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Comparative Analysis of US and China's Approaches towards ASEAN



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Executive Summary

Under the Biden administration, the US is reclaiming its engagement and influence in the Indo-Pacific to encounter China's growing power in the region. The US has shown its commitment to ASEAN by establishing the ASEAN-US Comprehensive Strategic Partnership during the ASEAN-US Summit in May 2022. On the other hand, China has succeeded in upgrading its partnership status with ASEAN to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2021. The rivalry between these two powers has not only created opportunities but also created a dilemma for ASEAN Member states (AMS).

The US approach towards ASEAN is based on military alliance and started to put more weight on building partnerships with its non-allied partners. Meanwhile, China's approach toward ASEAN places greater emphasis on building a relationship and promoting economic cooperation. Since the economic cooperation would create a greater direct impact on society rather than a military approach, the US needs to promote the broader scope of partnerships in traditional and non-traditional security, economic, and infrastructure development. Even though China is the largest trading partner in ASEAN, China still needs to gain trust from AMS, particularly in dealing with the South China Sea issue. Thus, ASEAN could implement a hedging strategy and strengthen its centrality in facing both China and US powers in the region.



US-China Rivalry in the ASEAN Region

The United States (US) has shifted its foreign policy focus from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific as China emerges as a major economic power in the 21st century. The policy change is a US effort to contain China's rapid military and economic growth. In the Southeast Asia region, the US presence is entrenched militarily, politically, and economically, while China's rapid economic growth has been the impetus for a regional power shift. In recent years, the rivalry between the US and China has left ASEAN in a difficult position and a dilemma. The challenges faced by the ASEAN Member States (AMS) are, on one hand, being entangled with China, and on the other hand, depending on the long-standing security guarantees of the US.¹

The impact of the US-China rivalry has now grown in various aspects, including economics, politics, and security in ASEAN. With a total population reaching 661.8 million and total combined GDP of US\$3.0 trillion in 2020,² ASEAN becomes the fifth

largest economy in the world as well as one of the fastest-growing consumer markets in the world. The US and China have been important trade partners and investors for ASEAN for decades. Based on the ASEAN Investment Report 2020-2021,³ inward Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from the US to ASEAN reached US\$34.6 billion in 2019 and US\$34.7 billion in 2020, placing the US as the biggest investor in ASEAN. Meanwhile, China's share of inward FDI in ASEAN only reached US\$9 billion in 2019 and US\$7.6 billion in 2020. In terms of trade volume, China has overtaken the US and Europe as the largest trading partner for ASEAN since 2009. According to the report, the total trade volume between China and ASEAN reached US\$685.28 billion, almost 25% of the total trade volume in ASEAN in 2020.⁴ On the other hand, the total trade between the US and ASEAN is estimated at US\$362.2 billion in 2020.⁵ In comparison, the data also shows

1 Mohammad Anthoni, "ASEAN Harus Solid di antara Rivalitas AS-China," Antara News, November 8, 2020, <https://www.antaranews.com/berita/1827692/asean-harus-solid-di-antara-rivalitas-as-china>

2 The ASEAN Secretariat, "ASEAN Key Figures 2021," The ASEAN Secretariat, December 2021, [https://www.aseanstats.org/wp-content/](https://www.aseanstats.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/ASEAN-KEY-FIGURES-2021-FINAL-1.pdf)

[uploads/2021/12/ASEAN-KEY-FIGURES-2021-FINAL-1.pdf](https://www.aseanstats.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/ASEAN-KEY-FIGURES-2021-FINAL-1.pdf)

3 The ASEAN Secretariat, "ASEAN Investment Report 2020-2021 Investing in Industry 4.0," The ASEAN Secretariat, September 2021, <http://investasean.asean.org/files/upload/ASEAN%20Investment%20Report%202020-2021.pdf>

4 China International Import Expo, "China-ASEAN Bilateral Annual Growth Rate Hits 16.5% from 1991 to 2020," China International Import Expo, September 13, 2021, <https://www.ciie.org/zbh/en/news/exhibition/news/20210913/29410.html>

5 Office of the United States Trade Representative, "Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)," May 20, 2021, <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/southeast-asia-pacific/association-southeast-asian-nations-asean#:~:text=U.S.%20goods%20and%20services%20trade,totaled%20%24307.7%20billion%20in%202020.>

that aggregate US trade to ASEAN was US\$135 billion, triple of total Chinese trade to ASEAN at US\$40 billion in 2000.

