



# The Indo-Pacific Strategy under the Biden Administration' s Southeast Asia Policy: Developments, Limitations, and China' s Countermeasures

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**Abstract:** The United States has advanced the "Indo-Pacific Strategy," a geo-strategic framework aimed at integrating the Indo-Pacific region for strategic positioning to counterbalance China's influence. Consequently, the U.S. Southeast Asian policy has undergone significant transformations and adjustments, shaped by the "Indo-Pacific Strategy," which revolves around the pivotal linkage between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. Southeast Asia, located at the heart of both oceans, plays a crucial role in determining the success or failure of this strategy. It is not only a vital component of the U.S. "Indo-Pacific Strategy" but also a significant strategic partner of China and a key region for China's neighboring diplomacy. Across multiple U.S. administrations, the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" has emerged as a primary policy instrument in the U.S. strategic competition with China. It also represents a pivotal variable influencing the strategic decisions of Southeast Asian countries in the China-U.S. rivalry. As Southeast Asia has become a strategic fulcrum in the U.S. "Indo-Pacific Strategy" aimed at containing China, it is imperative to promptly study and precisely understand the impact and trajectory of the U.S. strategy on China-Southeast Asian relations. Formulating targeted, forward-thinking, and directive countermeasures is of utmost importance. These countermeasures are crucial for breaking the encirclement posed by the U.S. "Indo-Pacific Strategy", reinforcing the China-ASEAN comprehensive strategic partnership, and fostering a conducive neighboring environment.

**Keywords:** "Indo-Pacific Strategy"; Southeast Asia; U.S.-China Relations; Strategic Competition; Neighborhood Environment

## I. Foreword

In February 2022, the Biden administration released the "U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy," identifying China as its greatest strategic competitor and geopolitical challenge. This strategy has involved a concerted effort to contain China across various domains, creating numerous "barriers" to suppress its development. The U.S. government has gradually transformed the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" from a conceptual framework into concrete policies, developing a more mature policy structure to guide its foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific region. Southeast Asia, with its unique geographic position and complex background, has consistently been at the forefront of great power competition, influencing the entire Asian landscape.

Following the release of the U.S. "Indo-Pacific Strategy," Southeast Asia has become a focal point for U.S. efforts to counterbalance China. The U.S. government has frequently communicated signals regarding the "Indo-Pacific Strategy," incorporating this concept into its relations with Southeast Asian countries and its foreign policy discourse on various occasions, demonstrating a clear intent to promote the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" throughout the region. ASEAN has introduced the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," which articulates its understanding and vision of the "Indo-Pacific Strategy," although responses from individual countries vary widely. As a significant arena for Sino-U.S. strategic competition, Southeast Asia is witnessing new trends in inter-state relations, geopolitical dynamics, and regional order compete the backdrop of China's peaceful rise, the U.S. promotion of the "Indo-Pacific Strategy," and ASEAN's "three-pillar interaction." How to respond to the impact of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy on Southeast Asia's peace and order has become a pressing challenge for both China and the Southeast Asian governments. This paper begins by analyzing the evolution of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia since the Trump administration and explores the effects of the U.S. "Indo-Pacific Strategy" on the region, offering suggestions for how China can effectively respond to these influences.

## II. The Indo-Pacific Strategy and U.S. Southeast Asia Policy

### (1) Motivations for the U.S. Implementation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy

From the perspective of consolidating hegemony, the U.S. implementation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy aims to enhance its power in the region by engaging allies and employing various means to protect its interests. The United States leverages the Indo-Pacific Strategy to increase its involvement in Asia-Pacific affairs across multiple domains. In the security realm, it has escalated its military presence in the region and enhanced collaborative operational capabilities with allies. Economically, it has ramped up investments in the Indo-Pacific, establishing the "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework" to maximize U.S. interests. In the technological sphere, it seeks to strengthen cooperation with regional countries to prevent China from acquiring high-tech capabilities, thereby solidifying its existing technological advantages. Additionally, in terms of governance and values, the U.S. has increased aid to relevant countries in the Indo-Pacific, focusing on climate change and environmental issues while delineating "democratic nations." Through the interconnection of policies across



these fields, the U.S. aims to amplify its attention on the Indo-Pacific, seeking to reshape its leadership role in the region. Furthermore, it continues to court allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific, mobilizing more countries to support its Indo-Pacific Strategy and share the associated costs, contributing to the achievement of U.S. strategic objectives. Militarily, the strategy emphasizes greater resource investment in the Asia-Pacific, reinforcing U.S. security commitments to allied nations, further coordinating policies with regional allies, integrating alliance systems, and establishing various frameworks or mechanisms that interlink and activate each other<sup>[1]</sup>.

