

# ASEAN BRIEFS

## Xi-Biden's 2023 APEC Meeting: Comprehending the Limits of Rivalry Management



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## Executive Summary

In recent years, the rivalry between the US and China has increased with the fluctuating relations between the two countries, and causing implications for global geoeconomic and geopolitical dynamics. Xi-Biden's 2023 APEC meeting was an important turning point in Sino-US relations since their last meeting at the sideline of the 2022 G20 Summit. It also symbolized the two leaders' good intentions for opening dialogue to maintain communication channels and reduce tensions. Although the 4-hour face-to-face meeting between Biden and Xi brought fresh air, however, the main purpose of the meeting was to prevent deterioration rather than improve US-China relations.

The meeting ended with several key agreements, chief among them is the agreement to work towards resuming military-to-military contacts. However, caution is needed due to lingering differences on the geopolitical front, particularly with respect to tensions in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. Although responses to the Xi-Biden meeting from external parties, including ASEAN member states, have primarily been indirect, most meetings conducted at the sideline of APEC called for adherence to international law in the Indo-Pacific region, signaling unease towards ongoing tensions in the region. Therefore, US-China relations remain precarious and central to efforts at ensuring regional stability.





## Introduction

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At the sideline of 2023's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in San Francisco, the US and China held a bilateral meeting, in which Joe Biden and Xi Jinping engaged in discussions the former described as one of their “most constructive and productive discussions.”<sup>1</sup> The meeting was noted as an important turning point following both countries' souring relations since their last meeting at the sideline of the 2022 G20 Summit in Bali, Indonesia.

The meeting was regarded positively by the Chinese side; more interestingly, journalists noted an “abrupt” change in tone within publications by Chinese media in the week of the meeting, wherein anti-US rhetoric was notably “paused” in exchange for more positive messages in support of closer cooperation and relations between Washington and Beijing.<sup>2</sup> However, reactions from the American public have been largely tepid, noting that despite various progress—particularly with respect to reopening military-to-military communications—the US and China failed to agree on various key

geopolitical issues, such as the South China Sea dispute and the US' military support to Taiwan.<sup>3</sup> However, both sides continue to stress the importance of peacefully managing competition to avoid potential conflicts.

While the outcome of the meeting was far from groundbreaking, it sits at an important geopolitical juncture in the Indo-Pacific region, following years of uncertainties with China's growing assertiveness and concerns towards the US' strategic choices in the region. This is particularly pertinent for Southeast Asia, a region proximate to the geopolitical flashpoints highlighted in the Xi-Biden meeting. This report argues that at this juncture, the main purpose of the Xi-Biden meeting was to prevent deterioration rather than improve US-China relations. The reliability of the approach the US and China take in managing their rivalry is of great importance to the Indo-Pacific region. Regarding ASEAN's response, Malaysia was the only ASEAN country that made an official statement due to ASEAN-related issues did not feature prominently during the meeting.

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1 “Remarks by President Biden in a Press Conference | Woodside, CA,” *White House*, 16 November 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/11/16/remarks-by-president-biden-in-a-press-conference-woodside-ca/>

2 Kelly Ng & Fan Wang, “China hails Xi-Biden meeting despite ‘dictator remark,’” *BBC*, 17 November 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-67447121>

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3 Alexandra Sharp, “The Big Takeaways From the Biden-Xi APEC Meeting,” *Foreign Policy*, 16 November 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/11/16/biden-xi-apec-meeting-talks-dictator-communication-channels-fentanyl-pandas-ai/>; Yukon Huang, Isaac Kardon, & Matt Sheehan, “Three Takeaways From the Biden-Xi Meeting,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 16 November 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/11/16/three-takeaways-from-biden-xi-meeting-pub-91042>

The analysis begins with a scrutiny of the recent Xi-Biden meeting to situate the meeting amidst recent tensions and efforts by both sides to improve engagement, particularly within the defense and economic sectors. Moreover, the report proceeds with an analysis of key takeaways of the Xi-Biden meeting and how it contributed to efforts in managing rivalry between China and the US. This analysis specifically addresses the meeting's relevance to developments in the Southeast Asian region. Lastly, the analysis ends with a conclusion and recommendations.

