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Kamala Harris' Trip to Southeast Asia- Charm Offensive amid Credibility Crisis

Vice President Harris's visit to South East Asia, in late August, was part of a diplomatic charm offensive by the Biden administration in a region it argues is crucial to the future prosperity and security of the United States. Harris's Asia tour came a week after the fall of Kabul to the Taliban and a rather chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The visit expected to put the focus back on countering China as criticism over America's Afghan policy mounted at home and abroad.



“The United States is a proud part of the Indo-Pacific. And this region is critically important to our nation’s security and prosperity,” Harris declared in Singapore during her first tour of the region. Inevitably, Harris also aimed at China. She accused Beijing of challenging the rules-based order and spoke against its claims of its

ownership of the vast majority of the South China Sea – a message she reaffirmed on her subsequent trip to Vietnam. Maritime security also figured prominently on both stops of Harris’ tour. In Singapore, Harris said that Beijing’s actions in the South China Sea amount to “coercion” and “intimidation.” In Hanoi, she called on Vietnam to join the U.S. in challenging China’s “bullying” in the strategically pivotal seaway.

Predictably, Beijing accused Harris of attempting to drive a wedge between it and south-east Asia. “I think it would be much more credible if the US said it was trying to maintain its hegemony and uphold its own interests,” Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said.

The United States’ recent frequent cabinet-level meetings with its Southeast Asian counterparts, and its offer to host the 2023 APEC summit, clearly indicate the country is ready to “re-pivot” to Asia. Harris’ visit sketches the contours of the Biden administration’s Southeast Asia policy agenda. During her visits to Singapore and Vietnam, Harris made a raft of announcements. They ranged from expanding cybersecurity collaboration with Singapore to offering free vaccines to help Vietnam combat Covid. In Vietnam, she also formally opened the new CDC south-east Asia regional office in Hanoi, which was initiated by the Trump administration last year. These moves showed that America was willing to help when the region needed its deep expertise.

Harris's first tour of the region as the most senior Biden administration official this week was significant. It reassured US partners that, unlike his predecessors, Joe Biden is paying close attention to the region.

However, regional commentators have argued that The US proposals for regional engagement are broad and vague. There is also a view that Harris visit did not provide a clear answer on how the United States will deepen its engagement and how it will address multiple concerns expressed by Southeast Asia. Others wondered about its willingness to resuscitate its role as a leading trade and investment partner in the region.

The visit has raised more questions rather than providing roadmaps and solutions. How the United States will take specific actions to engage with Southeast Asia and address multiple concerns from the region remains to be seen.

Regional Implications of Political Crisis in Tunisia

On 25 July President Kais Saied stunned the world by announcing the suspension of parliament, the sacking of the cabinet and assuming emergency powers citing an imminent threat to the Tunisian state. These extraordinary measures are supposed to last only for 30 days. However, On August 23, just before 30 days were up, the President renewed the emergency measures until further notice, plunging Tunisia deeper into a constitutional crisis.

The governance crisis that has seen President Kais Saied grab power is the culmination of months of institutional gridlock and political infighting. This has largely pitted the President against Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and the Speaker of Parliament Rached Ghannouchi over the powers of the legislature and the respective roles of the dual executive—the president and the prime minister. The most recent and devastating wave of COVID-19 infections and deaths was the last straw that ignited protests among a public increasingly fed up with squabbling politicians and dysfunctional institutions. It also provided Saied, who has cast himself as Tunisia's saviour from institutional paralysis, political corruption, and economic stagnation, the opportunity to impose a new political status quo through invoking emergency powers that some of his advisors had envisaged months ago.

Many commentators have drawn parallels with what happened in Egypt in 2013, when Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, then minister of defence and now president, intervened to remove the elected Muslim Brotherhood president, to the jubilation of huge crowds on the streets, in scenes similar to Tunisia after Mr Saied's announcement. However, there are some important differences. Mr Saied was elected with some 70% of the vote, and the army has not played any major role in Tunisian politics, while in Egypt it has been the bedrock of the state for nearly 70 years.

