



HAS WASHINGTON FOUND ITS FEET IN SOUTHEAST ASIA?

BY CATHARIN DALPINO

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This article summarizes the author's chapter in the new issue of [Comparative Connections](#), which can be read in its entirety [here](#).

In the months following Joe Biden's inauguration, Southeast Asia was on the backburner in US foreign policy. Starting in May, however, the administration heeded calls for a more active role with a succession of visits by high-level officials, culminating in Kamala Harris's first trip to the region as vice president. One key "deliverable"—[renewal](#) of the US-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement during Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's visit to Manila—was enough to label the summer strategy a success.

The administration also responded to the surge of the COVID Delta variant in Southeast Asia with donations of vaccines, making strides in the "vaccine race" with China and Russia. Southeast Asia's continuing economic crisis, a direct result of COVID-19, has raised concerns over Southeast Asia's place in global supply chains, an issue Harris addressed on her trip.

Diplomatic Surge

For the first half of 2021 Southeast Asians were uncertain about the new administration's approach to

China. The previous administration had failed to forge a coherent trade policy with the region, and half of Southeast Asian countries lacked a US ambassador confirmed by the Senate.

However, in late May and early June, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman [visited](#) Indonesia, Cambodia, and Thailand. Making Jakarta the first stop on Sherman's itinerary signaled continued US support for "ASEAN centrality" in the face of Biden's growing support for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad) as a key element of Asian regional architecture.

In late July Secretary of Defense Austin [traveled](#) to Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Then, in late August, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield [made](#) a brief stopover in Bangkok. And in late August, Vice President Kamala Harris [visited](#) Singapore, and became the first US vice president to visit Vietnam.

With Southeast Asia in the grip of a new and more serious surge of COVID-19, US officials also underscored Washington's position as a major vaccine donor. In Hanoi, Harris [announced](#) the opening of a Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) office in Vietnam to help coordinate US efforts in Southeast Asia, and also [pledged](#) 1 million doses of COVID vaccine to Vietnam, to be delivered within 24 hours. China increased its own vaccine pledge to Vietnam prior to her arrival in Hanoi, but Vietnamese officials attempted to derail the brewing competition with a public reminder that Hanoi "does not ally with one country against another," one of its longstanding "[Three No's](#)" (along with no military alliances and no military bases in Vietnam).

Renewing the VFA

The most important deliverable of these visits was the [renewal](#) of the 1998 US-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) facilitating military-to-military cooperation. Signed during a period of relative peace, the VFA has become increasingly relevant, both to the Philippines' defense against Chinese maritime aggression and as a vehicle for cooperation on counter-terrorism in Mindanao. On July 30, when

Austin was in Manila, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana announced that President Rodrigo Duterte had consented to the renewal, and also signaled that he and Austin were discussing a side agreement governing conduct of US forces in the Philippines (an expected long-term effort).

Duterte had dragged out negotiations for renewal of the VFA for more than a year in protest of criticism in the US Congress of human rights violations connected to his anti-drug campaign. The Biden administration demonstrated patience in the face of demands, aided by careful choreography between Austin and Lorenzana. Although the renewal is expected to stick, Duterte will likely remain a thorn in the side of US-Philippine security relations. On Aug. 25 he [announced](#) that he would run for vice president in the 2022 general elections, presumably with a hand-picked presidential candidate.

Duterte has publicly linked his agreement to the renewal to Washington's steady supply of COVID vaccines—nearly 3 million doses of Johnson & Johnson in July, and an equal number of Moderna in early August. He was also likely influenced by growing public disapproval of his handling of Chinese incursions into Philippine territorial waters, despite his overall public support.

Allies, Partners, and Strategic Partners

VFA renewal is a return to the *status quo ante* and it will mitigate China's narrative that the United States is losing strength and resolve in the region. The Thai press, however, was quick to view the Austin and Harris trips as snubbing Bangkok and questioned the course of the US-Thailand alliance. Deputy Secretary Sherman and Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield's stops in Thailand were essentially placeholder visits without notable deliverables. Bangkok, and to some extent Manila, worry Washington is prioritizing newer security partners in the region, particularly Singapore and Vietnam.

But if US-Singapore military-to-military relations are solid, the same cannot be said for the emerging security relationship with Vietnam. Harris' [declaration](#) in Hanoi that the United States was receptive to a strategic partnership with Vietnam got

a cool response. Vietnamese officials offered no public comment; the near-term prospects for a strategic partnership appear slim. To be sure, US and Vietnamese officials acknowledge informally that the two often act together "strategically." Hanoi has a number of strategic partnerships, including with China, and does seek to strengthen its relations with the United States.

However, with US-China tensions high, an announcement that Vietnam was willing to upgrade its comprehensive partnership with Washington to a strategic one would be a provocation to Beijing. Moreover, a strategic partnership applies across the board, and it is not clear what Washington is willing to offer in other areas, particularly trade. Vietnam's strategic partnership with South Korea led to a bilateral free trade agreement, for instance. The Biden administration does not appear willing to commit to new FTAs yet.

Nevertheless, the trajectory of US-Vietnam relations is positive. In June, the two countries announced that they had settled US charges of currency manipulation with a pledge from Vietnam that it would refrain from devaluing the dong to gain an export advantage.

Still, Southeast Asian leaders also worry that the Biden administration will continue former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's harsh line against China and ASEAN states will be caught in the middle. Harris and Austin made strong speeches centered on China during their trips, and Sherman's [visit](#) to Cambodia was perceived as a sign of concern over Chinese intentions to refurbish Ream Naval Base for their exclusive use. Harris' address painted China as a regional bully; the Chinese surrogate press charged that the Biden administration was attempting to "create a chasm." Southeast Asian states with claims in the South China Sea or otherwise challenged by China in maritime zones welcome a principled defense of their sovereignty from Washington. In their view, however, rhetorical jousting—particularly with ideological overtones—makes it difficult for ASEAN to maintain good relations with both sides.

Looking Ahead

The Biden administration has established a new baseline in relations with Southeast Asia, giving Washington greater traction for several fall events. This month, President Biden intends to convene an in-person summit of the Quad; Southeast Asian leaders will watch carefully for signs of an emerging anti-China bloc. Additionally, the administration intends to host a Summit for Democracy in December; the choice of invitations to Southeast Asian leaders will be controversial. Due to COVID, it is not clear whether there will be an in-person East Asia Summit. If there is, Southeast Asia will expect President Biden and Secretary Blinken to participate. If the United States is truly “back” in Southeast Asia, the region will expect Washington to move beyond diplomatic visits and articulate more solid policies, particularly on trade and US relations with ASEAN.

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