7</sup> U Nu, *The People Win Through: A Play*, with an introduction by Edward Hunter (New York: Taplinger Publishing, 1957), 12.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Burma” <https://web.archive.org/web/20021117075817/http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/po/com/10404.htm>.

the then army chief, General Ne Win, was frustrated with both U.S. and British policies toward Burma.<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding his own largely favorable attitude toward the United States, Nu himself was frustrated with U.S. support of the Kuomintang remnant forces that had fled China to the border areas of Burma and Thailand. The Kuomintang emergency exposed CIA moves in Southeast Asia and fanned further suspicions in Burma, particularly in the military. This dilemma tested U.S.-Burma relations, leading to Nu lodging a formal complaint to the United Nations in 1953 after several failed efforts at bilateral negotiations.

Burmese suspicions and perceptions of U.S. motives in the geopolitical moment of the times serve as a backdrop to decisions made by senior government figures that, when viewed collectively, may provide an understanding of some of the prevailing sentiments that continue among Burmese policymakers today. Those sentiments are also inextricably linked to Burmese notions of state legitimacy. As a result, Burmese leaders sought a horizon beyond the electoral legitimacy conferred by popular vote, beyond the nation state, and looked to international acceptance—and the United States was an important part of that acceptance.

### *Quest for Legitimacy*

Independent Burma's first prime minister, U Nu, sought to seek a path for the country's development that was not contingent on either the West or China. His neutralist foreign policy emphasized mutual nonaggression. Nu's perceptions of great-power competition led him to liken Burma to a "tender gourd among the cactuses" and advocate neutralism,<sup>10</sup> arguing that "we cannot allow ourselves to be absorbed into any power bloc."<sup>11</sup> This was reflected in his approach to regionalism, advocating the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence together with the leaders of Indonesia and India, Sukarno and Jawaharlal Nehru, at the Asia-Africa Conference in 1953, which gave birth to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). At the same time, Nu propounded Buddhism as anti-Communist. He also wrote a propaganda

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<sup>9</sup> Clymer, *A Delicate Relationship*, 42, 60–61.

<sup>10</sup> U Nu, "Korea" (speech delivered in parliament on September 5, 1950), reprinted in *From Peace to Stability*, Ministry of Information (Burma) (Rangoon, 1951) and cited in John Seabury Thomson, "Burmese Neutralism," *Political Science Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (1957): 261–83 ~ <https://doi.org/10.2307/2145776>.

<sup>11</sup> U Nu, *From Peace to Stability*, cited in Rodolfo Severino, "The Pressures on Burma's Foreign Policy: A Case Study," *Philippine Studies* 16, no. 3 (1968): 460–86 ~ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42720301>.



play cautioning the Burmese public against domestic insurgencies, which targeted Communists as one of the many factions taking up arms against the government. This aligned with the U.S. interest to stop the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia, and was even adapted into a Hollywood feature-length film via the “good offices” of the U.S. embassy in Rangoon.<sup>12</sup> Nu’s anti-Communist credentials led him to believe that he could play a mediating role between Washington and Beijing, particularly after he visited China in 1954.<sup>13</sup>

Despite tensions over the Kuomintang issue and other perceptions, the Burmese continued to accept a U.S. economic presence in the country and U.S. technical and advisory expertise for Burma’s national development plan.<sup>14</sup> There were military links as well. Burmese trainees participated in the International Military Education and Training Program, and the CIA supported counter-communist training. A symbolic U.S. Agency for International Development mission was maintained in Rangoon and dismantled only after the 1988 coup.<sup>15</sup>

Though the United States had initially viewed General Ne Win as being more amenable to U.S. “influence,” Ne Win—who seized power from Nu in a coup in 1962—reportedly did not trust foreign expertise, believing that such advice would not be objective.<sup>16</sup> The mistrust added to Ne Win’s alleged xenophobia; in 1963 sources quote that Ne Win blamed colonialism for the lack of skilled technicians but at the same time viewed the training programs offered abroad as inappropriate and producing “misfits.”<sup>17</sup> Among the first acts of his Revolutionary Council after seizing power were to terminate the operations of the Ford and Asia Foundations in Burma, discontinue student and faculty exchange programs, suspend

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<sup>12</sup> George Edman, attached to the U.S. embassy in Rangoon, helped bring *The People Win Through: A Play to the United States*. See Michael Charney, “U Nu, China and The ‘Burmese’ Cold War Propaganda in Burma in the 1950s,” in *The Cold War in Asia: The Battle for Hearts and Minds*, ed. Zheng Yangwen, Hong Liu, and Michael Szonyi (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 41–58.