Furthermore, both China and ASEAN have been establishing stronger economic and trade relations with other partners by signing Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand in November 2021 to remove trade barriers and expand market access. The US, on the other hand, failed to take the opportunity to strengthen its economic power in the Asia Pacific region when President Trump withdrew the US from the original Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in January 2017. Thus, the US government under the Biden-Harris administration should pick up the pace to scale up their economic relations in ASEAN.

In recent years, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the region, ASEAN received support from the US and China through vaccine distribution assistance. Although it was significantly helpful, it was believed as part of vaccine diplomacy, to seize their influence in the region.⁶ Pragmatically, vaccine diplomacy benefits vaccine providers and recipients. As a vaccine provider, the US' assistance does not only aim to help other countries deal with the Coronavirus but also to promote an image as a good neighbor in the Southeast Asian region. Likewise China, vaccine diplomacy is utilized to restore its global reputation, which had deteriorated after the outbreak started in Wuhan and spread throughout the world. The US and China are vaccine donors that can overcome health crises in AMS. However, if

it is related to the politics and close relations between the AMS and the US and China, they have to choose one. For instance, Singapore cooperates with the US, while the Philippines and Cambodia work with China.⁷

Furthermore, in the security realm, the rivalry between the US and China could be seen in their maneuvers in the South China Sea. Tensions in the South China Sea have heated up again when China's military exercises have been carried out. The US then responded to China's action by sending two of its aircraft carriers to conduct routine operations and military exercises.⁸ As a form of US opposition to China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, the US regularly sends warships to patrol the disputed area. As a result, the navies of both countries have repeatedly been involved in incidents in the region. The deployment of US and Chinese military forces in the South China Sea has impacted the stability of peace and security in the area.

ASEAN-US High-level Engagements under Biden's Administration

The ASEAN-US Special Summit

The ASEAN-US Special Summit was held on 12-13 May 2022, and was attended by ASEAN leaders with President Joe Biden as the host. Although the Myanmar Military Junta leader was excluded from the meeting, the AMS and the US promised to double the efforts to create peaceful solutions

6 Laraswati Adriane Anwar, "Asia Tenggara, Medan Tempur Diplomasi Vaksin China-AS," Kompas, August 6, 2021, <https://www.kompas.id/baca/internasional/2021/08/06/asia-tenggara-medan-tempur-diplomasi-vaksin-china-as>

7 Asia Today, "AS dan China Ingin Genggam Asia Tenggara melalui Diplomasi Vaksin COVID-19," July 8, 2021, <https://asiatoday.id/read/as-dan-china-ingin-genggam-asia-tenggara-melalui-diplomasi-vaksin-covid-19>

8 Hardi Alunaza SD, "Rivalitas China, AS, dan ASEAN dalam Sengketa Laut China Selatan," October 6, 2020, <https://untan.ac.id/rivalitas-china-as-dan-asean-dalam-sengketa-laut-china-selatan/>

and freedom for Myanmar. They were committed to establishing the ASEAN-US Comprehensive Strategic Partnership that is meaningful, substantive, mutually beneficial, and will be further discussed at the 10th ASEAN-US Summit in November 2022. This meeting begins a new era for the US-ASEAN relationship as President Biden announced the nomination of Yohannes Abraham as ASEAN ambassador, which the position had been vacant since 2017. In addition, the US also announced its commitment to provide \$150 million to ASEAN to address issues related to infrastructure, security, clean energy, and pandemic response.

Several issues were stipulated in the ASEAN-US Joint Vision Statement. Firstly, strengthening cooperation on pandemic recovery and health security to foster regional health resilience through the ASEAN-US Health Futures Initiative program and the Quad Vaccine partnership. Secondly, increasing economic ties and connectivity, including enhancing people-to-people connectivity, educational cooperation, and supporting sub-regional development. Thirdly, strengthening cooperation in tackling climate change to support the implementation of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), including supporting the ongoing ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation (APAEC) and ASEAN Power Grid. And lastly, increasing maritime cooperation through ASEAN-led mechanisms in the form of strengthening coordination between maritime law enforcement agencies in the fields of maritime domain awareness, search and rescue, maritime security and eradication of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU).

The 9th ASEAN-US Summit

Prior to this meeting, the 9th ASEAN-US Summit was virtually held on 26 October 2021 and was led by His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah, Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam. Similar to the Special Summit, Myanmar was excluded from this event. The summit marked the first time in the four years that the US president attended the high-level meeting in regional ASEAN. President Biden also announced a US\$102 million commitment to expand the US strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific region.