Supporters of Ennahda, an Islamic Democratic political party in Tunisia, suspect that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt have played a role in urging Saied to seize power and side-line their movement. Influential television and social media figures close to the power structures in the UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia have celebrated what they describe as



Saied's fatal blow to Islamists. This amplifies the fears of those who believe that the axis of Arab autocrats is determined to sabotage Tunisia's fragile democracy. On the other hand, Supporters of Saied also see a foreign hand in the crisis, especially that of Qatar and its Al Jazeera network. Between these two camps, there is Algeria, which played a constructive role in stabilizing the post-Ben Ali political transition.

The outcome of the current crisis has implications not only for Tunisia but has implications for regional geopolitics as well. What happens in Tunisia will not stay in Tunisia, as the experience of the past decade has demonstrated. For the moment, Mr Saied appears to have the power of the street, so to speak. But no one is denying that this is a slippery slope that could spell the end for Tunisia's precarious transition to an inclusive government.

Autocrats in the region are hoping it will give them more ammunition to argue that "Arabs are not fit for democracy" and the democrats are clinging to the hope that Tunisia will remain a beacon. Which way the dice will roll remains uncertain as yet.

The Congressional review of US DoD plans for Hypersonic Weapons Development

The Biden administration's fiscal year 2022 budget request aims to accelerate plans that began under the Trump administration to develop and field conventional hypersonic weapons to compete with Russia and China. The US DoD requested \$3.8 billion for projects related to the research and development of hypersonic weapons in the budget submission, including two new hypersonic cruise missile programs for the Air Force and Navy. The request also includes funding for initial procurement of the Air Force's Advanced Rapid Response Weapon (ARRW) system, the continued development of the Navy's Conventional Prompt Strike (CPS) program, the addition of the CPS to Zumwalt-class destroyers, and the procurement of additional batteries of the Army's Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon (LRHW) system.



Funding for hypersonic weapons has been relatively restrained in the past; however, both the Pentagon and Congress have shown a growing interest in pursuing the development and near-term deployment of hypersonic systems. This is due, in part, to the advances in these technologies in Russia and China, both of which have several hypersonic weapons programs and have likely fielded operational hypersonic glide vehicles—potentially armed with nuclear warheads. Most U.S. hypersonic weapons, in contrast to those in Russia and China, are not being designed for use with a nuclear warhead. As a result, U.S. hypersonic weapons will likely require

greater accuracy and will be more technically challenging to develop than nuclear-armed Chinese and Russian systems.

“This budget supports our efforts to...accelerate investments in cutting-edge capabilities that will define the future fight, such as hypersonics and long-range fires,” Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin told the Senate Armed Services Committee on June 10. Michael White, principal director for hypersonic weapons in the office of the Under Secretary of Defence for research and engineering, informed the US Congress that “we’ve really been very fortunate in having a new administration continue the momentum and step up and champion what we’re trying to do with delivering this war-fighting capability.” He emphasized the importance of this acceleration given that “our adversaries,” namely Russia and China, “have fielded capability today that we don’t have.”

As per reports, the US Congress aims to review the Pentagon’s plans for U.S. hypersonic weapons programs during the annual authorization and appropriations process. During the oversight of U.S. hypersonic weapons programs, the US Congress may seek to obtain information about DOD’s evaluation of potential mission sets for hypersonic weapons, a cost analysis of alternative means of executing these mission sets, and an assessment of the enabling technologies—such as space-based sensors or autonomous command and control systems—that may be required to employ or defend against hypersonic weapons. One of the key considerations in the congressional review process is the potential implications of hypersonic weapons as a threat to strategic stability or a driver for an arms race and what precaution the United States should take to mitigate risks or limit the weapons’ proliferation. Some of the mitigating measures include expanding New START, negotiating new multilateral arms control agreements, and undertaking transparency and confidence-building measures.