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US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

WASHINGTON FINDS ITS FEET IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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In the months immediately following Joe Biden’s inauguration, Southeast Asia was on the backburner in US foreign policy, but in May the administration heeded calls for a stronger voice and more active role in the region with a succession of visits by high-level officials, culminating in Kamala Harris’s first trip to the region in her role as vice president. The cumulative impact remains to be seen, but one key “deliverable”—the [renewal](#) of the US–Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) during Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin’s visit to Manila—was enough to label the summer strategy a success. More broadly, the administration responded to the surge of the COVID Delta variant in Southeast Asia with donations of vaccines, making considerable strides in the “vaccine race” with China and Russia.

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Although Southeast Asia began 2021 with optimistic predictions of growth rates close to 6%, those figures have been revised downward with new surges of the coronavirus beginning in April; by the end of August some countries were in economic contraction and others had their forecasts slashed to a third of the original figure. The continuing economic crisis has raised concerns over Southeast Asia's place in global supply chains, an issue that Harris addressed overtly on her trip. The pandemic has also roiled politics in the region, pushing Malaysia to [change prime ministers](#) and strengthening opposition against the government of Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha. COVID was a factor—but only one—contributing to the deteriorating situation in Myanmar. Over the summer the opposition turned increasingly to armed resistance, while the junta strengthened its ties to Beijing and Moscow.

Diplomatic Surge

With the immediate challenges in foreign and domestic policy facing the new Biden administration, Southeast Asia policy was on autopilot for the first half of 2021. However, that in itself was a weak course: Southeast Asians were uncertain about the new administration's approach to China; governments were caught off guard by stronger COVID variants; the previous administration had failed to forge a coherent trade policy with the region; and half of Southeast Asian countries lacked a US ambassador confirmed by the Senate. To underscore this low point in relations, an [attempt](#) on May 25 by Secretary of State Antony Blinken to organize a virtual US-ASEAN ministerial meeting during an airport layover left Southeast Asian foreign ministers waiting at their screens for an hour before the effort was abandoned for lack of an internet connection.

The Blinken meeting was intended to herald a new US diplomatic push with Southeast Asia. It was an embarrassing stumble out of the gate, but was eclipsed by the four high-profile visits to the region that followed. In late May and early June, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman [visited](#) Indonesia, Cambodia, and Thailand. In late July Secretary of Defense Austin [traveled](#) to Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines. (The [cancellation](#) of the Shangri-la Security Dialogue in Singapore for the second year in a row because of COVID forced Austin to postpone his planned debut trip to the region in June). In late August, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda

Thomas-Greenfield [made](#) a brief stopover in Bangkok, on the sidelines of attending the closing ceremonies of the Olympics in Tokyo. Also in late August, Vice President Kamala Harris [visited](#) Singapore and Vietnam, making her the first US vice president to visit Vietnam.



Figure 1 US Vice President Kamala Harris (left) waves beside Vietnam's Vice President Vo Thi Anh Xuan at the Presidential Palace in Hanoi. Photo: Manan Vatsyayana/AFP

Although these visits strengthened “America is back” optics in Southeast Asia, they pursued several more fundamental objectives. Itineraries were drawn up to underscore key US relationships in the region, although Harris did not visit either of Washington's two Asian treaty allies, Thailand or the Philippines. Making Jakarta the first stop on Sherman's itinerary was intended to signal continued US support for “ASEAN centrality” in the face of Biden's growing support for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“Quad”) as an element of Asian regional architecture. However, Washington will be expected to do more than maintain its rhetorical position to strengthen relations with ASEAN as a group: for the duration of the Trump administration, the US did not have a Senate-confirmed ambassador to ASEAN in Jakarta. US officials uniformly reiterated Washington's support for the ASEAN Five-Point Plan for Myanmar, although there were few indications throughout the summer that either side in the conflict there was prepared to embrace the plan in its entirety.

