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Panel 4 – ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific

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FEATURING
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Gregory Poling: All right, everybody. Thank you so much for hanging in there. We are almost at the end of our first live, real, in-person two-day conference, and I’m pretty happy. We’ve made it. We were – we were the guinea pigs for this hybrid conferencing. (Laughter.) That is our new normal, I suppose.

So far, most of the conversation has been around issues of economics, development, public health, and now we’re going to talk about all of the messy stuff – the politics, the geopolitics, the strategy – which is why we’ve framed this panel as being ASEAN and the Quad in the free and open Indo-Pacific. And I think what we’re trying to get at here is this tension that I think we’re trying to paint as complementary – and maybe it is – but there’s clearly a rhetorical tension here between a longstanding commitment by the U.S. and allies to ASEAN’s neutrality and all of these new acronyms we’re getting, Quad and AUKUS and whatnot.

And so we’re going to hear from three great panelists today. We’ll try to – I’ll try to keep my role as moderator limited to just maybe asking a follow-up question or two and then turn to the audience just like we have so far.

So first we’re going to hear from Paul Myler – Ambassador Paul Myler, who is the deputy chief of mission at the Embassy to Australia just across the street there.

Then we’ll hear from my good friend Elina Noor, who is the director for political and security affairs – is that right, is it political-security?

Elina Noor: Yeah.

Mr. Poling: OK. At – (laughs) – the Asia Society Policy Institute, also going to be my cohost on a newly launched podcast next week called “Southeast Asia Radio.” So you should all tune in next Thursday for the first episode.

And finally, my other friend Zack Cooper down there, who is over at the American Enterprise Institute and the German Marshall Fund and has his own fancy podcast at War on the Rocks called “Net Assessment,” which you can listen to if you finish our podcast – (laughter) – on Thursday. And so, with that, why don’t I turn over to Paul first. Paul, you don’t have a podcast, do you?

Paul Myler: I don’t have a podcast. (Laughter.)
Mr. Poling: Paul’s working on a podcast. (Laughter.) Let’s start over here.

Mr. Myler: Hey, thanks, Greg. And thanks for convening us. It’s great to be back in person. I haven’t quite got used to the fact that I don’t have my script up on one screen next to my webcam and everything else, so, you know, we’ll see how we go here.

I’ll just make some opening comments in terms of Australia in the Indo-Pacific. The fortunes of Australia and Australians have been inextricably linked to the Indo-Pacific, and successful – successive Australian governments have sought to anchor our foreign policy in our region. The reasons and rationale for that have changed over time, but the centrality and consistence of our focus hasn’t. We were the first country to be invited to become a dialogue partner for ASEAN in 1974, and nearly 50 years later in 2021 we became the first country to agree a comprehensive strategic partnership with ASEAN. We have invested $154 million in our partnership with ASEAN to address COVID recovery, support implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, on top a landmark $500 million package of new economic development and security measures in Southeast Asia. We’ve reinvigorated the Quad partnership, as you mentioned, with a positive, practical agenda to support an open and inclusive and resilient Indo-Pacific. And you know, people have seen our cooperation in delivering vaccines, setting standards for critical and emerging tech, enhancing clean-energy innovation, boosting supply chain resilience.

I think the reality, as we’ve – as you pointed to, the world has entered a period of profound strategic challenge and disruption with a lot of pressure on rules, norms, and institutions. Last month, Quad leaders met to discuss the conflict in Ukraine and assess its implications for regional stability in the Indo-Pacific. Leaders were united in their collective commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific where smaller states do not need to live in fear of more powerful ones. I think the meeting – we hope the meeting sent a powerful signal to our region and to the world that the Quad stands together to uphold the values and principles of our rules-based international order. Of course, Quad partners recognize that the onus is on us to deliver and to build the region’s trust in the grouping.

Turning to ASEAN and its role in the Indo-Pacific, you know, from a necessarily Australian perspective, since World War II, obviously, we’ve seen and been part of a remarkable transformation in our region characterized by optimism, prosperity, and openness. ASEAN sits at the – at the heart of the region’s architecture. Its habits of cooperation have earned it the role of convener for the wider Indo-Pacific. We don’t see any challenge to that.

Like Australia, our Southeast Asian partners are grappling with the impacts of geostrategic competition and seeking a settling point in that competition.
that does not diminish their voice or their agency in the region. We all find strategic competition uncomfortable, but in Australia’s view it’s vital we compete to preserve the liberal international order that has underpinned decades of stability and prosperity in the region.

