



Discussion Report Talking ASEAN Webinar

on

Joe Biden's One-Year Presidency and
ASEAN-US Special Summit:
How would it be beneficial to ASEAN?

Jakarta, May 31st 2022



Introduction

On Wednesday, 31 May 2022, The Habibie Center (THC) convened the Talking ASEAN Webinar entitled “**Joe Biden’s One-Year Presidency and ASEAN-US Special Summit: How would it be beneficial to ASEAN?**”. The webinar featured **Prof. Dewi Fortuna Anwar** (Chairperson, Board of Directors, THC), **Joanne Lin Weiling** (Lead Researcher, ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute), and **Steven Weston** (Charge d’Affaires, The US Mission to ASEAN). **Luthfy Ramiz** (Researcher of ASEAN Studies Program, THC) moderated the sessions.

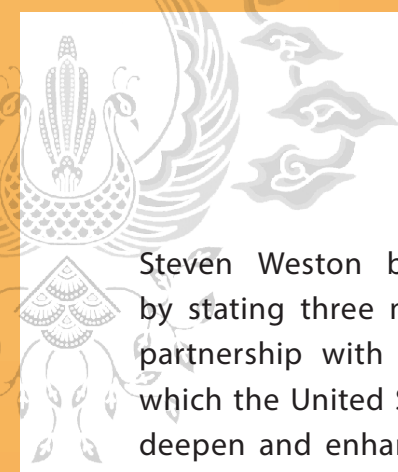
The objectives of this webinar were to: (a) compare the US policies toward ASEAN under Biden and the Trump administration; (b) discuss how the US implements its policies on ASEAN pertaining to the common issues, such as Myanmar, Ukraine, and the US-China Rivalries; and (c) explore and assess how ASEAN-US will implement the results of the ASEAN-US Special Summit.

This discussion report summarized the key points of each speaker as well as the questions and answers session that followed.

PRESENTATION FROM THE PANELIST



Steven Weston
(Charge d'Affaires,
The US Mission to ASEAN)



Steven Weston began his presentation by stating three main points, namely: (1) partnership with ASEAN in the ways in which the United States (US) is working to deepen and enhance its partnership with ASEAN, (2) ASEAN-US Special summit on 12-13 May 2022, and (3) the new initiatives and the outcomes of the summit.

The US has a long-standing partnership with ASEAN. President Biden was thrilled to host the ASEAN-US summit which marked the 45th year of the US dialogue relations with ASEAN. Additionally, the US was the first country in that ASEAN engaged in dialogue among its 11 dialogue partners. This year the US will be hosting the 10th ASEAN-US summit. After President Biden came into the office, he made it a priority to reinvigorate and modernize the US partnerships around the world, and in that strategy, he specifically referred to ASEAN. At the ASEAN-US Special Summit, the President stated that the US is launching a new era in the ASEAN-US relations in order to deepen the partnership with ASEAN. The US has started looking carefully at different areas of shared interest, where the US could provide more contribution and build closer cooperation. In general, the US has had strong engagements at the ministerial level on foreign affairs, defense, and economics. Over the past year and a half, the US has also looked at how it can expand this engagement in other areas including climate change, environment, health, energy, transportation, gender

equality, and women's empowerment issues, with various efforts below:

1. Energy issues: US Energy Secretary Jennifer M. Granholm held the first ASEAN-US energy ministers meeting in September 2021.
 2. Climate and environment issues: The US has engaged ASEAN across the sectoral bodies to address these issues. Furthermore, the US has also worked with ASEAN to convene an ASEAN-US environmental dialogue this year.
 3. Health issues: there have been plenty of ongoing cooperation to address health issues. In May 2022, US Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra hosted a special ASEAN-US health ministerial meeting, to discuss a three-year health cooperation work plan with ASEAN. Next month, the US will hold the first-ever ASEAN-US senior officials meeting on the transportation issue.
 4. Gender equality and women's empowerment: the US scheduled senior officials meeting with ASEAN and proposed ministerial-level engagements that would allow the US and ASEAN to advance shared goals and interests in priority areas of women's economic empowerment, women, peace, and security, gender mainstreaming and addressing gender-based violence.
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SPEAKERS

Steven Weston


Chargé d'Affaires, The US Mission to ASEAN



Additionally, in October 2021, during the ASEAN-US summit, President Biden announced an investment of over 100 million dollars in ASEAN-related initiatives that would expand US cooperation on health, climate change, science and innovation, trade facilitation, and education.