With Southeast Asia in the grip of a new and more serious surge of COVID-19, US officials also underscored Washington's position as a major vaccine donor. In Hanoi, Harris [announced](#) the opening of a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) office in Vietnam to help coordinate US efforts in Southeast Asia, and also [pledged](#) 1 million doses of COVID vaccine to

Vietnam, to be delivered within 24 hours. Harris was unwittingly pulled into a round of “vaccine poker” when China increased its own vaccine pledge to Vietnam just prior to her arrival in Hanoi. Vietnamese officials attempted to derail the competition with a public reminder that Hanoi “does not ally with one country against another,” one of its longstanding “Three No’s.”

Renewing the VFA



Figure 2 US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin fist-bumps with Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte during a courtesy call at Malacalang Palace in Manila on July 29, 2021. Photo: Robinson Ninal/Malcalang Presidential

The most important deliverable of the administration’s tag-team visits over the summer was clearly the [renewal](#) of the 1998 US–Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which facilitates military-to-military cooperation between the two countries. Although it was signed during a period of relative peace in the region, the VFA has become increasingly relevant, both to the Philippines’ defense against Chinese maritime aggression and as a vehicle for cooperation on counter-terrorism in Mindanao. On July 30, when Austin was in Manila, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana announced that President Rodrigo Duterte had consented to the renewal, although that had been assumed since early August. Lorenzana also signaled that he and Austin were discussing a side agreement to the VFA that would govern the conduct of US forces in the Philippines, but this is expected to be a long-term effort.

Duterte had dragged out negotiations for renewal of the VFA for more than a year in protest of criticism in the US Congress of human rights violations connected to his anti-drug campaign. The Biden administration had demonstrated considerable patience in the face of demands, aided by careful choreography between Austin

and Lorenzana. Although the renewal is expected to stick, Duterte will likely remain a thorn in the side of US–Philippine security relations beyond his tenure as president: on Aug. 25 he [announced](#) that he would run for vice president in the 2022 general elections, presumably with a hand-picked presidential candidate.

Duterte has publicly linked his agreement to the renewal to Washington’s steady supply of COVID vaccines to the Philippines—nearly 3 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine in July and an equal number of Moderna in early August. He was also likely influenced by growing public disapproval of his handling of Chinese incursions into Philippine territorial waters in the South China Sea; the [appearance](#) of a 200-ship Chinese flotilla off Johnson Shoal in the spring did particular damage to his image. In July a Social Weather Survey [showed](#) that 47% of respondents did not believe the government was making sufficient effort to assert the Philippines’ rights in the West Philippine Sea, while another 29% were uncertain. This contrasts unfavorably to Duterte’s overall popularity rating, which has stayed above 75% for the duration of his term.

Allies, Partners, and Strategic Partners

Renewal of the VFA is a return to the *status quo ante* and so cannot be scored as a leap for US security policy in Southeast Asia, but it will mitigate the Chinese narrative that the United States is losing both strength and resolve in the region. Nevertheless, securing the VFA was an affirmation of the US–Philippines alliance. At the same time, the Thai press was quick to view the Austin and Harris trips as snubbing Bangkok and questioned the course of the US–Thailand alliance. Although Deputy Secretary Sherman and Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield made stops in Thailand, these were essentially placeholder visits without notable deliverables. Moreover, Bangkok and, to some extent Manila, worry that Washington is giving priority to its newer security partners in the region, particularly Singapore and Vietnam

But if US–Singapore military-to-military relations are solid, the same cannot be said for the emerging security relationship with Vietnam. Vice President Harris’ [declaration](#) in Hanoi that the United States was receptive to forging a strategic partnership with Vietnam got a cool response from Hanoi. Vietnamese officials offered no public comment but the near-term prospects for a US–Vietnam strategic

partnership are slim. Both US and Vietnamese officials acknowledge informally that the two countries often act together “strategically.” Hanoi has a number of strategic partnerships with other countries, including China, and seeks to strengthen its relations with the United States.

However, with tensions between the United States and China still high, an announcement that Vietnam was willing to upgrade its comprehensive partnership to a strategic one with Washington would be an obvious provocation to Beijing. Moreover, a strategic partnership applies across the board, and it is not clear what Washington is willing to offer in other areas of the relationship, particularly in trade. Vietnam’s strategic partnership with South Korea led to a bilateral free trade agreement, albeit with a six-year interval, but the Biden administration does not appear willing to commit to new FTAs at this point. Nevertheless, the essential trajectory of US–Vietnam relations is positive, which is sometimes demonstrated in the breach. In June the two countries announced that they had settled US charges of currency manipulation with a pledge from Vietnam that it would refrain from devaluing the dong to gain an export advantage.

