

## Former Biden Defense Official: U.S. Needs Stronger and Clearer Strategy for Southeast Asia

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Washington, D.C., July 1, 2025 A former senior defense official from the Biden administration is urging the United States to develop a clearer and more consistent strategy for Southeast Asia, warning that the current approach is falling short as China strengthens its influence across the region.

Speaking at a policy event hosted by the Center for Strategic Engagement, the former Pentagon advisor said that while U.S. leaders often talk about the importance of a “free and open Indo-Pacific,” there is still no well-defined plan that addresses the specific needs of Southeast Asian countries.

“We’ve made strong statements, but what’s missing is a long-term, reliable strategy,” the former official said. “Countries in Southeast Asia want real partnerships, not just promises.”

Over the past few years, the U.S. has increased its defense presence through joint military exercises and security agreements with nations like the Philippines and Vietnam. However, the official pointed out that economic development, infrastructure, climate cooperation, and digital investment are just as important to countries in the region.

China continues to lead in these areas through large-scale projects under its Belt and Road Initiative, giving it a strong foothold in Southeast Asia. The U.S., meanwhile, has yet to match that level of economic engagement.

“You can’t rely on military presence alone,” the official added. “You have to show up with investment, education, and innovation.”

Policy experts agree that the U.S. needs a broader approach. Dr. Elena Morales, a Southeast Asia analyst, said that countries in the region are looking for support on challenges like climate change, technology access, and infrastructure, not just security.

“Southeast Asia isn’t asking the U.S. to choose sides,” Morales said. “But it is asking who will stand by them over the long term.”

Although the Biden administration has taken steps including pledging support for digital infrastructure and climate finance, those efforts have been inconsistent and not part of a unified plan.

With the Indo-Pacific becoming more important to global trade and diplomacy, analysts warn that the U.S. must act quickly to maintain influence in Southeast Asia.

“There’s still time to build trust and leadership,” the former official concluded. “But the region is watching and waiting.”