



Build Back American Engagement with Southeast Asia: The B3W Partnership and the American Approach to Southeast Asia

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No region of the world possesses as significant a role in the competition between the United States and China as Southeast Asia. While the region possesses great amounts of political and cultural diversity, one trend is evident throughout the region: the resurgence of Chinese influence. Gone are the days when support for communist [insurgencies](#) was one of the biggest exports from the People's Republic of China to the region. In the modern era, [infrastructure](#) development, trade, and other forms of investment have proven to be critical exports that have changed the [political and economic](#) landscapes of the region. The United States, despite possessing [security interests](#), [trade interests](#) and [treaty allies](#) in the region, has watched regional allies [slip away](#) and Chinese political influence grow throughout the region. Addressing the trend will require the United States to rethink its engagement strategies and provide an alternative to Chinese development in Southeast Asia.

Fortunately, the United States has shown that it is interested in providing an alternative to Chinese infrastructure influence in both Southeast Asia and elsewhere. The most recent sign of this interest is evident with the B3W Partnership (Build Back Better World Partnership). [The B3W Partnership](#), which was launched at the 2021 G-7 Summit by the United States and its allies, will provide billions in infrastructure support to developing countries with both private and public funding, transparency measures, and respect for the climate. The B3W Partnership is not the only evidence of the United States and its allies forming their own infrastructure initiatives in the developing world. [The Blue Dot Network](#), which involves the United States, Japan, and Australia, possesses similar aims by leveraging private capital towards infrastructure development. The recent advancement of these initiatives exhibits the American desire to actively engage with regions like Southeast Asia.

While in its infant stages, the B3W Partnership shows great promise for American engagement with regions like Southeast Asia. For one, the partnership shows that the United States is serious about offering an alternative to Chinese development. The demand for infrastructure development and aid will likely grow stronger with the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. More so, the B3W Partnership shows promise for [moving beyond](#) traditional definitions of infrastructure development. The partnership looks to engage with the region in areas like digital technology, health security, gender equality, and climate cooperation. Cooperation in these areas not only provides the region with support for different forms of infrastructure that are critical to modern development, but also support areas that are not the primary focus of the [Belt-Road Initiative](#). Additionally, the multilateral aspect of the partnership possesses important advantages. Collaborating with allies like Japan would increase the



reputation of the partnership through Japan's history of [providing the region](#) with development support. Reputation, quality, and clear aims will all be critical to the formulation of engagement strategies with Southeast Asia.

Successfully engaging with Southeast Asia will require the United States to accept a number of facts about the region. For one, the United States must accept that most countries in Southeast Asia are not in positions where they can pick one side between the United States and China. China not only possesses great regional power and an unavoidable regional presence, but also offers development support to a region with great development demands. Given this, Southeast Asian countries will continue to engage in varying degrees of economic and development cooperation with China. Additionally, the United States must recognize the limits of framing the U.S-China competition as an ideological struggle in this region. A region with few liberal democracies is unlikely to respond to concerns over China's authoritarian model. Concerns over Chinese [conduct](#) in the South China Sea, the rise of [divisive nationalist rhetoric](#) from the PRC, and [growing debt concerns](#) create the basis for greater American engagement with the region. American actions should be consistent with the goal of reducing regional dependence on China, cooperating with regional partners in areas with shared interests, and supporting the region's growth through development initiatives.

While important, infrastructure and development initiatives will not be the sole determinants of the United States' position in Southeast Asia. Rather, these projects operate as a necessary precondition for any effort to reduce regional dependence on China. The United States will not be able to raise its influence in areas that are overwhelmingly reliant on China for critical needs like development and growth. As such, infrastructure and development initiatives led by the United States and its allies complement grand strategic aims by opening the door to greater forms of collaboration with the region. The formation of multilateral development initiatives for regions like Southeast Asia ultimately represent an important step in the improvement of American engagement with the region.