



# The Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Policy: Views from Partners and Allies in the Region

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## Background

This memo is part of a larger effort by CNA's China & Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Division that is examining how allies, partners, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are assessing US policy in the Indo-Pacific. It focuses on how select allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific were viewing US policy toward the region during the initial months of the new US administration. The views herein are strictly those of the author and do not reflect the views of CNA or any of its sponsors.

## Introduction

The Biden administration has made the Indo-Pacific a focus of its foreign policy. The Department of Defense continues to regard the Indo-Pacific as its "priority theatre," and President Biden has characterized China as "our most serious competitor," pledging to "counter its aggressive, coercive action."<sup>1</sup> The administration's *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* declares that "our vital national interests compel the deepest connection to the Indo-Pacific" as well as Europe and the Western Hemisphere.<sup>2</sup> To this end, the interim guidance states that "we will reinvigorate and modernize our alliances and partnerships around the world," deepening "our partnership with India...as well as Singapore, Vietnam, and other Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states, to advance shared objectives."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, President Biden has consistently emphasized the central role that US allies and partners play in advancing US foreign policy goals. Regarding China, he stated in February 2021 that the US will "compete from a position of strength...by working with our allies and partners," and in September, he characterized US alliances as "our greatest source of strength," critical to "meet the threats of today and tomorrow."<sup>4</sup>

This report surveys a range of views from Indo-Pacific allies and partner states on the Biden administration's Asia policy. The allies and partners surveyed in this report include the three non-US members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad)—Australia, India, and Japan—and six ASEAN

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Garamone, "Asia Trip by State, Defense Secretaries Highlights Importance of Indo-Pacific," US Department of Defense, March 12, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2536402/asia-trip-by-state-defense-secretaries-highlights-importance-of-indo-pacific/>; The White House, "Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World," February 4, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>.

<sup>2</sup> President Joseph R. Biden, Jr., *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, The White House, March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Biden, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*.

<sup>4</sup> The White House, "Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World"; The White House, "Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom Announcing the Creation of AUKUS," September 15, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/09/15/remarks-by-president-biden-prime-minister-morrison-of-australia-and-prime-minister-johnson-of-the-united-kingdom-announcing-the-creation-of-aucus/>.

states: Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam. Because officials are often constrained in what they can say publicly, this report primarily examines the perspectives of think tank analysts (especially those with government affiliations) and opinion leaders, all of whom tend to enjoy greater latitude in expressing their views. While the views expressed by regional subject matter experts (SMEs) should not necessarily be construed as presenting the official positions of their governments, these individuals are, at a minimum, shaping public opinion and in some cases may be informing policy-makers. Given the premium that the Biden administration has placed on strengthening ties with allies and partners across the Indo-Pacific, knowledge of major currents of thinking in partner and ally states on the administration's policies in the region should have particular utility.

### **Key themes**

- Analysts across the Indo-Pacific generally assess that the Biden administration's policy toward the PRC contains many aspects of the Trump administration's competitive approach, with an added focus on US partners and allies and on multilateralism
- The Quad coalition of US treaty allies Australia and Japan, and security partner India, have all remained highly supportive of the administration's policy approach, most notably the administration's emphasis on cooperation with partners and allies.
- The view from Southeast Asia however remains mixed. To varying degrees, SMEs from every Southeast Asian country examined here expressed concern about the Biden administration's competitive approach to China, viewing it as potentially destabilizing for the region and posing potential challenges to their relationships with the PRC.
- Moreover, officials and SMEs in Southeast Asia remain highly skeptical of the administration's emphasis on human rights and democracy promotion, while many (with the notable exception of Vietnam) appear uncomfortable with the rapid rise of the Quad.
- Nonetheless, some SMEs and officials from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam expressed a greater degree of comfort with the administration's competitive China policy, suggesting that their countries could benefit as Washington courts the region.

**Analysts across the Indo-Pacific generally assess that the Biden administration's policy toward the PRC has been a continuation of the Trump administration's competitive approach, with an added focus on US partners and allies and on multilateralism.**<sup>5</sup> For example, in June 2021, Bilahari Kausikan, former permanent secretary of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, remarked, "Mr. Biden's policy is almost exactly the same as Mr. Trump's policy, except implemented in a more orderly way...and with more consultation with friends and allies."<sup>6</sup> Sahashi Ryo, an associate professor at Tokyo University's Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia and a faculty fellow at the government-affiliated Research Institute of Economy, Trade, and Industry, observed that "Biden has thus far shown a clear intent not just to maintain but to

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Tommy Koh, "The Biden Administration: The Road Ahead for Asia," National University of Singapore, Tembusu College, January 21, 2021, <https://tembusu.nus.edu.sg/news/2021/the-biden-administration-the-road-ahead-for-asia>; Kijoo Kim, "Changes in US Security and Defense Strategy toward China: Assessment and Policy Implications," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 32, no. 4 (December 2020): 539–560; Choe Wongi, "Outlook for the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy: The Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue," Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, May 12, 2021, [https://keia.org/shared\\_publication/india-and-the-quad-summit-is-india-ready-to-join-the-anti-china-bloc/](https://keia.org/shared_publication/india-and-the-quad-summit-is-india-ready-to-join-the-anti-china-bloc/); Ikegami Ryuzo, "US-China Hypercompetition and the US Strategy towards China: The Army as the Gird in the Indo-Pacific," *NIDS Commentary*, no. 182, National Institute for Defence Studies, March 2021, <http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/commentary/pdf/commentary162e.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Bilahari Kausikan, "US-China Rivalry is Unlikely to Become the 'New Cold War,' Says Former Diplomat," CNBC, 2:40, June 30, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/video/2021/06/30/us-china-rivalry-unlikely-to-become-the-new-cold-war-ex-diplomat.html>.

double down on the China policy of the Trump administration, which pushed Beijing to the top of America's global strategic agenda."<sup>7</sup>

## Views from the Quad

**Overall, the other three members of the Quad—US treaty allies Australia and Japan and security partner India—have been highly supportive of the Biden administration's Asia policy.** SMEs from these countries appear reassured by the administration's emphasis on cooperation with partners and allies and confident that their countries' relationships with the US are poised to grow stronger. They also appear pleased with the growing institutionalization of the Quad, including recurring ministerial- and leader-level meetings.