As stipulated in the Chairman's Statement of the 9th ASEAN-US Summit,⁹ the US emphasized the importance of the ASEAN-US Strategic Partnership and the establishment of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) initiative. In relation to the COVID-19, all leaders committed to working together to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and advance health security. The ASEAN leaders also welcomed US contributions of over 194 million in COVID-19-related assistance for expanding vaccine production in the region. They look forward to enhancing people-to-people ties through student exchange and internship programs. Moreover, they agreed on the adoption of the ASEAN-US Leader's Statement on Digital Development to prepare ASEAN for the fourth Industrial Revolution.

Friends of the Mekong Ministerial Meeting

Friends of the Mekong Ministerial Meeting was held virtually on 5 August 2021. This

⁹ Chairman's Statement of the 9th ASEAN-US Summit, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/85.-Final-Chairmans-Statement-9th-ASEAN-US-Summit-As-of-27-Oct-2021.pdf>



meeting was a US-led framework intended to promote stability, peace, prosperity, and sustainable development of the Mekong sub-region through cooperation among the Mekong partner countries and the US. The member countries that attended the meetings were five AMS (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam), Japan, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and the US. While the institution members were the Asian Development Bank, European Union, Mekong River Commission Secretariat, and the World Bank. Additionally, the ASEAN Secretariat, the United Kingdom (UK), and India also participated as observers.

This event commemorated the 10th anniversary of the Friends of Mekong where its member countries and institutions have provided more than US\$25 billion in development assistance to the Mekong subregion since 2015.¹⁰ It discussed the

efforts to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic, advance economic recovery, climate change, energy, human capital development, as well as sustainable water and natural resource management. Moreover, US Secretary Blinken and Japan's Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu also advised that the member countries should take action to ensure the Myanmar military holds accountability to the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus.

East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Regional Forum

Besides initiating the aforementioned meetings, the US is also actively involved in several meetings conducted in the region, such as the 16th East Asia Summit (EAS) and the 28th ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Ministerial Meeting. The 16th EAS was convened via video conference on 27 October 2021. The Summit was chaired by His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah, Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam.

10 Minh Vu, "Friends of Mekong provides US\$25B for Mekong Sub-region in past 6 years," Hanoi Times, August 7, 2021, <https://hanoitimes.vn/friends-of-mekong-provides-us25b-for-mekong-sub-region-in-past-6-years-318302.html>

Membership of the EAS comprises the ten ASEAN countries, Australia, the People's Republic of China, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, the United States, and the Russian Federation. The areas of cooperation discussed in this event include environment and energy, education, finance, global health issues and pandemic, disaster management, ASEAN connectivity, economic and trade cooperation, food security, maritime cooperation, and regional and international issues such as developments in Myanmar, Korean Peninsula, and the South China Sea.¹¹ In Addition, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) and World Trade Organization (WTO) briefed the 16th EAS on the vital importance of multilateralism and solidarity to confront global health threats and to assure the sustainability of the global economic recovery.¹²

The 28th ARF was virtually conducted on 6 August 2021. The Meeting was chaired by the Honourable Dato Erywan Pehin Yusof, Minister of Foreign Affairs II of Brunei Darussalam. The participants of the meeting consisted of 27 member countries, including ten AMS, ten ASEAN Dialogue Partners, Bangladesh, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Mongolia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, and Papua New Guinea. The US, as represented by Secretary Blinken, emphasized the importance of democracy, transparency, and accountability in the Indo-Pacific, including US efforts to address the COVID-19 pandemic by providing 23 million vaccine doses for countries in the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, Blinken specifically called China to follow international law in

regard to South China Sea issue. The US also raised concerns about ongoing human rights abuses in Tibet, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang, and the rapid growth of China's nuclear weapons.¹³

ASEAN-China High-level Engagements

The ASEAN-China Special Summit

ASEAN and China virtually conducted the ASEAN-China Special Summit on 22 November 2021, with President Xi Jinping as the Chairman, the ASEAN Secretary-General, and nine ASEAN leaders - without Myanmar's participation due to the lack of the Five-Point Consensus progress. China and ASEAN officially announced the establishment of a China-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership as a new milestone in the history of both parties' relations. It was expected that this strengthened partnership would inject new impetus into peace, stability, prosperity, and development of the region.¹⁴ During the meeting, China also pledged to provide ASEAN with another US\$1.5 billion of development assistance in the next three years to support ASEAN countries to fight against COVID-19 and economic recovery.¹⁵

