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Navigating Trump 2.0

From Trump 1.0 to Trump 2.0: Implications for Asia

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SYNOPSIS

Early actions by President Donald Trump and his second administration suggest that “Trump 2.0” may go beyond the transactional approach seen in “Trump 1.0”. This prospect raises important questions about the policy adjustments that Asian leaders, including those in Singapore, may need to make in their relations with the United States.

COMMENTARY

Donald Trump began his second term as American president on 20 January 2025. It is still early days but what we have seen thus far of his foreign policy is quite telling (and possibly even chilling), namely, the Trump administration’s evident disregard for its allies and partners, and an abysmal lack of professionalism and even competence, among other things. Furthermore, the early conduct of Trump and his senior leadership suggests that a key assumption many hold about “Trump 2.0” – that Trump, the self-professed dealmaker par excellence, would prosecute a [transactional foreign policy](#) – could in fact be misleading.

If so, this raises sobering questions about the kind of policy and/or practical adjustments that Asian leaders, including Singapore’s – who may be relying on their past experiences engaging (and even succeeding) with “Trump 1.0” – may need to make in their relations with the United States.

What Trump 1.0 Taught

From 2017 to 2020, the Asian region weathered the topsy-turvy behaviour of a president who spurned America's long-standing role as leader of the free world, which the United States has played in the postwar era, for a protectionist-minded, "America First" policy. Memorably, Trump criticised US-led alliances (including but especially NATO), denigrated multilateralism and globalisation, withdrew the United States from the erstwhile Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade pact, and roundly accused Asian countries of cheating at trade with America. Trump was a regular no-show at ASEAN summits, he attended a couple of APEC meetings but used those to excoriate APEC economies on trade, and he adopted a hardline stance against China and initiated a trade war with it.

That said, [Trump displayed flexibility](#) when the situation warranted. Efforts by various Asian leaders to wine and dine him worked enough to change his early misgivings. Singapore played its part with moves like inking a US\$13.8 billion aircraft deal with America's Boeing Company in 2017 and hosting Trump's first summit with North Korea's Chairman Kim Jong Un in 2018. In return, Trump signed into law the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA), which authorised US\$1.5 billion in annual spending for programmes in support of his administration's Indo-Pacific strategy. By late 2017 and in contrast to his earlier recriminations, Trump's apparent embrace of the Asian region had become so complete that observers noted [little difference between some of his Asia-focused speeches and those that Barack Obama](#), America's self-declared "first Pacific president", used to give.

Such experiences educated Asian leaders on how best to engage Trump in ways that benefitted their countries. "The Trump administration wasn't all bad", as [Bilahari Kausikan](#), former permanent secretary of Singapore's foreign affairs ministry, opined right before the 2024 US presidential election. "The world did not end. And some of the things Trump did to restore the credibility of American hard power were certainly in our interest."

Trump 2.0 So Far

Hitherto, the foreign policy of the second Trump administration has been nothing short of astounding. Some of its goals are not all bad (to borrow Bilahari's aphorism from above), such as ending the Ukraine war, bringing peace and geopolitical realignment to the Middle East, and balancing China's power and influence. But the ways through which it is seeking to realise those aims and others – as well as some of the reasons and motivations behind those goals – have been mindboggling, to say the least.

Take, for example, Trump's propensity to weaponise trade tariffs against other countries as his strategy to ostensibly secure the best advantages for the United States. The percentages of tariffs keep evolving on an almost daily basis – depending, so it seems, on the president's shifting moods – but after his ruthless "Liberation Day" tariffs of 2 April 2025 that sent markets into turmoil, Trump announced he was pausing those rates for 90 days and instead imposing [a baseline tariff of 10% on all nations except China, whose goods will face a 125% tariff apart from a 20% "fentanyl tax"](#). China, continuing its tit-for-tat tariff rates, announced a 125% tariff against US goods. In a further backflip a few days later, possibly in response to lobbying from tech companies, the Trump administration [announced](#) that smartphones, computers and

certain other electronics – imported mainly from China – would be exempted from reciprocal tariffs.

The levies announced before the 90-day pause on countries like Canada and Mexico are ostensibly because the United States wants to [hold those countries accountable](#) to their promises of halting illegal immigration and the flow of poisonous fentanyl and other drugs into America. However, in her testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on 25 March, [Trump's director for national intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard](#) – in direct contrast to her president's insistent claims – played down Canada's fentanyl contribution to the United States to less than 1%. Her testimony prompts the question of Trump's motives for wrecking America's ties with Canada, one of its oldest and closest friends, largely over a threat that barely exists.

Crucially for Asia, Trump's decision to end US support for Ukraine's war with Russia – and the disconcerting way he went about it by publicly embarrassing Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on his visit to the Oval Office on 28 February and showing strong support for Russian leader Vladimir Putin and Russia's claim on Ukraine – raises all sorts of red flags for small states like Singapore that worry over the predatory inclinations of larger powers over their smaller or weaker counterparts. (Indeed, that Trump has talked openly about annexing both Canada and Greenland, presumably for their supplies of critical minerals, raises concerns about the expansionist designs of Trump 2.0.)