### Australia

**Australian SMEs generally appear supportive of the Biden administration's Asia policy, although some variation among analysts is evident regarding the newly announced Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) strategic partnership.** Shortly after Biden's election, Peter Jennings, executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institution (an organization funded in part by the country's Department of Defense), assessed that "under Biden, Washington's door is open for Australia" and that "Biden may do more to expand the economic and technological aspects of our partnership."<sup>8</sup> In March 2021, Ben Scott, director of a program funded by the Australian Department of Defence at the Lowy Institute (an independent Sydney-based think tank), stated that "Biden's meeting on March 12 with the prime ministers of Australia, India, and Japan—'the Quad'—was a great leap forward."<sup>9</sup> Also in March 2021, Lowy Institute executive director Michael Fullilove wrote that with a Biden administration, "America's allies feel assured and comfortable."<sup>10</sup>

While Scott believed that "Washington's willingness to back Australia against China's use of geo-economic coercion is reassuring," he also suggested that Washington's aggressive defense of Australia might make it more difficult to compel Beijing to halt its coercion of Canberra.<sup>11</sup> Referencing a statement by White House Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell that the US will not improve ties with China "at the same time that a close and dear ally is being subjected to a form of economic coercion," Scott noted that "Australia's economic relationship with China is less likely to normalize if it is framed as a Chinese concession to the US than if it is framed as restoration of 'win-win' cooperation and compliance with commonly agreed rules."<sup>12</sup>

**Australian SMEs expressed a range of views regarding the AUKUS security partnership, an initiative announced in September 2021 and designed to facilitate information sharing and joint technology development in fields such as nuclear submarines, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and**

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<sup>7</sup> Sahashi Ryo, "Getting in Step with Washington's China Strategy: Toward an Integrated Security Policy," Nippon.com, June 7, 2021, <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00714/>.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Jennings, "Alliance Safe, But Real Danger Lies Ahead," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, November 14, 2020, <https://www.aspi.org.au/opinion/alliance-safe-real-danger-lies-ahead>.

<sup>9</sup> Ben Scott, "Quad's Great Leap Forward Leaves Free Trade Behind," *The Australian*, March 24, 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/quad-s-great-leap-forward-leaves-free-trade-behind>.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Fullilove, "Biden's Diplomatic Team Debut is Heartening for Australia," *Australian Financial Review*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/biden-s-diplomatic-team-debut-heartening-australia>.

<sup>11</sup> Scott, "Quad's Great Leap Forward."

<sup>12</sup> Scott, "Quad's Great Leap Forward."

**other advanced technologies.**<sup>13</sup> While a number of Australian SMEs applauded the trilateral partnership, several expressed concern.<sup>14</sup> For example, Sam Roggeveen, the director of the International Security Program at the Lowy Institute and previously a senior analyst in the Australian intelligence community, suggested that it was unwise for leaders in Canberra to have “staked their future on the alliance,” given the potential for US abandonment. Unlike Australia, he argued, “the United States is in Asia by choice.”<sup>15</sup> Given the enormous costs and risks Washington will need to bear “to take on a power as great as China,” he asks, “why should the United States commit itself to a contest with China when the stakes are less than existential?”<sup>16</sup>

Allan Gyngell, an honorary professor at the Australian National University’s College of Asia and the Pacific, acknowledged that a nuclear-powered submarine fleet would “offer Australia strategic and operational benefits.”<sup>17</sup> However, he lamented that because Canberra would need Washington’s help to operate and maintain the nuclear submarines, “the capability they provide is only available to us if we cede a degree—quite a high degree in this case—of Australian sovereignty.” Gyngell also expressed some concern regarding US staying power, noting that “even America’s ‘forever wars’ lasted only 20 years.”<sup>18</sup> Marcus Hellyer, a senior analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) and a former Australian Defense Department official, wrote approvingly of the operational advantages that nuclear submarines would provide Australia, but argued that the agreement has elevated Washington’s expectations of Australia vis-à-vis a China-related contingency: “The US doesn’t provide you with the crown jewels of its military technology if you are not going to use them when it calls for help.”<sup>19</sup>

## India

**Indian analysts have also written approvingly of Biden’s Asia policy.** S. Kalyanaraman, a research fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), an organization funded by the Indian Ministry of Defense, favors Biden’s tough approach to China, noting that the US and India “both share adversarial relations with China” while enjoying “amity in their bilateral relationship.”<sup>20</sup> After noting that “the Biden administration has categorized China as America’s ‘most serious competitor’ and expressed its determination to...‘counter its aggressive, coercive action,’” he states that “India and the United States

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<sup>13</sup> White House, “Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom Announcing the Creation of AUKUS.”

<sup>14</sup> For generally positive reactions, see for example Peter Jennings, “AUKUS sets a better direction for Australia’s defense,” ASPI Strategist, September 17, 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/aucus-sets-a-better-direction-for-australias-defence/>; Fergus Hanson and Danielle Cave, “The real potential of AUKUS is about far more than submarines,” ASPI Strategist, September 20, 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-real-potential-of-aucus-is-about-far-more-than-submarines/>.

<sup>15</sup> Sam Roggeveen, “Australia Is Making a Risky Bet on the US,” *New York Times*, September 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/20/opinion/AUKUS-australia-us-china.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Roggeveen, “Australia Is Making a Risky Bet on the US.”

<sup>17</sup> Allan Gyngell, “Australia signs up to the Anglosphere,” *Australian Financial Review*, September 17, 2021, <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/australia-signs-up-to-the-anglosphere-20210916-p58s3x>.

<sup>18</sup> Gyngell, “Australia signs up to the Anglosphere.”

<sup>19</sup> Marcus Hellyer, “Australia’s credibility rests on subs success,” *Australian Financial Review*, September 17, 2021, <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/australia-s-credibility-rests-on-subs-success-20210917-p58si6>.

<sup>20</sup> S. Kalyanaraman, “Changing Pattern of the China-India-US Triangle,” IDSA Comment, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, February 19, 2021, <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/changing-pattern-china-india-us-triangle-skalyanaram>.

have resolved to closely cooperate in support of freedom of navigation, territory integrity, and a robust security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region.”<sup>21</sup>

Indian SMEs also appear pleased by Biden’s embrace of the Quad. For example, in April 2021, Sujan R. Chinoy, director general of IDSA and a former ambassador to Japan, wrote that “the once inchoate group has now coalesced in response to the ominous clouds formed by China’s economic and military ascendancy. Its form and substance are beginning to see greater alignment.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Vivek Mishra, a research fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs (which is closely connected to India’s Ministry of External Affairs), asserted that US-India cooperation has been buttressed by the Biden administration’s prioritization of the Quad “and its embrace of its members early on in his administration by participating in the first heads of state meet.”<sup>23</sup>

## Japan

**Japanese officials and analysts have sounded generally positive about Biden’s Asia policy and its forward-leaning approach to competition with China.**<sup>24</sup> In April 2020, Masashi Adachi, a member of the House of Councilors in the Japanese National Diet, expressed support for the administration’s competitive China policy, stating that Tokyo shared Washington’s focus on “how to push back [on] China’s aggression.”<sup>25</sup> In June 2021, Tetsuo Kotani, senior fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs (a private foundation historically linked to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), wrote approvingly of the Biden administration’s effort to provide more support for Taiwan, stating that “there is no discrepancy between the two countries [the US and Japan] in terms of their understanding of the situation surrounding Taiwan.”<sup>26</sup> He went on to list a number of measures Japan should take to strengthen defense ties with Taiwan.<sup>27</sup>

Sahashi Ryo suggested that “we are past the point where Japan can strengthen ties with Washington and Beijing simultaneously.” He added, “With the April 2021 summit, Japanese diplomacy has reverted to its natural posture of placing the alliance first and relations with China second.”<sup>28</sup> He further praised President Biden and Japanese prime minister Yoshihide Suga for “break[ing] new ground by addressing economic security head-on and establishing it as a key focus of the Japan-US alliance.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Kalyanaraman, “Changing Pattern.”

