

Publication: South China Morning Post Online

Date: 18 December 2021

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There was widespread anticipation that the United States would offer more details on its Indo-Pacific security and economic plans in Southeast Asia during Secretary of State Antony Blinken's recent visit to the region.

But apart from criticising Beijing's "aggressive actions" in Asia and ensuring competition with China does not veer into a "catastrophic" conflict, details on how the US plans to translate its Indo-Pacific strategy from vision to reality were conspicuously missing.

However, Blinken's visit did underscore and deliver the message that the United States is serious and committed about rebuilding Southeast Asian ties that were frayed, even neglected under former president Donald Trump's administration.

Describing Blinken's speech as a disappointment, Sam Baron, a Southeast Asia analyst at The Asia Group, said that although the US State Department had hinted that Blinken would provide further clarification about the Indo-Pacific strategy while in Indonesia, "frustratingly few details were provided".

"Similarly, substantive details of the administration's proposed Indo-Pacific economic framework are thin," Baron noted.

"This lack of clarity from the administration on both strategy and trade has led to a perception in some diplomatic circles that Washington is 'all talk, and no action', despite the unprecedented level of engagement carried out in the region over the past several months," Baron added.

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Charles Dunst, a fellow with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies' (CSIS) Southeast Asia programme, said that Blinken's trip – the latest by a top US official to the region this year – drove home Washington's seriousness about engaging the region.

"While US-China tensions hang over Southeast Asia relations, the Biden administration is making a real effort to engage Southeast Asian countries on their own accord, rather than as proxies in this broader competition," Dunst said.

For the most part, Southeast Asia welcomes increased American engagement, noted Kevin Rutigliano, an international studies lecturer focusing on Asean-China relations at Thailand's Thammasat University.

He said that even though the region has economically benefited from the rise of China, many are concerned about Beijing's unilateral actions in the South China Sea and do not want to become too dependent on China.

"Asean and its member states want to maintain geopolitical balance in the region," Rutigliano said.

Chong Ja Ian, associate political-science professor at the National University of Singapore, said Chinese pressure in Southeast Asia made those who are wary of Beijing more receptive to Washington's outreach.

"In some ways this is an attempt to make up for some of the uncertainty and less consistent attention many observers and policymakers perceived about US policy under the Trump administration," Chong said.

But despite this widespread receptiveness to US visits and engagement, many want to see more concrete measures in trade and other areas, especially since Washington is unlikely to rejoin the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) any time soon.

Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat called on the US earlier this month to increase economic engagement in Asia with an "equally substantial alternative" deal to the CPTPP, which the previous administration exited in 2017 when it was then known as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and was widely seen as a key counterweight to China's growing economic clout.

Hanh Nguyen, a non-resident WSD Handa fellow at the Honolulu-based Pacific Forum, said that "words must be backed with actions to demonstrate that the US wants to sustain its regional presence".

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What the flurry of diplomacy means

Apart from Blinken's trip, which was cut short after a member of his entourage tested positive for Covid-19, US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo visited Japan, Singapore and South Korea in November to lay the groundwork for a new Indo-Pacific economic framework aimed at securing supply chains.

Last week, Raimondo said that the US will sign a "new kind of economic framework for a new economy" early next year that will focus on supply chain coordination, export controls and standards for artificial intelligence.

In August, Vice-President Kamala Harris visited Singapore and Vietnam where she rebuked China's territorial claims in the South China Sea while promising that the US was not seeking "zero-sum" engagement with Southeast Asia.

A month earlier, Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin made his way to Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines, where he stated that the US was committed to ensuring a free, open and rules-based region, and took aim at Beijing for conduct that did not adhere to those principles.

In May and June, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman visited Indonesia, Cambodia and Thailand, expressing concerns about China's military presence in Cambodia and touting Washington's shared values with Indonesia.

Apart from forging links with allies, the trips have sent clear, some say strident and unambiguous, messages to China to tone down its behaviour, but little else beyond vaccines and greater support for post-pandemic recovery

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Wen-Qing Ngoei, a historian and assistant professor at the Singapore Management University, said that Southeast Asian leaders' renewed confidence in the US is intertwined with worries about whether Washington will ultimately press members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to align with the US against China.

While the US is unlikely to "overplay its hand" Ngoei noted that increased US activity, "whether or not it results in more substantive engagement, may inadvertently alarm Chinese policymakers and escalate tensions in the Sino-US rivalry".

"Moves such as militarising the South China Sea likely signal a deep Chinese insecurity [and reflect] the moves of a power that has opted for sabre-rattling because of its lack of influence and popularity with Southeast Asians in a variety of other spheres," Ngoei said, referring to Chinese efforts building military bases on artificial islands in the disputed waterway, which is also claimed by Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam.

