

US hosts special ASEAN summit as conflict with China deepens

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16 May 2022

Members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) met for a special two-day summit with US President Joe Biden in Washington last week as part of a diplomatic offensive against China.

For US imperialism, the meeting provided an opportunity to escalate its confrontation with Beijing in the Indo-Pacific even as it prosecutes the US/NATO proxy war in Ukraine against Moscow. However, disagreements were evident within ASEAN over the US agenda.

The ASEAN-US summit took place May 12 and 13, and was the first to be held in Washington in the organization's 45-year history. It was also the second special summit held in the US following a 2016 meeting hosted by then President Barack Obama in California.

Biden exploited the summit to again accuse Beijing of planning an unprovoked invasion of Taiwan, comparing it to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In reality, the US is goading and antagonizing Beijing over regional territorial disputes and Taiwan, just as the US and NATO deliberately provoked the war in Europe.

Calling the meeting the launch of a “new era in US-ASEAN relations,” Biden told assembled leaders that “the breadth of our discussions reflects just how vital the Indo-Pacific and ASEAN region are to the United States of America, from our perspective.”

Without explicitly naming China, Biden stated that US was seeking “an Indo-Pacific that is free and open, stable and prosperous, and resilient and secure.” Washington regularly demonizes Beijing declaring it to be a threat to the “free and open” Indo-Pacific and to the so-called “international rules-based order.”

Washington's real fear is that China's economic expansion constitutes a threat to US global

domination—that is, the post-World War II order in which it set the international rules to meet its own economic and strategic interests.

The joint statement released after the meeting struck a similar note, stating, that the US and ASEAN “share relevant fundamental principles in promoting an open, inclusive, and rules-based regional architecture, in which ASEAN is central, alongside partners who share in these goals.”

In fact, Washington, for more than a decade, has stoked tensions in the region between China and ASEAN members Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The US Navy has repeatedly staged provocative “freedom of navigation operations,” sending its warships into waters claimed by China around islets under its control.

The ASEAN-US joint statement made several references to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the SEA (UNCLOS), which the US has never ratified, indirectly justifying these naval provocations. “We are dedicated to maintaining peace, security, and stability in the region, and to ensuring maritime security and safety, as well as freedom of navigation and overflight and other lawful uses of the seas as described in the 1982 UNCLOS,” it stated.

The aim of such denunciations, veiled or otherwise, is to paint China as a threat to “freedom” in the Indo-Pacific region while allowing for the development of Washington's military plans with its allies. In particular, the US and Australia have denounced a security agreement recently signed by China with the Solomon Islands and issued barely veiled threats of regime-change against the government of the small Pacific Island state.

Biden pledged \$150 million to ASEAN during the

summit to try to offset the \$1.5 billion in development aid pledged by Beijing to ASEAN in November. The largest allocation was \$60 million towards military cooperation in the South China Sea. This includes dispatching a US Coast Guard ship to the region to work with ASEAN-member fleets, on the pretext of preventing illegal Chinese fishing.

However, there are broad differences among the ASEAN countries in their stance towards Russia and China. So while both were undoubtedly discussed behind closed doors, public statements avoided direct condemnations. Only Singapore has imposed sanctions on Russia. Vietnam and Laos abstained from passing a UN resolution in March condemning Russia over Ukraine. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand have adopted more neutral positions.

On Ukraine, the summit's joint statement did not follow the US in condemning the Russian invasion. It reaffirmed "our respect for sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity" and reiterated "our call for compliance with the UN Charter and international law." It called for "an immediate cessation of hostilities" and a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Similar divisions exist among ASEAN members about fully lining up with the US-led war drive against China. Prior to the summit, Kurt Campbell, the US Indo-Pacific coordinator, publicly declared that Taiwan would be on the agenda and hypocritically claimed that the US wanted "to maintain peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait." However, no reference to Taiwan appeared in the summit's joint statement.

Amalina Anuar, a senior analyst at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore, told Al Jazeera, "[I]f we're talking about persuading ASEAN members to align with the US, it's doubtful that ASEAN members would move away from neutrality. ASEAN and China are in the same neighborhood and are interdependent in many ways, not least economically. ASEAN is not looking to exclude China from the regional architecture because of this."

Cambodia in particular has close relations with Beijing while Indonesia is heavily reliant on Chinese investment. In addition, the leaders of both Myanmar and the Philippines were absent from the summit, with the former excluded following a military coup in 2021

and the latter going through a leadership change. The new Ferdinand Marcos Jr. administration in Manila appears likely to follow in the footsteps of outgoing president Rodrigo Duterte in developing closer relations with Beijing.

To offset these economic relations, Washington is working on the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), which Biden plans to formally launch during his upcoming trip to Asia this week. The IPEF, announced last October and similar to the defunct Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), is meant to put US trade and interests at the center of economic relationships in the region. The administration intends to implement its plan through executive orders rather than risk facing Congressional opposition.

At the end of this week, Biden will travel to Northeast Asia where he will meet with new South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol on May 21 in Seoul and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on May 23 in Tokyo. The following day, Biden will take part in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) summit—a quasi-military alliance directed against China—with Kishida and the leaders of India and Australia.



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