The aforementioned initiatives helped build momentum toward the ASEAN-US Special Summit held in Washington DC. It is important to note that the two-day summit was the largest in-person summit during the Biden-Harris administration to date, where the US displayed the full depth and breadth of the foundational relationship with ASEAN. Steven highlighted several outcomes of the special summit below:

- a) President Biden announced over 150 million dollars in initiatives that aim to help mobilize billions of private financings to deepen ASEAN-US relations and expand the common capacity to achieve the shared objectives.
- b) The US is investing in the Southeast Asia smart power program to mobilize financing for clean energy infrastructure in the region.
- c) The US is launching a US-ASEAN climate solutions hub which will provide technical assistance to ASEAN countries to accelerate the implementation of their nationally determined contributions related to low emissions development.



d) The US will help advance digital development across the region with a new initiative to support innovation and strengthen the digital economy, including rulemaking and facilitating public and private connections.

e) The US will support the adoption of global standards and artificial intelligence in education by launching a new US-ASEAN universities connection exchange program. Through the program, academic fellows from ASEAN will travel to the US and explore opportunities for collaborative research, and teaching initiatives. President Biden also announced that the US would be doubling the size of the Fulbright and, within three years, doubling the size of the US premier program for the Young Southeast Asia Leader's Initiative (YSEALI).

f) The US will increase cooperation on countering illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, as well as expanding the US's coast guard support to maritime law enforcement agencies in Southeast Asia.

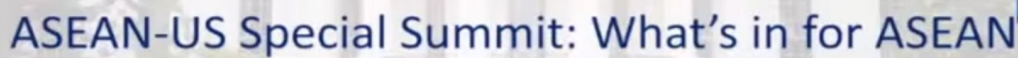
g) The US will help advance early detection and community response for the COVID-19, Tuberculosis, and other airborne diseases across Southeast Asia through a 10-million-dollar commitment for the USAID program.

There are several significant takeaways from the ASEAN-US Special Summit. Firstly, ASEAN leaders have committed to establishing a comprehensive strategic partnership at the upcoming 10th annual ASEAN-US Summit in November 2022. Secondly, the US reaffirmed recognition of the ASEAN centrality. Thirdly, the US acknowledged the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Fourthly, the US strongly supports a complete implementation of ASEAN's five-point consensus and also both parties reaffirmed their respect for Ukraine's sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity. Lastly, President Biden announced the nomination of Johannes Abraham as the next US ambassador to ASEAN.

PRESENTATION FROM THE PANELIST



Joanne Lynn Weiling
(Lead Researcher, ASEAN Studies
Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute)



ASEAN-US Special Summit: What's in for ASEAN

- US commitment to the region
- US\$150 million in initiatives
- Intention to establish a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) with ASEAN
- New Ambassador to ASEAN
- Enhance maritime cooperation

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SPEAKERS

Joanne Lin Weiling


Lead Researcher, ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute



Joanne Lynn Weiling started her presentation by comparing Trump and Biden's policies toward ASEAN. Despite having different policies, both administrations have three main similarities in terms of the importance of the Indo-Pacific in relation to China's domination, promotion of human rights and democracy, and approach to alliances and partnerships. The Biden administration's approach to the Indo-Pacific is broadly consistent with the past two decades. However, there are several new initiatives for Indo-Pacific since Biden took the office, namely, 1) a new approach to trade by launching the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF); 2) increase the US engagement and commitment towards ASEAN that can be seen by the appointment of Yohannes Abraham for the US ambassador for ASEAN after the position was vacant since

2017, the establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) with ASEAN and commitment to deliver 150 million development assistance to the region; 3) increases the US engagement with mini-lateral groupings by involving the QUAD and AUKUS; and 4) enhances the US multilateral engagements and focuses more on maritime security. ASEAN would welcome the initiative in relation to the maritime initiative as long as the US does not further complicate matters in the South China Sea.

Joe Biden launched IPEF on 23 May 2021 with 13 initial partners, namely, Australia, Brunei, Indonesia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam). Joanne argued that IPEF is an attempt to renew US engagement in the region, complementing US security presence.



The framework consists of four pillars: trade, supply chain, clean energy and infrastructure, and tax and anti-corruption. The framework is also designed to be flexible and provide technical assistance and capacity building which will be welcomed by developing countries. ASEAN, however, will also be observing China's reaction to this framework because China is still the biggest trading partner for ASEAN.