## Recent Developments of US-China Tension and Engagement

In recent years, the rivalry between the US and China has increased with the fluctuating relations between the two countries, and causing implications for global geoeconomic and geopolitical dynamics. In 2023, both countries have repeatedly clashed over security flashpoints, such as the Chinese surveillance balloon, military deployment in the South China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait.<sup>4</sup> In February 2023, a Chinese surveillance balloon that drifted across the US was shot down by an American fighter jet.<sup>5</sup> As a result, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's planned visit to China was postponed. In regard to the South China Sea dispute, the US and China have been accusing each other of actions taken in the region. China expelled US warships that the US Navy claimed were conducting freedom of navigation operations.<sup>6</sup>

4 "Biden-Xi Summit and the Outlook for US-China Relations," *Lazard*, 10 November 2023, <https://www.lazardassetmanagement.com/docs/m0-211632/Biden-XiSummitAndTheUS-ChinaRelations.pdf>

5 Ibid.

6 "China dan AS Saling Tudung atas Keberadaan Kapal AS di Laut China Selatan [China and AS Blames Each Other for the Presence of US Ships in the South China Sea]," *VOA Indonesia*, 26 November 2023 <https://www.voaindonesia.com/a/china-dan-as-saling-tuding-atas-keberadaan-kapal-as-di-laut-china-selatan-/7370667.html>

Meanwhile, the US stated that China's expanding maritime claims in the South China Sea were unlawful and posed a serious threat to freedom of navigation in the sea.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, another issue is that the close relations between the US and Taiwan have triggered reactions from China which heated tensions in the Taiwan Strait. For instance, in April 2023, China conducted a three-day military exercise after the President of Taiwan, Tsai Ing-wen, stopped by the US and met with US House Speaker, Kevin McCarthy.<sup>8</sup> China also deployed military aircraft and ships around Taiwan after the Vice President of Taiwan, William Lai, visited the US.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to tensions in the security realm, tensions between the US and China continued in the form of competing economic and technological policies aimed at weakening each other. A series of Biden administration policies have blocked the export of advanced chip technology to halt China's military development.<sup>10</sup> In response, China imposed export restrictions to the US on rare metals such as gallium and germanium that are used as semiconductor raw materials—in which China controls 80 percent and 60 percent of the supply of these respective metals.<sup>11</sup> The "ping-pong tactics" between the US and China regarding trade restriction policies in advanced technology industries could cause more disruption to global supply chains.

7 Ibid.

8 "China Launches Military Drills Around Taiwan after US House Speaker Meeting," *The Guardian*, 8 April 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/08/china-launches-military-drills-around-taiwan-after-us-house-speaker-meeting>

9 "Tensions in the Taiwan Strait," *Kompas*, 21 August 2023, <https://www.kompas.id/baca/english/2023/08/20/en-ketegangan-di-selat-taiwan>

10 Irene Sarwindaningrum, "Ekspektasi Tidak Tinggi pada Pertemuan Biden-Xi, Positif untuk Redakan Tensi," *Kompas*, 14 November 2023, <https://www.kompas.id/baca/internasional/2023/11/14/ekspektasi-tidak-tinggi-pada-pertemuan-biden-xi-positif-untuk-redakan-tensi>

11 "Costlier cars? Why China's Gallium, Germanium Export Curbs Matter," *Al Jazeera*, 12 July 2023 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/12/costlier-cars-why-chinas-gallium-germanium-export-curbs-matter>

Notwithstanding the intensification of great power competition, the US and China recognize the need to prevent rivalry from spiraling into open conflict. Tensions between both parties can be assessed—whether they are increasing or decreasing, warming or cooling—usually through the presence or absence of visits by high-level officials.<sup>12</sup> The US has shown its desire to reduce tensions with China since the middle of this year by opening dialogues. It can be seen from a series of diplomatic visits to China by US officials, including Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and Special Presidential Climate Envoy John Kerry. Subsequently, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Vice Premier He Lifeng have paid return visits to the US.

Albeit these meetings were notably attended by high-ranking officials, the resumption of military talks was proven to be trickier. The pause from 2022 to 2023 continued a declining trend of military-to-military communications between both parties which had persisted since 2014, which was particularly exacerbated after Former President Donald Trump took office. Not only has this complicated various uncertainties, especially with respect to various emerging issues such as cybersecurity and outer space, reduced communications signaled heightening distrust within the context of growing tensions in areas such as the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, prior to the bilateral meeting at the sideline of APEC, the American side, to no avail, had attempted to engage China in high-level military talks numerous

times, most notably through the occasion of the 2023 Shangri-La Dialogue<sup>14</sup> and Blinken's visit to Beijing.<sup>15</sup>