<sup>22</sup> Sujan R. Chinoy, “Yes, The Quad Will Endure!” Policy Brief, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, April 9, 2021, <https://www.idsa.in/policybrief/yes-the-quad-will-endure-srchinoy-090421>.

<sup>23</sup> Vivek Mishra, “The Quad Partnerships Stand Reinforced since the Pandemic Began,” Indian Council of World Affairs, July 17, 2021, [https://www.icwa.in/show\\_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls\\_id=6181&lid=4242](https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=6181&lid=4242).

<sup>24</sup> They have noted that Tokyo was pleased with Biden’s affirmation that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, also claimed by China, fall within the scope of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security. See Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, *The Biden Administration’s Indo-Pacific Policy: American and Japanese Perspectives*, June 2021, <https://spfusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Biden-Admin-INDOPAC-Policy.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, *The Biden Administration’s Indo-Pacific Policy*.

<sup>26</sup> Tetsuo Kotani, “The New Taiwan Clause: Taiwan and the Security of Japan,” *JIIA Strategic Comment*, Japan Institute of International Affairs, June 1, 2021, [https://www.jiia.or.jp/en/strategic\\_comment/2021/06/2021-01.html](https://www.jiia.or.jp/en/strategic_comment/2021/06/2021-01.html).

<sup>27</sup> Kotani, “The New Taiwan Clause.”

<sup>28</sup> Sahashi Ryo, “Getting in Step with Washington’s China Strategy: Toward an Integrated Security Policy,” Nippon.com, June 7, 2021, <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00714/#>.

<sup>29</sup> Ryo, “Getting in Step with Washington’s China Strategy.”

## Views from Southeast Asia

Southeast Asian views of the Biden administration's Asia policy are complex and varied. While some regional SMEs view the Quad favorably, others appear uncomfortable with it, viewing it as destabilizing and undermining "ASEAN centrality." Southeast Asian SMEs are almost uniformly skeptical of the Biden administration's emphasis on human rights and democracy promotion; however, regarding the administration's competitive approach to China, there is wide variation both across and within the six partner states surveyed.

### *The Quad*

**Officials and analysts from a number of Southeast Asian states appear uncomfortable with the Quad, though the extent of their discomfort and their reasons for it vary.** At one end of the debate, the Quad is viewed as an entirely unwelcome construct that will provoke China and destabilize the region. This view is stated most bluntly by former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, who in May 2021 remarked that "the grouping is an old strategy of encirclement where you try to encircle the enemy, but when you do that, the enemy will retaliate."<sup>30</sup> The Quad countries, he contended, "would be better off engaging with Beijing individually rather than joining hands to attempt to control China's rising influence."<sup>31</sup> Although most Southeast Asian SMEs do not appear to view the Quad to be quite as destabilizing, a number of them view it as potentially problematic for undermining "ASEAN centrality" and for being overly focused on traditional security issues.<sup>32</sup>

The concern about the Quad potentially undermining ASEAN centrality was on clear display during the July 2021 trip by US defense secretary Lloyd J. Austin III to Singapore. Following a speech in which Secretary Austin outlined America's commitment to the region, Singapore's ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh asked, "Has the US decided to give the Quad a higher priority than ASEAN and will this lead to the marginalization of ASEAN?"<sup>33</sup> In May 2021, former Indonesian deputy foreign minister Dino Patti Djalal wrote, "While the Quad leaders strongly endorsed ASEAN centrality, questions are being asked within ASEAN regarding the Quad's strategic objective and whether it will undertake measures that may be incompatible with ASEAN's goals."<sup>34</sup>

A number of Southeast Asian officials and SMEs point to the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) as the lodestar for how regional states aim to chart their course in an era of heightened strategic rivalry. ASEAN adopted the AOIP in 2019 (following the Quad's 2017 revitalization) as a response to what it termed

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<sup>30</sup> P. Prem Kumar, "'Old' Quad Strategy Risks Provoking China: Malaysia's Mahathir," *Nikkei Asia*, May 20, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Future-of-Asia/The-Future-of-Asia-2021/Old-Quad-strategy-risks-provoking-China-Malaysia-s-Mahathir>.

<sup>31</sup> "Don't provoke China, ex-PM tells US, Japan," Xinhua, May 27, 2021, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2021/05/27/news/world/dont-provoke-china-ex-pm-tells-us-japan/1800829>.

<sup>32</sup> Article 1 of the ASEAN Charter emphasizes the need to "maintain the centrality and proactive role of ASEAN as the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent, and inclusive," ASEAN Charter, Association of Southeast Asian Nations, January 2008, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> "Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Participates in Fullerton Lecture Series in Singapore," Department of Defense, July 27, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2711025/secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-participates-in-fullerton-lecture-serie/>.

<sup>34</sup> Dino Patti Djalal, "Can Biden Keep the Peace in Southeast Asia?" *Foreign Policy*, May 30, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/30/biden-asean-southeast-asia-china-us-rivalry-geopolitics/>.

“geopolitical and geostrategic shifts” that “present opportunities as well as challenges.”<sup>35</sup> The AOIP lists a number of principles by which ASEAN seeks to navigate such challenges, the first of which is “strengthening ASEAN Centrality.”<sup>36</sup> In July 2021, Thailand’s vice minister for foreign affairs, Vijavat Isarabhakdi, remarked, “We welcome the Biden administration’s emphasis on re-engaging with allies and partners.”<sup>37</sup> He then immediately referenced the AOIP, stating that it “serves as ASEAN’s vista on how to promote regional stability and prosperity based on the ASEAN-centered architecture. For us, AOIP is key...”<sup>38</sup>

Lina Alexandra, a senior researcher at CSIS Jakarta, a leading Indonesian think tank, suggests that the Quad is inimical to ASEAN centrality. Centrality, she suggests, refers to ASEAN as a “leader or driver” of regional developments. “Unfortunately,” she remarked, “what we are seeing now is the opposite....The United States is focusing on developing the Quad, a rigid alliance with like-minded supporters such as Australia, Japan and India. We hope that the newly elected United States President, Joe Biden, would change the course to multilateralism. But we still need to wait and see.”<sup>39</sup>

**Other Indonesia SMEs, however, do not view the Quad as detrimental to ASEAN or its centrality.** For example, Dewi Fortuna Anwar, a research professor at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences and a former deputy secretary to the Indonesian vice president, remarked at a September 2021 webinar, “Between ASEAN multilateralism and Quad unilateralism, they [the two groupings] need not be confrontational.”<sup>40</sup> The Quad, she said, “can also add value.” Indeed, Anwar argued that while the Quad “should not be intended to limit China’s growth as an economic superpower, I certainly hope that the Quad...can act as a constraint on China’s governing ambition.”<sup>41</sup>

