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Assessing Trump's Pivot to Asia and Possible Responses

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SYNOPSIS

Over a decade since it was initially announced, the United States finally appears to be completing its pivot to Asia under President Donald Trump — but it isn't clear if this move will have its desired strategic impact. Amid the lack of a positive trade and development agenda for the region, much more is known about the sticks that Trump brandishes than the carrots he wields. In response, ASEAN member states can choose to minimise or be more proactive in their engagement with the United States. Regardless of their policy path, ASEAN member states should hasten their economic integration efforts to act as a backstop against future disruptions.

COMMENTARY

The idea of an American pivot to Asia was first announced in November 2011, during the presidency of Barack Obama. The rationale was that the United States needed to rebalance its strategic attention away from the Middle East and make Asia the primary region for American attention, in large part to counter China's growing influence in Asia.

Yet, the pivot proved elusive. America's status as a global superpower typically burdens it with global responsibilities that it cannot easily avoid. Soon after this announcement, President Obama was bogged down with further crises in the Middle East; President Joe Biden, likewise, was ensnared with crises in Ukraine and Gaza.

Donald Trump is the latest president to make a serious attempt to refocus US attention towards Asia, but what is less clear is if a pivot under him will have its desired strategic impact. From trade to development, Trump has essentially no positive agenda for the region, with much more known about the sticks he brandishes than the carrots he extends. Regardless of whether members of the Association of Southeast Asian

Nations (ASEAN) hide from or proactively engage with this new administration, they should hasten their integration within the bloc to minimise the impact of further turbulence.



Trump is pivoting to Asia, but the US' positive agenda for the region is far from clear. ASEAN should strengthen economic integration to safeguard against potential disruptions.

Image source: [Flickr](#).

From Trade to Development, No Positive Agenda

A key aspect of Obama's pivot to Asia was the introduction of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The massive trade deal, which was painstakingly negotiated over nearly eight years and encompassed nearly [40 per cent](#) of global gross domestic product (GDP) in 2016, was supposed to intertwine the economic future of the United States and Asia and provide a foundation for future trade dialogues with its terminology.

The withdrawal of the United States from the TPP under Trump's first term dealt a heavy blow to US strategy and credibility. Granted, the United States is still a major investor and export market for Southeast Asian economies. Yet, private sector activities cannot substitute for a lack of official policy. Without the centrepiece of the TPP, the United States willingly surrendered a [seat at the table](#) for future conversations about multilateral trade in the region. Furthermore, the fact that Washington withdrew from a pact of its own design dealt a blow to its [credibility](#) that it has not recovered from.

The Biden administration aimed to fill this void with the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), but even that was a poor substitute for the TPP. While it covered novel areas such as supply chain issues, regional governments were perplexed by IPEF's refusal to offer more trade access to the US market as an incentive. Rather than signalling the US' return to a free trade agenda, the IPEF reinforced the concern that Washington was turning its back on the said agenda, especially as its trade pillar [foundered](#) following domestic pushback.

With Trump being an avowed opponent of multilateral trade deals, the prospects of him providing a positive trade agenda for Asia are slim. Some countries might benefit

from his preference for bilateral deals, especially if they have mineral resources that he wishes to leverage. However, much more is known about Trump's negative trade agenda for the region, including his distaste for trade imbalances and Washington's [growing suspicion](#) that Chinese companies are using Southeast Asia to circumvent tariffs and sanctions.

Trump's largely negative agenda on trade is not the only point of concern for US activities in the region. For one, he is likely to exacerbate concerns that US engagement with the region is [too heavily weighted](#) towards security cooperation. The pruning of USAID by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) has had [serious consequences](#) for the continued functioning of non-governmental organisations across Southeast Asia, many of which do important work such as demining in Cambodia and healthcare for refugees along the Thai-Myanmar border. More broadly, Trump's withdrawal from multilateral organisations and coercive actions undermine the very international order that allowed Southeast Asia to prosper, putting its continued prosperity in question.

Overall, a pivot that involves all sticks and precious few carrots is unlikely to be one that is strategically impactful.

Between Benign Neglect and Breadcrumbs

Faced with a United States that appears unreliable and overly self-interested, ASEAN member states may choose to minimise their engagement with it or adopt a more proactive approach.

Countries that do not have close ties with Washington could keep their heads low, giving Trump fewer reasons to turn his ire towards them. After all, if engaging Washington entails the risk of Trump's wrath in exchange for few benefits, it may be better for countries to hope that Washington maintains a posture of "benign neglect" towards them.

The challenge with this approach is that it limits the strategic space for countries to navigate between the United States and China. It also does little to shield a country from collateral damage, whether from a global trade war or broader disruption.

On the flipside, a proactive approach may involve greater risks and greater rewards. Southeast Asian governments could leverage Trump's transactional nature and desire for short-term victories to create a geopolitical trail of breadcrumbs, conditioning the kind of relationship that they wish to have from the United States. A deal for a Southeast Asian economy to invest more in the American mainland, for example, could open the door for short-term benefits such as an agreement on tech cooperation. However, this kind of cooperation could earn Trump's ire if a deal falls apart, or if he believes that he can demand more.

Regardless of their policy path with the United States, ASEAN member states should hasten integration efforts. From pursuing the completion of the digital economy framework to lowering trade barriers between fellow members, the grouping can act as a backstop against external disruptions from the United States and other powers.

The need for such unity has never been greater amid a turbulent and increasingly uncertain international backdrop.

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