

ENHANCE HEALTH COOPERATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

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Context and background

Australia and the United States should build on existing commitments to strengthen health security in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. These efforts must focus on addressing the secondary impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which threaten to reverse fragile gains made across broader health and development indicators over recent decades. Despite early containment measures resulting in lower caseloads throughout Southeast Asia and the Pacific compared to other regions, progress in controlling the spread of the virus and the ongoing capacity of national governments to respond to outbreaks remains deeply uneven.^{3.1} Diversion of material and human resources to address COVID-19 has placed further strain on already weak health systems, causing significant disruption to essential services and stalling momentum towards universal health coverage.^{3.2} An estimated 34.8 million infants throughout Southeast Asia have missed routine vaccinations as a result of the pandemic,^{3.3} with health experts warning that efforts to control and eradicate malaria in the Pacific are also at risk.^{3.4}

The 2020 AUSMIN Global Health Security Statement established a foundation for bilateral cooperation in tackling COVID-19 throughout the region with its pledge to strengthen and accelerate health security capacity building.^{3.5} Australia and the Biden administration should recommit to this joint plan of activities with an expanded

remit to confront a broader suite of health and development challenges emerging from the pandemic. This approach will be crucial for ensuring collective action strengthens health systems holistically, rather than creating parallel infrastructure that operates solely in response to COVID-19 and generates limited long-term impact.^{3.6}

The Biden administration

Engagement with multilateral institutions and stronger coordination with allies in meeting global health challenges is a key priority for the new administration. President Biden has stressed the need to “restore US global leadership to fight [the COVID-19] pandemic” and reversed former President Trump’s withdrawal from the World Health Organization on his first day in office.^{3.7} The White House roadmap for combating coronavirus includes ambitions for sustained domestic and international funding for global health security that extends beyond emergency funds for health and humanitarian assistance. The administration also intends to enact institutional change, creating an office of Global Health Security and Diplomacy at the State Department and re-establishing the Obama-era Directorate for Global Health Security and Biodefense within the National Security Council.^{3.8} This heightened focus on America’s contribution to health security has been underpinned by personnel appointments with experience navigating

pandemics, including Biden’s chief of staff Ron Klain who oversaw the Obama administration’s response to the 2014 Ebola outbreak. Other picks for key positions – including the Secretary of Homeland Security and Ambassador to the United Nations – also played active roles during the Ebola and Zika outbreaks.^{3.9}

But translating this momentum into sustained attention and resources for the Indo-Pacific will be a considerable challenge. Securing funding for an expanded international response will require ongoing congressional support in the face of significant challenges facing America’s own COVID-19 response and domestic economy more broadly.^{3.10} These efforts will also require a reconceptualisation of American global health financing, which has developed under a model of shared responsibility that encourages recipient countries to increase their own investments in health systems strengthening alongside donor contributions.^{3.11} Equally, achieving an explicit regional focus will require the introduction of specific directives or initiatives led by senior figures within the US government. For instance, USAID’s Over the Horizon Strategic Review – conducted to provide goals for the agency’s medium- to long-term response to COVID-19 – identified 14 focus countries that combined development need, opportunity for impact, and US national security interests, none of which are in Southeast Asia or the Pacific.^{3.12}

Table 4. The Australian Government’s COVID-19 development response: Partnerships for Recovery (published in May 2020)

Focus	2019-20: The swift initial response	2020-21: Investing in regional recovery
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Pacific and Timor-Leste › Southeast Asia › Global response <p>Priority action areas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Health security › Stability › Economic recovery <p>with a cross-cutting focus on protecting the most vulnerable</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Our development investments have pivoted to COVID-19 priorities. All continuing investments are addressing development challenges exacerbated by COVID-19. › Immediate distribution of PPE and other critical medical supplies. › \$280 million for the Indo-Pacific Response and Recovery Package. › Kept critical transport links open in our region amid global supply chain disruptions. 	<p>FY2020-21 budget:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › A\$4 billion in Overseas Development Assistance aligned with Partnerships for Recovery › Including \$80m commitment to Gavi-COVAX Advance Market Commitment <p>Additional targeted measures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › \$304.7m COVID-19 Response Package Pacific and Timor-Leste › \$23.2m Vaccine Access and Health Security Pacific, Timor-Leste and Southeast Asia › Response detailed in 27 tailored COVID-19 Development Response Plans

Source: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “Infographic: Partnerships for Recovery.” Available at: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/development/infographic-partnerships-recovery>

AUSTRALIA’S NEW PARTNERSHIPS FOR RECOVERY POLICY INCLUDES HEALTH SECURITY AS A CORE ACTION AREA, WHICH, COUPLED WITH AUSTRALIA’S RECENT COMMITMENT OF \$500 MILLION TOWARDS THE EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF VACCINES THROUGHOUT THE REGION, FURTHERS THESE ONGOING HUMANITARIAN AND REPUTATIONAL EFFORTS.

Australian interests

Enhanced health cooperation with the United States in Southeast Asia and the Pacific would help to ensure a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific, a key Australian national interest. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia had taken significant steps towards raising its profile and commitment to strengthening regional health systems and resilience, namely through the 2017 Indo-Pacific Health Security Initiative and associated Indo-Pacific Centre for Health Security.^{3.13} Australia's new Partnerships for Recovery policy includes health security as a core action area, which, coupled with Australia's recent commitment of \$500 million towards the equitable distribution of vaccines throughout the region, furthers these ongoing humanitarian and reputational efforts.^{3.14} Such projects also align with broader regional priorities, including ASEAN's COVID-19 Comprehensive Recovery Framework which focuses on enhancing health systems and accelerating inclusive digital transformation.^{3.15}

Pooling resources in pursuit of joint objectives will also enable Australia to step up its engagement throughout the region. Despite recent statements by Prime Minister Morrison that "ASEAN's centrality is at the core of Australia's vision for the Indo-Pacific,"^{3.16} Canberra's pivoted aid program focuses primarily on the Pacific,

Timor-Leste and Indonesia due to the presence of pre-existing partnerships.^{3.17} As the largest source of bilateral COVID-19 aid to Southeast Asia – with major contributions to the Philippines, Cambodia and Myanmar – further collaboration with the United States can help Australia bridge this gap.^{3.18}

Policy recommendations

Australia and the United States should:

- › **Partner to protect and restore essential health services in priority countries.** These efforts could focus on the delivery of routine immunisations that have been disrupted during the pandemic, or on a specific infectious disease at risk of re-emergence.
- › **Commit to joint investments in digital health technologies.** These would offer opportunities to support better care and disease surveillance and can act as an important tool for public communication during health emergencies. Financing should address the digital divide and ensure equitable access for rural communities and women. Such investments would align with the goals of the WHO 2020-2025 Global Strategy on Digital Health and present an avenue to operationalise the MOU between the United States Agency for International Development and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade from July 2020 supporting high-quality and sustainable development outcomes in partner countries through digital connectivity.^{3.19}
- › **Deepen regional and bilateral engagement in the Pacific.** Australia should express its support for bipartisan legislation currently before Congress that provides an expanded framework for US foreign policy in the Pacific islands. The Boosting Long-Term US Engagement (BLUE) Pacific Act proposes increased diplomatic and development presence, supports public health programs, and proposes funding of more than triple current levels of assistance. Importantly, the framework would integrate the US approach with other partners including Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Taiwan.^{3.20}