

US foreign policy

Antony Blinken blasts 'aggressive' China in Indo-Pacific policy speech

Secretary of state's tour of region aimed at shoring up US credibility in region, say analysts



Antony Blinken says Beijing's maritime claims in the South China Sea threaten the movement of \$3tn worth of trade © Olivier Douliery/Reuters

John Reed, south-east Asia correspondent 4 HOURS AGO

Antony Blinken has criticised “Beijing’s aggressive actions” against its neighbours and upheld Washington’s commitment to an Indo-Pacific region “free from coercion and accessible to all” in the US secretary of state’s first visit to south-east Asia since taking office.

The speech in Jakarta broke little new ground, said analysts, but they felt it might bolster US credibility in the region after the volatility of Donald Trump’s administration, which included a [trade war](#) with China and America’s [exit](#) from the transpacific trade pact.

Blinken also said that President Joe Biden planned to host regional leaders at a summit to be held in the US in coming months.

“It’s not about a contest between a US-centric region or a China-centric region. The Indo-Pacific is its own region,” Blinken said at the University of Indonesia, during the first leg of a three-country visit that will also take him to Malaysia and Thailand.

Blinken said that the US was committed to ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, where, he added, Beijing’s maritime claims on most of the sea threatened the movement of more than \$3tn worth of trade every year.

“It’s worth remembering that tied up in that colossal number are the livelihoods and

blocked from getting life-saving medicines.”

Blinken’s address was billed as a crucial update on Washington’s Indo-Pacific strategy, its policy of building ties with the countries on China’s doorstep in the face of an increasingly assertive Beijing.

His remarks were met with a pointed response from Beijing, where a foreign ministry spokesman accused the US of “exaggerating the so-called China threat”.

“The US should facilitate regional dialogue and co-operation, rather than provoke and disrupt relations in the region,” Wang Wenbin added.

South-east Asia is the region closest to the frontline of the US and China’s [conflicts over geopolitics](#), economic influence, human rights and maritime claims.

“Having a secretary of state come to the region and give a fairly normal, standard speech and try to get some awareness of what the US is doing is what needs to happen now to rebuild [after] the Trump years,” said Aaron Connelly, senior fellow in south-east Asian politics and foreign policy at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Singapore.

Last week, the US hosted a “[Summit for Democracy](#)” from which it excluded several south-east Asian countries, including Singapore and Thailand, ranking some in the region.

In Bangkok on Thursday Blinken is due to meet Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and, separately, civil society groups resisting what they describe as a clampdown on expression and human rights in the kingdom.

In his speech in Jakarta, Blinken said the US planned to strengthen its treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines and Thailand.

While the Biden administration has not announced any plans to join the [Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership](#), Blinken said Washington was developing a “comprehensive Indo-Pacific economic framework” that would include co-operation on trade, the digital economy, technology, supply chain resilience and investments in decarbonisation.

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