Weiling's presentation also highlighted QUAD and whether it is welcomed or feared by ASEAN. The QUAD has gained prominence under the Biden administration with four summits in the past year, including two physical meetings. Furthermore, QUAD has also been featured highly in the US' Indo-Pacific strategy, having been mentioned 13 times in the document. Thus, QUAD has moved from being a platform of security dialogue to one of practical cooperation in the areas of, inter alia, health, security, vaccines, infrastructure, clean energy, cyber security, and technology. The QUAD has also expressed its desire for greater cooperation with ASEAN through various drawing statements. Nevertheless, whether ASEAN would take up such an offer remains unclear because there are diverse views within ASEAN on the implication of such US-led mini-literalism that may weaken ASEAN centrality.

Weiling concluded her presentation by explaining a survey conducted by the ISEAS, that showed 58 percent of the sample in the region supports the strengthening of QUAD in practical cooperation areas. In relation to AUKUS, about a third of the region views it as a tool to balance China, while about 22.5 percent of the region feels that it will escalate the region's arms race and weaken ASEAN. To sum up, many developments have taken place within the last few months and such developments will affect ASEAN. The good news is that the importance of ASEAN has not declined, and we have seen positive developments between ASEAN and the US. Hopefully, such momentum will be maintained in the future and even in the next administration after Biden.

PRESENTATION FROM THE PANELIST



Prof. Dewi Fortuna Anwar
(Chairperson, Board of Directors,
The Habibie Center)



Prof. Dewi started her presentation by commenting on President Biden in managing ASEAN's expectations after four years of a dark age of President Trump's administration policy towards Southeast Asia. During the Trump administration, there was no US ambassador to ASEAN, Trump only attended one meeting with ASEAN, and there was basic neglect of multilateralism in general and ASEAN. Thus, there was a high expectation when Biden came to the office like Obama 2.0. After all, Biden was vice president during the Obama period, so there was this romanticism that Southeast Asia would become a focus not only on the policy but also at the personal level.

The first year of Biden's presidency was a bit of a disappointment because it was slow. Biden faced complicated domestic issues and had to focus on internal matters. Then in the second year, everything picked up. It can be seen from several high-level visits from Secretary of Defense, Vice President Kamala Harris, and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken to Southeast Asia. Furthermore, as President Biden took part in the East Asia Summit, the Secretary of Defense in the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), and Secretary Blinken in the Regional Forum, it is safe to say that ASEAN has obtained the proper attention from the US. Culminating in this special summit, there is a relief at the normative level that ASEAN-US relations obtained proper attention.

Unfortunately, some analysts tend to be skeptical and cynical. Rather than viewing the

glass as half full, there is always a tendency to view the glass as being half empty. Based on a number of comments in national papers and regional analyses, there is a consensus towards an agreement that there is a stronger focus on ASEAN by the Biden administration. At the declaratory level, the emphasis on the ASEAN centrality and the recognition of ASEAN as a regional convener point out a more inclusive regional architecture. At the same time, several US gestures said otherwise. Firstly, the actual launching of IPEF did not take place at the ASEAN-US Summit, but it took place in Tokyo during the QUAD Summit, which showed US preference towards the QUAD. Secondly, the US's commitment to delivering 150 million dollars for ASEAN is not small, but the comparison is to the 1.5 billion dollars commitment made by China. Thirdly, IPEF is seen to complement US's security initiatives in the Indo-Pacific and as means to provide ASEAN with alternative choices. However, ASEAN Member States do not want this initiative to force ASEAN to choose between the US and China and lean on one power. Additionally, the framework covers broad range of issues with no specific priority and an unclear narrative, unlike China's BRI which focuses on infrastructure. Finally, the concern is not on the policy but on the long-term consistency, sustainability, and reliability of the US policies. Analysts and policymakers seem to agree that ASEAN is not the main priority for the US. However, ASEAN is important as a derivative of a function of the US policy towards China.



QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

Questions

Yvette Tanamal (The Jakarta Post):

Questions to Mr. Steven Weston: You mentioned that the recent ASEAN meeting was the “largest in-person summit during the Biden/Harris administration”. What has motivated Biden to intensify engagement with ASEAN? How will the recently announced Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) work harmoniously with the existing ASEAN vision?