<sup>13</sup> Nu mentioned his belief that he could mediate U.S.-China tensions in his remarks at a dinner he hosted for Chinese premier Zhou Enlai in Beijing in 1954. See Chit Kyi Yay Kyi Nyunt, *Khit lay khit Ta-yoke Myanmar hset hsan yay* [China-Myanmar Relations over Four Eras] (Rangoon: Chit Kyi Yay Publishing, 1976), 135, 247–49.

<sup>14</sup> For example, the United States provided what amounted to \$2 million in mutual security funds for the Burmese government to pay Robert Nathan Associates for the Pyidawtha Plan’s survey. This was in addition to other, earlier surveys conducted by the Knappen, Tippetts, and Abbott Engineering Company of New York. See Clymer, *A Delicate Relationship*, 113–14.

<sup>15</sup> Thuzar, “Engaging Two Giants,” 260.

<sup>16</sup> Clymer, *A Delicate Relationship*, 177.

<sup>17</sup> Robert H. Taylor, *General Ne Win: A Political Biography* (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2015), 225.

the United States Information Service library, and cancel other aid projects.<sup>18</sup> Ne Win's perception that Burma could potentially become a "Cold War battlefield" or a "puppet to one of the major protagonists" in the Cold War made him both anti-Chinese and anti-American.<sup>19</sup> His stance of not taking sides and remaining aloof likely created perceptions that "Burmese officials were still suspicious of American intentions."<sup>20</sup>

Ne Win did not alter Nu's foreign policy principles, continuing with strict neutrality in international relations but asserting an "independent and active" foreign policy. Any pretensions to be taken seriously in international affairs, however, were belied by his increasingly isolationist actions and leaning toward the East European bloc and China. Still, Burma stuck to its strict neutrality principle in walking out of the NAM Summit in 1979 in Cuba.<sup>21</sup>

The bloody nationwide pro-democracy protests in 1988 replaced Ne Win's authoritarian rule with a military junta. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (later renamed the State Peace and Development Council) continued to mistrust the United States; these sentiments rose in proportion to U.S. policy moves focused on regime change and democratic transition for Myanmar. The military sought legitimacy via multiparty elections in 1990, which it later annulled when the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) led by the charismatic Aung San Suu Kyi won the majority vote, and a partial economic opening in 1992 (benefiting the generals and their associates more than the people). It also made efforts to rejoin NAM and obtain membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). However, the military regime that ruled Myanmar from September 1988 to March 2011 was paranoid about how it was perceived domestically and internationally. Myanmar's leaders aligned their interests with China in proportion to the deterioration of relations with the United States. Washington's labeling of Myanmar as "an outpost of tyranny" in 2005 contrasted unfavorably with Beijing's economic and military assistance. These were the chilliest years in U.S.-Myanmar relations, yet not all channels were closed. Despite the United States' escalation of sanctions over human rights and governance concerns in proportion with

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<sup>18</sup> Robert A. Holmes, "Burmese Domestic Policy: The Politics of Burmanization," *Asian Survey* 7, no. 3 (1967): 188–97.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, *General Ne Win*, 214–15.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>21</sup> The reason Burma gave for its summit walkout was that the NAM had failed to adhere to its founding principles. See Thuzar, "Engaging Two Giants," 269n25.

the junta's repression of Myanmar's democracy movement, Myanmar continued to appoint ambassadors to the United States (while the United States downgraded its representation in Myanmar to a *chargé d'affaires*), and several officers from Myanmar's intelligence apparatus were sent to the United States for "specialized IT training."<sup>22</sup>