A significant but more elusive issue in US security relations with Southeast Asia concerns US reliability as a partner. The message that the United States was “back” was a talking point for all four trips, and Harris [announced](#) Washington’s willingness to host the 2023 APEC leaders’ meeting when she visited Singapore. However, she arrived there as the Taliban was consolidating its hold on Afghanistan and weathered criticism from the press over the meaning and chaos of the US withdrawal. This is likely to be a transitory issue for Southeast Asian leaders, if it is an issue at all. Although some senior officials are inclined to draw comparisons between the fall of Kabul and that of Saigon in 1975, most do not view the US departure from Afghanistan as a sign that the United States will pull back from its commitment to security in the Indo-Pacific region.

To be sure, the events in Afghanistan will alter some security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. Chinese and Russian moves to establish closer relations with the Taliban will give them greater geostrategic space in South Asia and the Middle East, and the return of a theocratic state in Afghanistan will reinvigorate jihadist activity around the world. The terrorist threat will likely

rise in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. If Jakarta seeks to strengthen counterterrorism cooperation with the US and Australia, it will be comforted by the distinction that Biden drew between counterterrorism and nation-building when Kabul fell, which will make assistance more palatable.

Southeast Asian leaders also worry that the Biden administration will continue former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s harsh line against China and ASEAN states will continue to be caught in the middle. Both Harris and Austin made strong speeches centered on China during their trips, and Sherman’s [visit](#) to Cambodia was perceived as a sign of concern over Chinese intentions to refurbish Ream Naval Base for their exclusive use. The Harris address was particularly strong, painting China as a regional bully; the Chinese surrogate press, quick to play to Southeast Asian fears of divisiveness, charged that the Biden administration was attempting to “create a chasm.” Southeast Asian states with claims in the South China Sea or that are otherwise challenged by China in maritime zones welcome a principled defense of their sovereignty from Washington. In their view, however, rhetorical jousting—particularly with ideological overtones—only increases the conflict and makes it difficult for ASEAN to maintain good relations with both sides.

Countering the COVID Surge

Of most immediate concern to Southeast Asia is the need to curb the new surges of COVID-19 and promote economic recovery from the pandemic. Southeast Asia has some of the world’s highest COVID death rates; in the first two weeks of August, the region reported 38,522 deaths, nearly twice the number for North America. Indonesia leads the region in the total number of cases, with [over](#) 4 million to date, with the Philippines second at [over](#) 2 million. The COVID surge has been particularly acute in Malaysia, with 1.5 million cases in a population of 35 million, while the numbers in Thailand have climbed to nearly 1 million total, a stark contrast to cases at this time last year of only 100. From February 2020 to April 2021, Vietnam recorded 4,000 COVID cases; from April to mid-August of this year, case totals were over 380,000.

Singapore cases remain relatively controlled, at 68,000, in part because most infections are among migrant workers who are cantoned in government-run dormitories. They are below

Cambodia, which has recorded roughly 87,000 cases to date. Laos, with a population of 7 million, has had more than 11,000 cases. Brunei and Timor-Leste were COVID-free in 2020 but are now accruing cases. Government reporting of cases in Myanmar is spotty and frequently questioned, but the total number is [estimated](#) at over 434,000.

Overall, [vaccination rates](#) in Southeast Asia are below the global average of 28% but are picking up and vary widely across the region. By mid-August Singapore led with 68% of the population receiving at least one dose, followed by Cambodia (40.77%); Thailand (35%); Indonesia (30.93%); Malaysia (29.4%); Laos (16.67%); Brunei (16.32%); the Philippines (10.98%); and Vietnam (7%). However, Vietnam accelerated its program rapidly and doubled the vaccination rate to approximately 14%. Public vaccinations are believed to have been halted in Myanmar with the February coup, and the World Health Organization estimates that less than 1% of the population has received at least one dose of COVID vaccine.