Responses

Steven Weston (Charge d’Affaires, The US Mission to ASEAN):

The US engagement with ASEAN is a long-standing relationship with over 45 years of dialogue relations. The US engagement with ASEAN is often like to be put in the context of the China-US rivalry, but ASEAN does matter to the US. Historically, statistics show that since 2002 the US has provided 12.1 billion dollars in bilateral assistance to Southeast Asia, 3.6 billion in development assistance, 3.3 billion in health funding, and 1.4 billion in humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, ASEAN-US two-way trade was enormous at 430 billion dollars in 2021 and the US is the ASEAN’s largest source of Foreign Direct Investment. The US has also provided more than 195 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to the Asia Pacific region, including 35 million to Indonesia, 40 million to Vietnam, and 33 million to the Philippines.

It is absolutely true that the US is looking to find opportunities to work together with ASEAN. The narrative is that the US is doing a lot with ASEAN and looking at ways that it can do more with ASEAN to benefit the one billion people living in the region to increase their prosperity and security further.

To make IPEF meaningful, the US as the initiator really needs to sit down with all the stakeholders from 13 countries and see how the US can flesh out the details. It is also essential to have a more broad-based government and not just discuss physical infrastructure or the physical-economic development. The most important thing is that ASEAN-US needs to have more collaborative discussions because it is not about the US deciding on the standards and then having other countries sign on but making it into a participatory framework. Thus, all countries feel that they own it. In addition, there would be different measures for IPEF. Firstly, China’s BRI is a bilateral agreement, while IPEF will be a multilateral agreement. Secondly, the US does not want to create conflict among the members since most of the members of the IPEF are in RCEP. Instead of adding chores to the AMS’s bureaucratization without any meaningful benefits to gain from this new initiative, all the members need to work very seriously about what it is, what the details are, and what the delivery strategies and measures are.

Prof. Dewi Fortuna Anwar (Chairperson, Board of Directors, The Habibie Center):

Indonesians as a whole are always optimistic and they tend to see things half full. That is why Indonesia always tries to bring both parties together when other countries dismiss the efforts to mediate or facilitate conflict. In addition, the US is a long-term partner for Indonesia and the US has been there prior to Indonesia's independence and played a very important role during the revolutionary period, during the negotiation for independence. The US is one of the earliest countries that Indonesia has diplomatic relations with. Indonesia-US relationships have been continuous and have gone through ups and downs because they are big countries with many cultural differences. At the same time, there are understandings that both countries need each other. Geographically, Indonesia is located between the Indian and the Pacific oceans and between two continents, meanwhile, the US is the Pacific power and the Atlantic power. Thus, Indonesia needs to remind the US that the relationship needs to be nurtured over time, consistently, and less president-dependant. In fact, the relationship never changes at the bureaucratic level. Unfortunately, the symbolism at the top has grabbed attention, such as the absence of the US Ambassador for ASEAN since 2017. Thus, ASEAN is looking forward to seeing a new direction not only at the normative level but also at the practical level.

Steven Weston (Charge d'Affaires, The US Mission to ASEAN):

Steve added that Indonesia is the country coordinator for dialogue relations. The US is working and is very pleased to have Indonesia as a country coordinator. Indonesia's capacity helps guide and advise the US on ASEAN processes and how the US can work within ASEAN to achieve higher levels of engagement in programs and dialogues. Steve also made another point on the previous administration. There was work underway in 2020 to invite ASEAN leaders to a special summit in the US which was unfortunately postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Questions

Kang (Jakarta):

A question to Steven Weston: Is it possible that Taiwan can join hands with the US to contribute to the ASEAN region? If so, in what areas or what projects would it be?

Responses

Steven Weston (Charge d'Affaires, The US Mission to ASEAN):

ASEAN is the one that is responsible for ASEAN's relations with partners. Thus, the possibility of ASEAN-Taiwan cooperation lies mostly in their hands.

Questions

Kang (Jakarta):

A question to Prof. Dewi: China is Indonesia's biggest trading partner. Will US' efforts to expand its presence in ASEAN significantly impact China's economic and political influence on Indonesia?

Responses

Prof. Dewi Fortuna Anwar (Chairperson, Board of Directors, The Habibie Center):

Indonesia has comprehensive strategic partnerships with China and the US. Indonesia is a non-aligned country and has several comprehensive strategic partnerships with a number of countries, including India. China and ASEAN have a very special relationship because they have an ASEAN-China free trade agreement, in which in terms of trade, China has a very big influence in the region. Based on the survey carried out by ISEAS on the ASEAN perspective, it is found that China is the most influential country politically and most important country economically for Southeast Asia. If the question was asked 20 years ago, the answer would have been the US. Today, when asked about the most worrying country economically, politically, and security in Southeast Asia, the answer is also China. The results show that there are big impacts of China's influence on ASEAN but there is also a greater awareness of concerns about the vulnerability of AMS. In fact, attitudes towards the US tend to be more positive than towards China. AMS are fewer concerned about threats from the US compared to those from China. Furthermore, AMS are more welcoming towards the US under Biden's administration.

