

US-ASEAN Special Summit 2022: Launching a New Framework for US-ASEAN Cooperation?

From 12th to 13th of May 2022, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United States (US) participated in a Special Summit in Washington, D.C., on the occasion of celebrating four and a half decades of relations between ASEAN and the United States. With the exception of Myanmar, currently led by a military junta facing legitimacy issues both domestically and internationally, all the other 9 out of 10 ASEAN members have been represented at the Summit. Provided the on-going transition period in the Philippines, generated by a new term in the presidential election cycle, the country has been represented by the Secretary of Foreign Affairs. As expected, the ASEAN Secretary General also participated at the event.

From a US standpoint, the 2022 US-ASEAN Special Summit represents an opportunity to consolidate and elevate its relations with ASEAN and its member states, a region which seems to have recently become a focal point in the global arena. The very remarks of the **US President Joseph Biden** during the Special Summit stress such political importance of the US-ASEAN ties: *“The — the Indo-Pacific is an Indo-Pacific that is free and open, stable and prosperous, and resilient and secure. It’s what we’re all seeking.”*

According to a statement of the White House Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell, during the US-ASEAN Summit *“what we (i.e. the United States) want to underscore more than anything else is that the United States wants to take steps to maintain peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. (...) And we believe it’s critical for other countries to both publicly and privately underscore that what has taken place in Ukraine must never happen in Asia.”* **While Russia has not been directly referred to, all the participating leaders reaffirmed their “respect for sovereignty (...) with regard to Ukraine, as for all nations”.** Consequently, the respect for *“Ukraine, as for all nations”* sovereignty, as affirmed by the ASEAN leaders, **could be interpreted as a joint declaration that neither ASEAN nor the US will allow similar violations in the Indo-Pacific.**

For ASEAN, a Summit with the United States might represent a step further to less trade barriers to the US market. Facilitating the trade with US, as well as balancing the US security cooperation to existing maritime claims in the region, could be considered of paramount importance provided the current global dynamics.

Certainly, while seeking to deepen the economic exchanges with the US and accepting the security cooperation with Washington in matters related to the South China Sea, ASEAN has consolidated its key principles during the 2022 Special Summit. Emphasizing the role of the ASEAN Charter, the Declaration on Zone of Peace,

Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) during the 2022 Summit, **could be interpreted as a firm statement in which ASEAN rejects any potential security pacts of military nature. In other words, ASEAN seems determined not to be part of security agreements such as AUKUS.**

This point has been further stressed in the **ASEAN Chairman's** Press Statement on the occasion of the Summit, signaling the regional organisation's "*shared commitment to uphold ASEAN Centrality and unity through the existing ASEAN-led mechanisms.*" **One could infer that ASEAN does not need newly created mechanisms in order to safeguard ASEAN Centrality.**

The "*Joint Vision Statement*", immediately released by the ASEAN Secretariat and the White House in the aftermath of the Summit, provided foreign policy analysts with new information on the US's "*lasting commitment*" to ASEAN, as well as the view of ASEAN, based on such principles as "*ASEAN Centrality*" and Consensus. Indeed, the official statement released in the aftermath of the Special Summit showcases ASEAN and the US are equal partners. It is obvious that the ASEAN negotiating team of the final document succeeded in consolidating the existing acceptance of ASEAN and ASEAN Centrality by the US as a robust and equal partner, which will not give an inch to the possibility of stimulating the idea that the 10 member countries regional organisation will ever accept to minimize the role of the Association as central pivot of the regional architecture. No wonder why the US President Joseph Biden considered necessary to reassure the guests that "*ASEAN centrality is the very heart of my administration's strategy in pursuing the future we all want to see*". The American team of negotiators has shown due attention of this framework of cooperation, which led to a successful document, in which Washington managed to officially obtain the status of an accepted partner and world player in Southeast Asia.

The **Indonesian President Joko Widodo** pointed that "*I hope this meeting can build a momentum for the return of the US presence in the region.*" It is accepted within ASEAN that Indonesia is the driving force of the Association, which President Joe Biden underlined it at the very first meeting of the ASEAN leaders at his dinner hosted in their honor by thanking his Indonesian counterpart for his contribution to have the Summit becoming a fact.