ASEAN countries are also navigating the changing dynamics in their own bilateral relationships, managing a more assertive China, and looking to build positive connections with the Biden administration. And we, certainly, against this backdrop are supporting regional engagement, additional likeminded engagement bringing in partners from Europe and the like to support a stable and prosperous neighborhood we need.

The Australian prime minister put it quite well, I think, recently: Australia supports ASEAN centrality, but also ASEAN cohesion and ASEAN agency. Our support for the East Asian Summit, for ASEAN’s own Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, and our New Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with ASEAN are evidence of our commitment to enhance regional dialogue grounded in ASEAN centrality. We’re also ensuring our work in other forums such as the Quad sends a positive signal to ASEAN countries of our support for an open, sovereign, inclusive, resilient region, as well as our commitment to delivering practical cooperation.

We continue to advocate for likeminded partners to strengthen their engagement in the region. Obviously, the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy aligns really well with Australia’s priorities and vision for the region, and recognizes both the importance of partnerships and the importance of centrality of ASEAN in realizing that outcome. And we’re certainly keen to work closely with them on their – on operationalizing the Indo-Pacific Strategy and on crystalizing the Indo-Pacific economic framework.

I might just leave it there and I can be a bit more provocative in question and answer if people have some.

Mr. Poling: Thank you. That’s a promise. (Laughter.)

Elina, let me – let me turn to you. Paul says that ASEAN’s still central and has agency and is cohesive. What do you think?

Mr. Myler: Wait a minute. (Laughter.) I said our objectives were – (laughter) – for ASEAN to be central, have agency, and be cohesive. (Laughs.)

Ms. Noor: Here’s where the provocative bit comes in, right? (Laughter.)

Well, thanks, Greg, and CSIS, and USABC for having me on this panel. I think I’m also trying to get used to being in a hybrid panel, and so if I’m looking
down at my phone it’s because I’m looking at my notes not because – (laughter) – I’m looking at messages or anything else. But let me perhaps offer three thoughts to kick off.

I’m going to zoom out a little with my first thought and suggest that, although Southeast Asia is starting to open up to international travel/international business, the focus is still very much on COVID and COVID-related economic recovery. And I think those of us who sit in Washington and in the United States often forget that there’s still a pandemic around the world and not everyone has recovered at the same speed that we have in the United States. And those of us who’ve traveled to Southeast Asia very recently, I think, is reminded of this very starkly with all the mask using even out in public in the open air, some distancing maybe, but definitely a very different landscape to what we’re used to here.

And I say this because even while we occupy ourselves with thoughts of, you know, grand strategery and competition and rivalry and all that, the realities on the ground are really quite different in Southeast Asia, certainly for the governments and capitals of Southeast Asia but even more so for the people of Southeast Asia. And we all know politics is local, as we in the United States here gear up for our congressional elections in November. And the very different realities on the ground, obviously, affect government capacity and they affect government priorities as well. So that’s something to bear in mind as we think about reengaging with the rest of the world, whether you are sitting in Washington or in Hanoi or Puchajai (ph) or Singapore.

The second point I would make is that I think Southeast Asia is very heartened by assurances of ASEAN centrality, unity, and agency, all these good, positive feelings that Paul mentioned. It’s something that we in Southeast Asia also like to affirm to ourselves. Now, what we haven’t quite worked out in Southeast Asia is what all of those things mean in practice. And I think the manifestation of these plurilaterals – smaller arrangements, you know, minilaterals and all that – like the Quad, like AUKUS have, obviously, given some concern to some capitals in Southeast Asia, but I think the assurances that have been made are still very welcomed. Particularly with the crisis going on in Myanmar now, I think it’s very much appreciated in Southeast Asia that other countries have sort of given the leadership role to ASEAN. And you know, we can have a debate about how effective ASEAN has been with regards to Myanmar. But also the concretization of the Quad agenda with somewhat more, I think, less controversial agenda items like climate change, like public health diplomacy, like cyber and other emerging technologies, that’s something that has been welcomed at different levels by Southeast Asian countries. It puts them in less of a tight spot than I think what was originally expected.
That said, I think with prevailing U.S.-China fissures, with what’s going on in Ukraine, that maneuvering space is likely to become a lot smaller for Southeast Asian states, at least in the near term. And you see this already with some of the diplomatic engagement campaigns that have been going on in Southeast Asia to get Southeast Asian capitals to either come out strongly and support Ukraine or condemn Russia in a more overt way, and I don’t know that this is as appreciated in Southeast Asian capitals. What you saw, I think, at the U.N. General Assembly vote was this willingness to deplore Russian aggression in a multilateral setting, but if you compel Southeast Asian countries to take a stand in a more unilateral fashion you’re probably going to be disappointed.

