

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

US Presidential Election 2020

What Might ASEAN Expect from Biden?

By Tan See Seng

SYNOPSIS

Many observers anticipate major reversals in US foreign policy following Joe Biden's win in the US presidential election on 3 November 2020. But for the ASEAN region, Biden's approach will likely be characterised by both change and continuity relative to that of the Trump administration.

COMMENTARY

WITH JOE Biden touted as the 46th president of the United States – the election result remains under challenge from President Donald Trump on the supposed grounds of electoral fraud – what can ASEAN expect of President-elect Biden's approach to Asia?

Biden's win looks set to reverse the international course taken by Trump and his "America First" platform over the past four years, which largely rejected multilateralism and repudiated the US' role in international leadership since the end of the Second World War. Going by Biden's public statements, America's projected return to the international fold under a Biden administration will likely have key implications for multilateral cooperation on climate change, global public health, global trade, nuclear non-proliferation, human rights and a rules-based international order. However, Biden will first have his hands full restoring America's standing and credibility with allies and partners alike.

ASEAN's Warm Welcome for Biden

Biden will find ASEAN amenable and welcoming of the US. The ASEAN region went from being "cheaters" in Trump's perspective – nine of the ten ASEAN member states enjoyed fairly large trade surpluses with the US (the exception being Singapore) – to

prospective and somewhat reluctant partners with America in its effort to balance China.

Incentives like the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, which authorises up to US\$1.5 billion annually through 2023, were implemented to garner the ASEAN region's support for the US' "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy. But with Trump missing ASEAN meetings three years in a row, many regional observers hold the view, fairly or otherwise, that China seems to have gained the upper hand in the ASEAN region – the so-called "ground zero" in the strategic competition between the US and China.

The perception that the Chinese are winning against the Americans over ASEAN has just been strengthened by the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) at the Association's recently concluded virtual 37th summit hosted by Vietnam, ASEAN's current chair. Nearly a decade in the making – talks were launched in 2012 – the RCEP trade deal spans 15 countries and 2.2 billion people, nearly 30 per cent of the world's population, with a combined GDP of roughly \$26 trillion (or nearly 28 per cent of global trade based on 2019 data).

The fulcrum of this massive trade pact is China, whose economy dwarfs those of its fellow RCEP members. The US is neither in the RCEP nor in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) – of whose earlier incarnation, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), Trump backed the US out.

Biden's Expected Pivot towards Asia

Expect Biden to pivot towards ASEAN as well as Asia more broadly. But the road back in will not be easy. Were the Asians to graciously welcome US participation in their trade pacts, a divided US Congress and the protectionist-minded among the Democrats may still block any attempt by a Biden administration to move in that direction.

Even then, it is not all doom and gloom for America, which does \$2 trillion in trade with the RCEP countries – of which \$354 billion was with the ASEAN region in 2019 alone. (By comparison, China's trade with the ASEAN region was \$644 billion for that same year.) Yet if further rounds of budgetary battles were to ensue thanks to a divided Congress, it is not certain if Biden – like his Democratic predecessors Bill Clinton and Barack Obama – can actively engage with his ASEAN counterparts even if he wanted to.

Two key areas which ASEAN leaders emphasised at their virtual summit in Hanoi – tensions in the South China Sea and the region's post-pandemic recovery, respectively – could see differing responses from Biden. His markedly divergent response to that of Trump to the pandemic ravaging America implies he will adopt a cooperative approach globally.

While he is likely to recommit the US to the World Health Organisation (WHO), with whom the Trump administration had a falling out, it is unclear whether Biden will throw US support behind the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access Facility (COVAX), where participating countries pool money to offer manufacturers volume guarantees for potential vaccines in order to dissuade any country from hoarding.

But where ASEAN goes, Biden is likely to increase funding beyond the \$87 million the Trump administration has hitherto provided the ASEAN region to combat the pandemic therein. (On its part, China reportedly pledged in May 2020 to include the ASEAN states as prospective beneficiaries of its \$2 billion COVID aid package.)

Biden and South China Sea

On the other hand, Biden's stance on the South China Sea is unlikely to deviate from that of his predecessor. Expect him to continue the US' tough stand against China's territorial claims. The Obama administration conducted six freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea.

By contrast, the Trump administration has conducted over 20 such operations in the South China Sea, of which nine took place in 2019 alone. While the pace and scope of a Biden administration's participation in FONOPs in those waters remains to be determined, their intensity is unlikely to be diminished.

That said, Biden's readiness to engage with and listen to his ASEAN counterparts will likely temper his security approach to the region by downplaying the robust anti-China orientation of Trump. Much will also depend on leadership within ASEAN itself.

Arguably, ASEAN's collective reaffirmation at its June 2020 meeting regarding the 1982 UNCLOS treaty as the basis of sovereign rights and entitlements in the South China Sea might not have happened without Vietnam's vigorous chairmanship of ASEAN in 2020. Will that kind of institutional leadership be sustained by succeeding chairs in the face of relentless Chinese pressure, and if so, will it be with or without Biden's support?

*Tan See Seng is Professor of International Relations at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. His most recent books include *The Responsibility to Provide in Southeast Asia: Towards an Ethical Explanation* (Bristol University Press, 2019) and *The Legal Authority of ASEAN as a Security Institution* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). This commentary is part of an RSIS Series.*