From the standpoint of great power competition, amidst China's rising comprehensive strength and influence, as well as the increasing prominence of Sino-U.S. structural contradictions, the U.S. government has introduced the Indo-Pacific Strategy, adjusting its policy toward Southeast Asia to carry a stronger connotation of counterbalancing China. Containing China's rise has become a bipartisan consensus in the U.S., with the Indo-Pacific Strategy aimed at strategically encircling China in both security and economic spheres, curbing its influence in Southeast Asia, and achieving the dual goals of hindering China's development and consolidating U.S. hegemony.

### **(2) Southeast Asia's Position in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy**

The implementation of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy cannot overlook Southeast Asia. Often referred to as the "crossroads of the world," Southeast Asia serves as a critical intersection between Asia and Oceania, as well as between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. It is also central to the Indo-Pacific region. Major maritime trade routes extending from the western Pacific and East Asia to East Africa, West Asia, and South Asia must pass through Southeast Asia. Among these, the Strait of Malacca, one of the world's three major straits, holds unparalleled strategic importance. Key Asian nations, including China, Japan, South Korea, and India, rely on maritime routes traversing Southeast Asia for importing and exporting goods, as well as for sourcing energy and mineral resources. Due to the geographic proximity of Southeast Asia to China and its geopolitical significance, the U.S. has consistently viewed the establishment of a containment line compete with China through Southeast Asian nations as a crucial strategy. Consequently, as Sino-U.S. competition intensifies, Southeast Asia has garnered more attention and competition from the U.S.<sup>[2]</sup>

In the Biden administration's globally-oriented Indo-Pacific Strategy, the U.S. positions itself as the core and leading nation, with India, Japan, and Australia as three important partners. However, Southeast Asia, located at the geographical center of the Indo-Pacific, has been ranked relatively low in strategic priority. Under the Indo-Pacific Strategy Framework released by the Trump administration, Southeast Asia and Pacific Island nations were positioned at the bottom tier of the Indo-Pacific's internal segments. The strategic positioning of Southeast Asia in the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy documents and initiatives has not fundamentally changed. Although Southeast Asian nations have not been designated as the core backbone of the strategy, the effectiveness of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy in containing China would be difficult to achieve without the involvement of Southeast Asian nations. The region's critical geopolitical importance ensures that the success of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy hinges on the participation of Southeast Asian countries.

### **(3) The Biden Administration's Southeast Asia Policy**

**Background:** During the Trump administration, U.S. attention toward Southeast Asia diminished. Under Obama, the U.S. engaged with the region through various mechanisms, signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with ASEAN, joining the East Asia Summit, and appointing its first ambassador to ASEAN. In contrast, during Trump's tenure, he attended the East Asia Summit only once and never appointed an ambassador to ASEAN. The "America First" foreign policy deviated sharply from the Southeast Asian nations' focus on multilateral cooperation and economic benefits, adopting a confrontational stance on economic and trade issues during Trump's administration.<sup>[3]</sup>

**Pathway Framework:** The Biden administration has elevated the Indo-Pacific Strategy to the core of U.S. foreign policy, investing substantial resources to advance it, particularly by strengthening political ties with Southeast Asian nations and enhancing diplomatic engagement. In the National Security Strategy released in October 2022, Biden emphasized the recognition of ASEAN's central role and sought to establish deeper connections with Southeast Asian partners, while expanding U.S. regional diplomacy, development, and economic engagement, with particular attention to Southeast Asia and Pacific islands. <sup>[4]</sup>The Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy has developed a basic framework centered around the "Quad" (U.S., Japan, India, Australia), the AUKUS partnership (U.S., U.K., Australia), and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). The Quad and AUKUS are cooperative alliance mechanisms focused on political, military, and security aspects in the Indo-Pacific, while the IPEF addresses economic, trade, and supply chain considerations. The introduction of the IPEF aims to fill the economic void left by Trump's policies and to engage Southeast Asian nations.

<sup>[5]</sup>Concurrently, the administration has engaged in frequent high-level political interactions with Southeast Asian countries, leveraging platforms such as the G7, the Quad, and the U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit to strengthen connections.