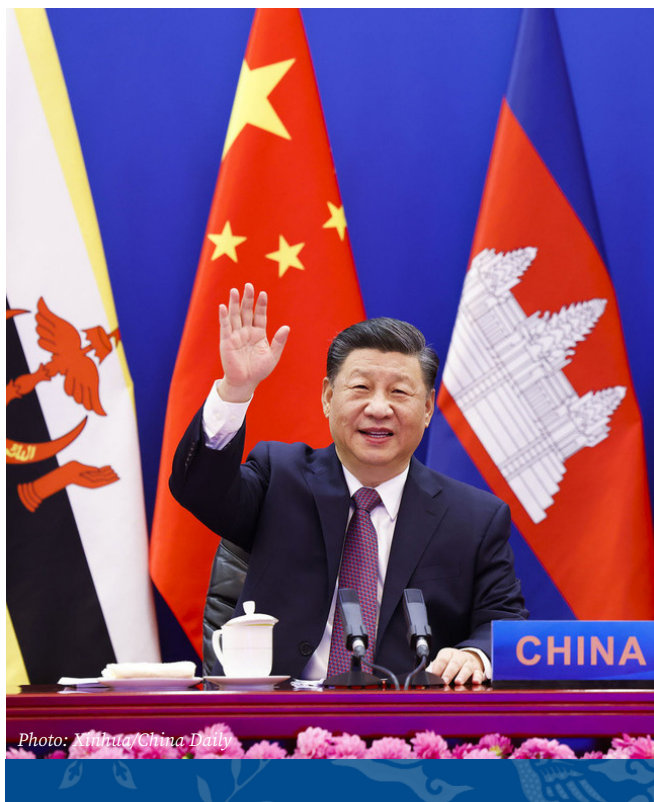
13 Ned Price, "Secretary Blinken's Participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum Foreign Ministers' Meeting," US Department of State, August 6, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-participation-in-the-asean-regional-forum-foreign-ministers-meeting/>

14 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Xi Jinping Attends and Chairs the Special Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of China-ASEAN Dialogue Relations and Officially Announces the Establishment of a China-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," November 22, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/kjgzbdyyq/202111/t20211122_10451494.html

15 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Singapore, "Xi Jinping Attends and Chairs the Special Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of China-ASEAN Dialogue Relations and Officially Announces the Establishment of a China-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," November 23, 2021, http://sg.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgxg/202111/t20211123_10451884.htm

11 Chairman's Statement of the 16th East Asia Summit 27 October 2021, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/96-FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-16th-East-Asia-Summit-on-27-October-2021.pdf>

12 Ibid.



Moreover, the Special Summit adopted the Joint Statement of the ASEAN-China Special Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations. The Joint Statement contained several important issues related to the partnership between ASEAN and China, one of which is the support for ASEAN centrality and the realization of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025. It also included efforts to promote concrete cooperation within the framework of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific in four priority areas, namely maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development goals (SDGs), and trade and investment. Furthermore, ASEAN and China agreed to promote economic cooperation (trade, digital economy, technology and innovation, sustainable energy, and the blue economy) and enhance post-pandemic ASEAN-China cooperation to support public health resilience in the region.¹⁶

¹⁶ Joint Statement of the ASEAN-China Special Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations:

The 24th ASEAN Plus Three Summit

The 24th ASEAN Plus Three (APT) Summit was convened via video conference on 27 October 2021. The leaders of the AMS, China, Japan, and South Korea, jointly attended the Summit and Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei presided over the Summit.¹⁷ China put forward proposals which included (1) improving public health governance; (2) deepening regional economic integration through Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP), (3) enhancing industrial cooperation in East Asia by extending the ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement Framework to all APT countries; (4) promoting the digital economy in East Asia to help regional countries bridge the digital divide; (5) energizing financial cooperation; and (6) promoting green and sustainable growth. The Summit adopted the APT Leaders' Statement on Cooperation on Mental Health Amongst Adolescents and Young Children. The next step after the adoption is to conduct a regional workshop on sharing best practices on mental health promotion in school settings amongst APT countries in 2022.¹⁸

ASEAN-China Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting

On the sidelines of the 15th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), the ASEAN - China Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting was virtually conducted under the chair of Brunei's Second Minister of Defense Dato

Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace, Security, Prosperity and Sustainable Development

¹⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Li Keqiang Attends the 24th ASEAN Plus Three Summit," October 27, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202110/t20211028_10348992.html

¹⁸ Chairman's Statement of the 24th ASEAN Plus Three Summit 27 October 2021



Paduka Seri Haji Awang Halbi bin Haji Mohd Yussof. The meeting was attended by ASEAN defense ministers, the ASEAN Secretary-General, and the Chinese Minister of National Defence.¹⁹ The event was also monumental since it took place on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of their dialogue partnership.