**Vietnam officials and analysts appear far less concerned with the notion that the Quad challenges ASEAN centrality.** In March 2021, Thuy T. Do, an associate professor at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam and a current diplomat at Vietnam’s Permanent Mission to the United Nations in Geneva, anticipated that the Quad will work to promote “a free and open rules-based order rooted in international law.”<sup>42</sup> Such a vision, she argued, accords squarely with Vietnamese interests and, in fact, Vietnamese leaders are working to achieve the same thing.<sup>43</sup> She acknowledged regional concerns about weakening ASEAN centrality, but argued that ASEAN remains the centerpiece of the regional security architecture and that both the Biden administration and the Quad have stated that they respect ASEAN centrality and the AOIP.<sup>44</sup>

Nguyen Hung Son, vice president of the Diplomacy Academy of Vietnam, also viewed the Quad favorably. During a September 2021 event, he suggested that rather than undermine ASEAN, the Quad would

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<sup>35</sup> “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” ASEAN Thailand 2019, June 2019, <https://asean2019.go.th/en/news/asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific/>.

<sup>36</sup> “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.”

<sup>37</sup> Satu P. Limaye, “New Opportunities for the United States-Kingdom of Thailand Alliance in the Indo-Pacific,” East-West Center, 1:07:20, July 27, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMw\\_BgpYzdo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMw_BgpYzdo).

<sup>38</sup> Limaye, “New Opportunities.”

<sup>39</sup> “Analyzing ASEAN’s Centrality and its Commitment to Regional Peace and Stability,” The Habibie Center, November 11, 2020, <https://www.habibiecenter.or.id/img/discussion-report/TA.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, “ISIS Forum: The Quad and Southeast Asia: Reception, Perception, and Opportunities,” ISIS Forum on the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, September 7, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IED9Cf4uEw>.

<sup>41</sup> ISIS Malaysia, “ISIS Forum: The Quad and Southeast Asia.”

<sup>42</sup> Elina Noor, “‘America is Back’: Views from Southeast Asia,” Asia Society Policy Institute, 1:30:44, March 16, 2021, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/america-back-views-southeast-asia>.

<sup>43</sup> Noor, “‘America is Back.’”

<sup>44</sup> Noor, “‘America is Back.’”

complement it. The two could work together on a number of issues, he remarked, including vaccine development, climate change, green technology, infrastructure, and supply-chain resilience. He acknowledged that the Quad arrangement might compete with ASEAN, but that “this competition might be good.” Nguyen further suggested that “minilateralism” between the Quad and particular Southeast Asian states is consistent with ASEAN principles and should be encouraged. He even went so far as to say that the ASEAN secretariat might want to “offer secretariat service to Quad members...as you grow.” Nguyen’s principal concern with the Quad was not with the perception that it is intended to contain China but, rather, with its “sustainability,” noting that Japanese and Australian priorities may change when national leadership in each country turns over and that India has the potential to become distracted with challenges stemming from Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>45</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Huu Tuc, a researcher at the Institute for Defence International Relations (IDIR), the Vietnamese Ministry of Defence’s primary “consultative organ,” also views Biden’s embrace of the Quad to be a potentially favorable development for Vietnam.<sup>46</sup> In a March 2021 article, Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen suggested that engaging the US alongside India, Japan, and Australia “will strengthen Vietnam’s negotiating position with China, especially in the South China Sea.”<sup>47</sup> Yet given Vietnam’s imperative to avoid antagonizing Beijing, he acknowledged, “Vietnam may also face challenges going down this path.”<sup>48</sup> The latter point is echoed by two researchers with the government-affiliated Vietnam Academy of Social Science, who wrote in a April 2021 paper, “It is difficult for Vietnam to engage with the Quad to conduct anti-Beijing activities.”<sup>49</sup>

**Another element of discomfort with the Quad—but one that the Biden administration has, in part, moved to address—is that some SMEs perceive it to be overly focused on security while neglecting practical issues that are viewed as more important.** In December 2020, for example, Joseph Liow Chin Yong, a professor and former dean at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS, a Singapore-based think tank and graduate school), wrote: “As for the Quad, I would like to see it continue but evolve in terms of its scope. Currently, it places a lot of currency on the strategic aspect, which is fine, but it should also introduce some economic, trade, and diplomatic initiatives. This would give it the form, if not substance, of a more comprehensive engagement strategy, which would in turn make it more appealing to the region.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> ISIS Malaysia, “ISIS Forum: The Quad and Southeast Asia.”

<sup>46</sup> “Major Research Institutes,” Ministry of National Defence, Socialist Republic of Vietnam, [http://mod.gov.vn/wps/portal/!ut/p/b1/vZPdjqJAEIWFZR\\_A0DR\\_etnQtDRgy0DDADcERxcFFRUcmH76dSebzWSyM95srLqq5KucOlUpKZdSKT-](http://mod.gov.vn/wps/portal/!ut/p/b1/vZPdjqJAEIWFZR_A0DR_etnQtDRgy0DDADcERxcFFRUcmH76dSebzWSyM95srLqq5KucOlUpKZdSKT-)

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<sup>47</sup> Nguyen Huu Tuc, “Is Vietnam open to Washington’s Indo-Pacific strategy?” East Asia Forum, March 4, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/03/04/is-vietnam-open-to-washingtons-indo-pacific-strategy/>.

<sup>48</sup> Nguyen, “Is Vietnam open to Washington’s Indo-Pacific strategy?”

<sup>49</sup> Nguyen Khanh Van and Nguyen Xuan Trung, “Vietnam and the United States: A Strategic Partnership in the Future?” *India Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (2021): 247. Nguyen Khanh Van is a researcher at the Vietnam Institute of Americas Studies, and Nguyen Xuan Trung is Director General of Vietnam’s Institute for Indian and Southwest Asian Studies.

<sup>50</sup> Vannarith et al., “Roundtable: ‘America is Back.’”



The Quad's commitment to address non-security issues in May, following the leaders' summit—namely, COVID-19 vaccine distribution, climate change, and critical and emerging technologies—was viewed positively by some SMEs.<sup>51</sup> Ivy Kewk, a former special functions officer for Malaysia's deputy minister of defense, wrote in April 2021, "By focusing on more practical cooperation, the Quad has gone some way to allow Southeast Asia a good entry point for cooperation."<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Chee Leong Lee, a research fellow with Anbound Malaysia (a Kuala Lumpur-based organization that is part of a "multinational think tank" based in Beijing) wrote that the Quad's focus on COVID-19 and climate change was a "significant development," not only as "a signal for the security grouping's commitment to achieve a 'free and open Indo-Pacific,' but also a show of its capacity to roll out measures that will fulfil the needs of regional countries in this post-pandemic age."<sup>53</sup>

Yet the Quad's efforts in this regard evidently have not entirely allayed regional concerns about the group's focus. In a June 2021 article, Alexander R. Arifianto, a research fellow at RSIS, and Yohanes Sulaiman, a professor at Indonesia's Jenderal Achmad Yani University, wrote, "The Quad puts greater emphasis on security over other forms of cooperation, such as economics and public health."<sup>54</sup>