US policy toward China has not changed much under both President Joe Biden and his predecessor, President Donald Trump, but the idiosyncratic factor of each leader reflects different approaches. Trump's "America First" slogan had a hawkish underpinning and unilateral approach that focused on the domestic economy as the US' main interest.<sup>16</sup> The policies taken by President Trump prioritized a transactional approach toward China; for instance, the trade war with China started in 2018 which occurred when the US increased import tariffs on Chinese products to stabilize its economy which was experiencing a trade deficit with China. Meanwhile, with the slogan "America is Back," President Biden prioritizes foreign relations to rebuild US alliances and partnerships which emphasizes the promotion of democracy and opposing authoritarianism.<sup>17</sup> It can be seen from his efforts to utilize minilateral and multilateral mechanisms such as AUKUS, Quad, and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) to contain China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

12 The United States. US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "2023 Report to Congress: Executive Summary and Recommendations, 2023," [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2023-11/2023\\_Executive\\_Summary.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2023-11/2023_Executive_Summary.pdf)

13 Paul Haenle, "Why the U.S. and Chinese Militaries Aren't Talking Much Anymore," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 11 August 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/11/why-u.s.-and-chinese-militaries-aren-t-talking-much-anymore-pub-85123>

14 Idrees Ali, Phil Steward, & Yew Liun Tian, "China's snub of U.S. military leader highlights escalation risk," *Reuters*, 3 June 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/chinas-snob-us-military-leader-highlights-escalation-risk-2023-06-02/>

15 Evelyn Cheng, "Blinken says he failed to revive military-to-military talks with China," *CNBC*, 20 June 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/06/20/blinking-says-he-failed-to-revive-military-to-military-talks-with-china.html>

16 David Shambaugh, "China's Place in the U.S. Election," *China-US Focus Digest*, Vol. 27 (October 2020), <https://www.chinausfocus.com/magazine/v27/China-US-Focus-Digest-v27.pdf>

17 Ibid.

## Finding Ways to Manage Conflict

### a. Key Takeaways from the Biden-Xi Meeting

The Xi-Biden meeting has notably achieved at least three key agreements.<sup>18</sup> Chief among these is the success in reestablishing communications between their militaries. This choice reflects China's usual resort in halting military contacts to display its discontent with actions or decisions taken by the US. The resumption of military contacts ended the fallout which started in August 2022 in response to the visit of Nancy Pelosi, then-Speaker of the US House of Representatives, to Taiwan. Moreover, efforts to restore contacts were repeatedly rejected by the Chinese side, as claimed by the Pentagon.<sup>19</sup> In the economic realm, the US and China are attempting to increase policy touchpoints and have established working groups on economic and financial issues to facilitate regular communication channels between officials across multiple levels of government.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, both sides also agreed to tackle fentanyl production and convene expert-level discussions on artificial intelligence (AI). However, observers note that agreements on counternarcotics should be put under further scrutiny, given the previous agreement on the matter was not aptly followed up.<sup>21</sup>

A similar caution should also be raised with regard to the agreement on resuming military-to-military contacts. As previously noted, the



Photo: Ezra Acayan/Getty Images News

consistency of high-level military talks between the US and China has been very volatile and sensitive to the degree of tensions between both parties. The US and China did succeed in following up on this agreement by holding a talk between Charles Q. Brown. Brown and General Liu Zhenli, both chairing the Joint Chiefs of Staff for their respective forces.<sup>22</sup> However, the extent to which this will translate to more fruitful engagement should be further observed, bearing in mind reports that the delay between the APEC meeting and the first military contact—which lasted for more than a month—occurred as China was rather unresponsive to

18 "Remarks by President Biden in a Press Conference," Op. Cit. See also: Sharp, Op. Cit.; Huang, Kardon, & Sheehan, Op. Cit.

19 Phil Steward & Idrees Ali, "China declined U.S. request for call between defense chiefs after balloon shootdown," *Reuters*, 8 February 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-declined-us-request-call-between-defense-chiefs-after-balloon-shootdown-2023-02-07/>; "China declines US request for a meeting between defense chiefs," *Reuters*, 30 May 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-rebuffs-us-request-meeting-between-defense-chiefs-wsj-2023-05-29/>

