

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.

Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy

US in Southeast Asia: Striking a New Balance?

By Prashanth Parameswaran

SYNOPSIS

The Biden administration has just unveiled its Indo-Pacific Strategy. Can the president deliver a US-Southeast Asia strategy that will manage the imbalances characteristic of US policy for decades?

COMMENTARY

THE BIDEN administration's newly-released Indo-Pacific Strategy on 11 February 2022 aims to more firmly anchor the United States in the Indo-Pacific. It is comprehensive in nature, with ten core thrusts across the economic, security and diplomatic domains to be advanced across the region including Southeast Asia. As the Biden team looks to deliver on this ambitious agenda, it will need to manage the imbalance in commitment that has characterised US policy in Southeast Asia over the past few decades.

As I argue in my new book, *Elusive Balances: Shaping US-Southeast Asia Strategy*, American commitment to Southeast Asia has been characterised by a series of ebbs and flows through the decades as US policymakers have had to simultaneously calibrate between shifts in power, threats and resources. The imbalances in US policy have been particularly evident as Washington has deepened its commitment to Southeast Asia in the 21st century.



US Indo-Pacific Strategy

Biden's Commitment Challenge in Southeast Asia

For instance, President George W. Bush focused more on bilateral partnerships than multilateral institutions such as ASEAN, while President Barack Obama was viewed as being too unwilling to confront Beijing's assertive behaviour, including in the South China Sea.

The Biden administration faces a similar challenge today. The combination of uncertainty about US power, rising threat perceptions about China and a limited ability to mobilise resources amid COVID-19 and political polarisation, risks distorting American commitment to the region.

The administration has taken a series of measures to mitigate these effects, including investing in high-level diplomatic engagement and trying to forge an economic strategy that balances out what might otherwise appear as an overly security-centric approach.

Nonetheless, it is already finding it difficult to fully fund US priorities and find a moderate course on aspects of US policy relative to the Trump years, such as on China or democracy. Getting past this challenge will require managing three particular commitment balances in the coming years.

Matching Means and Ends

The *first* is finding the balance between means and ends in US-Southeast Asia policy. American administrations have previously found their approaches either short on means amid periods of resource constraint such as the post-Vietnam War period. Or these had been expansive in ends to the point of distracting from core US interests in the Indo-Pacific as we saw following the post-September 11 period when the US entered into wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Biden administration is well-aware that it finds itself advancing ambitious Indo-

Pacific strategy in Southeast Asia amid constraints, as evidenced by a dedicated section in the newly-released strategy on “ends, ways and means”. Delivering on the strategy will require creativity about how to do more with less.

On the security side, this may come down to protecting specific line items related to Southeast Asia in the defence budget, rather than advancing ambitious new investments. On the economic side, it might mean wringing out some market access provisions in a challenging domestic environment that are attractive to at least the region’s largest economies, like Indonesia or Vietnam, to get them to sign on to the administration’s Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.

A More Calibrated China Approach

The *second* is finding a balance between a cooperative and competitive approach towards China. Southeast Asia has seen the most extreme manifestations of the two ends of the spectrum of US policy over the past half-century.

These range from Nixon’s trip to China in 1972 that paved the way for the normalization of ties that would alter the balance of power in the Cold War, to Trump’s confrontational approach to a risen China which shattered the already fracturing Washington Consensus that a mix of engagement and balancing was a sustainable approach.

The Biden administration’s slogan of responsible competition is a useful starting point to reassure the region that it is compartmentalising US-China ties into aspects of *cooperative, competitive and adversarial* components, as Secretary of State Antony Blinken has put it. The challenge in the next few years will be to find ways to cooperate with Beijing in areas of common global interest.

These includes climate change and nonproliferation, while also ensuring that China does not consume the administration’s approach to Southeast Asia and crowd out America’s own positive vision for the region. Such an approach would reassure the region while putting US-China competition on a relatively more stable path that does not foreclose the possibility of selective, positive-sum cooperation.

Balancing Interests and Ideals

The *third* is finding a balance between interests and ideals. US administrations have toggled between extremes on this score. The Clinton administration pursued an ambitious agenda of “enlargement” that alienated some US partners in Southeast Asia while the Obama administration took a calculated risk to improve certain rights-related areas to pursue greater engagement with Myanmar.

The Biden team faces its own version of this balance today, as evidenced by the controversy over last year’s Democracy Summit. That event saw only three ASEAN states participate and discontent in parts of the region over who was invited and America’s own democratic shortcomings.

Focusing more on specific governance issues of mutual concern, such as anti-corruption or an open Internet, could help advance the longstanding US objective of

promoting democracy while also moving beyond black-or-white conceptions that deprive US policymakers of the flexibility to pursue avenues between the extremes of engagement and isolation.

Future Prospects under Biden and Beyond

To be sure, this is far from easy to realise under Biden and future US administrations given the shifting domestic, regional and global context. Domestically, forging commitment balances can be an even more difficult task to accomplish in the context of the upcoming midterm elections, which can consume the administration's attention and introduce short-term political realities that supersede long-term policy investments.

Within Southeast Asia, evolving dynamics, such as the worsening situation in Myanmar or future strategic shifts like the case of China's security presence in Cambodia's Ream Naval Base, can come to quickly dominate Washington's approach to the region more generally and distort Washington's sense of its regional objectives and its own position.

And beyond the Southeast Asia, the past history of U.S. foreign policy will no doubt leave lingering anxieties about the propensity of Washington to be consumed by crises in other parts of the region and the world. There are no shortage of these as the Biden team gets underway with its Indo-Pacific strategy, including nuclear worries in Iran and North Korea, Russian maneuvers in Europe and rising militancy in the context of an Afghanistan post-U.S. withdrawal.

Nonetheless, a calibrated and comprehensive approach to US commitment in Southeast Asia offers Washington the best chance of getting past some of the challenges of the past and gaining the broadest support in the region for the future. If it plays its cards right, the Biden administration can build on the firm foundation it has established in US-Southeast Asia policy during its first year in office to make this aspiration a reality.

*Dr. Prashanth Parameswaran is a Fellow at the Asia Program of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars based in Washington, D.C. His new book is *Elusive Balances: Shaping U.S.-Southeast Asia Strategy*. Previously attached to RSIS, he contributed this to RSIS Commentary.*