### **Human rights and democracy promotion**

**Southeast Asian states are almost uniformly skeptical of the Biden administration's emphasis on human rights and democracy promotion.** According to polling conducted between November 2020 and January 2021 by the Singapore-based Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (an organization created by the Singaporean parliament and funded in part by the government), "All ten [ASEAN] countries are unenthusiastic about the Biden administration's emphasis on human rights and democracy promotion."<sup>55</sup> In a February 2021 article, Bilahari Kausikan warned, "Biden should be cautious about promoting American values....Such values are not necessarily a strategic asset in Southeast Asia, where they are not shared by all."<sup>56</sup>

In May 2021, Dino Patti Djalal argued that Southeast Asian states view the Biden administration's focus on democracy and human rights in the context of Washington's competition with Beijing. In this regard, however, he suggested that they are ineffective themes around which to try to rally Southeast Asian states. He writes, "No Southeast Asian country particularly minds China's political system....Not a single ASEAN country has echoed the US State Department's claim that China is committing genocide against Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Not one Southeast Asian country—not even Indonesia, which is home to the world's largest Muslim population—considers China an ideological foe."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> The White House, "Fact Sheet: Quad Summit," March 12, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/fact-sheet-quad-summit/>.

<sup>52</sup> Ivy Kewk, "The Quad's Uneasy Place in Southeast Asia," *The Interpreter*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/quad-s-uneasy-place-southeast-asia>.

<sup>53</sup> Chee Leong Lee, "Three Questions for the Quad's Indo-Pacific Security Commitments," *Diplomatist*, April 22, 2021, <https://diplomatist.com/2021/04/22/three-questions-for-the-quads-indo-pacific-security-commitments/>; "About Anbound," ANBOUND, <http://www.anbound.my/>.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander R. Arifianto and Yohanes Sulaiman, "US-Indonesia Relations Need a Reboot," *East Asia Forum*, June 28, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/06/28/us-indonesia-relations-need-a-reboot/>.

<sup>55</sup> Malcolm Cook and Ian Storey, "The Impending Biden Administration and Southeast Asia," *ISEAS Perspective*, December 16, 2020, p. 63, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2020\\_143.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_143.pdf).

<sup>56</sup> Bilahari Kausikan, "The Arena: Southeast Asia in the Age of Great-Power Rivalry," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2021-02-16/arena>.

<sup>57</sup> Djalal, "Can Biden Keep the Peace in Southeast Asia?"

**SMEs and officials from several Southeast Asian states express concern that the Biden administration's focus on democracy and human rights may lead to unwelcome interventions in their states' domestic affairs.** Analysts and officials from Thailand and the Philippines, both US treaty allies, are among the most vocal in this regard. Darnp Sukontasap, director of the Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies at Rangsit University and Thailand's representative to the Governing Council of the ASEAN Institute of Peace and Reconciliation, remarked that while "we respect and admire the US for its democratic principles...Thailand can never be completely like the US and we never have the intention to. This is why there is some resentment when we feel that we are being judged or measured by US standards, while we are fully aware that such standards are not being equally applied at all times to all friends of the US, even in Southeast Asia."<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Kavi Chongkittavorn, a senior fellow at Chulalongkorn University's Institute of Security and International Studies and an advisor with the ASEAN-affiliated Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, cautioned the Biden administration against the "desire to promote liberal norms and democracy as the No.1 cornerstone of its foreign policy."<sup>59</sup> Doing so, he warned, "can have a myriad of adverse impacts on US relationships and cooperation." Instead, he advised that "the best approach is to have quiet diplomacy and discreet consultation on issues related to human rights and democratisation."<sup>60</sup>

The Philippines' Duterte administration, which has jailed members of the political opposition, cracked down on journalists, and overseen a bloody anti-narcotics campaign, does not welcome the Biden administration's focus on democracy and human rights. When asked about US congressional pressure on the State Department to address alleged Philippine human rights abuses, Duterte responded, "Be careful, be careful of what you are planning or doing there because you, yourself, your country is—not only was, is—guilty also of so many violations of human rights."<sup>61</sup> While the Duterte administration may not welcome the prospect of a Biden administration concerned with democracy and human rights issues, Aries Arugay, professor of political science at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, noted during a March 2021 webinar that for the "debilitated political opposition...this a welcome development."<sup>62</sup>

Indonesian and Vietnamese SMEs also expressed concern about the Biden administration's focus on democracy and human rights. In June 2021, Yohanes Sulaiman, a professor at Indonesia's Jenderal Achmad Yani University, wrote, "Indonesia is particularly worried about potential Western intervention in Papua and its easternmost province—where local pro-independence activists have engaged in a secessionist campaign."<sup>63</sup> He also expressed concern that respecting human rights "may once again become conditions of US security and economic assistance"—as they were during the Clinton and Obama presidencies. With respect to Vietnam, a February 2021 article on the website of the government-affiliated Vietnam Institute of American Studies acknowledged that the premium the administration places on democracy and human rights could "interfere with bilateral relations."<sup>64</sup> However, Thuy T. Do, a professor at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam currently stationed at the country's Permanent Mission to the United Nations in

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<sup>58</sup> Limaye, "New Opportunities."

<sup>59</sup> Kavi Chongkittavorn, "Can Power Help Biden's Foreign Policy?" *Bangkok Post*, May 4, 2021, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2109923/can-power-help-bidens-foreign-policy->

<sup>60</sup> Chongkittavorn, "Can Power Help Biden's Foreign Policy?"

<sup>61</sup> "Duterte to US State Dept: Be Careful, You are also Guilty of Human Rights Violations," CNN Philippines, August 3, 2021, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/8/3/Duterte-US-State-Department-human-rights-violations.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Noor, "America is Back."

<sup>63</sup> Arifianto and Sulaiman, "US-Indonesia Relations."

<sup>64</sup> Hiệp, "Prospects of Vietnamese-American Relations Under President Biden."

Geneva, did not appear to believe that the administration's concerns in this regard were insurmountable, stating that "converging interests between the two countries outnumber the diverging ones."<sup>65</sup>

### **Competitive approach to China**

**Many Southeast Asian SMEs express ambivalence about the Biden administration's competitive approach to China.** In a June 2021 article, Kishore Mahbubani, a distinguished fellow at the National University of Singapore's Asia Research Institute and a former Singaporean diplomat, argued that Southeast Asian countries "do not want to see a heightened US-Chinese rivalry in Southeast Asia....ASEAN countries do not want to be polarized, pulled in different directions by different powers, and see the cohesion of the ASEAN community undermined."<sup>66</sup> This view accords with polling data collected by the Singapore-based Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) as the Biden administration was preparing to take office. Malcolm Cook and Ian Storey of ISEAS note that the polling "suggests that Southeast Asia would welcome a Biden administration policy toward Asia that is less confrontational and unilateralist than the Trump administration." At the same time, however, they note that ASEAN states hope to see an administration that is "firmer and more action-oriented than the Obama administration."<sup>67</sup> Below, we survey views from six Southeast Asian partner states and allies: Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam.

