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Background Brief:

U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit: Post-Mortem May 17, 2022

The Second U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit must be viewed as the sum of many moving parts centred around President Joe Biden's meeting with eight ASEAN heads of government plus the Secretary of Foreign Affairs from the Philippines. The moving parts included separate meetings hosted by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo (with American business executives) and two meetings chaired by Vice President Kamala Harris with ASEAN leaders, a number of bilateral meetings between the Secretary of State and his counterparts, plus other bilateral meetings between ASEAN officials and Secretary for the Treasury Janet Yellen, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and USAID Administrator Samantha Power.

The Second U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit was important because it was held after a gap of six years and involved a face-to-face meeting between ASEAN leaders and President Biden at The White House. This was the first time ASEAN leaders met in the U.S. capitol since the United States became an ASEAN dialogue partner forty-five years ago. The first Special Leaders' Summit was held in Sunnylands, California and that the second Special Summit, to be hosted by President Donald Trump, was due to be held in Las Vegas, Nevada. It was cancelled. The Washington venue may well set a precedent for future meetings.

The Special Summit was a significant demonstration of the Biden Administration's priority of stepping up its engagement with ASEAN despite the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

President Biden declared that the Special Summit ushered in a "new era" in U.S. relations with ASEAN. The Joint Vision Statement issued after the summit listed eight major areas of cooperation. But President Biden's commitment of \$150 million to new initiatives was a tad underwhelming given China's commitment in November last year to provide \$1.5 billion in development assistance to ASEAN over three years.

Also, the U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit generally conformed to ASEAN's norms. For example, despite Biden's attempt to enlist allies and partners to oppose Chinese belligerence in Southeast Asia and his desire for ASEAN to speak out more directly on Russian aggression in Ukraine, the Joint Vision Statement did not mention either country by name. There were two paragraphs devoted to the South China Sea, the second of which replicated ASEAN's standard declaratory policy on the issue.

Some analysts pointed out that the Joint Vision Statement included strengthened ASEAN wording on Ukraine. For example, the Joint Vision Statement noted: “With regard to Ukraine, as for all nations, we continue to reaffirm our respect for sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity.” That assessment may be a matter of splitting hairs. ASEAN foreign ministers’ first Statement on the Situation in Ukraine (26 February) noted: “it is the responsibility of all parties to uphold the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and equal rights of all nations.” Russia was not mentioned by name in both the Joint Vision Statement and ASEAN’s Statement on the Situation in Ukraine.

President Biden’s failure to provide specific details of his Administration’s forthcoming Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) was a lost opportunity and may have undermined the President’s claim of a new era in U.S. relations with ASEAN. As a senior U.S. official noted on 12 May, “I would stress it is an Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, not an ‘ASEAN economic framework.’ And I think that’s a significant distinction.” Reportedly, Biden will release the IPEF at a meeting of the Quad in Japan on 24 May.

The Biden Administration has repeatedly stated its support for ASEAN-centrality, ASEAN-regional institutions – ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) and East Asia Summit (EAS) and the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*. At the same time, President Biden has called for the exclusion of Russia from the forthcoming G20 Summit to be held in Indonesia. How is the Biden Administration going to reconcile its policy of isolating Russia internationally when at the end of the year ASEAN is scheduled to host the ARF, ADMM Plus and EAS all of which include Russia is a member? Will ASEAN dare to borrow from its treatment of the Myanmar junta and create a vacant chair for the Russian Federation?

There are four positive outcomes of the Special Summit:

First, the Biden Administration has committed itself to comprehensive and detailed cooperation with ASEAN across eight important sectors: fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and better health security, strengthening economic ties and connectivity, promoting maritime cooperation, enhancing people-to-people connectivity, supporting sub-regional development, leveraging technologies and promoting innovation, addressing climate change, and preserving peace and building trust.

While President Biden’s commitment of \$150 million for new initiatives seems paltry, the potential to mobilize \$2 billion in “blended financing for clean energy infrastructure,” \$13 billion in financing for clean energy products, and “leveraging over \$1 billion in public and private financing for investment in digital infrastructure and smart cities in Southeast Asia” will be highly significant developments if they come to fruition (background by senior Administration official, May 12, 2022).

Second, ASEAN and the United States agreed to raise their strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership in November. This will put the U.S. on a diplomatic par with China and Australia. This development signals that ASEAN will not privilege relations with one major power over the other in consonance with the AOIP.

Third, the Biden Administration committed \$60 million for new regional maritime initiatives involving the U.S. Coast Guard. A Coast Guard attaché will be assigned to

the U.S. Mission to ASEAN. Coast Guard personnel will be posted to the Indo-Pacific to participate in maritime training and capacity building programs. A Coast Guard cutter will be deployed to Southeast Asia and Oceania as a multinational training platform. The U.S. Coast Guard will cooperate with the Departments of Labor and State to assist regional states counter illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUUF) and strengthen the capacity of ASEAN sectoral bodies to prevent forced labour in the fishing industry.

Fourth, President Biden nominated Yohannes Abraham, one of his longest-serving and closest advisors, as Ambassador to ASEAN to fill a five-year gap dating back to the start of the Trump Administration. Abraham is currently Chief of Staff of the National Security Council.

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