As Southeast Asian governments seek to procure COVID vaccines, preference for Western over Chinese vaccines is growing. The more contagious Delta variant; clinical data comparing efficacy of the vaccines; and vaccine donations from the Quad, as well as bilateral donations from the US have all contributed to this shift. Malaysia [announced](#) that it will not use the Chinese Sinovac vaccine when current supplies of it run out; the Thai government [recommends](#) that people who have received Sinovac also be inoculated with the Pfizer vaccine; and Vietnam, which has seen a nationalist backlash against Chinese vaccines, uses its small store of Sinovac for limited purposes.

Pandemic Economics

Initial estimates for Southeast Asian economic growth in 2021 were an optimistic 6% for the region. By April, when the Delta variant surged, that figure was revised downward to 4%. It has sunk further in many countries, averaging 2% in some but underwater in others. Economic recovery from COVID faces multiple challenges beyond the need to accelerate vaccinations. The virus has shaken the confidence of foreign investors in the region and created concern about supply chain resilience. In Vietnam, for example, it has [forced](#) some factory closures. Moreover, recovery will be uneven across the region,

favoring economies with a strong manufacturing base, such as Vietnam and Malaysia, over those more dependent on the Thailand. COVID has caused poverty levels to rise, and growing debt will hamper domestic spending as well as domestic investment. These obstacles are offset in part by growing external demand for Southeast Asian manufactures from the United States, China, Japan, and South Korea and, particularly for Indonesia, the rise in commodity prices.

The US business sector has pressed the administration to engage more deeply with Southeast Asia on economic recovery from the pandemic. In Singapore, Vice President Harris [announced](#) the formation of a US-Singapore roundtable on supply chain shortages, intended to strengthen coordination between the two countries on trade flows. The initiative underscores the administration's formal review of supply chains in four critical sectors, including semiconductors. Although the roundtable is bilateral, the model could be applied to other US trading partners in Southeast Asia. US companies are also pushing the administration to negotiate digital trade agreements within ASEAN, first bilaterally but with the goal of linking them together in a regional agreement. Southeast Asia has the world's fastest-growing internet use, and the COVID pandemic has forced many businesses to transfer their work online.

Political Fall-Out: Malaysia and Thailand

The COVID pandemic has strained political as well as economic systems in Southeast Asia as governments come under increasing public criticism for their performance in taming the pandemic. In some countries, COVID emergency measures have given leaders greater powers, which have been used for political purposes. In Thailand, COVID regulations have enabled the government of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha to strengthen its surveillance and control of the political opposition; this in turn has re-energized the youth-based protest movement. This summer, however, the dramatic surge of the Delta variant refocused the protests from the administration's authoritarian measures to its handling of the COVID crisis, an issue with broader public appeal. By summer's end, Prayuth was facing his third no-confidence vote in Parliament since his inauguration in 2019. On Sept. 4 the censure motion against Prayuth and five of his ministers [failed](#), although the prime

minister received the highest number of no-confidence votes of the six.

The impact of COVID has been more direct and more dramatic in Malaysia. Former Prime Minister Muhiyiddin Yassin [came](#) to power in February 2020 as an appointed leader after Prime Minister Mohamed Mahathir was maneuvered out of office. Muhiyiddin, appointed by King Al-Sultan Abdullah after his poll of Members of Parliament, led a razor-thin coalition in Parliament. COVID prevented general elections and Muhiyiddin was able to use emergency decrees to avoid no-confidence votes, often by suspending Parliament. By August 2021, however, these tactics were no longer enough to sustain him in power. His successor, Ismail Sabri Yaakob, is also an appointed prime minister selected by Abdullah and, like Muhiyiddin, heads a fragile coalition. Abdullah has ruled out general elections until the pandemic is under control, but he has attempted to inject some political legitimacy into the process by requiring that Parliament hold a confidence vote on the new prime minister.

Sabri is vice chair of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Malaysia's dominant party for six decades until it was voted out in 2018. There is little reason to believe that Sabri's coalition will be more stable than the previous one, and the new prime minister faces additional challenges. With the shadow of the [1MDB scandal](#) still hanging over UMNO, he will have to demonstrate that the party is more willing to police corruption. As well, Sabri will encounter issues within his own party. He will likely spar with UMNO's president, Ahmad Zahi Hamadi, in an effort to gain the party chair as well as the prime ministership. Zahi is himself facing corruption charges, which he denies.