My final point is what does ASEAN unity, ASEAN centrality, ASEAN agency mean for ASEAN itself? What does it mean for ASEAN as a regional grouping? What does it mean for all the 10 member states of Southeast Asia of ASEAN? And these are two very different considerations, right?

What we’re seeing with AUKUS – and there was a really lengthy and substantial fact sheet that was released by the White House yesterday on AUKUS. What was is, 17 working groups that have already been convened multiple times? I think that’s really impressive, but the focus of AUKUS seems to be very defense-forward. And the implications of that in the medium to long term are things that Southeast Asian capitals will have to grapple with because, again, it will reduce, I think, the maneuvering space for diplomacy amongst Southeast Asian capitals.

So let me stop there, and look forward to hearing from Zack and having a conversation.

Mr. Poling: Thank you so much, Elina.

So, Zack, given that as much as I and everyone in the room deeply loves ASEAN, it is a bundle of contradictions. What does that mean for U.S. strategy in the region?

Zack Cooper: Well, first, thank you, Greg, for hosting this important conference. You’ve had so many great speakers the last few days. And thank you, Ted, also to USABC, for doing this.

So, look, I think there’s a tension here that we have to acknowledge, which is a central tension in U.S. strategy in Asia, which is between the Quad and ASEAN. And we can talk as much as we like about how the Quad respects ASEAN centrality, but look, if you think about what’s happened in, let’s say, the last five years across Democratic and Republican administrations here in the United States, where has the United States put most of its effort? It’s into things like the Quad and AUKUS, right? That’s, you know, we get a 17-page statement but we still can’t get the U.S.-ASEAN special summit to actually
happen, and we have been talking about this for almost a year and a half at this point.

So I think we have to acknowledge that this is a real tension now, and in some ways it’s a tension between going for more depth in terms of the coalitions we’re trying to build in Asia, right – working with the countries that are willing to do the most the fastest, right; Japan, Australia, sometimes India, right, sometimes the United Kingdom and others – or do we try and broaden out that group of countries that we’re working so closely with. And I think what we have seen is that actually broadening is really hard. It’s hard for a lot of reasons, right? You know, coups certainly have made the Biden administration’s job much more difficult. But I think at the end of the day there is a little bit of a tension here and it’s probably unavoidable.

And my personal view is that we have probably underinvested in Southeast Asia. Which is not to say that we’re overinvested in Australia and Japan – those are critical partners, right – but that at the end of the day, if you think in the long term about the countries that the United States can do a lot more with than it’s already doing, I think a lot of those countries are in Southeast Asia. So I do think there’s a little bit of a tension, if nothing else just because of prioritization, right?

So the president’s going to have to decide where does he go on this trip he’s taking in the next few months, and that’s going to be an important signal, right? Does he go to the countries with which the United States has its closest alliance relationships – Japan, Korea, Australia? Or does he do a stop through in Southeast Asia? I think Southeast Asians will be watching that, right? Whether we get a U.S.-ASEAN special summit finally on the books, Southeast Asian friends will be watching that, right? Whether the president goes – hopefully, he will – to the East Asia Summit and APEC and the ASEAN meeting in the fall, that’s going to, again, be extremely important.

So I think there is a little bit of a tension here that we have to acknowledge. Even if – even if, you know, we can do both, there’s a little bit of prioritization between the two.

And then the I think the other question is, frankly, can the U.S. deliver, right? We’ve talked a lot, and this is not just a Biden administration thing. This was true in the Trump administration and, frankly, back in the Obama administration as well. We’ve talked a lot about what the U.S. was going to do in the region, but often the U.S. talks more, in my view, than it actually delivers, right? And I think we heard a little bit of this this morning with the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, of which I’m quite hopeful but I think we have to acknowledge that some of what Senator Cornyn said is fair, right, that what the region wants is probably a bit more than IPEF, right? What the
region wants is some degree of trade liberalization, and that’s not what the United States is offering.

