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Published weekly, Founded in 1975.
The views expressed on the opinion pages are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect those of News India Times.
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News India Times (ISSN 0199-901X) is published every Friday by
Parikh Worldwide Media LLC.,
35 Journal Square, Suite 204, Jersey City, NJ 07306
Periodicals postage paid at Newark, N.J., and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address change to News India Times, 35 Journal Square, Suite 204, Jersey City, NJ 07306
Annual Subscription: United States: \$28

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Why Kamala Harris's Trip To Asia Was So Important

By JENNIFER RUBIN

Vice President Kamala Harris's trip to Southeast Asia coincided with the collapse of the Afghan government and the deadly attack on U.S. forces that killed 13 Americans and scores of Afghans. It was hard to find coverage of her trip in U.S. media, which understandably was absorbed in the events in Afghanistan.

But in a surprising way, the trip underscored an argument the Biden administration has been advancing: Afghanistan is not our biggest worry. The United States has much more significant national security and economic issues elsewhere, especially in Asia. Indeed, talk of a "pivot to Asia" has been going on for 20 years, but so long as we were spending billions to fight a war that was not really possible to win, past administrations have been unable to focus on China and our Asian alliances, no matter how hard they tried.

Harris's trip was not a certainty. Her first foreign trip outside the Americas could have been to Europe or the Middle East. Instead, she chose Southeast Asia, despite concerns of covid-19. As the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated, State Department sources tell me, the issue came up as to whether she should go. Harris came down strongly in favor. Both in private and in public, officials in Singapore and in Vietnam expressed enthusiasm that she had kept the trip on track. Backing out would have sent the wrong signal that the administration was in retreat or did not care as much about our future relationship with Asia as withdrawing from a 20-year war.

Harris could point to a series of meaningful "deliverables" in Vietnam, such as assistance on covid-19, new commitments on green energy, security cooperation and tariff reductions. At a time when U.S. media was comparing the fall of Kabul to the fall of Saigon, this was a reminder that the United States did not continue a futile war in Vietnam endlessly; we moved on, and our influence in the region is stronger than it was in the 1970s.

At a news conference in Vietnam, reporters naturally asked Harris about Afghanistan, but nearly the entire event centered on expanding relations with Vietnam on a number of fronts. "I am the first vice president to visit Vietnam since diplomatic relations were established in 1995. And I believe that this trip signals the beginning of the next chapter in the relationship between the United States and Vietnam," Harris said. This was in stark contrast to the picture that the media painted regarding Afghanistan - that the United States had shaken allies and raised questions about its commitments.

She also raised human rights in her discussions with Vietnam. She said she privately pressured officials on political dissidents and highlighted civil society players. "We're not going to shy away from difficult conversations," she said at her news conference. NPR reported that on the last day of her trip, she "turned her attention to issues surrounding worker



U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris (L) and Vietnam's President Nguyen Xuan Phuc pose for a photograph in the Presidential palace in Hanoi August 25, 2021

rights and civil liberties . . . elevating activists in a region of the world known for its challenges and restrictions to human rights." The report continued, "Harris participated in what her team billed as a 'changemakers' event with activists working on LGBTQ rights and climate change." Perhaps reports of our waning interest in human rights are premature - or just wrong.

The contrast between agonizing over America's standing and evidence of our determination to expand it was most evident in Singapore. The remarks from Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the start of a joint news conference were telling:

The Biden administration inherited an extremely difficult situation. The U.S. had invested considerable blood and treasure in Afghanistan. But it was an intractable task given the complex history, geography and tribal rivalries of the place.

Successive U.S. presidents have declared their resolve to withdraw from Afghanistan. So I told the vice president that we understand President Biden's reasons for his decision. The U.S. intervention has stopped terrorist groups from using Afghanistan as a safe base for 20 years. For this, Singapore is grateful.

We hope Afghanistan does not become an epicenter for terrorism again. And post Afghanistan, in the longer term, what matters is how the U.S. repositions itself in the Asia Pacific, engages the broader region and continues the fight against terrorism because that will determine the perceptions of the countries, of the U.S. global priorities and of its strategic intentions.

Well that surely does not jibe with the favored media narrative of a nation shunned by allies. Lee continued, "On this 55th anniversary of U.S.-Singapore diplomatic relations, I'm happy that we are embarking on new areas of partnership. We concluded three agreements between our cyberdefense and finance industries, agencies. Singapore and [the] U.S. are also launching a climate partnership, and we are also pleased with our joint smart city capacity building initiatives." He praised a new partnership "for growth and innovation" and welcomed dialogue to "strengthen supply chain resilience."

In a speech in Singapore, Harris briefly addressed Afghanistan, but then turned to the meat of her speech. She

reiterated commitments on security and then leveled a strong rebuke against China, which she said "continues to coerce, to intimidate and to make claims to the vast majority of the South China Sea." She emphasized, "These unlawful claims have been rejected by the 2016 arbitral tribunal decision. And Beijing's actions continue to undermine the rules-based order and threaten the sovereignty of nations. The United States stands with our allies and partners in the face of these threats."

Harris got strong reviews from foreign policy gurus. Jonathan Stromseth at the Brookings Institution noted:

In that speech [in Singapore] she put forward a positive vision of peace and stability, freedom of the seas, unimpeded commerce, advancing human rights - including in places like Burma - and a commitment to the international rules-based order. . . .

She also addressed the pullout in Afghanistan, indicating that as the U.S. addresses urgent developments there it's also capable of continuing to advance U.S. interests in other regions like Southeast Asia.

Stromseth argued that, "if the Harris visit is followed up by vigorous diplomacy matched with resources, then perhaps the pivot to Asia, or the rebalance policy of the Obama administration, can finally be realized as the U.S. becomes less distracted by these endless wars in the Middle East."

The notion that allies in other parts of the world fear that the United States will abandon ongoing mutual interests because it is shedding military obligations in Afghanistan certainly was not evident in Harris's meetings with officials in either country. State Department officials said her bilateral meetings went beyond the allotted time and estimated that 95 percent focused on issues at hand and 5 percent on Afghanistan.

Unsurprisingly, other countries around the world care about themselves and their regional issues. Harris was there to reaffirm that it is full steam

ahead on our relationships with Southeast Asian allies in the face of China's military, economic and cyber threats. In doing so, she underscored that rather than edging away from U.S. allies, the administration wants to draw them closer.

-THE WASHINGTON POST

Photo: The Washington Post