Neither political situation is likely to affect the course of US relations with Thailand or Malaysia. Relations between Washington and Prayuth have been cool since the 2014 coup brought him to power. However, the immediate bilateral focus is on fighting the pandemic, although Washington continues to express concern for the government's treatment of protestors. The transition in Malaysia is the political equivalent of musical chairs, although the return of UMNO is a significant factor. If Sabir fails to hold his own party to account for corruption, it could strain tensions between Washington and Kuala Lumpur. The US Department of Justice has helped Malaysia recover assets in the United

States that were siphoned off in the 1MDB scandal; in May, the US [returned](#) another \$460 million in recovered funds.

Myanmar: Arming the Opposition

Although data on COVID in Myanmar is sparse and unreliable for the most part, the pandemic has clearly surged. The junta has weaponized the virus against the civil resistance: reserving vaccines for military use; continuing to arrest and detain doctors and other health workers; and occasionally firing on civilians lined up to receive oxygen for COVID treatment. Although the pandemic is pushing Myanmar further into its downward spiral, the deeper dysfunction in public and commercial services brought on by the Feb. 1 coup is equally, if not more, damaging. At this point, the economy is on track for an 18% contraction in 2021.

With no apparent end in sight, the opposition's new military arm, the People's Defense Force (PDF) has ramped up operations in several provinces. In August the PDF [killed](#) nearly 100 Tatmadaw soldiers in three different locations, primarily through road mines. Its strength is its organization—or lack of—as a grassroots franchise with multiple actors. Another plus is the PDF's choice of attacks, usually in areas in which there are no ongoing armed conflicts and therefore a weaker concentration of government troops. The PDF's early gains have re-energized the armed ethnic groups, and fighting in the more traditional conflict zones in Kachin, Shan, and Karen state has increased. It also conducts smaller insurgencies in urban areas. This month seven bombs were set off in Yangon, and there have been several hit-and-run attacks on individual soldiers. While it attempts to respond to this new challenge, the government has strengthened ties with both China and Russia: for arms, economic aid, and political support.

The PDF has little hope of winning a military victory against the Tatmadaw, which now stands as Southeast Asia's largest armed forces. However, the gains of insurgency are primarily psychological, and the National Unity Government (NUG) hopes to maintain high levels of civil resistance with small victories. However, the NUG itself lacks impact as a shadow government, in part because of internal divisions. The most significant rift in the NUG is between the National League for Democracy (NLD) and more progressive groups. With top NLD leaders still in detention—and likely to be

sidelined eventually with convictions in the regime's kangaroo courts—disorganization within the opposition will endure.

With support from the United Nations and most major powers, ASEAN continues to press its five-point consensus plan for Myanmar, but with scant success. Calls to end the violence go unheeded by both sides; on the contrary, the opposition's PDF have realized some gains in its urban insurgency. Neither side appears interested at this point in negotiations. The single achievement of the plan to date is the [selection](#) of a Special Envoy for Myanmar, after months of internal wrangling. The foreign ministers agreed upon Brunei's second minister for foreign affairs, Erywan Yusof, as special envoy. This was a default choice after neither Jakarta nor Bangkok could sell the group on their nominations. It is not clear if Erywan's tenure as Special Envoy will expire when Brunei hands the ASEAN chair to Cambodia at the end of the year. In the meantime, he will likely see little progress in ameliorating the conflict in Myanmar. However, as the situation continues to deteriorate, ASEAN will be useful in funneling humanitarian aid to the country through a mechanism established in the five-point plan.

The United States has continued to strengthen sanctions against the coup leaders and the State Administrative Council, as well as their family members. In July, the Department of Commerce also added two Chinese companies with strong economic ties to the Tatmadaw to the Entity List. Washington continues to eschew broad sanctions that would inflict additional economic pain on a population being pushed further into poverty by political violence and the pandemic. However, there is no appetite in the US policy community for support of the PDF insurgency. Indeed, although the administration has repeatedly condemned the Feb. 1 coup and its aftermath, doubts about the willingness of the National League for Democracy to address issues such as protection for Muslim Rohingya remain.