A military-backed, quasi-civilian government took over in 2011, introducing wide-ranging reforms with an unexpected impact. The Thein Sein administration sought a different kind of performance legitimacy—it signaled its intent to diversify external partners by suspending a billion-dollar dam project with China, it recognized the NLD as a legal opposition party via by-elections in 2012, it allowed more freedom of expression, and it began to liberalize the economy in 2013. Beginning in 2012, the United States and the international community more generally began to recognize these reforms by lifting or easing sanctions and engaging with the government in a move toward democratic transition. A high point in thawing bilateral relations was President Barack Obama's speech at Yangon University in November 2013, which was the first-ever visit by a sitting U.S. president to the country. As part of its drive for legitimacy, the Thein Sein administration also acceded to international expectations regarding treatment of the Rohingya community, which successive governments in Myanmar had viewed as a security and immigration concern. Since 1948 the military had mounted periodic operations against the Rohingya, who were not recognized as part of the country's multiethnic makeup. A draconian security committee that controlled the Rohingya's movements and activities was finally dissolved in 2013, but communal tensions continued to simmer after violence between the Rakhine and Rohingya communities in 2012.<sup>23</sup>

U.S.-Myanmar relations reached their highest point in recent years following the NLD's landslide win in the 2015 elections and the inauguration of the civilian NLD government in April 2016 (albeit one hampered by military control of the home affairs, defense, and border affairs ministries). Relations hit a bump in 2017 following U.S. criticism of the Myanmar military's crackdown on Rohingya communities that caused over 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh, where they remain as refugees. International criticism of the military's behavior and the NLD government's

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<sup>22</sup> Andrew Selth, *Secrets and Power in Myanmar: Intelligence and the Fall of General Khin Nyunt* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), 18.

<sup>23</sup> Jamie Ferrie, "Myanmar President Disbands Controversial Border Force," Reuters, July 15, 2013 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-security-idUSBRE96E0B420130715>; and Human Rights Watch, "Letter to President Thein Sein Re: Amending the 1982 Citizenship Law," January 13, 2015 ~ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/01/13/letter-president-thein-sein-re-amending-1982-citizenship-law>.

silence reignited Burmese sentiments of distrust toward the United States and nationalist interpretations of Myanmar's role and standing. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi asked then U.S. ambassador to Myanmar Scot Marciel to refrain from calling the Rohingya population by that name.<sup>24</sup>

Tensions have risen again in bilateral relations since February 1, 2021. The Myanmar military re-seized power, deposing the NLD government, which after winning a second landslide election in November 2020 was preparing to begin its second term in office.<sup>25</sup> Washington responded to the coup by demanding that the junta halt its brutal crackdown of the democratic opposition and by imposing a new set of targeted sanctions.

### *Pragmatic Choices?*

Suspicious notwithstanding, Burmese policy elites do seem to have more favorable sentiments toward the United States than toward China. These attitudes may be a result of a conflation of resentment toward the previous military junta prior to 2011 and China's support that prolonged it, leading people to view U.S. engagement as a sign of returning to parliamentary democracy and a place of dignity in the global community. The ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute's annual "State of Southeast Asia" survey series, which track Southeast Asian views of regional and global dynamics, reveals some interesting preferences from Myanmar. From 2019 to 2021, findings show that Myanmar officials continued to have positive associations with the United States but also reveal some pragmatic acceptance of geopolitical realities.<sup>26</sup>

Myanmar survey respondents view China's political, strategic, and economic dominance in the region with concern, and these concerns have only grown over the past three years. In 2020, Myanmar placed high confidence in the U.S. ability to maintain a rules-based order and uphold international law. Yet, if forced to choose between China and the

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<sup>24</sup> Richard C. Paddock, "Aung San Suu Kyi Asks U.S. Not to Refer to 'Rohingya,'" *New York Times*, May 6, 2016 ~ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/07/world/asia/myanmar-rohingya-aung-san-suu-kyi.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Gregory B. Poling and Simon Tran Hudes, "Myanmar's Military Seizes Power," Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 1, 2021 ~ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/myanmars-military-seizes-power>.

