



**MAY IS A MAJOR OPPORTUNITY FOR  
US RELATIONS WITH ASIA—  
ESPECIALLY ECONOMICALLY**

BY JAMES A. KELLY

*James A. Kelly ([kellypacf@aol.com](mailto:kellypacf@aol.com)) is chairman of the Pacific Forum Board of Directors, and the former US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.*

Despite Washington's understandable focus on the Ukraine war, the United States and key leaders of Asia meet this month and the stakes are high. With timing that now looks skillful, the White House unveiled its Indo-Pacific Strategy 13 days in advance of Russia's invasion of the Ukraine. But the welcome strategy was missing its key economic component. A subsequent announcement of the IPEF (Indo-Pacific Economic Framework) was an improvement, but contained little detail.

The problem is that key segments of each US political party now abhor trade agreements, whether beneficial or not. This is a serious impediment for the US policy of rebuilding alliances and strengthening partnerships, especially in Southeast Asia. ASEAN members all know well China's power and influence and each has a significant trade relationship with China. But each worries that China's economic and military strength may become too great. Most Southeast Asian countries, then, welcome US investment and its political weight balances outlooks and that poses no threat to anyone's sovereignty. But ASEAN and most countries must not be asked to choose. Doubts about American attitudes remain, as do questions over whether the United States will be present if times become hard. Now Russia's invasion of Ukraine—through soaring energy and food costs alone—means that geo-politics weighs much more heavily than it did last year.

Washington will seek to prove this month—despite the day-to-day pressures of supporting Ukraine after the Russian attack—that it can concurrently work on all the important issues. In mid-May, President Biden and his foreign policy team will meet in Washington for a special summit with ASEAN leaders from 8 of the 10 ASEAN members. The two absentees are the Philippines—in the middle of its election—and Myanmar's power grasping army; Myanmar has missed ASEAN's own meetings and is facing what amounts to a civil war. The ASEAN leaders in Washington—including Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore—will meet with President Biden in person as COVID-19 fears and travel restrictions diminish. Perhaps the United States will become a “Comprehensive Strategic Partner” of ASEAN, as was the case of China last year.

Following the ASEAN summit, President Biden will fly to Japan for a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“Quad”) meeting, a fine chance to meet with new leaders of Japan—Prime Minister Kishida Fumio—and South Korea's newly inaugurated President Yoon Suk-yeol. But even more attention will focus Biden's meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India. For various reasons, India has chosen not to join with the United States and European Union in providing arms to Ukraine and sanctioning Russia.

The world is truly multi-polar now, and many countries—often privately horrified—have not joined the West in opposing Russia's attack. This is seen in not joining US-EU sanctions and in abstaining from UN resolutions. Some are leery of irritating China, always quick to punish middle countries that displease its “wolf warrior” officials. India has long seen itself as Russia's friend and also wants to be seen as no one's follower. Some of this is hard to swallow for Americans. But the period of what some saw in the 1990s as the “unilateral moment” is gone. On the possible Chinese domination of all of Asia, India and America have largely common views. But US-India cooperation is never smooth and always involves what some see as contradictions. The United States has to show patience, understanding and humility around India, as well as a helpful approach with other relationships. Nostalgia among too many Americans

for a kind of early Cold War world influence is futile. Dreams of isolation from the world are worse.

In Southeast Asia no country has a more difficult task than Vietnam in balancing its foreign policies and diplomacy. A leader of ASEAN, Vietnam has been at the forefront of both security and economic issues, especially the South China Sea and China's "Nine Dashed Line" assertions. Its relatively open economy has been growing slowly but steadily. Although Japanese and Korean investments have blossomed, "next-door" geography to China requires Vietnam to have major economic involvement with its giant neighbor. For Vietnam, China's maritime claims as well as its developing outside influence with Laos, Cambodia, and even Thailand are cause for concern. Every Vietnamese also knows of the centuries of disputes with China. There is a great opportunity for US-Vietnam relations to further improve.

All this underscores the importance of Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, accompanied by a high level delegation, attending the US-ASEAN summit in Washington. Vietnam's leadership role in ASEAN has grown and US-Vietnam relations have been improving since normalization in 1995. Relations are strong in many areas. Despite memories of the war, Vietnam is a prime choice for American companies concerned with interruptions in their supply chains. Vietnam has an educated workforce, youthful demographics, and an improving ability to move finished goods. High-technology producers are noticing. Tourism is a strong post-pandemic prospect for Vietnam, at several price points. It has great beaches and quality hotels. As Vietnamese cuisine becomes better known around the world, it can draw "foodie" travelers.

May offers a fine opportunity for Washington and its Asian allies and friends—none more so than Hanoi—to improve their mutual standings. This month is a chance to fill in details to Washington's IPEF—such as digital economies. Perhaps Vietnam's army may even wonder whether its Russian weapons supplies are still the best choice. With the world's second-most proven reserves for rare earth metals—key to automobiles and other batteries—Vietnam also has other resources to impress the world.

Active diplomacy with Asia is on the calendar this month and the White House does not need to dominate headlines. But it can move forward in many ways—not everything, but real movement. First would be the Quad with a steady hand involving India. Could the Quad—formally or not—welcome South Korea as at least a party to discussions? As for ASEAN, the Biden administration will have reaffirmed its unshaken involvement—especially to Vietnam and Indonesia. Summer and fall will also require follow up with each ally and partner. Keeping our interests in sight—all the time—is what will bring meaningful diplomatic progress.

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