### **Indonesia**

**Indonesian analysts and officials welcome US engagement in the region, but some appear uncomfortable with the administration's competitive posture toward China.** Shortly after Biden's election, Dino Patti Djalal remarked, "We don't want strategic battles in our region....Any outside power that wants to turn Southeast Asia against one of the major powers, that's not going to work."<sup>68</sup> In March 2021, I Gede Ngurah Swajaya, director general for American and European Affairs at Indonesia's Foreign Ministry, expressed his hope that Biden's Asia policy "not be preoccupied with one issue, which is in relation to the geopolitical dynamic here in the region."<sup>69</sup> He encouraged the administration to focus on "other countries and institutions" to help maintain regional peace and stability.<sup>70</sup> Yohanes Sulaiman, of Indonesia's Jenderal Achmad Yani University, wrote the following in June 2021: "Indonesia feels increasingly uneasy about US foreign policy. While Indonesia is concerned with the rise of China and its growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, it did not support the Trump administration's aggressive foreign policy toward China, which seems set to continue under US President Joe Biden."<sup>71</sup>

Dino Patti Djalal praised US Secretary of State Antony Blinken for using the phrase "'free, open, and *inclusive* Indo-Pacific,' [because] 'inclusive' is a code word...for keeping the door open for China to come in."<sup>72</sup> Yet

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<sup>65</sup> Noor, "America is Back."

<sup>66</sup> Kishore Mahbubani, "Asia, Say No to NATO: The Pacific Has no Need of the Destructive Militaristic Culture of the Atlantic Alliance," *Straits Times*, June 25, 2021, <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/app-essay-kishore-mahbubani-2/>.

<sup>67</sup> Cook and Storey, "The Impending Biden Administration."

<sup>68</sup> Dino Patti Djalal, "Analyst: Biden may undo some Trump tariffs, should engage Asia instead of turning it against China," ANC 24/7, 9:29, November 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDwXLesRw1w>.

<sup>69</sup> I Gede Ngurah Swajaya and Nguyen Hung Son, "Southeast Asia's Response to Present Biden's First Foreign Policy Speech," Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia, 1:09:31, March 30, 2021, <https://www.fpcindonesia.org/2021/03/30/eyes-on-southeast-asia-podcast/>.

<sup>70</sup> I Gede and Nguyen, "Southeast Asia's Response."

<sup>71</sup> Alexander R. Arifianto and Yohanes Sulaiman, "US-Indonesia Relations Need a Reboot," East Asia Forum, June 28, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/06/28/us-indonesia-relations-need-a-reboot/>.

<sup>72</sup> Djalal, "Can Biden Keep the Peace in Southeast Asia?"

others view the administration's approach to be in tension with ASEAN's principle of inclusivity. Shafiah Muhibat, a senior researcher and the head of the Department of International Relations, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Indonesia, remarked, "What worries Indonesia the most is the actual trajectory of President Biden's new administration...[and] the gap between a Southeast Asian emphasis on multilateralism through inclusivity with that of the US alliance-based order."<sup>73</sup>

**Some Indonesian SMEs, however, argue that Jakarta could potentially benefit from US-China competition.** For example, during a September 2021 event, Dewi Fortuna Anwar, a research professor at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences and a former deputy secretary to the Indonesian vice president, argued that "competition is useful because...the countries that are competing with each other will try to court ASEAN countries."<sup>74</sup> Similarly, in July 2021, Muhammad Zulfikar Rakhmat, a lecturer at the Universitas Islam Indonesia, wrote, "Indonesia enjoys a vital strategic position in the region, and could benefit as the two superpowers seek to strengthen their presence in Southeast Asia."<sup>75</sup> Thomas Noto Suoneto, an analyst with the Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (an independent Jakarta-based think tank), echoed these views, suggesting that Indonesia should be open to the Biden administration's effort to increase engagement "by boosting its cooperation with the US, mainly in trade and investment."<sup>76</sup>

## Malaysia

**A number of Malaysian SMEs have expressed discomfort with the growing US-China rivalry.** In May 2021, former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad expressed hope that "Biden might be able to reduce the tension and have a dialogue with China," stating, "It cannot become worse than Trump."<sup>77</sup> An April 2021 paper written by Kuik Cheng-Chwee, head of the Centre for Asian Studies at the National University of Malaysia's Institute of Malaysian and International Studies, and Abdul Razak Ahmad, the founding director of Bait Al Amanah (a Kuala Lumpur-based research institute), states, "Increased US engagement in Southeast Asia is welcome but increased US presence subsumed under US-China rivalry is not. Like other ASEAN countries, Malaysia wants Washington to view Southeast Asia in its own right, not as a tool, location, or avenue for big power competition."<sup>78</sup> During a July 2021 event, Ivy Kwek, a former special functions officer for Malaysia's deputy minister of defense, remarked that the "framing of China as a strategic

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<sup>73</sup> Noor, "America is Back."

<sup>74</sup> Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, "ISIS Forum: The Quad and Southeast Asia: Reception, Perception, and Opportunities."

<sup>75</sup> Muhammad Zulfikar Rakhmat and M. Habib Pashya, "Indonesia's Delicate Dance Between China and the US," *The Diplomat*, July 20, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/indonesias-delicate-dance-between-china-and-the-us/>.

<sup>76</sup> Resty Woro Yuniar, "Does the US and Indonesia's resumed strategic dialogue really herald a new era of bilateral relations?," *South China Morning Post*, September 5, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3147452/does-us-and-indonesias-resumed-strategic-dialogue-really-herald>.

<sup>77</sup> Kumar, "'Old' Quad Strategy Risks Provoking China: Malaysia's Mahathir."

<sup>78</sup> Kuik Cheng-Chwee, Abdul Razak Ahmad, and Kor Swee Kheng, "Malaysia-US Relations and the Biden Administration: Mapping Excitement, Managing Expectations," *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2021/46, April 16, 2021, [www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-46-malaysia-us-relations-and-the-biden-administration-mapping-excitement-managing-expectations-by-kuik-cheng-chwee-abdul-razak-ahmad-and-khor-swee-kheng/](http://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-46-malaysia-us-relations-and-the-biden-administration-mapping-excitement-managing-expectations-by-kuik-cheng-chwee-abdul-razak-ahmad-and-khor-swee-kheng/). Kuik Cheng-Chwee is an associate professor and head of the Centre for Asian Studies at the National University of Malaysia, Abdul Razak Ahmad is the founding director of Bait Al Amanah and a member of the Board of Directors of the University of Nottingham in Malaysia; and Khor Swee Kheng is a visiting fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies in Malaysia.

competitor by the US has further[ed] mistrust between the two great powers...led to a series of actions and reactions, [and] at the operational level this has increased the risk of missteps and miscalculation.”<sup>79</sup>