And so I think this is going to be a central tension, that, you know, as Paul said, right, the Indo-Pacific Strategy that the White House put out I think is a great document. You know, what it says sounds wonderful. It’s easy for friends in Asia to sign onboard with most of it. I think the question they’re asking isn’t are these the right objectives, it’s can the U.S. actually deliver, right? Can the Congress deliver? Can administrations of both parties deliver over the long term? And I think on that question, you know, to be very honest, it’s still a bit unsure.

And it’s great that we have leaders like Kurt Campbell and folks in the Cabinet departments that are working so hard to push on these issues, and certainly Secretary Raimondo, I think, has been a real leader on the economic side. But I think now the challenge for the Biden team is to say, look, we’ve set forth this strategy and now we’re going to put it in place. And so I think that’s where we find ourselves at the moment.

Mr. Poling: Thanks, Zack.

So, Paul, I’ll come to you first to respond. I want to highlight the – one of the points made here, which is there is – a big part of the tension in, I think, U.S. strategy is between political and security on the one hand and our economic engagement on the other. And I don’t know what’s going to come out of a U.S.-ASEAN special summit or when U.S. officials are out in the region for the ARF or the ASEAN leaders meeting in the fall, but I guarantee you that it’s going to be a whole bunch of acronyms related to investment and trade and energy, and most of them are going to be new names for projects that we promoted during the Obama administration or even the Bush administration. Which helps feed into, I think, some of this skepticism you’ve talked about within ASEAN that a lot of this feels like things that we’ve talked about for a decade, and you know, we’re not talking about an FTA.

So, Paul, in general, how are the U.S. and likeminded – meaning the Quad – doing when it comes to balancing these economic demand signals in the region versus the security signals that we all spend so much time in Washington talking about?

Mr. Myler: So there’s multiple layers there. (Laughs.) So –

Mr. Poling: I apologize.

Mr. Myler: How is Australia doing in balancing those? Extremely well. (Laughter.) We are in CPTPP. We are in RCEP. We have bilateral agreements. We have – you know, was that a massive strategic error on the part of the U.S. to pull out of
CPTPP? Yes, of course. I mean, unequivocal, massive. Is Zack absolutely correct that the U.S. has failed to pay enough attention to Southeast Asia? Absolutely, without any doubt. We say it every day, every meeting, every session. You know, when was – you know, how often does President Biden call President Widodo compared to how often does President Xi call President Widodo? I can tell you which way that telly goes. So there is absolutely no question there.

Now, is the solution – I think he set up a juxtaposition, though, between U.S.-ASEAN relations and U.S.-Quad relations which I don’t think is fair, because the way we look at the Quad is as the U.S. coming to the region with friends and capability that is stronger than a purely unilateral approach. And from Australia’s perspective, that’s a better U.S. engagement with ASEAN. If the U.S. comes to ASEAN and comes to the Indo-Pacific with Australia, with India, with Japan in partnership, that’s a – that sets the stage for a more comprehensive, a more continuous, a more balanced, a less choose-us-or-choose-China tone to the whole thing. It positions it very much as about the sort of region you want. And it’s not just a U.S. vision for the sort of region you want; it’s a vision that’s shared by, you know, countries which are, you know, in many ways quite diverse. And so for me, the investment in the Quad that the U.S. has made is not as investing there as against investing directly in ASEAN but as a conduit, as a mechanism for that underlying investment in ASEAN.

And look, I mean, you know, the investment in AUKUS is a completely different investment. It’s not – you know, it’s not an alliance; it’s a capability. It’s not a change in strategy; it’s a change in capability. And you know, it’s hard to even take seriously discussions around whether it – whether it contributes to heightened tension in the region when you look at the sheer pace and size of China’s capability development. I mean, eight Australian submarines, you know, very useful for us but it’s not going to shift the balance of military power in the region.

Mr. Poling: Elina, any thoughts?

Ms. Noor: No, but it might impact on the stability of the region in a positive and negative way depending on which Southeast Asian country you ask. And I think we’ve seen this variety of responses in official statements. Contrast Singapore’s statement with that of Indonesia’s and Malaysia’s, for example, with regard to AUKUS.