20 Lazard, Op. Cit.

21 Sharp, Op. Cit.

22 Phil Steward & Doina Chiacu, "US, China top military officials speak for first time in over a year," *Reuters*, 22 December 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-china-top-military-officials-spoke-thursday-pentagon-statement-2023-12-21/>





initial engagements from the US.<sup>23</sup>

The 4-hour face-to-face meeting between Biden and Xi brought fresh air as an important moment in Sino-US relations. It also symbolized the two leaders' good intentions for opening dialogue to maintain communication channels and reduce tensions between both parties to prevent conflict. However, this temporary thaw in Sino-US relations was limited and tactical.<sup>24</sup> Rick Waters, former Head of the State Department's China House, noted that at this juncture, the China-US Summit was no longer primarily about building relations but more about managing declining relations,<sup>25</sup> which Biden stated would mean "to manage competition responsibly to prevent it from veering into conflict, confrontation, or a new Cold War."<sup>26</sup>

23 Courtney Kube & Carol E. Lee, "U.S.-Chinese military hotline hasn't been restored a month after Biden-Xi summit," *NBC News*, 12 December 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/investigations/us-chinese-military-hotline-hasnt-restored-month-biden-xi-summit-rcna129137>

24 Lazard, Op. Cit.

25 Lili Pike, "What to Expect from Xi-Biden Meeting," *Foreign Policy*, 13 November 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/11/13/xi-biden-meeting-united-states-china-apec-diplomacy/>

26 The White House, "President Joe Biden's Meeting with President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China," *U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Indonesia*, 15 November 2023, <https://id.usembassy.gov/president-joe-bidens-meeting-with-president-xi-jinping-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned achievements, several shortcomings can also be noted from the meeting, pointing to the failure of both states to find a middle ground on several fundamental perspectives concerning geoeconomic and geopolitical issues. On the geoeconomic front, the US has yet to lift various restrictive and punitive measures in trade and investment, particularly those which the Biden administration inherited from his predecessor. One observer attributed Biden's firm stance on these measures to the fact that anti-China sentiments are shared by the Republicans and Democrats.<sup>27</sup>

On the geopolitical front, their rift is even more palpable. With respect to the South China Sea Dispute, Biden stressed in the press conference following the Xi-Biden meeting that China's "coercive activities" were raised during the meeting, although both parties reached no agreement on that matter. Biden's response to one question on China's adventurism in the South China Sea reaffirmed that the US' network of minilateral groupings in the region

27 Huang, Kardon, & Sheehan, Op. Cit.



will serve as an important “warning” to the Chinese side.<sup>28</sup> Yet, the extent to which this measure will, on one hand, alleviate concerns from other claimant states and, on the other hand, signal the US’ resolve to China should be put under further scrutiny, particularly given the intensification of standoffs between China and the Philippines in the second half of 2023.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, their discrepancy is even more pronounced with regard to the extent of the US’ support to Taiwan. In this respect, both firmly stood by their initial stance; while China demanded the US to stop its arms support to Taiwan and support “peaceful reunification,” the US expressed that China should “respect” the 2024 election in Taiwan.<sup>30</sup> Following the meeting, Biden noted that he would not expect China to interfere in the election. However, such a level of trust is not necessarily echoed by many in the US. Rep. Mike Gallagher, the Chairman of the Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party, noted that the US will still have to rely on its hard power to counter “totalitarian aggression” in the region, particularly to anticipate a potential invasion of Taiwan.<sup>31</sup>

## b. ASEAN Countries and the Biden-Xi Meeting

In general, any progress achieved and better relations between the US and China will greatly benefit countries worldwide, including ASEAN and other states in the Indo-Pacific. With regard

to the response of ASEAN countries to the Xi-Biden meeting, no country made an official statement except Malaysia—given that issues related to the ASEAN region, for instance, the South China Sea, were not addressed specifically in the meeting. From Malaysia’s perspective, the Xi-Biden meeting could not be considered an ordinary discourse as it was being looked upon not only by the APEC members but also by the world.<sup>32</sup>

In response to the rivalry between the major powers, Prime Minister (PM) Anwar Ibrahim stated that Malaysia would not be tilting towards China, although geographically the country is closer and the US as its traditional ally is also equally important.<sup>33</sup> He also emphasized that although developing countries have to listen to big powers, they also have to listen to the developing countries’ views in making their own decisions.<sup>34</sup> This statement underlined that with the great influence of the US and China, Malaysia still must have the ability to determine its own policies.

In the context of the South China Sea dispute, PM Anwar Ibrahim stated that, ideally, ASEAN should take a multilateral regional position with China. Malaysia’s position is to ensure the South China Sea remains a regional issue rather than a bilateral issue.<sup>35</sup> Responding to the Chinese standard map released recently which also claims Malaysian maritime territory, Malaysia rejected China’s claim in the South China Sea and pointed out that the map has no binding effect on Malaysia.<sup>36</sup> Even though Malaysia

28 “Remarks by President Biden in a Press Conference,” Op. Cit.