<sup>26</sup> See Tang Siew Mun et al., "The State of Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report," ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, January 2019; Tang Siew Mun et al., "The State of Southeast Asia: 2020 Survey Report," ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, January 2020; and Sharon Seah et al., "The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report," ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, February 2021.

United States, Myanmar's choice seemed to be Beijing, given uncertainty about Washington as a reliable strategic partner.

Continued concern about China's growing influence has compelled more Myanmar officials to look forward to the Biden administration's increasing engagement with Southeast Asia, and to more expressions of confidence in the United States as a strategic partner and provider of regional security. In 2021, Myanmar's distrust of China was higher than distrust in the United States.<sup>27</sup> However, any prospects for reconciling pragmatic engagement with China and a desire for diversified external partnerships were paused with the military's seizure of state power in February.


### *Prospects and Implications*<sup>28</sup>

At the time of writing, Myanmar is spiraling into chaos. Any hope of reform, transition, development, or positive change in the country seems decidedly over as the military's brutal repression of nationwide resistance to the coup continues. Given that most governments around the world have condemned the military's coup and subsequent violence, Myanmar's international image and dignity have also declined to almost the pariah status of the previous junta years. The State Administration Council (SAC) junta's dismissive attitude toward the recent surge in Covid-19 infections and deaths has further compounded the political, economic, and social crises caused by the coup. Myanmar is now on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe of a magnitude that the outside world will find hard to fathom and even harder to assist, as governments worldwide deal with their own domestic socioeconomic concerns caused by the global pandemic. In this context, legitimacy concerns have again come to the fore for both the SAC and the opposition National Unity Government (NUG) that emerged on April 16 to cohere and coordinate the views and aspirations of various groups and ethnic nationalities across the country.

The main foreign policy issue is determining who is the legitimate authority representing Myanmar internationally. The NUG has sought dialogue with ethnic and civil society organizations, armed groups across Myanmar, and the member states of ASEAN and the international community in its quest to establish itself as the entity representing the

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<sup>27</sup> Seah et al., "The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report."

<sup>28</sup> This section expands on analysis made by the author in Moe Thuzar, "Post-2020 Myanmar in the World: Contesting Legitimacy and Change," *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, no. 31 (2021)  <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-31/post-2020-myanmar-in-the-world-contesting-legitimacy-and-change>.

legitimate interests of the Myanmar people. In May the NUG established the People's Defence Force as a self-protective measure against the violence being meted out by the junta's security forces against unarmed civilians. On September 7 the NUG escalated this conflict as a "people's defensive war" to call global attention to the military's continued brutal suppression of the anti-coup protests and the SAC's willful neglect of repeated calls for a cessation of violence by ASEAN, the United States, and other members of the international community.

The NUG, however, is limited in available options to contest the foreign policy space in areas where the SAC dominates. Indeed, in addition to attending ASEAN's various sectoral meetings, the SAC representatives have attended virtual meetings between foreign ministers of ASEAN and their U.S. counterpart (and in-person meetings with their Chinese counterpart). Recently, the United States and China reached an agreement on maintaining the incumbent in Myanmar's seat at the United Nations, deferring a decision on Myanmar's UN credentials to November. While this certainly dealt a diplomatic blow to the SAC's assertions of political legitimacy, the status of the NUG remains unclear.

On the part of the United States, the current sentiment seems to be to support an ASEAN-coordinated diplomatic response for Myanmar, while continuing bipartisan engagement at the think-tank and Track 2 level with the NUG representatives and also expressing condemnation of the coup at the UN level. The United States has also led moves to impose targeted sanctions on members of the SAC and their associates. Beyond these measures, however, historical knowledge of the trajectory of bilateral relations suggests another episode of tensions and distrust will characterize relations for as long as the SAC continues to occupy the seat of power in Myanmar. ♦