I think there’s definitely a greater weight that’s been accorded to the security portion of the relationship, particularly with the U.S. vis-à-vis ASEAN and Southeast Asian states. Of course, we’ve talked a lot about IPEF, so I think the region waits with full anticipation about what a fleshed-out IPEF will look like.
But I think we also should, to be fair, look at the U.S.-Southeast Asia relationship in a more holistic manner. And I think we forget sometimes that there are efforts going on on many other fronts, like the U.S.-ASEAN Smart Cities Partnership for example; YSEALI, which remains highly, highly popular amongst the youth of Southeast Asians. And so this talk about soft power is still there to a certain extent building up the capabilities and the capacity of the next generation in many forward-leaning aspects – climate change, small and medium enterprises, and a variety of other things that the younger generation are really passionate about.

So I think there is great potential there in leveraging on that portion of the U.S.-ASEAN relationship. I know Australia, as well, is doing a lot in the region with respect to some of those areas. So it’s not just a security versus economic relationship that we should be attempting to assess. I think there are all these other parts that are often missed out.

And one of the areas, I think, that really could do with a lot more bolstering is in the preservation of the arts and culture in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia is so rich – we all know this – in its traditions and variety of its artisanship. Things like craftsmanship, woodworking, textiles, you know, all of these are at risk of being lost in Southeast Asia. There’s a lot of work at the nongovernmental stage that’s going on, particularly with sometimes the revival – I know there’s a project that has to do with the revival of the ancient Khmer kingdom, for example, bringing that to life in a 3D fashion, done by some universities in the U.S. in partnership with those in Cambodia. And those are the kinds of things that are often understated and underappreciated that I think will have really long-term benefits for both the U.S. and Southeast Asia.

Mr. Poling: Zack, before I let you finish out this round of questions and then I’ll go to the audience, Elina, let me follow up with something. So it seems, I think to me and I would suspect to many in the U.S. government who are dealing directly with governments in Southeast Asia, that there is not a singular mind, a singular demand signal from within the region for engagement on ASEAN, ASEAN centrality. On specific issues, in fact, there’s plenty of partners in the region who asked for bilateral and trilateral and Quad cooperation on issues on which ASEAN is unwilling to exercise its centrality or its agency, be that the South China Sea or the Mekong. I can – I’m sure many of us saw the last ISEAS Southeast Asia survey. We all know how the public of Myanmar feels about ASEAN at the moment. So how are not just the U.S., but all dialogue partners expected to not undermine ASEAN centrality while also dealing with demand signals from the region that seemingly undermine ASEAN centrality?
Ms. Noor: Yeah. What I’ve heard is that, you know, the dysfunctionality of ASEAN makes it work somehow. (Laughter.)

So take it at face value, I think it’s, obviously, very difficult to deal with 10 different countries with different priorities and different capacities. But the relationship with the U.S., with Australia, with Japan, et cetera, has all been working, humming along let’s say. It can be tweaked for improvement, of course.

But I would just caution that the rhetoric about ASEAN centrality, particularly by dialogue partners, should match the reality. And I say this because I see fissures and I see a bit of dissonance between the rhetoric and reality. So there are all these proclamations of ASEAN centrality support, but then there is a preference that you allude to, Greg, of working with only certain partners on certain issues that risks leaving behind the rest of the ASEAN member states. It’s a tricky balance. I don’t have the answer. But I would just caution wisdom in going forward with that.

Mr. Poling: Thanks.

Zack, I’m just going to let you respond to anything that you heard coming down the line.

Mr. Cooper: Well, I mean, so I agree a hundred percent, Elina, right, that this is one of the real challenges, is that we all say ASEAN centrality, and sometimes we mean it and sometimes it’s just not a top priority, but we feel like we have to say it. Which I think is a bit of a risky approach, and eventually we will get called out on these – on these efforts, and I think that’s potentially dangerous.

I guess I would just say, you know, I – Paul, you’ve got a really important point that, right, if we engage the Quad in an effective way it can be an avenue into the region. My concern there is about whether we’re doing enough of that kind of work within the Quad to outweigh some of the skepticism in the region. So, you know, for example, the Quad vaccine initiative, which I think is incredibly important, right, you know, I’d love to see that really accelerated so that we can actually be delivering real numbers of vaccines, right? Like, make this promise a reality, something that matters in Southeast Asia.

