



## THE PENINSULA

### **Korea Policy Series: The Challenge for Southeast Asia**

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The return of Donald Trump to the Oval Office has ushered in an era of uncertainty. From Ukraine and the Middle East to the global climate agenda and “Liberation Day” tariffs, the second Trump administration has embarked on a foreign policy behavior that departs—certainly in form if not in substance—from his predecessors. Against this backdrop of uncertainty and transformation, the nature of U.S. competition with China will have consequential significance for the entire world and most certainly [Southeast Asia](#), a region that has found itself an arena for this great power rivalry.

#### **Redefining National Interests**

U.S. commitments in Asia, whether the Korean Peninsula or the South China Sea, will have to be squared with the sea change in U.S. perceptions of its power and position. The assumptions that lend meaning and credibility to these commitments—that the United States is capable and willing to expend resources to maintain faraway security networks—may no longer be as self-evident as they once were.

A key issue is the question of U.S. primacy in the region. While it has been a long-held belief that one of the key U.S. strategic objectives in Asia since World War II is preventing the rise of a regional hegemon, this may no longer be the case. While academics continue to argue about multipolarity, the second Trump administration has gone ahead to accept it as *the* premise of the contemporary distribution of power. As Secretary of State Marco Rubio recently opined, “It’s not normal for the world to simply have a unipolar power ... that was an anomaly. It was a product of the end of the Cold War, but eventually you were going to reach back to a point where you had a multipolar world, multi-great powers in different parts of the planet.” Likewise, he continued elsewhere, “We’re not a global government ... we’re the Government of the United States [and o]ur number one priority needs to be our national interest.”

This narrow definition of national interest and presumption of multipolarity are predicated on growing weariness toward costly commitments—chiefly overseas military ventures—which in turn manifests in concerns that the United States is overstretched and sacrificing men and material on causes irrelevant to core U.S. interests.

Trump has long articulated an aversion to overseas “forever wars” and military intervention in general, pushing allies to assume greater responsibility for U.S. defense commitments by either paying more for the U.S. security umbrella or mustering their own defense. Elbridge Colby stated during his confirmation hearing for under secretary of defense for policy that he “understands strength for sure, but also understands... the downside risks of the use of military force ... of not being cavalier about... deploying our men and women in uniform.”

Instead of seeing alliances and relationships as commitments and vehicles for pursuing regional interests, the Trump administration openly views them as underutilized leverage to further advance an America-First agenda.

### **How Should Southeast Asia Respond?**

Southeast Asia has insisted on nonalignment and hedging rather than picking a side in the ongoing rivalry between the United States and China. While this may have served the region well in the past, Southeast Asia is not quite in an enviable position in the current climate. The increasing unreliability of U.S. commitments casts doubt on the role that the United States can be expected to play as a regional counterweight to China, while persistent trade protectionism jeopardizes the economic strategies of Southeast Asian economies eager to capitalize on the supply chains of the two great powers. While many in the region have pushed back against what Washington has called “values-based” diplomacy, they may soon come to find its nakedly transactional side equally daunting.

Facing unpredictable U.S. leadership, more conditional forms of U.S. engagement and commitment, and the decline of a rules-based order, Southeast Asia will have to double down on hedging and an omnidirectional policy—all while seeking to avoid overreliance on the United States and brace themselves for the worst of U.S. tendencies.

To that end, Southeast Asia needs to consider greater diversification and integration efforts to improve their collective resilience in order not to be held hostage to U.S.-China rivalry. This will entail deepening engagement at both bilateral and multilateral levels with other external powers, in which some have fared better than others. Vietnam and Singapore, for instance, are enmeshed within robust trade networks such as the Comprehensive and

Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific (CPTPP) and trade agreements with the European Union, while Thailand is seeking to conclude long-overdue trade talks with the European Union. Indonesia and Malaysia, on the other hand, are moving in the other direction in seeking closer ties with Russia and Central Asia as well as the BRICS grouping. Cambodia recently forged free trade deals with South Korea and the United Arab Emirates, but such efforts at diversifying trade ties are still too incipient to offset being cut off from what is its largest export market, the United States.

In addition, Southeast Asian states must double down on their efforts at regional integration. Economic integration among Southeast Asian countries has long figured in the region's agenda, but heightened global uncertainties have injected new urgency into this mandate. They must also look to each other as real, viable complements to shared strategic interests, rather than taking a myopic view focused on external powers. Such efforts can and should start small rather than through the cumbersome processes of ASEAN. Recent defense cooperation between the South China Sea claimants of Vietnam and the Philippines and the new special economic zone between more developed Malaysia and Singapore are modest but welcomed signs of mutual confidence-building.

Such efforts are easier said than done, but there is a common denominator on which they can build a common cause: no Southeast Asian state wishes to be in a position where they have to choose between the United States and China, and all Southeast Asian states are staring at the possibility of being collectively squeezed by the two great powers.

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**Return to the Peninsula**