



United States President Joe Biden at the US-Asean Special Summit at the State Department in Washington last month. The US should work with Asian countries for its own as well as for their sake, rather than because of Beijing's growing influence, says the writer. It is imperative that the US does not make regional countries feel like pawns in a broader geopolitical contest with China, he adds. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Think regional, act local – the better US approach to South-east Asia

The Biden administration deserves kudos for stronger diplomatic engagement with the region; here are some steps to improve on its current efforts

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For *The Straits Times*

The recent Shangri-La Dialogue exposed the stark differences between the United States and China's respective visions for Asia security. Whereas Beijing believes that Washington is "fanning confrontation" in the region, the US worries China's growing assertiveness threatens the freedom and openness of the Indo-Pacific.

Bilateral disagreements over Taiwan, the South China Sea and regional order are unlikely to abate in the near term. More broadly, the two countries are competing for influence in Asia. But Washington's Asia policy needs to be about more than just competing with China.

BIDEN'S REINVIGORATED APPROACH TO ASIA

Eighteen months into his presidency, President Joe Biden's approach to the Indo-Pacific is solidifying. The administration has discarded former president

Donald Trump's mercurial unilateralism and centred its regional engagement on diplomacy and the provision of security, economic and public goods. Analysis of Mr Biden's Indo-Pacific initiatives reveals the administration is on a much better track, though several challenges remain.

On the diplomatic front, Mr Biden has drastically improved on his predecessor's largely indifferent attitude towards most Asian nations. Thus far, several senior US officials have visited South-east Asia, and Mr Biden virtually attended a US-Asean Summit in December and hosted another such meeting in Washington last month.

Regional experts have taken note of the administration's increasing regional engagement. In the latest edition of the Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index, the United States' diplomatic score shot up 15.5 points, allowing it to surpass Beijing as the most diplomatically powerful player in Asia. South-east Asian experts also trust the United States considerably more now than they did only one year ago.

The administration has married

stronger diplomatic engagement with a renewed focus on strengthening regional security structures with allies and partners. While the Trump administration deserves credit for reinvigorating the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), President Biden has deepened the partnership among the United States, India, Australia and Japan.

The four countries have expanded the scope of their cooperation to include emerging technologies, vaccine distribution, maritime domain awareness, cyber security and infrastructure, among other areas. In short, the Quad is not only a security grouping, but also one focused on providing regional nations with public goods.

Although the "clumsy" Aukus roll-out surprised some US allies, the agreement was an important step towards enhancing Australia's naval capabilities. Aukus is also about more than nuclear-powered submarines; the agreement also includes cooperation with Australia and the United Kingdom on artificial intelligence, quantum computing and hypersonics.

On top of the Quad and Aukus,

the US has held several notable military drills with regional countries, including the August 2021 Seacat exercises with 20 other navies and the March 2022 naval exercises with the Philippines. The administration also succeeded in restoring the Visiting Forces Agreement with the Philippines, further solidifying the US military footprint in Asia, which the incoming Marcos administration may seek to further enhance.

PROGRESS IN ASIA, BUT RISKS REMAIN

Mr Biden certainly deserves credit for reorienting US foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific. There remain, however, several risks with which the President must contend.

First, the administration has had trouble articulating a comprehensive vision for regional economic engagement. Senior officials are reportedly split on how to enhance the US economic approach to the Indo-Pacific. US domestic popular opposition to traditional trade deals has also complicated Mr Biden's hand in solidifying America's position in Asia and risks rendering the US

approach to the region too security-centric.

The administration recently rolled out its long-awaited Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), which seeks to drive cooperation on the digital economy, build resilient supply chains, and encourage the generation of clean energy. Though 13 countries have signed on to the IPEF, the agreement does not offer countries enhanced access to the US market. Moreover, the signatories approach digital trade standards very differently, which could make securing binding agreements difficult. For the IPEF to reach its potential, the Biden administration will need to figure out how to harmonise standards across a diverse region while offering IPEF countries concrete benefits.

Second, the Biden administration risks muddling its approach to Asia by approaching the region through two distinct lenses: one focused on the broader region, the other on China. Although the February 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy presents a vision for Asia beyond responding to China's rise, it appears as though the administration is filtering its regional approach through competition with Beijing. Asian countries, however, neither want to be forced to choose between the US and China nor caught in the middle of the two giants' intensifying competition.

Therefore, the administration must find a way to frame regional engagement. The US should work with Asian countries for its own as well as for their sake, rather than because of Beijing's growing influence. It is imperative that the US does not make regional countries feel like pawns in a broader geopolitical contest with China.

Third, President Biden's overt embrace of ideological competition could backfire. So far, Mr Biden has presented competition with China as that between democracy and autocracy, but such an approach has found little, if any, regional purchase. Asian nations are motivated more by interests than values. Therefore, US policy should put the interests of regional countries front and centre, rather than harkening back to framing that reminds the region of the Cold War and highlights a clash of systems.

Finally, there is a chance that a future administration could easily roll back many of the Biden initiatives come 2025. The Quad and Aukus are likely here to stay, but the renewed focus on high-level regional diplomacy and economic initiatives like IPEF, and the Build Back Better World Partnership (B3W), for that matter, could be jettisoned. As Mr Biden faces mounting political challenges at home, important mid-term elections this November and a presidential election in 2024, regional experts are naturally growing concerned about the durability and consistency of this revitalised US approach to the region. Now, it will be up to the United States to demonstrate that it can maintain an enduring commitment to contributing towards stability and prosperity in Asia.

THINK REGIONALLY, ACT LOCALLY

Looking ahead, the US must think creatively about how to offer South-east Asian nations attractive alternatives to China-backed options. Key to a successful regional approach will be finding the nexus of what specific countries want from the United States and what Washington can offer.

To that end, the administration should think regionally but act locally. The government should meet with officials from each South-east Asian nation to clearly identify areas of possible synergy across trade, investment and infrastructure. Helping regional countries become more resilient in the face of climate change would be a smart place to start.

President Biden should also explore forming multilaterals on specific issues. For example, the US could work with Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia on strengthening maritime domain awareness in the South China Sea. It could also consider revitalising and expanding the Mekong-US Partnership with mainland South-east Asian nations that are increasingly adversely affected by climate change and Chinese upstream dam construction. The US should remain engaged in Asean as an important regional institution, but empowering smaller, issue-focused groupings could lead to more effective and positive outcomes for Washington.

Next, Washington should direct many of the Quad's and the Build Back Better World's infrastructure investments towards South-east Asia. While China has myriad Belt and Road Initiative-linked projects in the region, Japan is still South-east Asia's top infrastructure investor. Tokyo's expertise is a boon for the Quad, and Washington should boost those efforts by soliciting more funding from B3W.

Last, Washington should refrain from lecturing, or punishing, countries that take actions that harm American interests. After the revelation that China is constructing a naval base in Cambodia, US officials warned Phnom Penh there would be "consequences" should Beijing use the facility. Such actions will not help the United States' cause with countries so far in China's camp. Instead, the administration should offer a more constructive vision for future engagement based more on carrots than sticks.

Most importantly, the US must put forth an affirmative vision for the region that goes well beyond competing with China. In short, Washington needs to listen more and work with this important region on its own merits, rather than only due to its strategic salience.

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