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## **How Will Southeast Asian Leaders Approach Trump 2.0?**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*How will Southeast Asian governments react to the second Trump administration? On the one hand, structural factors suggest that there will be a high degree of US policy continuity in the region. On the other hand, personal relationships matter greatly to Donald Trump and could dominate structural variables. This paper suggests that Trump tends to have four different types of relationships with foreign leaders, and that Southeast Asian officials will have to keep this in mind when dealing with the new administration in Washington.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Southeast Asian leaders, like their counterparts elsewhere, are currently deciding how to approach the second Trump administration. Despite suggestions to the contrary, US policy in Southeast Asia is likely to exhibit a high degree of continuity. After all, the US approach to the region did not change drastically from Trump to Biden, so reversion to Trump is unlikely to be transformative.

There are two fundamental reasons for this continuity. First, the Trump and Biden teams both viewed the Indo-Pacific as their priority theatre, so remained committed to the region. Second, despite this fact, neither Trump nor Biden was willing to provide additional US market access or tone down talk of strategic competition with China — which were Southeast Asia's top two desires.

Therefore, although American engagement will continue, Southeast Asia will remain disappointed with Washington's policies. What changed on 20 January was not the fundamentals of US policy toward the region, but rather the relationships between the US president and his regional counterparts. It is therefore vital to understand the types of leader-level relationships that Trump had in his first term, and to assess how these might apply to Southeast Asia in his second term.

In his first term, two factors were particularly critical for foreign leaders dealing with Trump. First was Trump’s perception of that leader’s domestic political position. Trump preferred leaders with strong support at home. When Trump saw leaders as weak, he tended to discount their ability to build the political support necessary to strike deals. Trump also took into account whether a democratic leader was conservative or liberal, seldom building ties with progressive leaders.

The second factor for Trump was the national relationship with the country in question. Notably, this tended to be a secondary consideration — it did not determine the nature of Trump’s relationships. Trump paid more attention to countries that he viewed as either aligned with the United States or un-aligned but powerful. But greater attention did not always mean a better relationship, particularly with leaders of progressive democratic governments.

**Figure 1: Trump’s Relationships with Foreign Leaders**

		Trump’s View of National Relationship	
		US Aligned	Not US Aligned
Trump’s View of Leader’s Political Position	Strong Leader	<u>Friends</u> (Abe and Modi)	<u>Frenemies</u> (Xi and Putin)
	Weak Leader	<u>Foes</u> (Trudeau and Merkel)	<u>Forgotten</u> (Lula and Jokowi)

As Figure 1 shows, Trump tended to have four different types of relationships with foreign leaders:

- *Friends*: The simplest scenario for a foreign leader dealing with Trump is to be a strong conservative hailing from a country aligned with the United States. Examples in the first Trump term included Japan’s Shinzo Abe and India’s Narendra Modi. Each had a close relationship with Trump, and was viewed as a critical ally on the global stage. They were careful to focus on building relationships with Trump early in his term, rather than using that leverage too early. But after doing so they were able to exert a degree of influence over Trump’s thinking by keeping him close and giving him a “bear hug”.
- *Frenemies*: A second group included rulers of large countries not aligned with the United States. Russia’s Vladimir Putin and China’s Xi Jinping each had productive working relationships with Trump. Indeed, he labelled them friends, praising Putin’s “genius” and stating that he and Xi “love each other”. Trump appeared to prize these “strongmen” for their ability not only to rule their countries but also to deliver on their promises. In each case, Trump had a far

better personal relationship with them than did most other recent American presidents.

- *Foes:* Leaders from US-aligned countries whom Trump viewed as either weak or at odds with his political objectives were in a more difficult position. In his first term, these included Canada's Justin Trudeau, Germany's Angela Merkel, and South Korea's Moon Jae-in, each of whom had challenging relationships with Trump. Notably, a handful of leaders were able to move from this category to the first — Trump initially saw Australia's Scott Morrison as domestically weak but adjusted his view after the latter's unexpected election victory in 2019. These leaders often tried to ward Trump off like a rattlesnake, yet seldom had positive results.
- *Forgotten:* A final group of leaders are those from non-aligned countries and who are seen by Trump as either weak or mis-aligned politically. These leaders tended not to have bad ties with Trump, but little relationship at all. Trump appeared to view them as either unimportant or uncooperative. Examples from Trump's first term included Brazil's Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, Indonesia's Joko Widodo ("Jokowi"), and Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky (although the latter's position in Trump's friendship calculus might shift in his second term). For these leaders, the best strategy was often to be adaptive like a chameleon, hiding in plain sight when possible and changing colours when necessary.



Can Southeast Asia build strong relationships with the second Trump administration?

*Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

What does this mean for Southeast Asia? No categorisation is perfect, but descriptive frameworks can provide insight into how Trump might react to regional leaders, almost all of whom fall into the category of leaders likely to be largely forgotten during Trump's term. One exception might be the Philippines' Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, who is from an allied country and could become a friend to Trump. Another possible, albeit unlikely, exception is Indonesia's Prabowo Subianto, who is the popular president of the world's fourth largest country by population.

With these possible exceptions, it appears unlikely that Southeast Asian leaders will be able to build strong relationships with Trump. They will therefore find themselves unable to lobby effectively for the three things Southeast Asians want most from the United States: (1) greater access to American markets and investment, (2) a consistent security presence that is calming rather than confrontational, and (3) support for ASEAN centrality without interference in countries' domestic politics. Trump is likely to disappoint on the first, maintain continuity on the second, and opine less on the third — there is little Southeast Asian leaders can do on these points.

Biden was by no means perfect in these respects. Although he created the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, it did not open access to US markets. Meanwhile, the US military presence in Southeast Asia increased, but confidence in the United States as a strategic partner decreased, according to surveys of Southeast Asian experts. US engagement disappointed many as Biden skipped ASEAN meetings and his rhetoric on democracy played poorly in several countries.

In his first term, Trump was criticised for several related decisions. His withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations dashed hopes for greater US market access. His more confrontational approach with China worried many in the region who hoped to avoid “having to choose” between Washington and Beijing. And his inconsistent regional engagement left many wondering how deeply committed the United States was to Southeast Asia.

These concerns are likely to remain, regardless of how Southeast Asian leaders choose to engage Trump during his second time in office. Washington is set on a suboptimal path in the region, but given their inability to fundamentally change US policies, most regional leaders are likely to favour quiet consultations with administration officials over major public engagements with Trump. Being forgotten is not ideal, but it is better than being a foe or a frenemy — this may not please the region, but it is probably the best that Southeast Asia can do in the years ahead.

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