The delegates reviewed the results of defense cooperation between ASEAN and China over the past time and exchanged their views on international and regional situations of mutual interest.²⁰ On this occasion, the Chinese Minister of National Defence reaffirmed China's commitment to strengthening ASEAN-China defense cooperation in areas such as think-tank exchanges, counter-

terrorism, and humanitarian mine action.²¹ Additionally, China emphasized that the relevant parties should build consensus, manage differences, and advance cooperation to jointly uphold peace and stability in the South China Sea.²²

The Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting

The Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Celebration of the 30th Anniversary of the Dialogue Relations was held in Chongqing, China, on 7 June 2021. The meeting was co-chaired by State Councilor

19 ASEAN Defence Military - Meeting, "China Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting Virtually Held," June 16, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3GxUCOI>
20 Ibid.

21 The Singapore Ministry of Defense, "Preparing for a Future-Ready, Peaceful and Prosperous ASEAN," The Singapore Ministry of Defence, June 15, 2022, https://www.mindef.gov.sg/web/portal/mindef/news-and-events/latest-releases/article-detail/2021/June/15jun21_nr

22 The State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China, ASEAN Pledge Efforts to Safeguard Regional Peace," June 16, 2021, http://english.www.gov.cn/statecouncil/weifenghe/202106/16/content_WS60c94402c6d0df57f98db403.html

and Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Foreign Secretary of the Philippines Teodoro Locsin and attended by other foreign ministers of the AMS and ASEAN Secretary-General.²³ Over the past three decades, China and ASEAN have worked together to enrich the strategic partnership in political security, economy and trade, and social and people-to-people exchanges. To mark the centenary of the Communist Party of China (CPC), China begins a new journey toward fully building a modern socialist country under the leadership of the CPC Central Committee with Xi Jinping as the key leader. China plans to provide a vast market, more opportunities, and stronger drivers for ASEAN, maintain and develop a road of regional cooperation with East Asian characteristics, build a higher level of China-ASEAN strategic partnership, and build a closer community with a shared future.²⁴

Various issues were discussed in the meeting, such as (1) enhancing ASEAN-China public health cooperation in vaccine and medical supplies; (2) pushing forward economic recovery through a digital economy, low-carbon economy, and blue economy; (3) upgrading bilateral relations to elevate the China-ASEAN relations into the comprehensive strategic partners; (4) reaching the Code of Conduct (COC) at an early date by increasing dialogue and consultation of the South China Sea issue; (5) upholding multilateralism based on the UN Charter and international law; and (6) jointly carrying forward Asian values to support the ASEAN integration and forge a

closer community with a shared future. As a result of the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting, ASEAN countries were willing to work with China on materializing the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership Vision 2030 and the Plan of Action to Implement the Joint Declaration on ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity (2021-2025). In addition, ASEAN and China agreed to restart the COC consultations and continue with the full and effective implementation of the Declaration of Conduct.²⁵

Analysis: Comparison of US and China's Approaches towards ASEAN

In the US strategy, President Trump as Biden's predecessor has launched a concept called Free and Open Indo-Pacific, endorsing the conventional building blocks of US relationship in the Indo-Pacific in terms of security networks of regional allies and partners, economic prosperity, and good governance. However, the foreign policy to promote the America First policy had undermined the implementation of Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiatives. Furthermore, US withdrawal from TPP had driven an uncertain relationship between the US and ASEAN. It also limited the US participation in the regional multilateral economic agreements.

In contrast with Trump's policies, President Biden attempts to strengthen the US engagement in the Indo-Pacific to counter an increase in China's influence in the region. As stated by the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Coordinator, the US should be focused on the AMS for an effective Indo-Pacific approach to reclaim its influence and

²³ Co-Chairs' Statement on the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Celebration of the 30th Anniversary of the Dialogue Relations

²⁴ Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in Mumbai, "Wang Yi Attends Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Celebration of the 30th Anniversary of Dialogue Relations," June 7, 2021, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgmb/eng/zgyw/t1882097.htm>

²⁵ Ibid.

engagement with the region. It is reflected in several high-level multilateral meetings between the US and the AMS, such as the ASEAN-US Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Friends of Mekong Ministerial Meeting, EAS, the 9th ASEAN-US Summit in October 2021, and the ASEAN-US Special Summit on 12-13 May 2022. Furthermore, the US engagement through bilateral meetings and visits also increased during Biden's presidency, such as Vice-President Kamala Harris's visitations to Singapore and Vietnam on 22-26 August 2021, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's meeting with Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto on 20 November 2021, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Indonesia and Malaysia on 13-16 December 2021.