You know, I think too often there is a core challenge within the Quad, which is that, you know, if you read a Quad leaders statement, often it won’t mention China, right? It’s sometimes not even in the statement at all. And if you ask Quad leaders what the Quad is about, they’ll often say, well, this really isn’t about balancing against China; it’s about all these other public goods. And I like that language. I would say the same thing if I were in government. But I think at the base level what do India, the United States,
Australia, and Japan have in common that other countries don’t? We’re willing to balance against China, right? That, in my view, is sort of the core of what the Quad is.

And so I think there is a little bit of a challenge, here, which is that when we think about building coalitions in Asia, you know, if you were going to build an economic coalition, would it be built around the Quad? Probably not, right? I mean, frankly, the U.S. is not exactly an economic leader in terms of trade agreements at the moment. India is highly protectionist. So those aren’t necessarily the countries you would pick.

You know, we’re doing a lot of supply chain work in the Quad, which I think is great. But again, you know, there are some other countries that you would think would be included in those supply chain discussions that aren’t Quad members.

And governance issues, you know, for example what we’re seeing right now with India on Russia – and you know far more about Russia than I ever will – is, you know, I think India’s going to be a great partner on security issues in Asia, right, but it might not be as active globally as the United States would like, and we’re going to have to accept that reality.

And so I think part of the challenge with the Quad is that we’re doing a lot of things with the Quad in all of these other areas, but at its core what the four Quad countries have most in common is a willingness to actually carry out some tough balancing efforts on the security side. And I think that’s why it’s a little bit tricky sometimes to deal with ASEAN, which is basically not willing to carry out a lot of those tough balancing efforts as a whole, certainly. And you know, with maybe one or two exceptions I think that’s true of a lot of the ASEAN member states.

So I think it’s not so much a question of whether we’re putting too much effort into the Quad or, you know, too little necessarily into Southeast Asia. It’s about, you know, when do you engage the Quad and what’s the purpose of doing so? And when do you have to engage ASEAN and what’s the purpose in doing that? And I would just say, you know, I think the administration, it really needs to step up.

And Greg, you mentioned the ISEAS poll. I will say the most shocking number to me in that ISEAS poll from this year was the fact that, actually, a lot of Southeast Asian experts think that U.S. engagement decreased last year, right, that we were worse in the first year of Obama (sic; Biden) than we were at the end of the Trump administration. I mean, I – that was shocking for me. And I think as an American that should be a bit bracing.

Mr. Myler: Greg, can I just jump in –
Mr. Myler: – on one thing, and it’s always a risk because I’ve got two thinkers and I’m a government representative. (Laughter.) So I’m on a hiding to nowhere, potentially, here.

And so, look, obviously, the Australia – you know, there is a – you know, I think the Australian government is very proud and satisfied with the signaling effect and the impact that both the Quad – the revival of the Quad and AUKUS have had, but they are two acronyms. They are not the universe of acronyms. You know, we mentioned RCEP. We mentioned CPTPP. You know, one of the best dialogues I’ve been part of is Australia-Indonesia-India. We have as our closest, I think, strategically aligned at the moment partner in ASEAN, Vietnam. There’s any number of different acronyms that are bubbling away, you know, under the surface, and I think – I mean, you know, Tambey Maiden (ph) actually, you know, probably two years ago wrote an article where – you know, looking at the Quad not as a – as a standalone organization, but the culmination of, you know, a whole range of interactions. So I think we need to – like, these headlines have been picked and we’re not looking at the depth of and the network of other engagements that’s happening.

Now, yes, do some of those pick off significant ASEAN countries that are, you know, willing to engage in a conversation like Indonesia or Vietnam? Yes, OK. Should we be having all of those conversations with the entirety of ASEAN? I don’t think it – I don’t think it works. But don’t be – don’t be overly focused on – there is more that Australia or the U.S., India even, are doing in the region than just the Quad and AUKUS.

Mr. Poling: Thank you, Paul.
On the ISEAS survey, it’s telling that the last survey was done after the election in the U.S. but before the inauguration, so the drop in score wasn’t actually between U.S. engagement; it was the engagement expected, right? So –

Mr. Cooper: That was the previous.

Mr. Poling: Yes, and so this year’s numbers, when comparing, are actually showing a drop in the expected engagement from the Biden administration.

Mr. Cooper: Ah. Fair. Yeah.

Mr. Poling: Not over the Trump administration.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah.
Mr. Poling: So even though I think most parts of the region feel like they've gotten more love than they did under the Trump administration, it wasn't the level they expected, and that is very bad.

