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## **The Unravelling Rules-Based Order: Easy Pickings for China in Southeast Asia?**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*With Donald Trump's second term as US president, the prospects of a Washington-led, rules-based regional order look grim. China seems poised to remake this order with itself at the helm. What does this mean for Southeast Asia and ASEAN?*

### **COMMENTARY**

US president Donald Trump's first month in office has seen a flurry of actions that have seemingly [undermined](#) the global order based on established rules and norms. These actions have accelerated fears in Southeast Asia of massive disruptions, from global supply chains resulting from the [escalating trade war](#), to the undercutting of the regional security architecture and rules-based order. Most importantly, this gives China a golden opportunity to fill the void left by Washington in Southeast Asia. However, such a view is premature, given the region's reticence towards accepting the dominance of a hegemon.

### **Trump 2.0 and ASEAN**

It should be recalled that Trump [missed](#) all East Asia Summits during his first term, and attended only one of three ASEAN-US Summits. This demonstrated how ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) seemed to be a distant consideration, overshadowed by the need to contain China and the emphasis on bilateral and minilateral engagements. Even though the Trump administration's policy of countering China may keep the United States in the region, its "America First" approach will rankle many in ASEAN, especially if Trump starts demanding that Southeast Asian countries choose between Washington and Beijing.

Trump's own [transactional](#) approach towards US allies could mean pressing countries like Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea to take on greater costs for their own defence as he has [demanded](#) European allies to do. There are speculations that Trump may even strike a "[grand bargain](#)" with China that may result in the abandonment of US allies.

Moreover, the recent [public confrontation](#) at the Oval Office between Trump and Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, followed by a [pause](#) in US military aid and intelligence to Kyiv, further laid bare Washington's willingness to throw allies or partners under the bus if they are unwilling to acquiesce to Trump's demands, or inadvertently anger him through "disrespect" or "ingratitude".

### **Are China's Initiatives Viable Alternatives?**

Amid upheavals in the rules-based order brought about by the second Trump administration, some are warning that [China](#) will [take over](#) what is left of the international order. Southeast Asia will be the first logical choice for Chinese dominance, given the region's proximity to the Chinese mainland.

China has long been attempting to woo Southeast Asian countries with economic engagement and investments through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), followed by its [Global Development Initiative](#) (GDI).

Beijing has also been ramping up its defence diplomacy efforts in the region, with the promulgation of its [Global Security Initiative](#) (GSI), its vision for creating a new global security architecture. According to a [report](#) published by the China Institute of International Studies, China has made progress in implementing the GSI in Southeast Asia, particularly with the Mekong riparian states in law enforcement cooperation.

Now that the current rules-based order is imperilled by its own leader, China's alternatives are tantalising to some in ASEAN. However, one must recall that ASEAN has traditionally been wary of accepting the dominance of the region by any hegemon.

### **Southeast Asia: Unlikely to Accept Chinese Dominance**

Despite China's economic heft and ever-growing military prowess, ASEAN countries, for most part, do not want to put all their eggs in the Chinese basket. In the 2024 edition of [The State of Southeast Asia](#) survey conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, respondents were evenly split between whether they would align with China or the United States if made to choose, even if China won out by a slim margin: 50.5 per cent for China and 49.5 per cent for the United States.

Of course, views on the United States may very well plummet this year, but it remains to be seen if perceptions on China will rise proportionally. What is telling is that half the respondents in the survey expressed little confidence (50.1 per cent) for China to "do the right thing" towards maintaining global peace and prosperity, while well over half were confident (58.9 per cent) that Japan would do so.

Another [survey](#) of six Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) also suggests that these countries' elites do not view China as having the legitimacy to lead the region's order.

Much has been made of how Trump's shutting down of US foreign aid would create a void that [China would rapidly fill](#), especially in Southeast Asia. However, this may not necessarily be the case as China's slowing economic growth may cause Beijing to eventually [struggle to provide](#) financial assistance and investment through the BRI, while Southeast Asians remain doubtful about the [reliability](#) of Chinese foreign assistance.

Finally, even as the narratives promulgated by the GDI and GSI, along with the Chinese concept of a "[Community with a Shared Future for Mankind](#)", seek to portray Beijing as a benevolent leader that upholds the international order and only conducts win-win cooperation, they nevertheless gloss over China's behaviour towards countries with which it has disputes, drawing further [scepticism](#) among some Southeast Asian countries.



ASEAN must navigate diplomacy with both Washington and Beijing, while strengthening its economic and security partnerships with other middle powers to maintain its central role in the region. *Image source: Pixabay.*

## The Way Forward

Southeast Asian countries should gird themselves against the worst impulses of the Trump administration, while ensuring they are not dragged too far into China's orbit, thus maintaining ASEAN's non-alignment. First, Southeast Asian countries should be prepared to conduct diplomacy with Trump with their own [transactional approaches](#). They should be prepared to offer something beneficial to the table in any negotiation with the United States, rather than continuing to expect Washington's generosity based on principles like shared values or support for a rules-based order. While it might be tempting for Southeast Asian countries to maintain ties with Washington by offering to be an instrument for countering China, they should be aware of the high risk of retaliation from Beijing.

Second, ASEAN should be prepared for the United States to pay little to no attention to ASEAN and its forums, instead focusing on buttressing bilateral alliances and minilateral arrangements. ASEAN should be ready to formulate a viable strategy for constructively engaging with minilateral arrangements such as the Quadrilateral

Security Dialogue (Quad) and AUKUS. ASEAN has already been engaging with the Quad, to the point where each [joint statement](#) by Quad leaders since 2021 [has expressed support](#) for ASEAN Centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

Third, ASEAN should deepen its partnerships with other Indo-Pacific countries and middle powers. On the security front, ASEAN should step up engagement with as many defence partners as possible through meetings and exercises, even as it maintains diplomacy with both Beijing and Washington. Such partners include Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea. For example, the [14th Japan-ASEAN Defense Vice-Ministerial Forum](#) took place in early February, a positive step in ASEAN's engagement of other countries and middle powers in the region. Moreover, ASEAN has at its disposal numerous mechanisms and forums with which it can engage these other countries, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM)-Plus.

### **No Time for Complacency**

Despite the volatility brought about by the second Trump administration, Southeast Asian countries do not want complete Chinese dominance of the region. To forestall such an outcome, ASEAN must strive to remain relevant and central to the region's economic and security architecture, while making sure it diversifies its economic and defence partners.

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