

US defense chief Austin to visit Singapore, Vietnam, Philippines

Washington seeks coordinated approach to Beijing in South China Sea

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WASHINGTON -- U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will travel to Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines from later this week, Pentagon press secretary John Kirby announced Monday, in the first visit to Southeast Asia by a top member of the Biden administration.

Leaving Friday, Austin will stop in Alaska before heading to the region. In Singapore, he will speak at an event hosted by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Kirby said in a statement. Nikkei reported on the planned trip earlier Monday.

"Secretary Austin's visit will demonstrate the importance the Biden-Harris administration places on Southeast Asia and on ASEAN as an essential part of the Indo-Pacific's architecture," Kirby said. "This trip will underscore the enduring U.S. commitment to the region, and our interest in upholding the rules-based international order in the region and promoting ASEAN centrality."

With territorial tensions smoldering in the South China Sea as Beijing looks to extend its reach, Washington hopes to cooperate with countries in the region for a more unified approach to China policy.

"For an effective Asia strategy, for an effective Indo-Pacific approach, you must do more in Southeast Asia," said Kurt Campbell, the National Security Council's Indo-Pacific coordinator, at an Asia Society virtual event on July 6.

As defense secretary, Austin has traveled to Europe twice to work on repairing relationships with allies there. He has also visited Japan, South Korea and India but has yet to go to Southeast Asia. He had been slated to attend the IISS's Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore last month, but the event was canceled over the coronavirus pandemic.

China, apparently looking to capitalize on Washington's absence, has been flexing its muscle in Southeast Asia to assert its expansive maritime claims.

Chinese vessels have moored in waters that the Philippines claims as its exclusive economic zone. Malaysia's air force in May scrambled jets in response to an apparent Chinese incursion into its airspace. Vietnam continues to butt heads with Beijing over oil and gas rights in the South China Sea.

For the U.S., improving relations with Manila will be key to its Southeast Asia policy pivot.

Last month, the Philippine government again avoided a final decision on whether to maintain or terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement that provides a legal framework for the presence of U.S. troops in the country. President Rodrigo Duterte moved to scrap the deal in February 2020 but has suspended an official end to the deal three times.

The Biden administration hopes to persuade Manila to keep the deal. In what some observers see as a move to this end, the State Department [in late June approved](#) \$2.6 billion in proposed arms deals with the Philippines, including the sale of F-16 fighter jets, in a nod to the Duterte administration's push for defense support from Washington.

American forces in the Philippines are tasked mainly with counterterrorism operations in that country and are not an effective deterrent against China as things stand.

Establishing a stronger presence in the South China Sea is a focus of the global force posture review that the Biden administration aims to complete by this fall. The U.S. military looks to spread out its forces to make them less vulnerable to a Chinese precision missile strike and will likely seek to expand access to military facilities in the Philippines for this purpose.

Opportunities are growing for cooperation between Vietnam and the U.S. as Hanoi grows warier of Beijing.

Washington lifted its remaining restrictions on sales of lethal arms to the country in 2016 under then-President Barack Obama, and has provided patrol boats and signed a deal to supply drones since then. An American aircraft carrier in 2018 visited Vietnam for the first time since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975.

The U.S. Navy has a logistical command unit in Singapore, and deploys ships and reconnaissance aircraft there for South China Sea patrols.