During his leadership, Biden announced the creation of the IPEF in October 2021 and the establishment of the ASEAN-US Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in May 2022. Instead of focusing on free trade deals to increase market access to the member countries, IPEF offers broader features addressing clean energy, supply chains, anti-corruption, and fair and resilient trade. IPEF is seen to be a durable and critical economic strategy to advance US commercial, diplomatic and strategic interests amidst China's economic power in the region and beyond. Since other countries have been actively negotiating trade agreements in the region, it is an urgent call for the US to step up the game and push forward the realization of IPEF.

Furthermore, the establishment of the ASEAN-US Comprehensive Strategic Partnership shows the deep commitment of the Biden leadership to ASEAN's central role in the US vision for a free and open

Indo-Pacific.²⁶ This initiative will be focused on four main sectors, namely health futures to lead the global fight against COVID-19, climate futures to tackle the climate crisis, economic futures to promote economic growth and opportunity, and a billion futures to provide funding for education, training and gender mainstreaming programs. Although the US' status as a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership might assist the implementation of one of its own development programs, for instance, Build Back Better World (B3W), the realization of this partnership remains unclear since it will be discussed later in the next ASEAN-US Summit.

In rebuttal to economic ties efforts, the US has been actively strengthening its military influences in the region. In September 2021, the US announced its trilateral partnership with the UK and Australia called AUKUS to deepen diplomatic, security, and defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. The partnership accelerates the effort to transfer and share technology, including sharing submarine technology to a non-nuclear-armed country. The establishment of AUKUS shows the US effort in balancing power toward China's domination by employing its defense technology and its strong relationship with the allies.

Furthermore, in February 2022, the US launched the Indo-Pacific Strategy document that captures the US commitment to a free and open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient Indo-Pacific. Although the Southeast Asia is central to the regional architecture, Australia appears more frequently than any

26 The White House, "Fact Sheet: New Initiatives to Expand the U.S.-ASEAN Strategic Partnership," The White House, 26 October 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/26/fact-sheet-new-initiatives-to-expand-the-u-s-asean-strategic-partnership/>



specific AMS names in the document. The document mentioned Australia seven times, while AMS such as Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia only appeared one time, Thailand and the Philippines appeared three times. Thus, it is fair to say that the US favors Australia as its ally than other AMS.

Moving to ASEAN-China relations, both parties began their informal cooperation in 1991, and China became ASEAN's full dialogue partner in 1996. During the ASEAN-China Summit in 2003, ASEAN and China established their strategic partnership - the most longstanding strategic partnership among all ASEAN Dialogue Partners. Subsequently, both sides agreed to upgrade their partnership status to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2021.

China's effort to upgrade its relations with ASEAN into a comprehensive strategic partnership is part of China's active neighborhood diplomacy, which is further emphasized during Xi Jinping's administration. China's neighborhood diplomacy is gaining even more prominence and urgency with the rise of US-China tensions and China's increased estrangement from the West. China wants to conduct diplomacy with a salient Chinese feature and a Chinese vision by boosting bilateral and multilateral cooperation across multiple sectors with ASEAN.²⁷

ASEAN-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership would serve as an instrument to amplify the positive narrative about

²⁷ Hoang Thi Ha, "The ASEAN-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: What's in a Name?," ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute Perspective Issue: 2021 No. 157 (November 2021): 1 - 11.