Figure 3 Members of the People's Defence Force (PDF) make handmade guns to be used in fighting security forces near Demoso, Kayah state on June 4, 2021 as the country remains in turmoil after the February military coup. Photo: STR/AFP via Getty Images)

Looking Ahead

The Biden administration established a new baseline in relations with Southeast Asia through its diplomatic campaign over the summer, and this will give Washington greater traction for several fall events. In September, President Biden intends to convene an in-person summit of the Quad; Southeast Asian leaders will watch carefully for signs of an emerging anti-China bloc. Additionally, the administration intends to fulfill a campaign promise and host a Summit for Democracy in December, and the choice of invitations to Southeast Asian leaders will inevitably be controversial. The COVID pandemic will continue to restrict diplomatic activity, and it is not clear whether there will be an in-person East Asia Summit. If there is, Southeast Asia will expect President Biden and Secretary Blinken to appear. And, if the United States is, as the administration insists, back in Southeast Asia, the region will expect Washington to move beyond diplomatic visits and articulate more solid policies, particularly on trade and US relations with ASEAN as an institution.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

MAY – AUGUST 2021

May 5, 2021: United States and ASEAN [hold](#) the 34th annual US-ASEAN Dialogue online. Acting Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Ambassador Atul Keshap co-chair with Lao PDR Deputy Foreign Minister Bounleua Phandanouvong. Keshap raises climate change, among other issues. He stresses support for countries most vulnerable to climate change and the need for a shared effort to reach net zero emissions by 2050.

May 17, 2021: US [announces](#) new sanctions against Myanmar's military regime. The regime itself is designated through sanctions on the State Administrative Council. Also, four members of the SAC are named, along with nine military-appointed Cabinet members and three adult children of previously designated officials.

May 18, 2021: US [launches](#) 2021 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis and announces \$155 million in new assistance to sustain critical efforts to support Rohingya refugees and host communities in Bangladesh, as well as internally displaced Rohingya in Myanmar.

May 21, 2021: Senior delegations representing the US and Thailand [meet virtually](#) for 7th US-Thailand Strategic Dialogue. The Dialogue is co- led by Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Keshal and Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Thani Thongphakdi. Both sides reiterate their commitment to the US-Thailand alliance and discuss deepening cooperation across a spectrum of issues, including technology and climate change.

May 25, 2021: Secretary of State Antony Blinken [attempts](#) to host a virtual US-ASEAN ministerial meeting while in transit to Tel Aviv in Shannon Airport but technical issues block a connection.

May 30-June 4, 2021: Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman [visits](#) Indonesia, Cambodia, and Thailand. In Jakarta, she affirms US support for ASEAN centrality. In Phnom Penh, Sherman meets with Prime Minister Hun Sen and urges Cambodia's leadership to maintain an independent and balanced foreign policy. She expresses serious concerns about China's military presence and construction of facilities at Ream Naval Base and seeks clarification on the demolition of two US-funded buildings at Ream. In Thailand, she discusses a range of bilateral and regional issues, including the crisis in Myanmar.

June 8, 2021: Biden administration [releases](#) report of its 90-day review of supply chain disruptions caused by the COVID pandemic and announces formation of the Supply Chain Disruptions Task Force to address short-term discontinuities. The review focused on four critical sectors, including the semiconductor supply chain, which is of increasing importance in US investment in Southeast Asia.

June 20, 2021: In a joint statement, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Nguyen Thi Hong, governor of the State Bank of Vietnam, [announce](#) that the two countries have reached an agreement over US charges of currency manipulation. Vietnam pledges that it will refrain from "competitive devaluation" of the *dong* in order to gain export advantage.

July 1, 2021: State Department [releases](#) the 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report. Thailand is downgraded from Tier 2 to the Tier 2 Watch List, while Malaysia is downgraded to Tier 3. Myanmar remains in Tier 3.

July 2, 2021: In response to the deteriorating situation in Myanmar, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Assets Control [designates](#) 22 individuals connected to the military regime for sanctions. These include two additional State Administrative Council members; four military-appointed Cabinet members; and 15 adult children or spouses of previously designated officials. In addition, the Department of Commerce adds the Chinese company Wanboa Mining, Ltd., and two of its subsidiaries, as well as King Royal Technologies to its Entity List.

