

Committed to ASEAN 'for generations', says U.S.

Biden moots special envoy to the bloc

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

President Joe Biden on Friday promised a long-term commitment to Southeast Asia in the face of China's growing clout as he met regional leaders for a first summit in Washington.

Mr. Biden laid out \$150 million in new initiatives and announced plans for the first full U.S. Ambassador to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in more than five years.

A region that "is free and open, stable and prosperous, and resilient and secure is what we're all seeking," Mr. Biden told ASEAN leaders, a day after he kicked off the two-day summit.

Vice-President Kamala Harris said the U.S. "recognises the vital strategic importance of your region." "As an Indo-Pacific nation, the U.S. will be present and continue to be engaged in Southeast Asia for generations to come," she said.

Mr. Biden said he would nominate Yohannes Abra-

ham, the chief of staff of the National Security Council and a key aide during the presidential transition, as Ambassador to ASEAN's secretariat in Jakarta.

The U.S. has not had a Senate-confirmed Ambassador to ASEAN since Barack Obama's presidency, with Donald Trump only nominating an envoy after losing the 2020 election.

The Biden administration is hoping to demonstrate a sustained interest in Southeast Asia after months focused on repelling Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Mr. Biden took office saying that his top foreign policy priority would be the global competition with China, which has surpassed the United States as Southeast Asia's top trading partner and has been increasingly assertive on territorial disputes in the region.

Chinese President Xi Jinping at his own virtual summit with ASEAN last year announced \$1.5 billion in COVID-19 aid over three years.