China as China's image has taken sharp downturns since the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. China has been calibrating a holistic investment strategy for the long-term development of ASEAN-China relations through Belt and Road Initiative projects that would further weld Southeast Asia to China economically. China's strategy aims to increase its image as *primus inter pares* compared to other ASEAN Dialogue Partners and consolidate its stature as the predominant power in the region.²⁸

A comprehensive strategic partnership is considered a higher level of bilateral ties above the strategic partnership. The comprehensive strategic partnership can be defined as "comprehensive" means all-dimensional, wide-ranging, and multi-layered cooperation; "strategic" means long-term and stable relations that transcend differences in ideology and social system, bearing the large picture of the overall relationship; and "partnership" means equal-footed, mutually beneficial and win-win cooperation.²⁹

Both the US and China have engaged their relations with ASEAN through comprehensive strategic partnerships. Nevertheless, the degree of depth and scope of cooperation between the US-ASEAN and China-ASEAN is different, although under the same frameworks. In fact, ASEAN's dialogue relations with China span around 50 sectoral cooperation mechanisms, compared to around 20 with the US.³⁰ It is also important to note that in the ASEAN-US Special Summit, the US pledged US\$150 million for development in ASEAN, while China pledged US\$1.5 billion for a three-year program in the

region. By number, China excels over the US by ten times.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Comparing the US and China's approaches to ASEAN, we can conclude that the US's engagement is a treaty-based, threat-driven, and security-centric alliance system, even though the US has also increasingly leveraged partnership diplomacy with its non-allied partners. On the other hand, China's partnership diplomacy places greater emphasis on cultivating political relationships and promoting economic cooperation. At this juncture, the economic partnership would be more impactful to gripping power in ASEAN rather than military alliances.³¹

The US needs to implement a strong and continuing role in ASEAN by promoting the broader scope of partnerships in traditional and non-traditional security, economic, trade, and infrastructure development. It will reinvigorate the US' economic and strategic presence in the region and balance cooperative and competitive strategies toward China. In another case, despite China having impactful economic power in the region, it does not mean that China has been entirely successful. There is still plenty of distrust of China's policies among the AMS in terms of the security sphere, particularly on the South China Sea issue. Some ASEAN claimant states (Malaysia, Brunei, Philippines, Vietnam) are not ready to put all their choices in the China basket and remain leaning toward the US as the long-standing security guarantees.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

Finally, it is important to note that military alliances generate security by deterrence, whereas economic cooperation generates security by interdependence and would last longer.³² ASEAN's centrality needs to be strengthened in facing the tug of war in the constellation of great powers. Instead of choosing one of the US or China's great powers, ASEAN could apply a hedging strategy to embrace both and optimize benefits for ASEAN. In essence, creating and expanding more collaboration in multiple sectors with ASEAN could also serve the US and China's interests in the region.

32 Kishore Mahbubani, "In Asia, China's Long Game Beats America's Short Game," *Foreign Policy*, December 12, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/12/china-us-asean-trade-geopolitics/>





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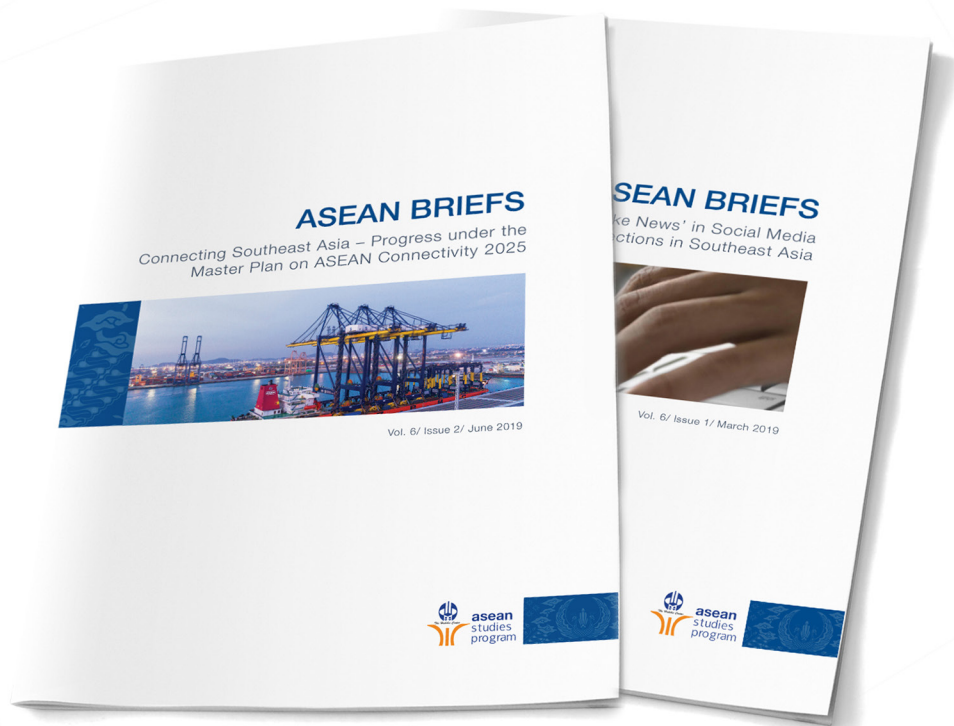
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The Habibie Center was founded by Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie and family in 1999 as an independent, non-governmental, non-profit organisation. The vision of The Habibie Center is to create a structurally democratic society founded on the morality and integrity of cultural and religious values. The mission of The Habibie Center are first, to establish a structurally and culturally democratic society that recognizes, respects, and promotes human rights by undertaking study and advocacy of issues related to democratization and human rights, and second, to increase the effectiveness of the management of human resources and the spread of technology.