July 13, 2021: Secretary Blinken [participates](#) in a virtual Special US-ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting. They pledge to continue strengthening the ASEAN-US Strategic Partnership, and Blinken praises the ASEAN five-point consensus plan on Myanmar, urging ASEAN to take immediate action to implement the plan.

July 26-30, 2021: Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin [visits](#) Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines, making him the first Cabinet member of the Biden administration to visit Southeast Asia. In a keynote speech in Singapore and in meetings in Vietnam and the Philippines he calls out aggressive Chinese behavior in the South China Sea and stresses the importance of keeping the wider region free and open.

July 30, 2021: Philippines Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana [announces](#) that President Rodrigo Duterte has agreed to the news of the new Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States, abandoning a plan to terminate the pact. Lorenzana says that Duterte made the decision after meeting with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin during his visit to Manila.

Aug. 1, 2021: State Administrative Council of Myanmar [declares](#) itself a "caretaker government" and appoints junta leader and Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing as prime minister. Min Aung Hlaing walks back the regime's promise after the Feb. 1 coup to hold elections in 2022 and says it is more likely that new elections will be held in 2023.

Aug. 2, 2021: Secretary Blinken [co-hosts](#) second US-Mekong Partnership ministerial meeting, which is held online.

Aug. 3, 2021: Secretary Blinken [conducts](#) a virtual US-ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting. He highlighted ASEAN centrality, US cooperation with ASEAN to quell the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic impact; the need for bold action on climate change; and the urgency of the situation in Myanmar.

Aug. 3, 2021: Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi [visits](#) Washington and meets Secretary Blinken to open the first US-Indonesia Strategic Dialogue since the establishment of the bilateral strategic partnership in 2015. The leaders discussed the COVID-19 pandemic; maritime security; and the peaceful resolution of ongoing conflicts in the Middle East.

Aug. 4, 2021: ASEAN [announces](#) that it has chosen Brunei's second minister for foreign affairs, Erywan Yusof, as special envoy to Myanmar. The special envoy position is one of five points in a consensus plan ASEAN developed following the Feb. 1 coup to help stop political violence in Myanmar and encourage the parties to resolve the conflict peacefully.

Aug. 5, 2021: United States and governments of the Friends of the Mekong Group [hold](#) a virtual meeting and release a joint statement celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Group and reaffirming its commitment to development in the Mekong sub-region. They congratulated the Mekong River Commission for completion of the Basin Development Strategy 2021-2030.

Aug. 6, 2021: Secretary Blinken [participates](#) in the online ASEAN Regional Forum hosted by Brunei as ASEAN chair and including representatives from 26 countries. He calls upon China to abide by its obligations under the international law of the sea and cease provocative behavior in the South China Sea.

Aug. 10, 2021: US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield [visits](#) Bangkok and announces \$55 million in US assistance to aid Thailand's humanitarian response to COVID-19. Prior to her visit, the US had donated 1.5 million doses of COVID vaccine to the country. Thomas-Greenfield also announced that the United States would donate \$50 million for critical humanitarian aid to Burmese both inside and outside Myanmar.

Aug. 16, 2021: Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin and his Cabinet resign after Muhyiddin [acknowledges](#) that his administration no longer commands a majority in Parliament. King Al-Sultan Abdullah appoints Muhyiddin as caretaker prime minister and polls Parliament on legislative support for a new appointment PM.

Aug. 21, 2021: Ismail Sabri Yaakob is [sworn in](#) as prime minister of Malaysia after King Abdullah announces his selection. Sabri is vice chair of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). The king specifies that Parliament must hold a confidence vote on Sabri's selection, although he does not specify a date.

Aug. 22-26, 2021: Kamala Harris [visits](#) Singapore and Vietnam on her second international trip in her capacity as vice president. In Singapore she delivers a speech on the Biden administration's commitment to the Indo-Pacific region; addresses US sailors aboard the *USS Tulsa* visiting Changi Naval Base; and announces bilateral initiatives on climate change and supply chain support. In Vietnam, she focused on the pandemic and Chinese aggression in the South China Sea.