**Implementation Outcomes:** As Biden's term approaches its conclusion, the effectiveness of his Southeast Asia policy has only partially met its intended objectives. During his tenure, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore have been prioritized in U.S. diplomatic efforts, yielding some progress. In February 2023, U.S. Secretary of Defense Austin visited the Philippines, where a statement was made regarding the reopening of four military bases to U.S. forces under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, alongside previously agreed bases under construction, bringing the total to nine military bases in the Philippines, thereby deepening military ties. In September 2023, President Biden visited Vietnam, resulting in an upgrade of bilateral relations from a comprehensive partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership, making the U.S. the second country, after China, to establish the highest level of friendship with Vietnam. Although this move holds more symbolic significance than practical impact, it represents a significant breakthrough in U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic history, occurring during the best phase of relations since the end of the Vietnam War. The U.S. also announced an upgrade of its relationship with Indonesia to a comprehensive strategic partnership, and during the

2023 ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting, the U.S. and Indonesia signed a defense cooperation arrangement memorandum. However, the Biden administration has struggled to successfully integrate most Southeast Asian countries—such as Thailand, Brunei, Cambodia, and Laos—into the framework of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The fundamental issue lies in the differing views these nations hold regarding China; while the U.S. perceives China as a strategic adversary, Southeast Asian countries generally see China as a cooperative partner. Despite variations in their acceptance and views of China and the Belt and Road Initiative, most Southeast Asian nations prefer to maintain good relations with China to achieve a “great power balance diplomacy.” As economic interactions between China and Southeast Asian countries deepen, and with the U.S. lacking a systematic approach in the region, the competitive landscape between the U.S. and China in Southeast Asia appears increasingly unfavorable for the United States.

### III. Southeast Asia's Response to the Indo-Pacific Strategy

Southeast Asia comprises numerous countries with complex national situations, resulting in significant variations in their perspectives and responses to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy. Furthermore, ASEAN as a whole has introduced the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” which collectively addresses the U.S. strategy, indicating ASEAN's attitude of “limited acceptance” toward it.

The relationship between the U.S. and Southeast Asian nations can be broadly categorized into three types: ①**Formal Allies:** Countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore maintain a formal alliance with the U.S. ②**Mixed Relationships:** Nations like Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Laos exhibit both conflict and cooperation in their ties with the U.S. ③**Hostile Nations:** Countries such as Myanmar and Cambodia have a generally antagonistic stance toward the U.S. When formulating its Southeast Asia policy, the U.S. aims to strengthen relationships with the first group of countries, engage the second group, and actively reach out to the third. To achieve this strategy, the U.S. seeks to consolidate its traditional alliances while expanding friendly relations with non-allied nations in the region. According to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, Southeast Asia is a key partner for promoting the strategy.

The U.S. is committed to solidifying alliances with the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore, developing partnerships with Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia, while maintaining engagement with Myanmar and Cambodia. There are noticeable differences in the acceptance of the Indo-Pacific Strategy among countries of varying statuses. U.S. allies advocate for an active response to the Indo-Pacific Strategy and support a strengthened U.S. presence in the region. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, at the sixth ASEAN-U.S. Summit, asserted that the core principles of the Indo-Pacific Strategy align with ASEAN's primary interests, emphasizing the important and constructive role of the U.S. in the region, and expressing Singapore's desire to continue strengthening bilateral relations while promoting cooperation between ASEAN and the U.S.

However, many Southeast Asian countries believe they should not have to choose sides between the U.S. and China by aligning too closely with the Indo-Pacific Strategy. They seek to limit the U.S. presence in the region and enhance ASEAN's autonomy. A 2024 survey conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute revealed that when asked which country ASEAN should align with if forced to choose between the two strategic competitors, China emerged as the preferred partner, with 50.5% of respondents favoring China over 49.5% for the U.S. <sup>[6]</sup>Increasingly, Southeast Asians perceive the U.S. as having double standards in its foreign policy—domestically dysfunctional while pursuing a self-serving agenda abroad—especially in light of its positions on the Ukraine conflict, the Israel-Palestine issue, and relations with China. Most Southeast Asian countries aim to achieve economic benefits through cooperation with China while maintaining security interests through collaboration with the U.S. A common sentiment among these nations is to avoid complete dominance by either the U.S. or China in the region and to refrain from making a choice between the two. ASEAN strives to maintain regional stability and promote cooperation to realize mutual benefits. It also aims to strengthen multilateral mechanisms and dialogues to prevent tensions and conflicts, thereby achieving more equitable and sustainable development. However, ASEAN's ability to hedge has been eroded by the increasingly aggressive anti-China stance of the U.S., and the Indo-Pacific Strategy has forced all Southeast Asian countries to confront the pressure of “choosing sides.”