At the same event, Shahrman Lockman, a researcher at Malaysia’s Institute of Strategic and International Studies (a Malaysian government-established think tank that operates autonomously but retains close ties to the government), remarked that he sensed “some degree of impatience growing in the US toward Malaysia.” He stated, “I will not be surprised if people in Congress or various parts of DC say they are not getting bang for their buck, or say ‘why can’t they be more assertive toward China.’” Seemingly trying to lower US expectations, Lockman stated, “Malaysia will always be a...hesitant partner of the United States. It’s never going to be quite all in, unless the security situation changes drastically.” Kuala Lumpur, he suggested, will have trouble deepening military ties with the US “for fear of reprisal,...economic costs especially, that China is able to impose.”<sup>80</sup>

**Some voices in Malaysia, however, have encouraged Kuala Lumpur to engage more robustly with the US and to be more assertive in international affairs.** For example, in a January 2021 article, Tan Sri Munir Majid, chairman of both Malaysia’s ASEAN Business Advisory Council and CARI ASEAN Research and Advocacy (an independent Kuala Lumpur-based think tank), encouraged Kuala Lumpur to “identify which of the global issues are in Malaysian interest and engage the Americans actively in the bilateral relationship as well as in multilateral forums.”<sup>81</sup> On the South China Sea issue, he argued, “We cannot duck clarity by simply saying we do not want to have to choose between China and the US....We cannot countenance Chinese incursions into our exclusive economic zone and...prevaricate, as we have done in the past, by saying it is no big deal for us that China does so.”<sup>82</sup>

## Thailand

**Thai SMEs express concerns with the Biden administration’s competitive approach to China.** During a July 2021 event, Darnp Sukontasap, director of the Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies at Rangsit University and Thailand’s representative to the Governing Council of ASEAN-Institute of Peace and Reconciliation, remarked that he is “concerned about increasing political and military tensions in the region, especially in the South China Sea.”<sup>83</sup> He said that while his concerns are not “the things that undermine the US-Thailand alliance...[they are] hurdles that need to be overcome together.”<sup>84</sup> Others have expressed their concerns with the administration’s competitive approach toward China in more dramatic terms. For example, in an April 2021 article in the *Bangkok Post*, Kavi Chongkittavorn, a senior fellow at the Institute of Security and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University, wrote that “President Joe Biden has created the China imbroglio....Washington has already dragged in its allies to face China’s challenges.”<sup>85</sup> He continued: “Mr. Biden’s views on China have been far more severe than those of the Trump administration. Fresh narratives against China have now been embedded and they rump [*sic*] up the US-China strategic

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<sup>79</sup> Thomas Daniel, “The South China Sea: Challenges, Opportunities, and Prospects for Collaboration,” ISIS Malaysia, 1:24:03, July 6, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9l68QISogck>.

<sup>80</sup> Daniel, “The South China Sea.”

<sup>81</sup> Tan Sri Munir Majid, “Identify Global Issues that are in Malaysia’s Interests,” *New Straits Times*, January 21, 2021, <https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columnists/2021/01/660494/identify-global-issues-are-malaysias-interests>.

<sup>82</sup> Majid, “Identify Global Issues.”

<sup>83</sup> Limaye, “New Opportunities”; “Dr. Darnp Sukontasap,” ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation, [https://asean-aipr.org/team\\_mf/gc-thailand/](https://asean-aipr.org/team_mf/gc-thailand/).

<sup>84</sup> Limaye, “New Opportunities.”

<sup>85</sup> Kavi Chongkittavorn, “US Creates 3 New Entrapments in Asia,” *Bangkok Post*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2102271/us-creates-3-new-entrapments-in-asia>.

competition, which could reach the brink of war. Worse still, this might deepen the ongoing anti-Asian sentiment in the US.”<sup>86</sup>

## The Philippines

**Senior Philippine officials and SMEs hold a range of views—often in opposition to each other—regarding the administration’s competitive China posture.** Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte—who, throughout his term, has adopted a conciliatory posture toward the PRC—is decidedly skeptical of Biden’s embrace of rivalry with China. In February 2021, Duterte expressed concern with the prospect of the Philippines becoming entrapped in a US-China conflict, stating that “when the war breaks out, we all pay.”<sup>87</sup> Regarding the Visiting Forces Agreement with the US (which Duterte reinstated in July 2021), he remarked, “We do not like it because we want to remain neutral...but the exigency of the moment requires their [US troops] presence here, [and] I am okay with that.” Also in February 2021, Jose Manuel Romualdez, the Philippines ambassador to the US, stated, “I’m afraid that we have to now be more circumspect in the way we handle our relationship with both countries. We don’t want to be caught in the middle.”<sup>88</sup>

**Much of the country, however, including the Philippine national security establishment, does not support Duterte’s approach to China and is supportive of the Biden administration’s competitive posture.** Julio Amador III, the former deputy director-general of the Philippine Foreign Service Institute and current interim president of the Foundation for the National Interest, conducted a survey of 600 individuals in the Philippine national security community. According to the survey, support for Duterte’s policies of building ties with China and Russia—which he called “unorthodox security partners”—remains at “an all-time low.”<sup>89</sup> Illustrative of how much of the Philippines’ national security community supports the Biden administration’s competitive approach to China, promptly following the announcement of the AUKUS partnership, the Philippine foreign secretary, Teodoro L. Locsin, Jr., issued a statement supportive of the initiative. Locsin stated, “There is an imbalance in the forces available to the ASEAN member states, with the main balancer more than half a world away. The enhancement of a near abroad ally’s ability to project power should restore and keep the balance rather than destabilize it.”<sup>90</sup>

SMEs outside the administration also express support for Washington’s competitive approach to China. According to Richard Heydarian, a leading commentator in the Philippine media, many of Duterte’s critics in the Philippines were “worried about the prospect of a more China-friendly administration in the [Biden] White House. Many Filipinos across the ideological spectrum have welcomed the Trump administration’s tough stance on China, including regularized freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea as well as expanded Foreign Military Financing (FMF) to allies such as the Philippines.”<sup>91</sup> Similarly, Renato Cruz De Castro, a professor at De La Salle University, viewed the Biden administration’s focus on alliances

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<sup>86</sup> Chongkittavorn, “US Creates 3 New Entrapments in Asia.”

<sup>87</sup> Neil Jerome Morales and Karen Lema, “Philippines Says May Benefit from any Pivot to Asia by Biden Administration,” Reuters, January 28, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-usa-china/philippines-says-may-benefit-from-any-pivot-to-asia-by-biden-administration-idUSKBN29Y03Y>.

<sup>88</sup> Morales and Lema, “Philippines Says May Benefit from any Pivot to Asia by Biden Administration.”

<sup>89</sup> ISIS Malaysia, “ISIS Forum: The Quad and Southeast Asia.”

<sup>90</sup> Joyce Ann L. Rocamora, “Australia’s Security Pact with US, UK to Benefit SEA: Locsin,” Philippine News Agency, September 21, 2021, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1154154>.

