

Biden must emphasise Washington's commitment to Asean and the bloc's importance to US foreign policy at summit

- US needs to explain why Asean needs America and how the bloc factors into its Indo-Pacific plan without asking the group to disregard China's regional interests
- Asean is seeking to open up Southeast Asia such that the US can maintain a larger regional footprint to balance China's relentless influence

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Published: 4:38pm, 12 May, 2022

US President [Joe Biden](#)'s meeting with Southeast Asian leaders in the days ahead herald fresh optimism for [US-Asean relations](#). But the extent of any progress and the future of engagement fundamentally depends on whether both sides will be able to move closer on long-standing, unresolved commitments.

Washington will host the [US-Asean Special Summit](#) on May 12-13 to examine opportunities to revitalise cooperation in critical areas of non-traditional security. That includes the response to [Covid-19](#) and global health security; economic recovery; connectivity; human resource development and sustainability; climate change; as well as traditional security issues of common interest and concern, such as the [South China Sea](#), maritime security, and the situation in Myanmar.

The special summit is seen as an opportune time for both sides to identify the key issues that will redefine the future US-Asean relationship. Both sides must reassure each other of mutual trust and closer collaboration to effectively address the emerging concerns from the shifting geopolitical environment.

The Biden administration is expected to express Washington's keen commitment to [Asean](#). Likewise, Asean leaders are looking forward to a productive summit where a cohesive and resilient Asean is able to inject more vigour into America's regional strategy.

There is no question that Asean is seeking to open up Southeast Asia such that the [US](#) can maintain a larger regional footprint to balance China's relentless influence. Asean also looks to the US to be a reliable economic partner and is eager for more details of [Washington's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework](#). In order for the special summit to succeed, the US and Asean need to pay attention to the following issues.

For the US, the Biden administration must articulate convincingly its foreign policy toward Asean and reassure the regional bloc of its firm commitment to Asean's central role in the American vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific.

For Asean, it must persuade Washington that the regional grouping remains a credible regional driver that is willing to engage strategically with the US to ameliorate a broad range of regional

and global challenges at a time when the security and economic outlook in the [Indo-Pacific](#) remains uncertain and volatile.

The bloc must make the US perceive Asean to be an honest broker and a neutral actor, avoiding taking sides with one power or the other.

One of the most pressing concerns is the [war in Ukraine](#), which has ramifications that could affect Asean's unity. At the summit, the US and Asean will reiterate their respective positions on the conflict.

In an unambiguous position, the US has pledged to stand behind the Ukrainian people in opposing the Russian invasion; but it has stopped short of resorting to direct military intervention.

The US is determined to weaken Russia's aggression by imposing harsh economic sanctions on [Russia](#) and providing [massive aid](#), including military support.

The [Ukraine](#) war has already crossed over into a proxy war between Russia on the one side and [Nato](#) and the US on the other. US determination to oppose Russia's invasion may inadvertently exert pressure on some Asean member states – that have various levels and types of exposure to the Russian economy – to exit business partnerships with Russian companies.

More challenging, President Biden could ask Asean not to invite [Vladimir Putin](#) to the Asean Summit in November. If unsuccessful, the US President could decide not to attend. Since Biden took office, Asean has begun to significantly strengthen its relationship with the US and there are high hopes for this rescheduled meeting.

But what will be essential is for the summit to offer concrete deliverables in terms of coordination, commitments, and collaboration with Washington on issues of common interest, particularly in the area of hard and soft infrastructure improvement that can assist Asean member states to narrow the development gap and boost their respective economic growth.

Within Asean, the growing maritime-mainland divide along with the continuing development gap among the CLMV states ([Cambodia](#), [Laos](#), [Myanmar](#), and [Vietnam](#)) and the six other Asean members is the most significant long-term, existential threat that Asean is only now beginning to confront.

US support to close those gaps, where possible, will be essential if Asean is able to move forward as a bloc and continue its process of community building.

The future of the Mekong river also remains in significant peril. Intensifying the Mekong-US partnership, building on the significant achievements of the Lower Mekong Initiative is an excellent step in the right direction.

The pace of programming needs to speed up and public awareness of the partnership and its activities significantly strengthened if it is to achieve its desired outcomes.

Greater clarification is necessary as to the commonalities and shared goals of Washington's [Indo-Pacific vision](#) and the Asean outlook on the Indo-Pacific – with as much clarity and detail and concrete plans for development/next steps based on those commonalities as possible.

“Synchronising” these strategies as much as possible and, ideally, a joint declaration regarding the shared interests of Asean and the US following the summit would be much needed for confidence-building for both sides as well as a document that could serve as the basis for future cooperation.

The special summit offers a fresh slate for the US and Asean to reassure each other of their mutual commitments and discuss their respective national security priorities.

For the Biden administration's enduring commitment to Asean to gain greater stride, the US needs to clearly explain why Asean needs America and how the grouping factors into the US' Indo-Pacific strategy without asking the bloc to disregard China's interest in the region.

Asean needs to convince Washington that Southeast Asia is an important region that is receptive to US pre-eminent engagement and that Asean can count on the US to boost the bloc's centrality and unity amid wider regional and global hotspots, including the military coup in Myanmar, controlling the pandemic outbreak, resuscitating the world economy, reinvigorating the healthcare system, and the war in Ukraine.

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