



[U.S. Secretary of State Blinken Embarks on His First Multi-Stop Trip to Southeast Asia as America's Top Diplomat](#)

This week, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken took his first official diplomatic trip to Southeast Asia, which included stops in Indonesia and Malaysia. The visit to the region comes at a time of increasing American-Chinese competition and rising tensions. Blinken has been critical of China's aggression in the South China Sea, expressing that its behavior there is a growing concern and a threat to more than \$3 trillion in annual trade which flows through the area. The overall trip by Secretary of State Blinken is part of the Biden administration's wider Indo-Pacific strategy that is aimed at expanding economic and security cooperation with Southeast Asian nations, and strengthening ties between the United States and its major allies there such as Indonesia, Australia, India, and Japan. Analysts have also noted its geopolitical significance as it pertains to the United States making attempts to counter China's influence in the region. When a reporter traveling with the State Department tested positive for COVID-19 in Malaysia, the remainder of Blinken's tour through Southeast Asia was unfortunately cut short and prompted him to return to the United States sooner than originally planned.

Secretary Blinken's first stop was in Indonesia where he appealed to allies and partners in the region to defend the rules-based order. This is a clear reference to claims that China will engage with multilateral institutions only to the point that it receives a benefit, ignoring conditions of engagement which the rest of the international community adheres to. Blinken praised Indonesia for its strong commitment to the rules-based international order and also acknowledged it is the world's third-largest democracy. He met with Indonesia's president, Joko Widodo, and the country's foreign minister, Retno Marsudi, stated that the U.S. had made it very clear that it values its vital bilateral partnership.

Mr. Blinken's trip is being conducted as part of the United States' expressed commitment to a free and open Southeast Asia – one of the main components of the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy. The economic framework of this strategy involves answering the core demands of Southeast Asian countries for the U.S. to invest more substantially in the region as a means of bolstering it to be able to resist potential Chinese coercion. An official with the U.S. State Department has said that the United States is prepared to increase its engagement with the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to new heights. This aligns with President Biden's public commitment to further deepen cooperation with ASEAN.

Also within this strategy is the informal geopolitical alliance between the United States, India, Australia, and Japan, known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). President Biden met virtually with leaders from these countries last week in the first ever leaders' summit of the informal alliance. The Quad has recently conducted naval exercises together and is set to become a much larger part of the regional security architecture. For the last decade, this informal alliance has been of limited consequence because of concerns by India that its participation would provoke China. Its greater participation now comes at a time that it is reevaluating its position in the power balance in the region. China, for its part, has been unhappy with the existence of the Quad, and the latest developments have only served to increase its sentiment that the United States is encircling it.