I had also flagged that – the other survey result that caught my attention was that most elites in Southeast Asia support the Quad and support AUKUS. And the levels of support there are a directly corollary to the last question: If forced to choose between the U.S. and China, who would you pick? You can go right down the line and compare support for the Quad to those with the highest numbers who said U.S.

With that, we've got a couple minutes since we started late here. Let me go to the first question from our online audience. And if anybody in the room wants to ask a question, I know it's a little intimidating, but we do have the stand mic and we can invite you up to stand over there, and let me know what you'd like to ask.

So, first, let me go to Shofan Albama Chorizad (ph) – (changes pronunciation) – Chorizad (ph), sorry – from Universitas Indonesia, who, touching on Elina's point earlier about the people-to-people ties, is currently a former U.S.-ASEAN visiting scholar at American University here. We talked quite a bit about the Quad, so let me skip to Shofan’s (ph) second question. The word “inclusive” in the Indo-Pacific was included in some U.S. officials’ speeches, but now it is not in the Indo-Pacific Strategy. What does this mean?

Zack, can I come to you on this? At this point – I think there’s a bigger question here, right? The Biden administration has had some difficulty deciding how many adjectives can go before its Indo-Pacific Strategy. And they change based on which agency you talk to. Is there anything to actually be read into that?

Mr. Cooper: So I'm trying to remember, but I think the first version of the Indo-Pacific Strategy that I saw still had “inclusive” in it. And I guess it maybe dropped out after that. Look, I think the Biden team wants an inclusive regional approach, right? The question is how best to do that, right? And does that inclusiveness mean that you are going to add countries onto existing groupings? Like, do you add them onto the Quad, right? Or do you add Australia, Korea, India onto the G-7, right? What’s the right way to get that inclusiveness? I wouldn’t read anything into the possibility that inclusiveness isn’t directly mentioned in the Indo-Pacific Strategy. I think, you know, in talking with the team that wrote that document, they absolutely thought that inclusiveness was important.

I think the tension they have in thinking through some of the language with which they want to address the region is, you know, they do want to be
inclusive, but they also have to acknowledge that there’s sometimes that you can’t engage all of ASEAN as a group, right? And so you want to be inclusive and welcoming but, you know, as Elina and Paul have said, you don’t want to allow that to stop engagement broadly, right? And I think we saw a little bit of that the first year, where, you know, just because of the coup in Myanmar you sort of had a bit of a pause in how we engaged ASEAN. But I don’t think that there’s any specific limitation on the idea of inclusiveness coming out of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. I think that’s something that the Biden team certainly believes in.

Mr. Poling: I’m going steal John Brandon’s question as my wrap-up question here. So John at the Asia Foundation said, Zack said the U.S. is underinvesting in Southeast Asia. So what more should the U.S. be doing in Southeast Asia? And I think his second part here is very interesting. Should the U.S. be investing more ASEAN-wide or in the key countries, like Indonesia? Are we – are we negligent uniformly or are we negligent in specific cases?

And maybe I’ll reverse the order and just start with Paul. You don’t have to just talk to the U.S. I know that makes you uncomfortable. (Laughter.) You can say what Canberra is not doing well, that would be fine. (Laughter.)

Mr. Myler: On the eve of an election, that might make me even more uncomfortable. (Laughter.)

Look, I think the – you know, again, I think we need to be careful in suggesting that the U.S. isn’t doing anything. I mean, at the end of the day, you know, there have been a lot of vaccines delivered and, you know, a lot of engagement in the first year of the Biden administration. There seems to be a commitment. You know, we expect the president to attend all of the summits. I think the symbolism of the way that they very clearly focused on treaty allies, which include Philippines, which include Thailand, and the like, in the first year of the administration – you know, there have been some very, very important signals.

More can definitely be done. You know, they need an economic proposition, which is not to say that there isn’t, you know, a huge base of, you know, historic capital, accumulated U.S. capital, and soft power capital in Southeast Asia. But on a year-to-year basis, what’s the next thing between engagement? It’s not – and so they need to do that. And I do think we have some incredibly important individual countries that will be more – frankly, more decisive in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific than potentially the Quad countries. Who are, you know, in many regards, looking to open up the strategic space for significant ASEAN countries to, you know, be resilient, act on their national interests, to have – ensure that their sovereignty isn’t infringed or their space for sovereign decision making isn’t infringed. And I think – I think the U.S. should be doing more to invest heavily in those individual
countries. And certainly Indonesia and Vietnam are right up there on that list.

