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## **Bracing for a Possible Trump 2.0: Implications for the Indo-Pacific**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*A second Trump presidency could prove as rocky for the Indo-Pacific region as Trump's first term was. Asian leaders weathered the upheaval and even earned Trump's trust and support the first time around. Whether they can do so a second time – should Trump, a convicted felon, regain the presidency this November – is likely to depend on how well Asia engages Trump.*

### **COMMENTARY**

American voters will decide on 5 November 2024 who the president of the United States will be in 2025: whether current US president Joe Biden, going for his second consecutive term, or Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, who is hoping to get back into the White House. The numbers may differ depending on which poll one looks at, but the long and short of it is (at time of writing) neither man is showing a commanding lead over the other.

While polling data is fickle and often unreliable as a predictor of future events, the most recent findings suggest that Trump's current legal troubles – the former president was convicted of felony on 34 counts in a Manhattan court on 30 May – are starting to impact his electability. (In addition, Trump faces 57 more felony counts across one state court and two different federal districts.) That said, depending on what the courts decide, the possibility that Trump could still contest the elections this November and be re-elected as president cannot be prematurely discounted.

Should Trump return next year as America's commander-in-chief, what can the Indo-Pacific region expect? [In a recent essay in \*Foreign Affairs\*](#), a former Australian prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, offered this sombre comment: "If Trump returns to the White House in 2025, only the wilfully deluded could imagine that a second Trump administration would be less volatile and alarming than the first." Few from this region, having endured the trying consequences of dealing with an unpredictable and highly capricious US leader during his term (2017–2020), will likely disagree with Turnbull.



Based on his first presidential term, Donald Trump's potential second term could be challenging for the Indo-Pacific region if he is re-elected. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

## Reassessing Trump 1.0

A look back at how the first Trump presidency and its Indo-Pacific policy transpired is in order. Memorably, Trump started his term with massive complaints against Washington's allies and threats to quit NATO over perceived imbalances in payment for the alliance. On his first day in office, he withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade arrangement – an early indication of [Trump's dislike \(and regular disparagement\) of globalism and multilateralism](#), including multilateral organisations like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization.

Trump was a regular no-show at the ASEAN summits, including the East Asia Summit. He attended meetings of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum but used those occasions to [attack other APEC member economies](#) for allegedly having cheated America over trade. Despite professing "love" for China's president Xi Jinping in 2016, his administration adopted a hardline stance against China. These and other instances have collectively made the case for Trump's purported [abandonment of America's long-standing role](#) in the post-WWII era as leader of the "free world" and guarantor of strategic order.

That said, despite openly declaring the demise of his predecessor Barack Obama's Asia pivot (or rebalance), Trump's "free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy, rather than killing the Obama pivot, [arguably retained](#) significant facets of existing US engagement with Asia while promising to enhance others. Evidently, the efforts by various Asian leaders to wine and dine Trump worked enough to change Trump's early misgivings, not least from a transactional standpoint ([which is how Trump reportedly approaches things](#) given his widely touted self-image as a consummate dealmaker).

Among the ASEAN countries, Singapore doubtless played its part through moves like inking a US\$13.8 billion aircraft deal – signed at the White House under Trump’s watchful eye – with the Boeing Company in 2017 and hosting Trump’s first summit with North Korea’s Chairman Kim Jong Un in 2018, among other things. (Another ASEAN member, Vietnam, hosted the second Trump-Kim summit in 2019.)

## **Winning Trump Over**

By late 2017, Trump’s warming “lovefest” with Asia and his embrace of US allies like Japan and South Korea had become so complete that [observers noted little difference](#) between some of Trump’s Asia-focused speeches and those Obama used to give. A year later, Trump would sign into law the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA), which authorised US\$1.5 billion in annual spending for programmes in support of “[a long-term strategic vision](#) and a comprehensive, multifaceted, and principled United States policy for the Indo-Pacific region, and for other purposes”. Granted, shortly before Trump signed the ARIA, the US Congress slashed funding for the Asia Maritime Security Initiative (a US aid programme that pre-dated the ARIA) by about half its previous sum, but the [ARIA compensated for that reduction](#).

It could be argued that Trump’s plan – to the extent he had one – during his first term was not to sever ties with Asian allies as such but to compel them to spend more on behalf of their relations with the United States. And if so, it could even be said that the Obama pivot was survived by Trump’s FOIP strategy, one that was sufficiently distinct but no less important or comprehensive than its predecessor – even if its coherence and consistency had occasionally been threatened by the imperatives of Trump’s “America First” focus.

## **America Hardening on China?**

Furthermore, if Indo-Pacific leaders are concerned that a second Trump presidency will be disastrous for their region, it is instructive that, according to [a reputable annual survey](#) published in 2024 by the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, China appears to have edged out the United States for the first time in years – 50.5% in favour of China against 49.5% for the United States – when Southeast Asian respondents were asked who their choice would be if their region were forced to align itself in the ongoing US-China rivalry.

The survey’s findings underscore the region’s discontent over the ongoing escalation in tensions between Washington and Beijing over their comprehensive strategic competition, which has led to an increase in sabre-rattling over the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea – including, in the latter case, Beijing’s new maritime engagement rules that allow the Chinese coast guard operating in the South China Sea to [fire at will at foreign ships](#) as well as [detain foreign nationals](#).

This is not to imply that Southeast Asians will prefer an America led by Trump over one led by Biden. If anything, it is difficult to expect that a second Trump administration will adopt a less robust stance on Beijing than that currently taken by the Biden administration, especially given how Americans on both sides of the aisle regard China today. The Democrats and Republicans may not agree on much but there is a

remarkably strong and stable bipartisan consensus among them on China, which is supported by the [findings of a recent Pew study](#).

## Whither Trump 2.0

Where a potential Trump 2.0 is concerned, we are reduced to speculating on its potential consequences for the Indo-Pacific. Trump has insisted that he will, if re-elected, [fill his cabinet with China hawks](#). If so, a robust policy against China, as evidenced by Biden's current strategy, can work only if all allies and partners are on board with the United States. As much as Trump would presumably want them to pay more for regional security, it is equally plausible that Trump may be forced to produce another ARIA or equivalent, or to keep doing what Biden is now doing to engage the Indo-Pacific.

That said, the broader concern for the region may boil down to whether Trump will find good people for his team. Trump's first term was painful for the unfortunate way he got rid of the so-called "[adults in the room](#)" – Jim Mattis, Rex Tillerson, John Kelly, H. R. McMaster and others – whose collective efforts arguably kept their boss's negative tendencies in check, until they themselves got fired or quit. If Trump gets to form a new administration, it is likely to be [a team picked for their pre-vetted loyalty to him](#), one staffed with fawning sycophants who may not know their business. No independent-minded thinkers need apply for they are not likely to be tolerated by Trump.

If Trump 2.0 happens, the Indo-Pacific could be in for a rough ride. The apparent ability of Asian leaders to win Trump's trust during his previous term will stand them in good stead. Again, [according to Malcolm Turnbull](#), the best way for foreign governments to influence Trump is to build a strong relationship between their top leader – not their ambassador or foreign minister, but their head of state or government – and Trump. Regional leaders will do well to take note of that advice.

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