29 Brad Lendon, “China-Philippines maritime standoff escalating on path that could drag US into conflict, analysts warn,” *CNN*, 13 December 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/12/13/asia/china-philippines-maritime-standoff-analysis-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>

30 “President Xi Jinping Meets with U.S. President Joe Biden,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*, 16 November 2023, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/202311/t20231116\\_11181442.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202311/t20231116_11181442.html)

31 “The Inside Story - Biden-Xi, Apec 2023 | Episode 118 TRANSCRIPT,” *VOA*, 16 November 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/7358282.html>

32 “Malaysia’s Anwar Says ‘not tilting to China, But is Geographically Closer’ than US, Ahead of Xi-Biden Summit at APEC,” *South China Morning Post*, 15 November 2023, [https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3241613/anwar-says-malaysia-not-tilting-china-it-geographically-closer-us-ahead-xi-biden-summit-apec?campaign=3241613&module=perpetual\\_scroll\\_0&pgtype=article](https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3241613/anwar-says-malaysia-not-tilting-china-it-geographically-closer-us-ahead-xi-biden-summit-apec?campaign=3241613&module=perpetual_scroll_0&pgtype=article)

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 “Malaysia Rejects New China Map Claiming Entire South China Sea,” *Al Jazeera*, 31 August 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/>

has consistently rejected China's unilateral claims in the South China Sea area, PM Anwar Ibrahim assessed that the country has been rather successful in negotiating with China.<sup>37</sup> In comparison to the Philippines and Vietnam, the friction between China and these countries is more troublesome and controversial as the Chinese Coast Guard has been assaulting Philippine and Vietnamese vessels with water cannon blasts in contested waters. According to an observer, no agreement about the South China Sea was reached during the meeting between the US and China, which made the Philippines realize that the great powers could not compromise on core issues in geopolitical dynamics in the region.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, the Philippines will prioritize actions over statements, such as its close military ties with the US through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) to assist the country in countering China's assertive actions in the South China Sea.<sup>39</sup>

Notwithstanding the absence of any public acknowledgment of the Xi-Biden meeting, bilateral meetings with other leaders in the Indo-Pacific pointed to a similar call for adherence to international law which, to some degree, can be inferred as an indirect renouncement of China's growing assertiveness. One such example is the bilateral meeting between Biden and President Joko Widodo (Jokowi). Given the ongoing genocide and humanitarian crisis in Gaza, discussions on the South China Sea dispute did not garner much public attention. Jokowi and Biden's joint statement points to their convergence on the South China Sea issue,

especially with respect to the adherence to international law and ASEAN's role in the dispute. The reference to the 2016 arbitral tribunal,<sup>40</sup> in particular, can be highlighted as an indirect jab at China's recent aggressive engagements with the Philippines in the South China Sea. Both states' agreement to sign a bilateral Work Plan on Maritime Security Cooperation was noted as an important part of the US' effort to enhance Indonesia's maritime capacity amidst rising tensions in the South China Sea.

Another important bilateral meeting was that between Xi and Japan's PM, Fumio Kishida. The meeting did serve as a platform for both sides to reaffirm their "strategic relationship of mutual benefit."<sup>41</sup> Yet, sharp divergence persisted, bearing in mind rising economic tensions following China's blanket ban on Japanese seafood following the release of water from the Fukushima nuclear plant. With regard to geopolitical issues, both were seemingly adamant on their respective stances and failed to produce meaningful progress. For instance, a request from Kishida for China to remove its marking buoys in Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone within the East China Sea was not heeded. Moreover, while Japan expressed wariness about China's increased military activities around its territories and emphasized the importance of maintaining peace and stability in Taiwan, China was firm in reminding Japan of the "vital" importance of respecting China's position on Taiwan to the "political foundation" of China-Japan relations.<sup>42</sup>

news/2023/8/31/malaysia-rejects-new-china-map-claiming-entire-south-china-sea

37 "Malaysia's Anwar Says 'not tilting to China,'" Op. Cit.