### IV. Deficiencies in the Biden Administration's Southeast Asia Policy

#### (1) Lack of Policy Consistency and Stability

U.S. policy toward Southeast Asia often fluctuates with changes in administration, leading to outcomes that can harm the interests of Southeast Asian nations. The Obama administration failed to ensure the actual implementation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and many security commitments to Southeast Asian countries were abandoned with the transition of power. Upon taking office, President Trump immediately withdrew from the TPP and exerted economic pressure on key Southeast Asian nations. His trade war with China severely disrupted the markets, production, and supply chains in the region, as his “America First” strategy was applied to Southeast Asia. This created a complex and fragile economic environment, filled with uncertainty for the region's development and recovery. <sup>[7]</sup>Although the Biden administration has, to some extent, emphasized the importance of Southeast Asia through the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the region remains positioned on the “periphery” of U.S. strategic concerns. To avoid the pitfalls faced by the TPP during congressional approval, the Biden administration made it clear from the outset that the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) would not be submitted to Congress for approval. This means that any agreements reached under the framework would remain at the level of presidential executive orders and lack formal legal status, significantly weakening the IPEF's

binding power.<sup>[8]</sup>With the Biden administration nearing its end and Trump potentially returning to the White House, U.S. policy toward Southeast Asia may face yet another severe “earthquake”.<sup>[9]</sup>

## **(2) Undermining ASEAN’s Central Role**

The core objective of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy is fundamentally to rally regional countries to counter China’s rise. However, the current strategic landscape in Southeast Asia is not conducive to achieving this goal. The U.S. views existing ASEAN-centered regional cooperation and security mechanisms as ineffective in fulfilling its strategic aims. The U.S. has repeatedly criticized ASEAN’s proposed mechanisms as mere “empty talk,” asserting that ASEAN-centered cooperation must rely on U.S. support and coordination. The aims of the Indo-Pacific Strategy conflict with ASEAN’s principles and objectives, leading to the conclusion that the U.S. does not genuinely recognize ASEAN’s centrality; instead, it seeks to make ASEAN serve its strategic objectives. By attempting to contain China outside the framework of ASEAN-centered cooperation and dialogue, the U.S. fosters inherent tensions that contradict ASEAN’s mission of “promoting peace and neutrality,” thereby weakening ASEAN’s central role and exacerbating divisions within the organization.

## **(3) Disrupting Great Power Balance and Regional Cooperation Mechanisms**

The peace and stability of Southeast Asia, along with the effective operation of ASEAN’s cooperative mechanisms, rely on two essential conditions. The first is the ability of influential powers to reach compromises in regional cooperation. The second is the recognition of ASEAN’s proposed cooperative mechanisms by these powers, in line with ASEAN’s neutral policy. However, the advancement of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy in Southeast Asia has disrupted the strategic balance among great powers and existing cooperation mechanisms. In its efforts to draw more Southeast Asian countries into the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the U.S. has intensified defense and security cooperation, leading to heightened tensions and deteriorating relationships among great powers, making compromise increasingly difficult. As ASEAN’s influence wanes, the platforms for engagement through ASEAN’s mechanisms are gradually disappearing, causing Southeast Asian nations to lose numerous opportunities for in-depth contact and cooperation. Consequently, ASEAN may lose its channels for mediating and influencing relations among great powers, further exacerbating divisions and conflicts among its members on critical security issues, and challenging ASEAN’s unity.

## **(4) Constraints on Regional Economic Growth**

The Indo-Pacific Strategy, designed to serve U.S. interests, fails to provide genuine benefits to Southeast Asian countries, particularly in the economic and trade sectors. The economic policies under this strategy neither allow Southeast Asian nations to gain adequate economic advantages nor require them to accept “American standards” in institutional arrangements, while also forcing a reconfiguration of supply chains that contravenes market and economic principles. This lack of support is unlikely to garner Southeast Asian nations’ backing.

Since taking office, the Biden administration has neither joined the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) nor the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The proposed IPEF, positioned as the economic pillar of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, lacks provisions for tariff reductions and market access, which are core concerns for Southeast Asian countries. The U.S. refusal to offer trade concessions and open its markets leads to inflated costs for those responding to the “American proposal” without delivering tangible benefits, rendering the IPEF unattractive to Southeast Asian nations. The U.S. aims to restructure global supply chains through the IPEF, attempting to exclude China as much as possible to ensure what it calls “supply chain security.” This exclusionary approach runs counter to the principles of economic globalization.