<sup>91</sup> Richard Javad Heydarian, “South China Sea: A Biden-Duterte Reset,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, January 8, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/south-china-sea-a-biden-duterte-reset/>.

and “efforts to constrain China’s expansion in the Indo-Pacific,” as providing “opportunities” for the US and Philippines “to strengthen the defense relationship.”<sup>92</sup>

## Singapore

**Singaporean officials and SMEs expressed concern with the administration’s competitive China policy.** In August 2021, Singapore’s prime minister Lee Hsien Loong characterized the Biden administration’s competitive posture vis-à-vis China as “unfortunately” one of continuity with the Trump administration.<sup>93</sup> He stated, “Many countries still hope that the deterioration in the relationship can be checked. Because many US friends and allies wish to preserve their extensive ties with both powers. No good outcome can arise from a conflict. It is vital for the US and China to strive to engage each other, to head off a clash which would be disastrous for both sides, and the world.” Lee hoped that the US would “play a major role in fostering an inclusive, rules-based world order.”<sup>94</sup>

Other senior Singaporean officials have sounded similar notes of caution on the administration’s tough China policy. Tommy Koh, an ambassador at large for Singapore’s foreign ministry, wrote, “The Biden administration has said that it intends to unite the democratic countries against China. I don’t think this is an achievable objective....There are very few countries in Asia, democratic or otherwise, who are willing to join a US-led coalition against China.”<sup>95</sup> In an August 2021 article in the *Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, Bilahari Kausikan maintained that, confronted with an increasingly intense US-China competition, “ambivalence...infuses the way third countries regard the two. No one wants to make an enemy of either China or the US; no one can do without having a relationship with both; and everyone has some concerns about the two.”<sup>96</sup>

## Vietnam

**Relative to their ASEAN peers, Vietnamese SMEs express a greater degree of comfort with the administration’s competitive approach toward China.** Indeed, some Vietnamese analysts expressed anxiety that Biden might alter Trump’s competitive approach, a disposition viewed as beneficial to Vietnam.<sup>97</sup> In March 2021, Nguyen Huu Tuc, of IDIR, anticipated that the administration would keep the free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, which he assessed was “compatible with the strategic interests of Vietnam.”<sup>98</sup> Thuy T. Do, of Vietnam’s Diplomatic Academy, remarked in March 2021 that the Biden administration’s *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* appeared favorable to Vietnamese interests

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<sup>92</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro and Brad Glosserman, “The Philippine-US Alliance and the Biden Administration: Challenges and Opportunities,” *PacNet #64*, Pacific Forum, <https://pacforum.org/publication/pacnet-64-the-philippine-us-alliance-and-the-biden-administration-challenges-and-opportunities>.

<sup>93</sup> “PM Lee Hsien Loong at the Aspen Security Forum,” Singapore Prime Minister’s Office, August 3, 2021, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-at-the-Aspen-Security-Forum>.

<sup>94</sup> “PM Lee Hsien Loong at the Aspen Security Forum.”

<sup>95</sup> Koh, “The Biden Administration.”

<sup>96</sup> Bilahari Kausikan, “Can America Regain Global Leadership? A View from Singapore,” *The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, August 2021, <https://jstribune.com/us-policy-biden-asia-china/>.

<sup>97</sup> Lê Hồng Hiệp, “Prospects of Vietnamese-American Relations under President Biden [Triển vọng quan hệ Việt – Mỹ dưới thời Tổng thống Biden],” Vietnam Institute of Americas Studies, December 12, 2020, [http://vienchaumy.vass.gov.vn/noidung/tintuc/Lists/Tintucsukien/View\\_Detail.aspx?ItemID=97](http://vienchaumy.vass.gov.vn/noidung/tintuc/Lists/Tintucsukien/View_Detail.aspx?ItemID=97).

<sup>98</sup> Nguyen, “Is Vietnam open to Washington’s Indo-Pacific strategy?”; “Major Research Institutes,” Ministry of National Defence, Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

and that the administration's policies have been "quite positive for...[the] relationship between the US and ASEAN as a whole and the US and Vietnam in particular."<sup>99</sup>

Nonetheless, Vietnamese SMEs have expressed hopes similar to those of their ASEAN counterparts that the Biden administration will manage competition with China in a more stabilizing manner and not compel ASEAN states to choose sides. For example, Pham Quang Vinh, a former deputy foreign minister and former ambassador to the US, expressed optimism that US-China competition would "be managed in a more predictable way under Biden," stating that it "would be a relief for Southeast Asia."<sup>100</sup> Nguyen Huu Tuc voiced concern that "Washington will entice Vietnam into the ranks of its anti-China coalition, forcing Vietnam to risk taking sides." And because "neither Vietnam nor its neighbors are interested in taking sides,...Vietnam must be cautious and avoid officially participating in Washington's FOIP—doing so might violate Hanoi's core principle of not aligning with one country against the other." He suggested instead that Hanoi unofficially engage with the US and its partners to advance regional stability.<sup>101</sup> Pham Quang Vinh also expressed the concern that greater "consultation with US allies and partners...may entail...greater pressure on these countries to take sides with Washington."<sup>102</sup>

## Conclusion

Understanding US partners' and allies' perceptions of the Biden administration's Asia policy should help inform US efforts to deepen partner relations and advance US interests across the Indo-Pacific. Given the variation in their perceptions—both across and within partner states—the findings outlined above may help US officials tailor their engagement with individual partners in ways that maximize effectiveness. For example, because a number of Southeast Asian officials and analysts express reluctance to deepen defense ties with the US and the Quad, centering engagement around non-defense issues—for example, global health, infrastructure investment, and climate change—may be a particularly productive way of cultivating relationships with such states. In this respect, regional responses to the September 2021 Quad Leaders' Summit, which announced initiatives in exactly these areas, warrant close attention.<sup>103</sup> It may take quite some time to see whether increasing cooperation in non-defense areas eventually translates to a greater willingness to strengthen defense ties with the US, but it will be a key issue to watch.

Administration officials will also want to be wary of accommodating every concern expressed by Southeast Asian officials and analysts. Given regional fears of antagonizing China, even if Washington modulated central elements of US policy, it might not result in an increased willingness among Southeast Asian partners to strengthen defense ties. Furthermore, accommodating Southeast Asian concerns in this regard could risk generating new, or exacerbating existing, concerns in other partner states, either in the Quad or among US allies outside the region. For example, abandoning or deprioritizing US efforts to promote democracy and human rights in the region may work at cross-purposes with Washington's efforts to strengthen its core treaty-alliances around the world, including with Japan and Australia, to address the China challenge.

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<sup>99</sup> Noor, "America is Back."

<sup>100</sup> Vannarith et al., "Roundtable: 'America is Back,'" p. 8.

<sup>101</sup> Nguyen, "Is Vietnam open to Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy?"

<sup>102</sup> Vannarith et al., "Roundtable: 'America is Back,'" p. 8.

<sup>103</sup> The White House, "Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders' Summit," September 24, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/fact-sheet-quad-leaders-summit/>.



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