

ENGAGE EARLY WITH ASEAN TO JUMPSTART U.S. INITIATIVES

<p>ISSUE</p>	<p>China's growing use of economic leverage and aggressive tactics, particularly in the South China Sea, has left Southeast Asian nations increasingly threatened but hesitant to push back. Their economies are also becoming increasingly integrated with that of China, drawing many closer to Beijing. These countries are more likely to defend their own sovereignty and resist Chinese coercion and overtures if they have confidence in U.S. backing. An early, high-profile gesture by President Trump, such as a coveted invitation to Mar-a-Lago, would signal U.S. commitment and strengthen the resolve of leaders in this important region. ASEAN leaders, often sidelined in recent U.S. initiatives including the Quad and AUKUS, would welcome such an invitation as a mark of respect. Particularly since the planned U.S.-ASEAN Summit in March 2020 was canceled due to the pandemic, an early summit would reinforce the partnership with the United States and go far toward countering China's influence.</p>
<p>SIGNIFICANCE</p>	<p>ASEAN is a vital economic partner and a key arena for U.S.-China competition. With bilateral trade nearing USD500 billion in 2023, Southeast Asia serves as a critical hub for global supply chains and strategic industries. Its young population, growing digital economy, and location are essential for diversifying supply chains and countering Chinese dominance. American leadership in areas such as economic development, infrastructure, and maritime security can position the United States as the preferred partner in the Indo-Pacific. These initiatives could focus on infrastructure, supply chain diversification, and technology. Increased maritime presence, including Freedom of Navigation Operations, support Southeast Asian states' territorial disputes and protect critical sea lanes.</p>
<p>RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION</p>	<p>With ASEAN leaders feeling marginalized by the Biden administration's promotion of mini-laterals, the Trump administration has an opening to assert U.S. leadership in China's backyard. Hosting an ASEAN-U.S. Leaders' Summit within the first six months in office would signal strength and commitment and set the stage for closer engagement over the next four years. Many of the leaders are known as avid golfers: an invitation to Mar-a-Lago for a summit might be particularly well received and generate positive personal relationships with Trump. Laying the groundwork with U.S. hospitality could jumpstart many of the economic and security initiatives that counter Chinese influence in Southeast Asia.</p>