# **V. China’s Response to the Indo-Pacific Strategy in Southeast Asia**

## **(1) Supporting ASEAN’s Central Role and Building a Community of Shared Future**

Under the continuous push from the Trump and Biden administrations, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy has made significant progress in terms of perception, policy, and strategy. It has become a primary tool for the U.S. in its strategic competition with China, significantly influencing the strategic choices of Southeast Asian countries.<sup>[10]</sup>As an “extraterritorial” power, the U.S. cannot easily replace ASEAN-centered regional cooperation mechanisms in the short term. China should continue to support ASEAN as a steadfast force for maintaining peace, promoting cooperation, and fostering development in Southeast Asia. This includes respecting the “ASEAN Way,” which emphasizes non-interference, consensus-building, and dialogue to resolve differences. China must be cautious of disruptions to development caused by the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and work to avoid significant impacts on existing cooperation mechanisms. By leveraging established cooperation frameworks, China can enhance strategic collaboration, tap into practical cooperation across various fields, and promote mutual benefits. This approach will help ASEAN navigate the pressures of choosing sides between major powers and foster a path of friendly relations and cooperative win-win outcomes, ultimately building a closer China-ASEAN community of shared future.

## **(2) Deepening Regional Economic and Trade Links to Prevent Decoupling**

High-level economic cooperation between China and Southeast Asia has always been a “ballast” and “catalyst” for their relationship. From January to July this year, China-ASEAN trade reached \$544.9 billion, a 13.1% year-on-year increase, solidifying ASEAN’s status as China’s largest trading partner for 13 consecutive years. The Biden administration’s attempt to weaken economic ties between China and Southeast Asian nations through the Indo-Pacific Strategy, along with its narrative of “China risk,” is evident through tariffs and technology sanctions aimed at stifling China’s industrial growth. Given the geographical proximity and complementary industrial chains between China and Southeast Asia, both sides have significant potential for future cooperation. Under the pressures of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, China should seize opportunities arising from the shift of labor-intensive industries to Southeast Asia and promote the upgrading of

local manufacturing to high-end sectors. Strengthening industrial cooperation can drive Southeast Asia's transformation and development in emerging fields such as green energy and the digital economy. By relying on frameworks like the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area 3.0 Agreement and the Belt and Road Initiative, China can stimulate economic growth and job creation in the region, enhancing both parties' positions in global supply chains and stabilizing international supply networks.

### **(3) Enhancing Key Infrastructure Investments for Regional Connectivity**

Inadequate infrastructure is a major bottleneck for development in Southeast Asian countries, where there is a lack of funding and technological reserves to improve conditions. The Biden administration has infused geoeconomic and geopolitical competition into U.S.-Southeast Asia infrastructure cooperation, seeking to challenge China's influence in regional affairs. China should prioritize infrastructure cooperation with Southeast Asian nations by utilizing platforms like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and multilateral development financing centers. Continuing to promote high-quality Belt and Road projects, such as the China-Laos Railway and the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway, can serve as exemplars in the region. China should also expedite the construction of key projects like the China-Thailand Railway, the East Coast Rail Link in Malaysia, and the Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Highway, enhancing hard connectivity through railways, highways, and port infrastructure. Following principles of consultation, contribution, and shared benefits, China can implement high-quality Belt and Road initiatives, advancing cooperation with Southeast Asian nations at a higher quality and level and assisting their modernization processes.

### **(4) Coordinating Security Cooperation to Balance Great Power Competition**

The Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy explicitly identifies China as a primary adversary, aiming to shape the strategic environment around China, particularly regarding issues like the South China Sea. To counter this, China must strengthen strategic mutual trust with Southeast Asian nations and enhance cooperation in security fields, expanding the depth and breadth of collaboration in military exercises, counter-terrorism efforts, and maritime security. This will help jointly maintain regional stability and security while balancing development and security objectives. By fostering dialogue at various levels with Southeast Asian countries and properly managing security issues, China can ensure the healthy development of bilateral relations and reduce Southeast Asian nations' reliance on the U.S. and its allies for security. Additionally, enhancing international discourse power and improving the communication of China's global image are crucial for building mutual understanding. Utilizing differentiated approaches to enhance political and economic interactions can help China and Southeast Asian nations counterbalance each other and navigate the complexities of great power competition effectively.

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