38 Shannon Tiezzi, "What Do US Indo-Pacific Allies Think of the Biden-Xi Summit?" *The Diplomat*, 17 November 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/what-do-us-indo-pacific-allies-think-of-the-biden-xi-summit/>

39 Ibid.

40 "Joint Statement from the Leaders of the United States and the Republic of Indonesia: Elevating Relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," *U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Indonesia*, 13 November 2023, <https://id.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-from-the-leaders-of-the-united-states-and-the-republic-of-indonesia-elevating-relations-to-a-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>

41 "President Xi Jinping Meets with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 17 November 2023, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/202311/t20231118\\_11182935.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202311/t20231118_11182935.html)

42 Ibid.

Taken together, the interlinkages between these bilateral meetings point to three important observations. First, concerns over China's military assertiveness, particularly in the maritime domain, had not subsided and continued to serve as the source of various major flashpoints in the Indo-Pacific region. Second, fundamental divergence in the geopolitical realm did not cease, which was understandable given that most of these issues were concerned with issues such as sovereignty and would demand substantial political engagements prior to any meaningful developments. Lastly, various developments in geoeconomic issues, both between the US-China and other parties, will serve as an important basis to nurture trust and encourage peaceful engagements on geopolitical issues.

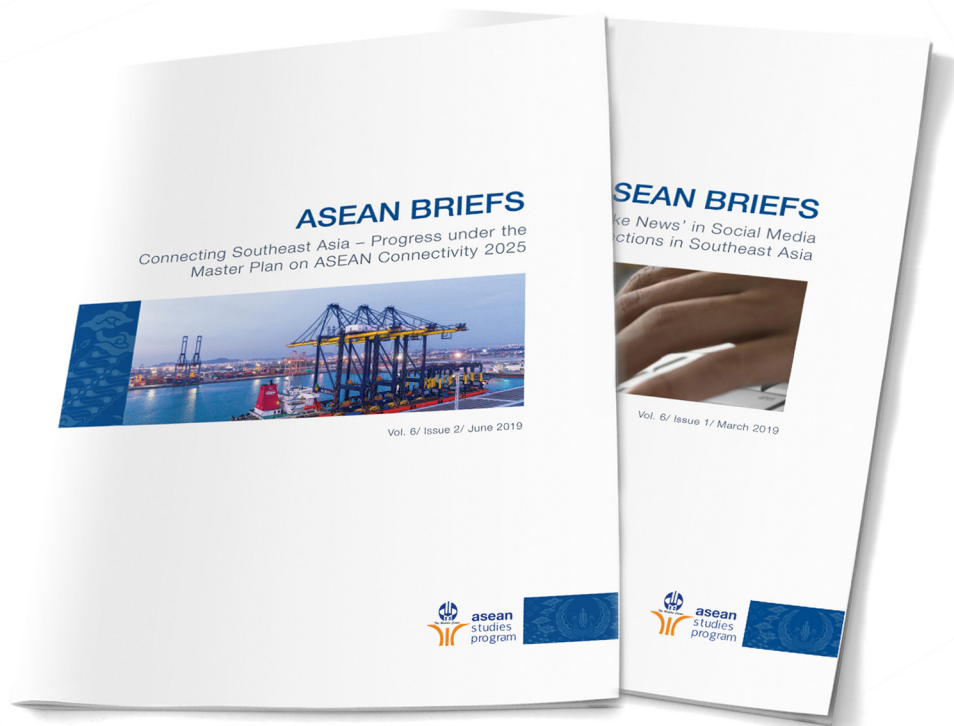
## Conclusion and Recommendations

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Looking ahead to relations between the US and China, strategic competition remains as a defining feature of the relationship with an uncertain degree of tension. The US presidential election could be consequential for the future path of US-China relations. Among his rivals, Trump is leading in the polls, while Biden's approval rating is dropping due to low marks on his policy addressing immigration, inflation, and support for Israel. The stance against China will be used as a campaign issue by Democratic and Republican presidential candidates, which could bring new turbulence between the US and China. If Trump returns to office, the most likely scenario is that he will impose harsher curbs on trade with China. Given Trump's unilateral approach, the US might also pull back from its alliances and focus on direct bilateral negotiations with China.

The observations outlined above point to several recommendations for all parties in the region. First, the US and China should fulfill expectations of more frequent and reliable military contacts between high-level officials as a precondition to build stronger trust. Issues of distrust were persistent in previous failed attempts to foster engagements and became the primary reason for previous contacts to fall through. Second, ASEAN Member States (AMS), especially Indonesia, should maintain their convening role for future discussions on geopolitical issues in the region, especially with respect to the South China Sea dispute. Matters of great importance for the region, particularly with regard to the future of the Indo-Pacific, should continue to be driven by ASEAN Centrality. Yet, this approach should also be mindful of the reliability of rivalry management between the US and China. Third, developments in the Taiwan Strait will also have to receive greater attention from states situated in the Indo-Pacific, especially following the election in 2024. AMSs will have to consider potential approaches should any form of tension or clash erupts. Lastly, Taiwanese leaders will also have to consider the ramifications of future exchanges with the US. The fallout between China and the US prior to the meeting pointed to the importance of Taiwan's strategic choices in engaging with the US.