Xirui Li, a PhD candidate at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, noted that the US is competing with China in reaching out to Southeast Asia.

"Without doubt, the US-China competition has intensified in Southeast Asia, and such tension is likely to sustain," said Li, also a research fellow at the Guangzhou-based Intellisias Institute think tank.

Adding that Washington's increasing involvement in the region, especially in economic affairs, is a concern for Beijing, Li said that to balance US influence, China is working on its existing economic framework with Asean countries and is expected to embrace the grouping's Indo-Pacific vision, known as the Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

Under this Outlook, the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions are viewed by Asean as a closely integrated and interconnected region, where the regional grouping plays a central and strategic role, turning to dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry.

Li added that for the Biden administration, Southeast Asia may not be as important as its European allies who are more "like-minded", pointing out that only Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines were invited to the Summit for Democracy held earlier this month.

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Tardy appointment of ambassadors

Even as the US has pledged to step up engagement in the region, delays in the appointments of ambassadors have left some such as National University of Singapore's Chong wondering if this might "dampen the message of active engagement".

In late November, technology entrepreneur Jonathan Kaplan was sworn in as the US ambassador to Singapore, after being nominated in July, filling a post that had been vacant for nearly five years.

Marc Evans Knapper, deputy assistant secretary for Japan and Korea in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs at the State Department, was nominated in April as ambassador to Vietnam, while Caryn McClelland, minister-counsellor for economic affairs at the US embassy in London, was nominated in July for the position of ambassador to Brunei.

But both have yet to be confirmed by the Senate, prompting Blinken to urge senators to confirm Biden's ambassador picks worldwide, saying the sluggish process is hampering foreign policy and national security.

CSIS' Dunst said the unfilled positions are "not at all reflective of the Biden administration's approach to the region" but the result of domestic US politics where Republican senators are holding up confirmation processes as part of an effort to press the administration on other foreign policy issues.

He also noted that a number of ambassadorial positions were already filled by career foreign service officers, including those in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Indonesia.

Singapore Management University's Ngoei said that ambassadorial positions are just one of various points of interaction cooperation between the US and the region, which also includes long-standing military and economic cooperation.

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“It might not be ideal for some ambassadorial positions to remain vacant, [but] it’s not clear that these are deal-breakers in Washington’s bid to more deeply and intimately involve itself in Southeast Asian affairs,” Ngoei added.



What lies ahead

Most analysts expect the renewed US interest in Southeast Asia to continue into the new year, with many looking forward to the proposed economic framework agreement which is likely to be announced in the first quarter.

Apart from a US-Asean summit and more high-level meetings next year, CSIS’ Dunst said the US will continue working with Southeast Asian countries on the security front through joint military exercises, port calls and other forms of engagement that “help the region hedge against China”.

“I expect the US to engage with Southeast Asia even more actively and seriously in 2022,” Dunst said, adding that a digital trade pact that provides Southeast Asian governments with substantial economic incentives to sign onto standards that require high quality and openness is also a distinct possibility.

“This is something in which the Singaporeans are particularly interested,” Dunst said, adding that more development funds, likely through the US Finance Development Corporation, are also expected.

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The donation of US vaccines to the region will also continue and will become more critical, Baron from the Asia Society noted, in light of new evidence that Sinovac vaccines do not provide adequate protection against the Omicron variant.

Pacific Forum's Nguyen expects to see more concrete pandemic measures and responses from the US. Apart from medical equipment, Washington is likely to help improve regional health systems and even strengthen the region's resilience against climate change.

But she also cautioned that while China will follow closely what the US does, Beijing is still generally confident in its economic sway over Southeast Asia.

Economic ties between China and Asean have grown rapidly over the years, with trade in goods increasing from just US\$9 billion in 1991 to US\$685 billion in 2020. Last year, China's direct investment in Asean reached US\$14.4 billion while in the first half of 2021, Chinese companies invested US\$6.8 billion in the region.

Thammasat University's Rutigliano said the US is likely to increase its support for initiatives aimed at supporting economic development and transparency in the Mekong region, which in recent years has emerged as a hotbed of strategic competition between China and the US.

But with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue's second leaders' summit slated to take place in Japan next year, and amid plans to hold additional summits, The Asia Group's Baron said there are concerns that the security grouping comprising the US, Japan, India and Australia could supplant Asean as the leading rule-setting organisation in Asia.

"The launch of the Quad's Blue Dot Infrastructure Initiative in countries across Southeast Asia and the Pacific have also heightened these concerns," Baron said, referring to the network comprising public, private and civil society sectors that will build and finance quality infrastructure projects.