

Subtle threat to ASEAN: US indifference to Indonesia and Thailand

Long-awaited diplomatic moves by Washington endanger bloc's solidarity

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BANGKOK -- Six months after the inauguration of President Joe Biden, the U.S. has finally begun diplomatic overtures to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken attended virtual foreign ministerial meetings on July 14 as well as the Aug. 4 ASEAN gathering, which brought together member states and representatives from nonmember countries to discuss security in a series of meetings.

Blinken attended the meetings until Friday, when the ASEAN Regional Forum -- another online event -- was convened, attended by representatives from countries including Japan, China, India, Russia and the European Union.

Southeast Asia has become the latest front of the coronavirus pandemic and has been hit hard by the delta variant, pushing important meetings online. But virtual meetings lack the weight of traditional face-to-face diplomacy, despite providing a needed venue for talks.

Still, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin personally visited Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines in late July, and Vice President Kamala Harris is scheduled to visit Singapore and Vietnam later this month.

So far, the message the U.S. has sent lacks anything new, predictably indicating its desire to keep China in check over the South China Sea, trumpeting concern over human rights violations in the region, and promising new supplies of coronavirus vaccines -- all of which is framed against the backdrop of competition with China.

ASEAN officials might have breathed a sigh of relief for the U.S. focus on the region because until then Biden had largely directed efforts toward Japan, South Korea, and India, with hardly a word about ASEAN.

The U.S. had disappointed and even angered some ASEAN countries before then with its indifference during a "mirage" foreign ministerial meeting in late May. Blinken was to join online while on a flight to the Middle East, but his plan to participate came across as perfunctory. To make matters worse, a technical issue forced foreign ministers from 10 countries to wait for Blinken to appear only for the meeting to be eventually canceled.

Although Deputy State Secretary Wendy Sherman visited Indonesia, Cambodia and Thailand immediately following the incident, it created distrust among ASEAN officials.

In some ways, however, the U.S. lack of attention shown ASEAN is understandable. The country is focusing on the region mainly as a way to deter China. This thinking clearly emerged

under the "America first" policy of former President Donald Trump, which created friction with many friendly nations.

Given this, the Americans thought it imperative to first coordinate with larger players -- including Australia and the EU -- in its aim to encircle China before engaging with ASEAN, the buffer zone.

However, the U.S. choice of ASEAN countries it is targeting has raised other concerns, as both Austin and Harris will visit the same countries, notably leaving out regional powerhouses Indonesia and Thailand, countries that would have been prioritized in the past.

This cold shoulder has not been lost on key media outlets in the two countries.

When news broke that Austin would visit Southeast Asia late last month, regional watchers waited to see if Indonesia would be on his itinerary.

"So a loud groan could be heard in Jakarta's corridors of power when it became obvious that Austin would only visit countries that mattered "strategically": Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines," wrote M. Taufiqurrahman, editor-in-chief of The Jakarta Post. "One week later, we certainly could expect a bigger prize when it was announced that Vice President Kamala Harris would visit Southeast Asia in August. But again [she] will only make stops in Singapore and Vietnam, that have direct strategic value to the US."

Referring to Biden's recent speech on climate change, in which the U.S. president alleged that Jakarta may be underwater in the next 10 years, M. Taufiqurrahman said: "You may not have to help us, but at least don't insult us."

"Obviously, the U.S. Defense Department had to pick the most important U.S. allies and friends in the region for Mr. Austin's itinerary due to time constraints," wrote Kavi Chongkittavorn, senior fellow at Chulalongkorn University, in a commentary in the Bangkok Post. "But it showed Washington's real intention that the Land of Smiles is off the radar. The verdict was earlier embedded in the Interim National Security Strategic Guidelines issued in March as it just did not mention Thailand."

The three countries being visited by U.S. officials undoubtedly have strategic importance. Singapore, for example, has a key port for the U.S. 7th Fleet, playing a significant role in providing logistic support for U.S. military aircraft and ships. Vietnam and the Philippines directly confront China over their respective territorial issues in the South China Sea.

On the other hand, Indonesia and Thailand have been becoming noticeably pro-China as well as Cambodia over the past few years. In light of this, the move by the deputy secretary of state to group these three countries together might be seen as a warning.

What message is the Biden team trying to project?

The term Southeast Asia began to be used after allied forces set up the South East Asia Command in Sri Lanka during World War II. The term was created by people outside the region. By contrast, ASEAN, which was established in 1967 as a regional cooperation framework, was named functionally by the people in the region. It was born as a counter-communist alliance and has since shaped the region's geopolitics.

Thailand, which led the formation of ASEAN by drafting the Bangkok Declaration, and Indonesia, which hosts the bloc's headquarters and has fostered its growth, are the countries that have led ASEAN since it started with just five founding members.

In fact, the two countries have led many of the important decisions made by ASEAN. For example, the ASEAN Free Trade Area was proposed by former Thai Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun in the early 1990s and grew into the ASEAN Economic Community.

Indonesia's then-President Suharto played a key role when Myanmar, which was at the time under the previous military rule, joined ASEAN in 1997. Indonesia again played a key role in the bloc's response after the February military takeover in Myanmar.

Do the Americans prefer to build strategic relations with individual countries in Southeast Asia, rather than with ASEAN per se? In early July, when preparing the Biden administration's diplomatic moves, Kurt Campbell, Biden's policy coordinator for the Indo-Pacific said: "For an effective Asia Strategy, for an effective Indo-Pacific approach, you must do more in Southeast Asia."

To step up its game against China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, under which Beijing seeks to expand its economic and security sphere, the Biden administration has made the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, comprised of Japan, the U.S., Australia and India, the pillar of its Asia strategy.

There is nothing unusual for the U.S. to reason that having talks with individual countries such as Vietnam and Singapore will be more efficient than dealing with ASEAN, whose members have different views toward China, making it difficult for the association to coordinate actions.

Chulalongkorn University's Kavi Chongkittavorn warns: "An ASEAN member deciding to associate with the Quad in whatever formula will immediately weaken the ASEAN-led regional architecture." Such a scenario could rock ASEAN's survival strategy of uniting small countries to secure external influence.

The situation is reminiscent of multilateral trade talks in recent years. In 2010, the U.S. led the initiative for Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations, with Vietnam and Malaysia announcing their desire to join the trade bloc.

In response, ASEAN, fearing it could lose its aim to create a larger free-trade zone, changed tack and began promoting the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Overcoming eight years of difficult negotiations, the association finally agreed on the deal last November.

Competition between the U.S. and China makes it difficult for ASEAN members to find common ground, but it does not necessarily mean the bloc cannot force compromise and cooperation from both sides. The main stumbling point seems to be the unanimous agreement among members needed to advance ASEAN's interests.

The much-awaited return of the U.S. focus on Asia is ironically threatening ASEAN's *raison d'être*. Will it be able to maintain its leading role in regional affairs, just as it did when it approved the RCEP? If ASEAN leadership continues to weaken, the bloc -- which recently failed to unite in its response following the military takeover in Myanmar -- may erode further.