Mr. Poling: Elina.

Ms. Noor: So the question that I have is related to the calculations on which countries are decisive at what point in time, right? So countries that may be important now may not be as important for particular issues further down the road. Countries that are often overlooked and dismissed now, thinking of one particular smaller country in Southeast Asia now that is often given short shrift, suddenly becomes a strategic point of importance when a naval base is looked upon with – askance. So this balancing of which countries are important at what point in time I think is something for Australia, the U.S., and all to figure out. And that’s why I caution wisdom about picking countries and prioritizing some over others. That’s it. (Laughs.)

Mr. Poling: Thanks. Zack.

Mr. Cooper: So, Elina, I take that point. I guess I do think, though, you know, the U.S. is going to have to make some decisions about where it puts investment of time and resources. And I – you know, I think we’ve started to see a bit of a decision from the administration about where they’re going to prioritize. You know, I think the fact that Tony Blinken tried to give the Indo-Pacific vision and strategy presentation in Jakarta was a pretty clear signal that, you know, Indonesia’s going to be a focus. I think they’re – and frankly, you know, engaging Indonesia’s been hard because of the challenges traveling there. So being there on the ground, I think that took real commitment by the administration.

Clearly, you know, they sent – the vice president and the secretary of defense last summer both went to Singapore, both went to Vietnam. I think that shows that those are, you know, pretty critical partners, in their minds. And of course, you know, the Philippines, we’ll see what happens with the election, but I think the Philippines as a U.S. treaty ally is going to be critical. I think that maybe leaves the two members of ASEAN that probably need a bit more attention, but both are going to be a little challenging. You know, Malaysia would absolutely be one of them. A big, critical country, but where we haven’t had as much U.S. engagement as you might have seen in other parts of Southeast Asia. And then Thailand, right, where I do think the defense relationship with Thailand remains quite good, but the broader political relationship I think is really a challenge.

So, you know, it’s not to say that the rest of ASEAN isn’t important, but I think the more we pick apart ASEAN’s centrality and acknowledge we’re going to have to engage different parts of ASEAN at different times on different issues – I think that really puts those six countries at the top of the
list. Which is not to say, as Elina was mentioning, right, that we can ignore the rest of ASEAN. But it's just to say for an administration that's going to be thinking about visits coming up over the next six months, you know, where do we think they're going to go? Where are ambassadors most needed? Where are presidential phone calls most needed? I think those six are likely to be at the top of the list. Exactly what the order is, I don't know. But I certainly hope we'll see, you know, as much engagement as they can fit in between now and summit season in the fall.

Mr. Poling: Thanks. And with the recent nomination of ambassador to Thailand, I think we've now got a name at least for all 10, although we're still missing the ASEAN secretariat.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah.

Mr. Poling: Well, that is it for the panel, and very nearly it for the conference. If you could all join me thanking Paul, Elina, and Zack for their time. Thank you very much. (Applause.) And now I'm going to let them go and I've asked Ted, if you don't mind, we'll – if you want to come up on the stage, we'll say some closing words and then let everyone get on with their day. This way we don't have to rearrange a podium or anything.

So thank you all for coming for our first big in-person, you know, return to hybrid conferencing. I'm sorry we couldn't have everybody there. We'll start to, hopefully – fingers crossed – fit in more chairs month by month and, you know, until we're back to the good old days, or something like it. But I still think we'll have a lot of people who want to watch in their sweatpants, and I get that. (Laughter.) For those in the room, we're going to have some lunch outside if you'd like to join us. I'm not going to rehash why all of this was important. I'll leave that to Ted, maybe. (Laughter.) I just want to say thank you. Thank you so much. If you missed anything, it'll be online, YouTube, on csis.org and we'll have the transcripts from all the conversations up for everybody to make use of.

Ted.

Ted Osius: I'm not going to rehash why all this is important either, but that last panel was kind of a reminder of why it's all important. So I was glad that we ended on that note. It's nice when thinkers balance government officials. Actually, it's great. (Laughter.) Thanks to all of you very much. Thanks to my friend Greg, and to Dr. Hamre, and CSIS. Thanks to our team. Bernie's back there in the corner. He worked very, very hard to pull this – and Ryan. So thanks to everybody for contributing. I hope it is the first annual and that we'll be able to do this again next year. Thank you.

Mr. Poling: Thank you all so much. (Applause.)