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US-ASEAN Ties: Setting and Delivering on a Better Tone

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SYNOPSIS

*Relations between the United States and ASEAN have been in the spotlight recently, with President Joe Biden's 2022 National Security Strategy outlining a recalibrated approach to external partners and the US-ASEAN relationship being upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. While concerns about the US commitment to the region and broader fears about geopolitical instability are likely to remain, **KEVIN CHEN** argues Washington can prove it is a reliable partner by delivering on its commitments under the upgraded partnership, such as the US-ASEAN Electric Vehicle Initiative.*

COMMENTARY

Relations between the United States and ASEAN have been in the spotlight with the recent release of two documents.

President Joe Biden's National Security Strategy (NSS), released in October 2022, offers key insights into the strategic priorities of his administration and how he intends to structure engagement with external partners. In contrast to past NSS documents, it calls for a more inclusive approach to engaging external partners.

Accompanying the NSS is the upgrading of the US-ASEAN relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) during the 10th US-ASEAN Summit on 13 November 2022, making the United States ASEAN's fourth such partner alongside China, Australia and India. A CSP is ASEAN's highest tier of relations with its external partners and indicates the presence of extensive elements of cooperation beyond just

regular trade and diplomatic ties. Accordingly, the United States and ASEAN committed to [five new high-level dialogue processes](#) (health, transportation, women's empowerment, environment and climate, and energy) on top of the three existing dialogue tracks (foreign affairs, economics and defence).



Can a comprehensive strategic partnership between the US and ASEAN deliver on its promises? *The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

Through these documents, Washington is setting the right tone, with its recalibrated approach towards ASEAN. However, there are still concerns about US commitment to the region, as well as broader fears about instability caused by escalating US-China competition. To address these concerns, Washington should proactively look to instrumentalise and implement the deliverables under its CSP with ASEAN. While concerns about geopolitical turmoil are likely to remain, delivering on the CSP will aid in convincing regional leaders that the United States is a reliable partner.

Towards the Right Tone

In comparison with past NSS documents, at least three elements of the Biden administration's NSS should appeal to ASEAN governments: the document's emphasis on climate change as a critical shared challenge; its recognition of regional fears about being swept up in great power rivalry; and recognition of fears that the United States will exclusively focus on engaging democracies.

First, the Biden administration's labelling of climate change as "the greatest and potentially existential [problem] for all nations" is a marked change from previous NSS documents. The Obama administration's 2010 NSS had described climate change as "real, urgent and severe", and its sequel in 2015 described it as an "urgent and growing threat to [US] national security". While discussion of climate change was absent in the NSS released under President Donald Trump in 2017, the emphatic language used in the latest NSS suggests an even greater urgency not only for the United States but for

the world at large. ASEAN countries, many of which are at high risk of suffering from the effects of climate change, are likely to welcome this shift.

Second, the NSS emphasises that it will “avoid the temptation” to approach strategic ties with external partners through the “prism of strategic competition”. While the United States has typically framed its engagement with external partners as intended to advance common interests, the latest pledge goes further, promising to engage external partners “on their own terms”. This suggests a more pointed effort to reassure governments worried about becoming pawns in a broader geopolitical game.

Third, the NSS also takes pains to reassure non-democratic governments that US engagement will not be predicated on the nature of their political system. While the promotion of democracy has been and continues to be a core element of the NSS, its implementation has been criticised for lacking consistency. For example, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines were the only ASEAN members [who were invited to attend](#) the inaugural US Democracy Summit in December 2021, leading observers to [question](#) the criteria behind their selection. The disclaimer in the 2022 NSS thus redefines partners from democracies as those who “depend upon a rules-based international system”, offering to create more inclusive coalitions for “constructive problem-solving ... based on shared interests”. The distinction here is not between democracies and non-democracies, but between parties that aim to uphold the international system and revisionists who seek to disrupt it.

Potential Sour Notes

However, it is not enough for the United States to promise — it must also deliver. Since Washington pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) multilateral trade agreement in 2017, US policy towards Asia has lacked a strong economic anchor. While the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) launched by President Biden in May 2022 is a novel effort to regain lost ground by outlining deeper regional economic cooperation, it suffers from a similar lack of concrete action. With China supplementing its cooperation with the region with high levels of trade and investment in key infrastructure, US economic engagement with the region appears less substantial by comparison.

Furthermore, the United States’ explicit strategic prioritisation of competition with China is likely to worry regional leaders, despite assurances that Washington will “compete responsibly”. Even a promise to oppose unilateral changes to the status quo across the Taiwan Strait and not support Taiwan independence is likely to be viewed with suspicion, not least due to President Biden’s repeated [remarks contradicting his country’s longstanding official position](#). Regardless of whether the president’s remarks constituted a gaffe or not, some regional leaders have expressed concerns that the two parties may “[sleepwalk into conflict](#)”.

Bright Spots Ahead

Despite these concerns, the announcements accompanying the CSP illuminate promising fields for cooperation.

The US-ASEAN Electric Vehicle (EV) Initiative, for example, aims to support the regional EV ecosystem and will be warmly welcomed by regional governments. ASEAN members such as Indonesia have strong ambitions for EV manufacturing and usage, with Jakarta aspiring to have EVs constitute 20% of domestic car production and court 2.5 million users by 2025.

Similarly, the new [US-ASEAN Platform for Infrastructure and Connectivity](#) promises to address critical regional challenges such as climate change and urbanisation. Under the broader auspices of the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), the Group of Seven's counter to China's Belt and Road Initiative, the platform is expected to support the implementation of ASEAN's numerous infrastructure strategy documents by catalysing private sector investments in regional infrastructure. While this space is already crowded with parties such as Japan and China, the extent of ASEAN's multi-trillion-dollar infrastructure gap suggests that more interest from external partners will almost certainly be welcomed.

Granted, it is not necessary for Washington to reinvent the wheel to engage ASEAN. Existing modes of cooperation such as the [US-ASEAN Smart Cities Partnership](#) can be energised with larger commitments. Non-monetary support for other efforts, including combatting illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and creating interoperable digital economy standards, is also an important aspect that underpins the US-ASEAN relationship.

Uncertainties about broader geopolitical trends are unavoidable. Nonetheless, in order to live up to the moniker of a "comprehensive strategic partnership", Washington should show ASEAN that it is ready to deliver on its promises and take its relationship with the grouping to the next level.

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