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## About The Habibie Center

The Habibie Center was founded by Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie and family in 1999 as an independent, non-governmental, non-profit organisation. The vision of The Habibie Center is to create a structurally democratic society founded on the morality and integrity of cultural and religious values. The mission of The Habibie Center are first, to establish a structurally and culturally democratic society that recognizes, respects, and promotes human rights by undertaking study and advocacy of issues related to democratization and human rights, and second, to increase the effectiveness of the management of human resources and the spread of technology.

## About ASEAN Studies Program

The ASEAN Studies Program was established on February 24, 2010, to become a center of excellence on ASEAN related issues, which can assist in the development of the ASEAN Community by 2015. The Habibie Center through its ASEAN Studies Program, alongside other institutions working towards the same goal, hopes to contribute to the realization of a more people-oriented ASEAN that puts a high value on democracy and human rights. The objective of the ASEAN Studies Program is not merely only to conduct research and discussion within academic and government circles, but also to strengthen public awareness by forming a strong network of civil society in the region that will be able to help spread the ASEAN message. With the establishment of ASEAN Studies Program, The Habibie Center aims to play its part within our capabilities to the ASEAN regional development.

## About Talking ASEAN

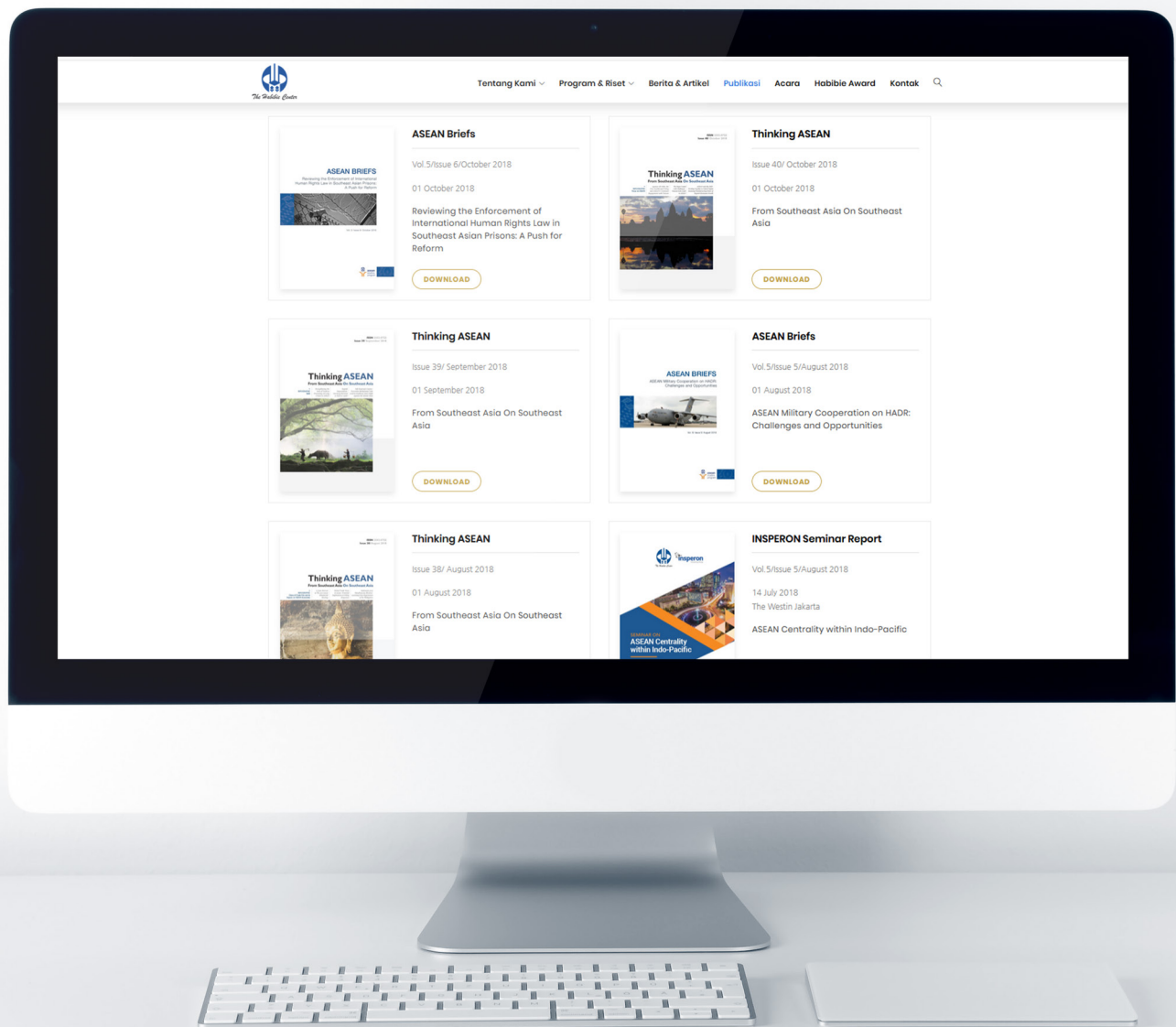
Talking ASEAN is a monthly public dialogue held at The Habibie Center in Jakarta. Covering a wide array of issues related to ASEAN, Talking ASEAN addresses topics of: Economic Integration, Socio-cultural, & Democracy, human rights and regional peace, among others. Featuring local and visiting experts, Talking ASEAN is one of a series of twelve dialogues regularly held each month and open to a target audience consisting of ASEAN officials, foreign ambassadors & diplomats, academics, university students, businesses, and the media.

