

# SEEKING TO COUNTER CHINA, BIDEN HOSTS ASEAN LEADERS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: South-East Asia, ASEAN and India

U.S. President Joe Biden will host leaders and top officials of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in Washington DC on Thursday and Friday, as the U.S. remains focussed on the Russia-Ukraine war and grapples with China's influence in the Pacific. The ASEAN "special summit" was postponed from the end of March and comes days before Mr. Biden's first trip to Asia as President.

ASEAN member country Myanmar, whose junta overthrew the government in a coup on February 1 last year, will not be represented at the summit.

The U.S. had wanted a 'non-political' representative of Myanmar to attend the meetings. There will be an "empty chair" at the summit to reflect the leaders' "dissatisfaction with what's taken place" in the country, a senior U.S. administration official, who did not want to be named, told reporters on a briefing call on Wednesday.

ASEAN's 'Five Point Consensus' to end the turmoil in Myanmar has not progressed since it was released in April last year. In addition to discussing Myanmar, leaders are also expected to discuss Ukraine as well as regional issues.

The members of ASEAN are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

With the administration of former U.S. President Donald Trump pulling the U.S. out of what was then called the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP, now called the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the TPP, or CPTPP) and the U.S. not joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade agreement, of which China is a part, Washington ceded ground to Beijing in the ASEAN region, especially as far as economics is concerned.

"...Clearly, the Indo-Pacific is a broad region, and too often we speak a lot about Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, and India. But it's equally important to focus on the Pacific, and you will be seeing indications of that going forward," the official told reporters on Wednesday.

## Economic plan

Mr. Biden is expected to discuss his administration's economic plan for the region — the Indo Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) during this week's summit.

The framework — which will structure cooperation across several pillars from infrastructure and supply chains to taxation — is likely to be formally unveiled during Mr. Biden's visit to Asia later in May.

The President will travel to South Korea for bilateral talks with new South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and then on to Japan for a Quad leaders' summit with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

Mr. Modi is considering India's participation in the IPEF, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had said during her visit to Washington DC in April.

During their visit to Washington, ASEAN representatives will meet with U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi and members of both parties for a working lunch. They will also have meetings on Thursday with business leaders \_ and be joined by U.S. officials including Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo and U.S Trade Representative Katherine Tai \_ to discuss challenges, such as those related to technology, post-COVID-19 recovery, energy and climate, the administration official said on Wednesday.

Mr. Biden will also have “quick, private time” with each of the leaders, apart from hosting a dinner for them as a group, the official said. Vice-President Kamala Harris and Secretary of State Antony Blinken will also hold meetings with officials.

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