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As Biden seeks to contain China's regional influence, Asean can offer a platform for Sino-US cooperation instead

The US seeks an Asean alliance that undermines the bloc's partnership with China, but the fact is Southeast Asia can benefit from both

An Asean-led strategy in the Indo-Pacific can promote the region's own interests while providing ground for building mutual tolerance between the US and China


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Illustration: Craig Stephens

The Indo-Pacific region remains the primary focus of US foreign policy, despite warnings by senior US officials that a war between Ukraine and Russia could “start at any time”. In its long-awaited [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#), revealed last Friday, the US made clear that Southeast Asia would be at the centre of its plans for the region.

While this strategy has been taking shape, the contest between the US and China in the region has been heating up. The newly-released document indicates that the US' goal “is not to change China, but to shape the strategic environment in which it operates, building a balance of influence in the world that is maximally favourable to the United States, our allies and partners”.

Although US officials have denied that the Indo-Pacific Strategy is in fact a China strategy, it is pretty clear that the US intends to use alliances to better contain China.

How the Indo-Pacific became the new arena for US-China rivalry

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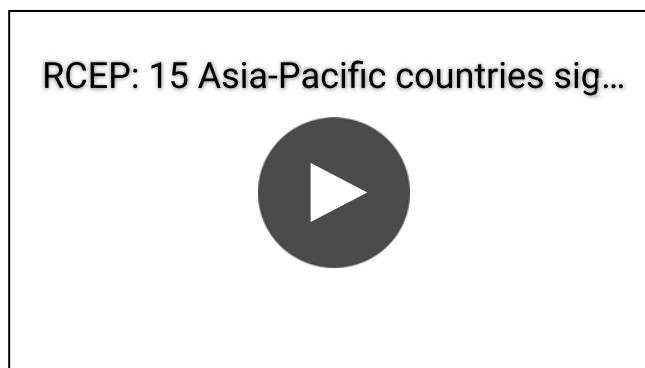
As the US outlines its elaborate grand narrative, China has already made substantial progress in Southeast Asia by taking a step-by-step approach. Last year, China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) stepped up cooperation in the development of the region's digital, blue and low-carbon economies. The opening of the [China-Laos railway](#) in December also marked a step towards the realisation of a China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor and Trans-Asian Railway.

In November, the two sides officially upgraded their relationship to a [comprehensive strategic partnership](#), promising all-around cooperation. However, the most crucial aspect of their agreement is often overlooked: President Xi Jinping made it clear that China supports the Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, the bloc's own regional strategy, as well as cooperation between the Belt and Road Initiative and the Outlook.

Despite these offers of allyship [pouring in](#), Southeast Asia is regrettably facing deeper US military involvement and slow progress in negotiations over the South China Sea [code of conduct](#).

While US President [Joe Biden](#) wants to restructure the Indo-Pacific at China's expense, the Asean Outlook paints a better future for all. Indeed, it may be the key to unlocking China-US mutual tolerance in Southeast Asia, with the potential for the two sides to promote inclusive regional cooperation.

The Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific was drafted by Indonesia and is promoted by Asean member states. Although the US, Japan, India, Australia and the EU have all developed their own Indo-Pacific strategies, the Asean concept is the one most universally accepted. In addition, the critical areas of cooperation and relevant terms and definitions outlined in the framework are fairly neutral, emphasising inclusiveness and opposing the exclusion of China.



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Diverging from the “rules-based order” stressed by the US, Japan, and others, the Asean Indo-Pacific strategy has four main takeaways.

First, allow Asean states to define the geographical and economic space of the Indo-Pacific; second, adhere to the traditional “Asean way” instead of legal documents or treaties; third, use existing Asean norms and mechanisms, such as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the East Asia Summit, the Asean Regional Forum, and Asean Defence Minister's Meeting-Plus; and fourth, respect international laws, such as the United Nations Charter and Asean Charter.

Most of the ideas and principles in the outlook are in line with the bloc's behaviour. And both the US and China support it. Thus, we have found a connecting platform in Southeast Asia for China's Belt and Road Initiative and the US' Indo-Pacific Strategy.

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China's development goals remain inward-looking; it hopes to maintain steady growth in national strength. That is why China fundamentally does not want strategic competition with the US and promotes "a new type of major power relationship" with mutual respect and mutual benefit as its core features.

For its part, the US under Biden has not broken with the Trump administration's position of seeing China as a strategic competitor, but Biden has put more focus on avoiding conflict and cooperating with China on the global economy and climate change. The Asean Outlook creates further common ground for China and the US. There is considerable room for future exploration.



A visit by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Jakarta, Indonesia, in December 2021 was part of the US' attempt to gain more influence in the country and region at large. Photo: Reuters

Indonesia is likely to play a significant role here. Both China and the US attach great importance to it. President Joko Widodo said in a recent interview that Indonesia wants relations with China and the US, both of which are good friends, to be mutually beneficial and contribute towards world peace and stability.

Indonesia can play a forethoughtful role in promoting the Asean Outlook to resolve conflicts of ideas between the world's major powers.

In the end, each side will have to learn to live with the status quo. It will be in their best interest to pursue an open and inclusive regional order. Indonesia should communicate and coordinate with the US and China, using the Asean Outlook to interweave the aims of both. It can also identify areas for practical cooperation and optimisation.

There is now, for example, an Asean-China Joint Statement on Enhancing Green and Sustainable Development Cooperation. At the same time, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Asean signed the Regional Development Cooperation Agreement last September. Both pacts share links with the Asean Outlook through their emphasis on the bloc's role in regional integration and cooperation. Indonesia can thread the needle here.

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4 Feb 2022



In a nutshell, it is not very smart for the US to attempt to win over Asean states in a bid to contain China. The association knows that China's rise is unstoppable. If Southeast Asia instead serves as a platform for Sino-US cooperation, it can pool strength from two major powers for its own development while managing relations between them.

The Americans seem unwilling to recognise that China's rise presents an opportunity for Asean states. And it would be a great joke if the US narrative fits only itself in it. Southeast Asia has placed an attractive offer on the desks of US architects and builders of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. It now expects the US to show authentic leadership.

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