

## Kamala Harris's Asia Trip Can't Fix Biden's Troubled Indo-Pacific Strategy

**Lacking a serious vision for the region, the administration is aiming low.**

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When the White House announced that U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris would visit Singapore and Vietnam in August, Asia watchers scratched their heads. Sure, Washington has ground to make up in Southeast Asia. But of the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, why return to two of the countries that U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin already visited in July?

The answer is simple: The Biden administration is playing it safe. This is not just to keep things easy for Harris, who has relatively little foreign-policy experience. The administration is aiming low because of underlying weaknesses in its approach to Asia, as we argue in a forthcoming United States Studies Centre report. For all the administration's rhetoric about strategic competition with China, it has yet to present a serious Indo-Pacific policy—or its most important element, an effective economic strategy for the region. Had Harris visited countries other than the two U.S.-friendly stops prepared by Austin, Washington would have had to put much more on the table to secure a warm welcome.

Singapore and Vietnam are **safe options for a visit by an inexperienced vice president** in a region fraught with potential pitfalls and challenges. Singapore is the only country in Southeast Asia that gives the United States reliable military access. Its leaders are the region's savviest strategists, recognizing a U.S. military presence as necessary to preserve their own strategic autonomy and the broader regional balance. This makes Singapore eager to do what it can to enmesh the United States in the region.

Since the 2016 election of President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, which put the traditional U.S.-Philippines alliance in a quandary, Vietnam has been the country in the region most willing to overtly defy China. In the South China Sea, Hanoi has seen Washington as an essential part of the strategic balance and its efforts to deter Beijing. While U.S.-Vietnamese military ties remain limited and the Vietnam War still casts its long shadow over the two countries' relations, **Hanoi's deep distrust of Beijing creates a strong rationale for further expansion of U.S.-Vietnamese ties.**

**In both Singapore and Vietnam, strategic elites speak a language on China that resonates with their American interlocutors. Both countries see the United States' presence in the region as vital for their future security. In neither country is public opinion much of a constraint. All of this means that Harris is knocking on open doors. Even if the United States doesn't get everything it wants in terms of stepped-up defense ties, the atmospherics during both visits were certainly expected to be warm and positive.**

This would not have been a sure thing elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Austin got a good result in Manila, where he secured an agreement to maintain the Visiting Forces Agreement, which enables the U.S. military to operate bases in the Philippines. But further progress, such as full implementation of the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, which would expand the U.S. military's footprint in the Philippines and enhance interoperability between both armed forces, is unlikely under Duterte.

The other obvious candidates for a Harris visit, Indonesia and Thailand, would have been more challenging. Thailand's reluctance to lend support to broader U.S. strategic objectives vis-à-vis China means the Biden administration can expect little from Bangkok, despite the country's official designation as a "major non-NATO ally." And Indonesia, despite its weight and potentially powerful regional and strategic role, remains inwardly focused, transactional, and cautious about overtly challenging China. Any progress in security ties will be incremental, unlikely to lend itself to ambitious deliverables for a vice presidential visit.

Yet the United States cannot achieve its goal of maintaining a favorable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region without engaging more deeply all across Southeast Asia, not just in a few U.S.-friendly capitals. Southeast Asia's size and strategic geography—and the fluidity of countries' alignment decisions—make it the region where U.S.-Chinese competition for influence is most intense.