



BIDEN STRUGGLES AS CHINA ADVANCES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

BY ROBERT SUTTER

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The Joseph Biden administration's priority to compete more vigorously with China in Southeast Asia features strong [efforts](#) but widely publicized [shortcomings](#). The latter consist of [insufficient attention](#) because of higher priorities, economic programs competing poorly with China-led trade and infrastructure initiatives, and lagging official postings dealing with Southeast Asia. What gets less attention are Beijing's remarkable efforts to advance regional leadership over the past year, using a wide range of persuasive and coercive measures that overshadow US initiatives and curtail ASEAN members cooperating with the United States in ways Beijing opposes. Chinese [efforts](#) and the resulting Southeast Asian reluctance to cooperate with the United States are the most important obstacles in struggling Biden government efforts to outcompete China in the region.

Chinese advances overshadow US initiatives

China's success in spreading influence in Southeast Asia since the 2020 US election is one of the most remarkable advances Beijing has made in countering the United States in the Indo-Pacific over the past decade. Keenly attentive to Biden's proposed efforts to compete more effectively with China in Southeast Asia—and elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific—Beijing has relied on ever-expanding Chinese influence in

Southeast Asia to eclipse and offset US initiatives. For more than a year, Chinese officials and media have devoted more [attention](#) to Southeast Asia than any other foreign policy topic apart from relations with the United States. President Xi Jinping closely identified with the efforts in Southeast Asia, weighing in with authoritative [initiatives](#); Foreign Minister Wang Yi has been peripatetic throughout the region. Beijing has used a combination of impressive positive incentives and coercive mechanisms to impose its will in the region, thereby sidelining the United States.

In particular:

- Beijing took advantage of former President Donald Trump's absence from East Asian Summit and APEC leaders meetings in November 2020 to conclude an agreement on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), excluding the United States; and to highlight Xi' Jinping's [initiative](#) to join the other major regional trade agreement, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which the United States rebuffed.
- Wang Yi [visited](#) leaders in nine Southeast Asian countries from October 2020-January 2021 and then held in-person [meetings](#) in China in April with four regional foreign ministers.
- Secretary of States Antony Blinken's failed video conference with ASEAN counterparts in late May contrasted sharply with Wang's successful two days of in-person meetings with the ASEAN foreign ministers in China in early June.

China-ASEAN relations have prospered. For example:

- ASEAN-China [trade](#) grew [20%](#) and approached \$800 billion in 2021 and the opening of the \$6 billion Chinese highspeed railway in Laos underlined Chinese widespread [infrastructure](#) investment in ASEAN.

- China was the leading [source](#) of medical supplies and vaccines for Southeast Asian countries.
- China used its [control](#) of headwaters of rivers important to Southeast Asian development, providing unique leverage on down-river countries.
- It sustained good relations with the Myanmar junta and ASEAN, putting Beijing in a much better position than the United States to deal with the crisis.
- The Chinese military, coast guard, and maritime militia ably [controlled](#) and advanced China's enormous claim to most of the South China Sea against weak Southeast Asian claimants.

Beijing's less overt but common [means](#) of influence were:

- efforts influencing Chinese diasporas in Southeast Asia;
- leveraging Chinese-provided transportation, communication, and other infrastructure to compel recipients' deference to Chinese requirements;
- routinely accommodating corrupt regional leaders in economic agreements, winning their support;
- fostering China's state penetration of local media, gaining positive publicity; and
- leveraging Chinese tourists dominating this regional industry to advance Chinese ambitions.

Against this background, ASEAN and most Southeast Asian states remained publicly silent in the face of Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea. Southeast Asian governments followed a broader [pattern](#) avoiding criticism of an ever-widening range of Chinese policies, knowing that doing so would prompt Chinese punishment. In contrast, Southeast Asian officials freely criticized US policies and practices.

Wrapping up advances in 2021, Xi Jinping hosted a summit to commemorate the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-China dialogue on Nov. 22. He [announced](#)

that China-ASEAN relations were elevated from a strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership, which meant more security cooperation along with deep economic and diplomatic cooperation. The China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement will also be upgraded. China will donate 150 million doses of COVID vaccine to ASEAN members and pledged an additional \$1.5 billion in development assistance over the next three years.

China had already [provided](#) ASEAN with 360 million doses of the COVID vaccine (versus the US count of 60 million by December 2021). China-ASEAN trade reached \$684 billion in value in 2020 and reached \$703 billion in the first 10 months of 2021, representing a growth of 20 percent. (US-ASEAN trade was \$308 billion in 2020).

Significantly, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte offered a rare public [rebuke](#) of Chinese coercion in the South China Sea. Xi, however, ignored Duterte's intervention and with seeming confidence in China's control of the overall situation emphasized the mendacious claim that China will "never seek hegemony, still less bully smaller countries."

Meanwhile, Chinese [hard tactics](#) advanced in the South China Sea. The Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia undermined Philippines control of its claimed waters. Indonesia reportedly was [warned](#) against undertaking gas and oil development in areas claimed by China and a Chinese survey vessel spent seven weeks conducting seabed mapping inside Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Malaysia's developing oil and gas in its EEZ, also claimed by China, were regularly harassed by Chinese Coast Guard ships. In October, Malaysia protested a Chinese survey vessel operating in the Malaysian zone.

Outlook

China resolutely employs blandishments and coercion in Southeast Asia. The Biden administration lags behind, still working on developing elements of a recently announced [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) that deals with the shift, over the past five years, from a policy in Asia premised on sustained constructive engagement with China to a policy based on acute

competition with China. The unilateral and often erratic measures of the Trump administration accelerated US relative [decline](#) in Southeast Asia. The Biden government emphasizes enduring strong rivalry with China and reassurance of allies and partners against the unilateral and unpredictable America first policies of the Trump government. However, the possibility of a return of Donald Trump to the White House (or the election of a Trumpist) suggests that US reliability cannot be taken for granted.

For now, the Biden administration seems determined to advance relations with Southeast Asia in areas those governments believe will not upset Beijing. The pace and intensity of US efforts will no doubt depend on numerous developments in the world. Reflecting a more fundamental obstacle to US ambitions, Beijing is effective in countering American initiatives, while persuading or cowing regional interest in cooperating more closely with the United States in ways opposed by China.

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