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Is the Pivot to Asia Finally Happening?

By Drew Thompson

SYNOPSIS

The Obama Administration pledged to pivot to Asia but was unwilling to pay the political costs of prioritisation, choosing to rebalance instead. As the Trump Administration turns its back on Europe, does this mean the pivot is going to happen? Asianists in key positions within the Administration will compete for Trump's approval to prioritise competition with China.

COMMENTARY

Trump has stunned Europe by following through on his pledge to force an end to the fighting in Ukraine, and making European allies take more responsibility for their own security. The Pentagon has reportedly been instructed to [prepare to withdraw US forces deployed in Syria](#). Is the Trump administration in the early stages of actually pivoting to Asia?

The pivot to Asia was first articulated around 2010 during the Obama administration, with Kurt Campbell, then Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, one of its most passionate advocates. Campbell's book, [The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia](#), was published in 2016. The Obama administration was uncomfortable with the label, feeling that "pivot" implied withdrawing from Europe and the Middle East. The semantic compromise was to call it a [rebalance](#), which undermined the premise of prioritisation and failed to acknowledge that scarcity of resources necessitated hard choices. In the Biden administration, Kurt Campbell returned as a senior National Security Council official and then as Deputy Secretary of State, [sparking speculation that the pivot would actually happen](#). But Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine dragged Washington back to the business of defending Europe.

On the campaign trail, Donald Trump derided America's endless wars and promised to end the wars in Gaza and Ukraine. Many of his foreign policy supporters argued

that America's real threat is its near-peer competitor in Asia, China, and that US attention should focus on support for Asian allies building their capabilities to defend themselves.

Once in office, Trump has invested considerable political capital and attention on ending the Ukraine and Gaza conflicts. But is the administration actually pivoting to Asia, or will America retreat from Asia as well? The jury is still out. Trump has not committed, leaving his appointees to jockey for position and make their respective cases.

Rise of the Asianists?

Trump's appointees are a mix of right-wing libertarians, Wall Street capitalists, and Asianists, each with competing foreign policy ideologies. (Some refer to the libertarians as "isolationists", "restrainers", or "realists," while the Asianists have also been described as "prioritisers".) The libertarians and Asianists have the strongest influence on foreign policy and the contest between the two will shape whether or not the US successfully pivots to Asia.

The libertarians oppose foreign development assistance and seek to avoid wars, counselling restraint. Some argue that China and Russia are nuclear powers that deserve a degree of deference, and that it is not in the national interest to go to war with big powers over minor American interests on their peripheries. Essentially, Taiwan and Ukraine are not worth fighting China or Russia over. They ultimately support the reduction of spending on defence concurrent with the decoupling of security commitments around the world.

The Asianists agree with reducing European and Middle Eastern security commitments but diverge from the libertarians in prioritising national security policy resources on China as the primary threat to the United States, with Taiwan as the battleground for conflict. They believe that US alliances in the region should support that priority, and that Taiwan and Japan should bear a greater part of the burden in defending themselves.

If the Asianists prevail, the pivot could become reality. For the first time, the Deputies Committee – the key forum where national security issues are brought for senior-level discussion and initial decision – will be led for the first time by three Asianists. They are Deputy National Security Advisor Alex Wong, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy-nominee Bridge Colby, and Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs-nominee Alison Hooker. These Asia experts will put critical choices before the President for decision. This does not assure that the administration ultimately doubles down on the defence of Taiwan and whole-hearted competition with China. But personnel is policy, and we have experienced Asia hands running defence and foreign policy at the key agencies.

President Trump has not backed either school of thought, however. He is not ideologically driven. He keeps his own counsel, keeps his cards close to his chest, and revels in his own unpredictability and the leverage it gives him when negotiating with foreign counterparts, and perhaps his own advisors as well. This makes for uncertainty, as well as a lack of clarity, and perhaps even our awareness of whether

a pivot is actually happening. Barring a clear speech or Truth Social post, observers may struggle to perceive that a pivot is underway.

Contours of a Trump Pivot

If America does finally pivot, what might it look like? Certainly, decoupling from European security would be sustained. The administration would need to succeed in extracting troops from Syria and avoid putting boots on the ground in the Eastern Mediterranean or Yemen. There will be sustained bilateral engagement with capable allies in the Pacific, and enhancement of security cooperation with select partners. There are indications that is already occurring. [Taiwan](#) and [Philippines](#) foreign military assistance was approved just days after a declared freeze on all military aid. [Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's visit to the White House](#) in February exceeded expectations and resulted in a joint statement that reflected Tokyo's security concerns, not just Washington's.

A Trump pivot to Asia would likely not manifest itself as an embrace of Asian multilateral networks, or a comprehensive strengthening of bilateral relationships. Trump believes multilateral architectures dilute US power. He finds multilateral engagements socially awkward and is more comfortable engaging counterparts bilaterally, where he can choose to either dominate a counterpart, as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky discovered, or bestow goodwill, as Ishiba received.

ASEAN is unlikely to feature prominently in a Trump pivot, but there are opportunities for strengthened bilateral relations in both North and Southeast Asia. The Quad (Australia, India, Japan and the US) may feature in a pivot, but that would likely reflect Trump's personal preference for the individual leaders in that group. Bilaterally, economic competition and Trump's insistence on economic reciprocity and reindustrialisation of America will still be a feature of US relations in Asia, even with concurrent strengthening security relationships.

Singapore, Australia, and Mongolia are the only countries in Asia that have a trade deficit with the US (Hong Kong, the Special Administrative Region of China, also has a deficit), leaving the rest of the region to accept Washington's economic coercion as a part of the pivot.

Conclusion

The volatility of an administration fuelled by Trump's outlook and leadership style, coupled with competing schools of thought amongst his advisers, makes it impossible to conclude with certainty what the future holds for American foreign policy. Contradictions and unpredictability will undoubtedly define US foreign relations, much as Trump imposes tariffs on friend and foe alike. There are nevertheless indications of a shift in US focus towards Asia, as the competing foreign policy visions are debated within the Administration.

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