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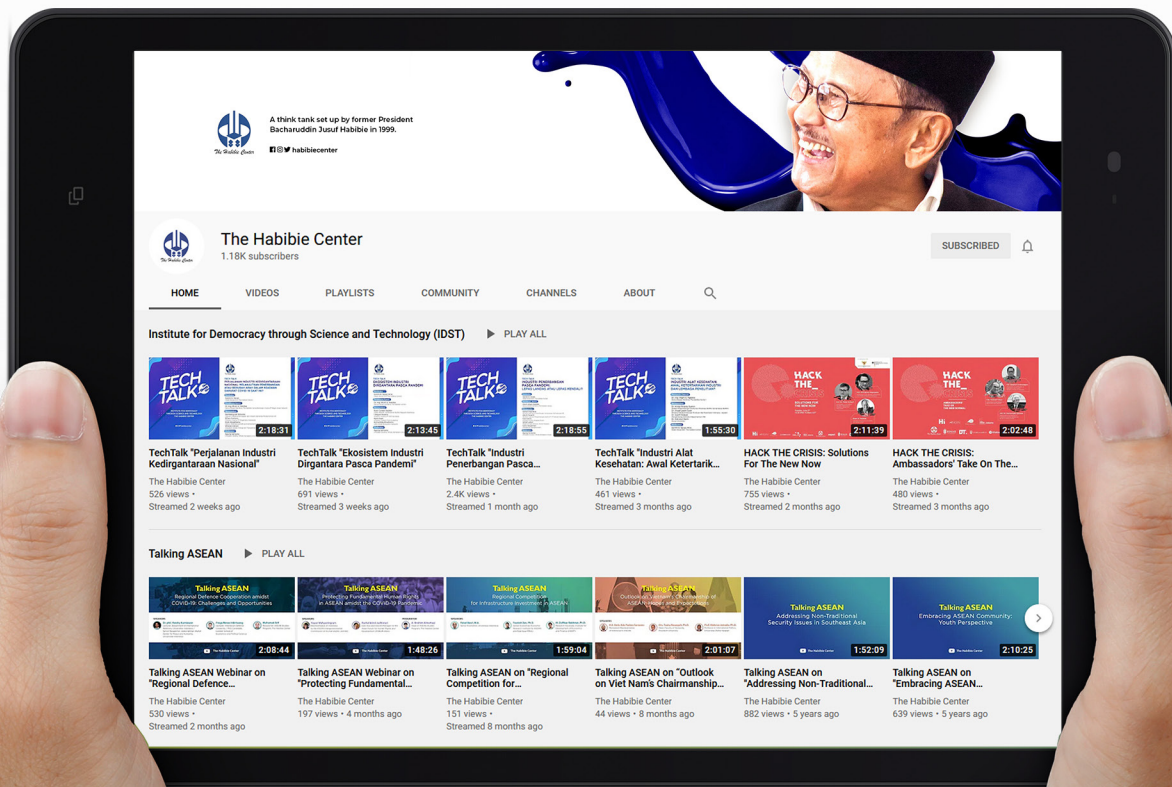
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