

Indo-Pacific Economic Framework threatens ASEAN's centrality

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The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), which includes a dozen Indo-Pacific countries and is designed to provide a counterweight to Chinese economic clout in the region, was launched by US President Joe Biden on May 23, 2022.

Australia, Brunei, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam are among the countries that participated in the launch. At the launch event in Tokyo, Biden was joined in person by Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as well as virtually by the others.

The IPEF was attended by seven ASEAN members, with the exception of Cambodia, which is chairing ASEAN this year, Lao PDR, and Myanmar, which is still in crisis. The three ASEAN countries that were excluded from the US's IPEF have a low economic status and were accused of having close relations with the Chinese Government.

It should be noticed that the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is a free trade agreement (FTA) between the ten member states of ASEAN and its five FTA partners (Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand and Republic of Korea). ASEAN's existing groups and partners should be valued. Praying for ASEAN solidarity when it comes to national benefits, on the other hand, is just a pipe dream.

The US Embassy in Cambodia's website and Facebook page have repeatedly stated that the US is working to improve ASEAN's centrality and stands with the Cambodian people, but the US government's recent announcement of the IPEF, appears to be yet another strategy to undermine ASEAN's Centrality. How can the US claim to be working to strengthen ASEAN's centrality while paying attention to some ASEAN members and ignoring others? This is a kind of disbanding of a group, not a show of solidarity.

President Biden announced over \$150 million in initiatives on May 13, 2022, with the goal of mobilizing billions more in private financing to deepen US-ASEAN relations, strengthen ASEAN centrality, and expand common capacity to achieve



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shared goals, but then he announced the IPEF, with only seven ASEAN members participating, not all ten ASEAN countries. It seems like the US abandoned the three countries and then accuse those countries to be too close to China.

Through the previous activities of the US government, it seems like the US only works with beneficial partners who can provide significant trade exchange and geopolitical competition against China or Russia; the US does not pay honest attention to those who may require their assistance, instead ignoring them and accusing them of being too close to their competitors.

Since the US is implementing a complicated strategy in ASEAN countries right now, ASEAN member states, particularly small countries, must be smart and flexible in maintaining good relations with the US, because the US government treats changes in foreign policy as a part of the democratic system, whereas ASEAN countries would interpret those changes as a kind of dishonest action with their alliances.

Even during the same administration, differences in US foreign policy occurred frequently. People may hear the US government speak about human rights, freedom of expression, and adherence to the rule of law in relation to developing countries or countries that provide the least benefits to the US; however, the US will not speak about human rights or democracy in relation to countries that provide benefits such as trade or geopolitical competition. There are ASEAN countries with worse human rights records that

never hold elections but become close allies of the US administration. It appears that actions speak louder than words.

When discussing Asia and the Indo-Pacific, US President Joe Biden's administration has repeatedly mentioned the concept of "ASEAN Centrality." From senior officials' visits to Southeast Asian countries to Biden's attendance at the 2022 U.S.-ASEAN summit, the United States has repeatedly stated that it recognizes and respects ASEAN's central role, and that it will firmly uphold the principle of "ASEAN Centrality." Furthermore, the current administration has pledged to include ASEAN's central role in its vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). But the latest announcement of the IPEF of the US Government, looks like the US does not know how many ASEAN countries are in the association, and it also seems like the US could not differentiate between economics and politics but exude elements of prejudgment.

The IPEF is a middle ground for Biden's plans to gain more control over economic flows in the Indo-Pacific, particularly with China at the heart of the region's supply chains. As a non-trade agreement entry into Asia, Biden would not be required to seek congressional approval, avoiding a ratification battle at home.

If the US truly wants to help and support ASEAN's centrality, it should encourage all ten ASEAN countries to participate in the IPEF, not just the seven, because ASEAN requires consensus to make any decision. That way, countries with low economic status will have a

better chance to sit near the developed countries and learn from those countries, rather than pushing them away and accusing them of being friendly to China.

There are some worries that the measure of the US Government which just announced the IPEF, are more symbolic than practical since each president of the US Government is always changing their policy or their contract and there is something that the US is implementing differently from their words, for example, the amount of money the US has promised to invest in its relationship with ASEAN: Whether the amount is \$102 million, as announced last year, or \$150 million, as announced just a few days ago, it is insufficient, especially in comparison to China's \$1.5 billion aid pledge to ASEAN and the US' own \$40 billion in aid to Ukraine.

Overall, it is clear that the US is working to decentralize ASEAN rather than unite it, as the US has always wanted to bring many initiatives into ASEAN, such as Aukus, Quad, PTT, and now the IPEF. Instead of whining about being left out of the IPEF, the three ASEAN countries should work hard to supplement their needs and try to improve their capacities in terms of human resource development, technology, internal production capacity, and military power, before exploring their own precious resources. It's also crucial to be adaptable and aware of your friends and benefits. ■

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