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The ASEAN Studies Program was established on February 24, 2010, to become a center of excellence on ASEAN related issues, which can assist in the development of the ASEAN Community by 2015. The Habibie Center through its ASEAN Studies Program, alongside other institutions working towards the same goal, hopes to contribute to the realization of a more people-oriented ASEAN that puts a high value on democracy and human rights. The objective of the ASEAN Studies Program is not merely only to conduct research and discussion within academic and government circles, but also to strengthen public awareness by forming a strong network of civil society in the region that will be able to help spread the ASEAN message. With the establishment of ASEAN Studies Program, The Habibie Center aims to play its part within our capabilities to the ASEAN regional development.

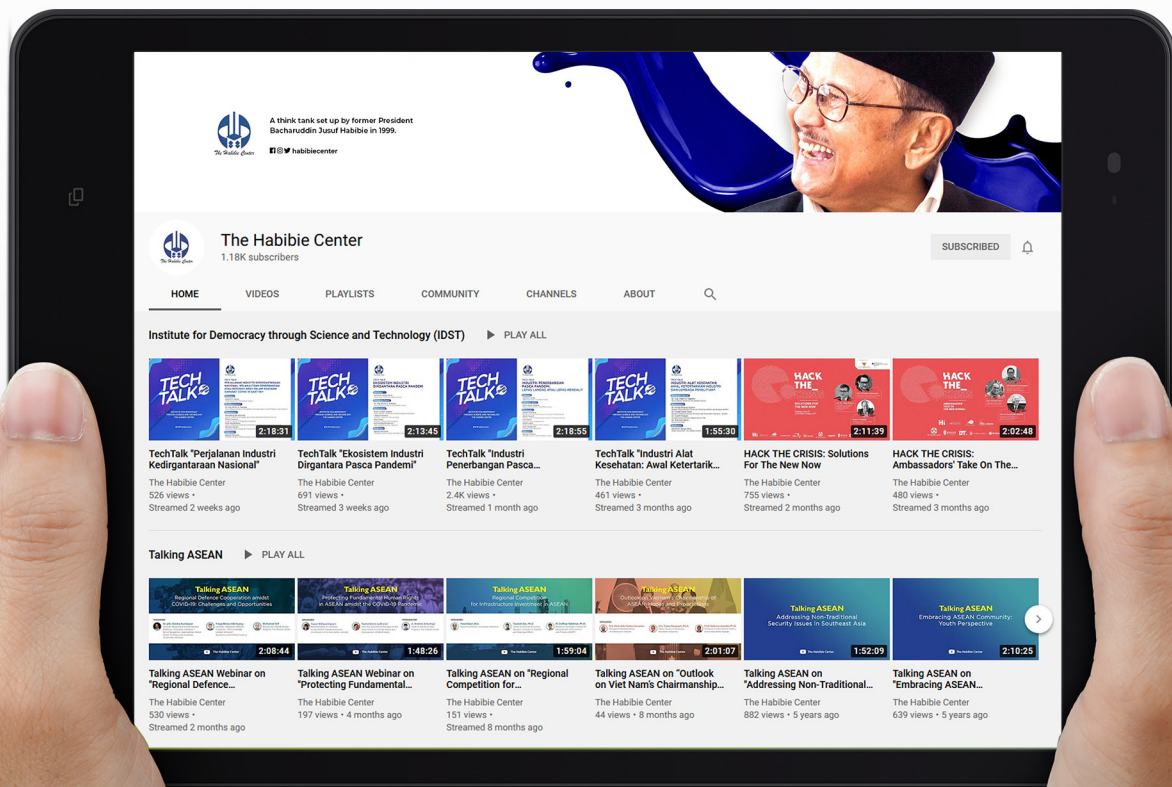
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