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Background Brief:

Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy & U.S.-ASEAN Summit

May 11, 2022

We request your assessment of the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy, on the occasion of the 2nd US-ASEAN Summit in Washington this week.

Q1. What is the meaning and importance of this summit meeting to U.S. strategy?

ANSWER: The Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy was released in February this year. This strategy states that the United States "welcomes a strong and independent ASEAN that leads in Southeast Asia." Towards that end the U.S. endorses ASEAN-centrality and will support ASEAN "to deliver sustainable solutions to the region's most pressing challenges."

At the 2nd U.S.-ASEAN Special Leaders' Summit, President Biden will strengthen present cooperation on health security, climate change, the environment, energy, transportation, and gender equity and equality.

Q2. From the U.S. point of view, which role should ASEAN play?

ANSWER: The Biden Administration supports ASEAN's role as central to the region's security architecture. In the U.S. view, an empowered ASEAN will play a leading role alongside the Quad. According to the *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, the United States "will work with ASEAN to build its resilience as a leading regional institution and will explore opportunities for the Quad to work with ASEAN. We will also support closer ties between South Asian partners [India] and ASEAN."

Q3. Do you expect any essential results from the summit?

ANSWER: The United States and ASEAN will celebrate the forty-fifth anniversary of dialogue relations this year. ASEAN and the United States became strategic partners seven years ago. Currently, the two sides are implementing a Plan of Action, 2021-25. In other words, there is a framework in place to review progress, to focus on what has already been agreed, and to adopt new initiatives for the future. It is likely that this Special Summit will see newly funded initiatives in the four priority areas President Biden announced in October 2021 at the virtual U.S.-ASEAN Summit: public health security, COVID-19 economic recovery and broad-based economic growth, mitigating climate change and digital infrastructure development.

Q4. Washington has not announced a National Security Strategy yet. What do you think there has been a delay?

ANSWER: Although the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 (Public Law 99-433) mandates that the President submit an annual U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) at the time the Administration submits its defence budget request, past history has shown that on some occasions the NSS is received late or not at all.

In late 2021, Biden Administration indicated that it would release its National Security Strategy and National Defence Strategy early this year. This has not happened and it is likely the war in Ukraine must be taken into account. However, the Biden Administration released an Interim National Security Strategic Guidance in March 2021 and an Indo-Pacific Strategy in February 2022.

In other words, the broad thrust of the United States' security strategy in the Indo-Pacific is set. Ordinarily the process would be reversed: the NSS would be issued first, followed by the National Defence Strategy and then other strategies such as the Indo-Pacific.

Of greater concern is that the Biden Administration has promised but not yet released its *Indo-Pacific Economic Framework*. This is important to ASEAN because its attention is on implementing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). In addition, four of its members (Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam) are keen to develop the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

It is unlikely that the U.S. will join either the CPTPP or RCEP; but the U.S. is considering a high-quality agreement on ecommerce and digital economy. It would suit the Biden Administration's interests to issue the *Indo-Pacific Economic Framework* and provide details on the digital economic agreement at the Special Summit or as soon as possible after that.

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