There's always been a concern for Indonesia related to complex domestic issues from the history of economic penetration, the presence of Chinese workers, and the questions of South China and the North Natuna Sea. The massive influx of Chinese products threatens industrialization, where many Indonesian manufacturing companies are no longer competitive and closed down because they are not as competitive as China's companies. In the agriculture sector, Indonesian farmers are not as competitive as China's farmers. Recently most of the fruits in Indonesia's supermarkets are imported from China. There are also concerns about economic penetration and the models of businesses. China's companies can offer cheaper products because the planning, operating, and delivery are done by Chinese workers. During election times, this has been a major issue among Indonesians. They were afraid of losing their jobs but at the same time, Indonesia is a very close partner with China and China is a major provider of trade for Indonesia. China is also a favorite destination for studies which eventually increases the people-to-people contact.

Questions

Luthfy (The Habibie Center):

How would you think the US could utilize the concern of particular parties in Indonesia towards China to strengthen their relations with Indonesia and ASEAN in general?

Responses

Prof. Dewi Fortuna Anwar (Chairperson, Board of Directors, The Habibie Center):

ASEAN needs to be more cohesive and resilient. The ASEAN centrality could never actually take place if ASEAN is not united. If ASEAN is not able to set the agenda, be cohesive, and to be able to advance its positions, for example, on the South China Sea, then it would be a dark page in ASEAN history. In 2012, ASEAN failed to develop a joint statement because of disagreement about the South China Sea due to China's pressure on Cambodia at that time. It is also not in the interest of ASEAN if the US puts pressure on ASEAN to go against China. Thus, it is very crucial to increase ASEAN's resilience and national resilience because they have the convergence of policy within ASEAN. Southeast Asia countries are always at the crossroads of trade and civilizations, and have been able to absorb, adopt, adapt, and manage relations with various global powers. The most important thing is that the ASEAN centrality needs to be understood and internalized by itself, not something to be taken for granted. Whether ASEAN will be respected by other powers and deserve to play central law will depend on ASEAN.

Questions

Taufan Samudra (The Habibie Center):

As you mentioned earlier, a new set of Indo-Pacific Strategy was published at the beginning of this year. Can you tell us the difference between this IPS and the one from your predecessor? How would it affect common concerns, such as the South China Sea, ASEAN, and Indo-Pacific region?

Responses

Steven Weston (Charge d'Affaires, The US Mission to ASEAN):

IPS is focused more on the US partnerships and trying to strengthen and deepen those partnerships. It also focuses a lot on helping build the capacity of those partnerships. Some areas certainly are similar, such as the continuation of the US policies in putting privacy on freedom of navigation

and overflight that is consistent with international rules-based systems; rejecting countries' claims that are not based on international law; and maintaining the previous policies in the South China Sea. The US believes in the importance of ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight, not only for the US but for all countries that are consistent with international law. The US also supports the ASEAN's efforts to conclude a code of conduct for the South China Sea that respects international law and is consistent with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.



ABOUT ASEAN STUDIES PROGRAM

The ASEAN Studies Program was established on February 24, 2010, to become a center of excellence on ASEAN related issues, which can assist in the development of the ASEAN Community by 2015. The Habibie Center through its ASEAN Studies Program, alongside other institutions working towards the same goal, hopes to contribute to the realization of a more people-oriented ASEAN that puts a high value on democracy and human rights.

The objective of the ASEAN Studies Program is not merely only to conduct research and discussion within academic and government circles, but also to strengthen public awareness by forming a strong network of civil society in the region that will be able to help spread the ASEAN message. With the establishment of ASEAN Studies Program, The Habibie Center aims to play its part within our capabilities to the ASEAN regional development.

ABOUT TALKING ASEAN

Talking ASEAN is a monthly public dialogue held at The Habibie Center in Jakarta. Covering a wide array of issues related to ASEAN, Talking ASEAN addresses topics of: Economic Integration, Socio-cultural, & Democracy, human rights and regional peace, among others. Featuring local and visiting experts, Talking ASEAN is one of a series of twelve dialogues regularly held each month and open to a target audience consisting of ASEAN officials, foreign ambassadors & diplomats, academics, university students, businesses, and the media.

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