The concrete sign of a very near practical new step towards strengthening the ties between the US and ASEAN is the consensus to reach by November this year a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) between ASEAN and the US, as it is already the case of such economic, political and strategic partnership of ASEAN with China and Australia.

The word "*joint vision*" characterizing the essence of the Statement has a particular diplomatic meaning, yet to be defined, from the perspective of two different aiming strategies such as the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) launched by the US in February and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which the group came up with in 2019. However, **one may interpret some of the points expressed in the Joint Statement as a synergy between these two documents.** It has to be stressed that the final statement showcases ASEAN's intention to remain balanced and neutral. The maritime cooperation in the South China Sea and the standpoint of ASEAN for reaching a Code of Conduct with China remain, however, a position shared by both ASEAN and the US. **Indeed, the United States seems to have continued to endorse ASEAN's diplomatic efforts for reaching a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.**

Apart from the above geopolitical reading, this year's 2,500+ word, 28 item long statement represents a clear evolution from the 2016 Sunnylands Declaration following the 2016 US-ASEAN Special Leaders' Summit. **The 2022 joint statement paints a comprehensive picture of the future cooperation framework between the US and ASEAN, covering – inter alia – economic relations, maritime cooperation, peace, interpersonal relations, sub-regional development, technologies, and climate change. Despite a newly envisaged framework for economic cooperation – the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) – having been most certainly discussed during the 2-day long Summit, the US-led initiative has been left out of the Statement.** Such an omission may signal a consensus over the ASEAN member states involvement in IPEF is yet to be achieved. In fact, the statements made during the Summit by several ASEAN leaders have been very clear from this point of view. Despite IPEF not having been mentioned in the joint statement, the ASEAN-U.S. Trade and Investment Framework Arrangement and Expanded Economic Engagement Initiatives Work plan have been jointly presented as instruments of future cooperation.

As some analysts have interpreted the **US-initiated economic framework as an endeavour to balance and even counter other international actors' actions in Asia-Pacific**, a possible reluctance in mentioning the exact name of the IPEF in the official joint statement could be understood. Even more, the US President did not explicitly referred to either IPEF or economic matters in his Special Summit speech. President Biden however announced *“\$150 million of initiatives to deepen U.S.-ASEAN relations and achieve more — our — even better our shared objectives from the Coast Guard to climate change to — to modern infrastructure.”*

One may argue that the amount announced, out of which a major part regards Coast Guard capabilities of the ASEAN members, appears smaller than the previously committed (2016) *“\$425 million dollar Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (MSI)”*. MSI involved multiple, yet not all, ASEAN states and sought to address the ability of these countries to face the maritime challenges they confront with.

In many regards, the US-ASEAN Joint Statement could be interpreted as the nexus of foreign policy and security interests of the Southeast Asian countries and the United States. In this light, the 2022 US-ASEAN Special Summit could be described as a major event to reaffirm the parties' interdependence, yet equal footing from a foreign affairs, security ad economic standpoint.

As the language used in the Joint Statement could be described as complex and – to some extent – symbolic, one may expect more pragmatic steps to be taken in the future. Reinvigorating regional business and economic activity through a marked reduction in trade barriers with the US could represent such a concrete step. Having been treated, for the past decades, among the most potential security providers in the region, **the United States, from its global political and strategic considerations, seeks to evolve as a robust business partner of ASEAN, in a context where other international and regional actors have consolidated their trade and economic links with Southeast Asia.** Clearly, such an objective is rather a process than an event and, consequently, its success might only be noticeable in the second half of President Biden's mandate provided the current signal given during the Summit by the US to boost economic and trade links with ASEAN will be speedily materialized, even in a different manner.

One may expect as well that, as the international competition intensifies in the Asia-Pacific, a united

and balanced ASEAN will increment its role and weight from “ASEAN Centrality” in Southeast Asia to a regional organisation capable to project soft-power at Asia-Pacific level.

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