

NATO Return to Asia Is a Threat to ASEAN and Continent

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Centrality constitutes the foundation of the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Charter. The concept guides the way for the bloc to play a [proactive](#) role as the main driving force for its relations and cooperation with non-members and encourages it to become the dominant regional platform to overcome challenges and engage with external partners.

The US President Joe Biden's "Indo-Pacific Strategy" claims to endorse the ASEAN [centrality](#) and support its efforts to deliver sustainable solutions to the region's most pressing challenges; it actually aimed to undercut the bloc's core [objective](#) by building the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) as a "[premiere regional grouping](#)" and bringing together Asia-Pacific allies through the AUKUS (Australia, the UK and the US), a trilateral security pact, which received a strong [renunciation](#) from Indonesia and Malaysia.

These institutional initiatives as well as the US [Indo-Pacific Economic Framework](#) (IPEF) – which didn't mention ASEAN centrality once – [contradicted](#) America's commitment to ASEAN and its centrality. The [exclusion](#) of Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos from the IPEF further cast doubts within the alliance about Biden's seriousness to the grouping's unity.

Unsurprisingly, ASEAN's response to the Quad, a [hotbed](#) of the US strategic rivalry with China, has been muted for its tendency to challenge the alliance's centrality and securitize the region by creating an "[Asian NATO](#)." The IPEF isn't received well within the region either where people of the major economies hold negative views about the initiative or are uncertain the initiative will lend a positive impact on the region ([Q15](#)).

People in ASEAN countries remain "ambivalent" in cooperating with mini-lateral alliances such as the Quad. The [institutional competition](#) between the Quad and ASEAN is another factor that urges the regional states to draw [closer](#) to China in an attempt to hedge against the consequences of Washington's strategic rivalry with Beijing.

As ASEAN centrality barricades the success of the Biden administration's dangerous goals, it has been forcing regional states into taking sides with the US against China as it did to the [neutralist](#) countries, which nevertheless resisted the pressure and maintained their neutrality, during the Cold War. In order to prevail upon the political and economic union, America's military presence is being promoted to gain its support for the US subversive activities such as a "[free and open Indo-Pacific \(FOIP\)](#)."

Some Quad diplomats are also striving to [link](#) the "ASEAN Framework of the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)" with the "FOIP." But the use of the term "Indo-Pacific" by the bloc doesn't mean the alliance is pursuing institutional [bandwagoning](#) with the Quad or supports its unruly vision. The AOIP rather [responds](#) to the four-nation alliance's presence in the region and reaffirms ASEAN's [common interest](#) to maintain peace, stability and prosperity in Southeast Asia and the wider region.

China's endorsement of several key elements, including [independence](#), openness, development and cooperation, has fostered an integrated approach to regional growth and stability in 2022. This concerted effort has propelled bilateral [trade](#) to nearly \$1 trillion and with the launch of the third version of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (ACFTA 3.0), the cooperation is set to witness further advancements, benefitting the people across both regions.

Already 90% of the goods traded between China and ASEAN get zero tariff treatment. Since the ACFTA 3.0 will further reduce duties and enhance trade and investment liberalization and facilitation, it is expected to add a strong impetus to high-quality regional development including in digital economy and green transformation and complements the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership for open and inclusive regional growth. The recent ASEAN summit has also appreciated the progress made on the ongoing ACFTA 3.0 [Upgrade](#) negotiations.

In a number of meetings held so far this year, China and ASEAN states have agreed to jointly uphold [multilateralism](#), deepen economic engagement, support ASEAN neutrality and inclusiveness, and reject the Cold War mentality and bloc confrontation. During these discussions, diplomats emphasized the regional countries didn't want a conflict between China and the US and sought to maintain a strong economic relationship with Beijing and others.

Yet once the US failed to rally support from the region for its "Indo-Pacific strategy" and [stingy](#) IPEF that denies market access to Southeast Asia, it is endeavoring to [jeopardize](#) ASEAN centrality and foment divisions within the alliance. These sorts of coercive tactics and aggressive regional policies risk the stability of Asia-Pacific as well as have also led to a decline in the US [influence](#) and credibility in the region.

ASEAN strictly practices a policy of non-intervention. In its foundational document (the 1976 Bangkok Declaration), the alliance showed determination to safeguard regional stability and security from [external interference](#). It was further solidified through [Article 2](#) of the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation which embodied universal principles including mutual respect for independence and every country's right to lead its existence free from external interference, subversion and coercion. It continues to manage its security from outside [interference](#).

But NATO intrusion in Asia-Pacific, after the buildup of the Quad and the AUKUS, poses hard

challenges to these fundamental tenets, putting ASEAN centrality in a chimera and undermining regional peace and prosperity. The opening of the so-called defensive alliance's liaison office in Japan represents more intense threats NATO is bringing to the region with possible spillover effects in the entire continent.

The regional countries cannot be swindled by the US assurances that it isn't trying to [create](#) NATO in Asia-Pacific and the AUKUS is just a [technology-transferring arrangement](#), not a security alliance. The Southeast Asian countries had long realized the AUKUS was part of a much bigger [dynamic](#), the Quad; they remain [concerned](#) about regional security as NATO edges closer to them and the US continues making efforts to [militarize](#) the region.

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