Alone among the ASEAN countries, [Singapore formally censured Moscow](#) for invading Ukraine and enacted sanctions against Russia. But while Washington's turnabout on Ukraine and Russia does little to blunt the moral force of Singapore's position on the matter, it potentially complicates Singapore's already difficult ties with Russia. And while Trump's decision could in a sense be justified on transactional grounds by a minerals deal subsequently struck between the United States and Ukraine as a way for Washington to ["recoup" the financial aid](#) it has given to Kyiv since the start of the Ukraine war, the reality is that his grandiloquent promises aside, Trump's efforts have done little to bring peace to the conflict, which in recent times has only intensified. (If anything, Zelensky's warning to Trump about [Putin's ultimate goals and negotiating tactics](#) – which allegedly drew the wrath of Trump and his vice president, J. D. Vance, during their White House showdown – has proven true.)

But just as disturbing for Asia and Singapore are the lengths to which the Trump administration has gone to insult and denigrate its European allies and partners. While Trump's long-held bugbear against American allies for failing to meet the threshold of 2% of GDP spending on their defence (and supposedly freeloading off the United States) could arguably be justified – Singapore, not an ally but a "major security cooperation partner" of the United States, reportedly spends about [3% of its GDP on defence](#) – it however ignores the actual contributions rendered by NATO countries to America's war efforts. For example, the former US defence leader [Robert Gates concluded in 2011](#) (when he was still serving as defence secretary) that "though some smaller NATO members have modestly sized and funded militaries that do not meet the 2% threshold, several of these allies have managed to punch well above their weight because of the way they use the resources they have." Clearly, this is not a concession the Trump administration is willing to entertain.

The recklessness with which Trump and his senior leaders – such as Vance and his boorish performance at the Munich Security Conference on 14 February – have attacked NATO allies and European countries or, for that matter, Trump’s threat to annex Greenland (a self-governing territory belonging to Denmark, a US ally), reflect an America that revels in breaking bad. This is not to imply that [American criticisms of European democracy](#) are thereby unfair and irrelevant. But it shows an unhealthy contempt that the Trump administration harbours for allies and friends that resolutely stood by America at its neediest moments including during 9/11.

Importantly, on his visits to Manila and Tokyo in March, [US Defence Secretary Peter Hegseth](#) reassured America’s Asian allies that their alliances with the United States – despite [Trump’s persistent complaints](#) that they are “unequal” partnerships – are “iron-clad” and the “cornerstone of peace and security”, and that “America First does not mean America Alone”. (For his part, [Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba](#) last year called on the United States to show more reciprocity in its alliance with Japan.) Just as crucial, Hegseth assured Manila that Washington would restore the US\$500 million military aid package that the Biden administration had originally committed itself to providing the Philippines.

Of concern to South Korea, however, was the fact that Hegseth skipped Seoul on his trip. Although [Trump had previously accused South Korea](#) as a “free rider” and threatened to withdraw US troops from the country if Seoul did not increase its financial contributions to their alliance, Hegseth’s decision was likely because South Korea remains embroiled in the ongoing efforts to impeach its former president Yoon Suk Yeol. Even so, [some observers feel that Hegseth’s security assurances](#) may ultimately matter little so long as they are not shared by Trump himself.



During his first visit to the region in March 2025, US Defence Secretary Peter Hegseth reassured Asian allies that their partnerships with the United States remain “iron-clad” and serve as the “cornerstone of peace and security”. *Image source: Wikimedia Commons.*

Whither Trump 2.0?

During Trump 1.0, the US effort to balance Chinese power and influence necessitated the Trump administration’s continued cultivation of its Indo-Pacific allies and partners like Australia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam and Singapore. Indeed, while much has been made of the Biden administration’s vigorous engagements with three ASEAN members – the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam

– which the Biden team regarded as key partners for its China policy, it bears reminding that those engagements were in fact [holdovers from Trump 1.0](#). And, as the assurances given by Hegseth during his visit to the region suggested, there is really no compelling reason for Trump to not pick up where Joe Biden left off vis-à-vis US ties with those three Southeast Asian states, especially if his plan to balance China is to succeed. But as with all things Trump at this point, whether expressed assurances (or threats!) translate into reality remains to be seen.

The ambivalence shown by Trump 2.0 towards America's allies and partners aside, an equally troubling concern for all is the mix of hubris, arrogance, amateurishness and irresponsibility shown hitherto by Trump's present leadership, which raises serious questions about America's reliability and trustworthiness.

Trump 1.0 started with a relatively solid foreign policy and national security team manned by proven corporate, diplomatic or military leaders like Rex Tillerson, James Mattis, John Kelly, H.R. McMaster and John Bolton, among others. Those so-called "[adults in the room](#)" played their parts in advising – and, oftentimes, restraining – a president given to caprice, hubris and volatility. But it is equally telling that none of those officials survived their tenure; to a person, all of them (and those who took their places) were either unceremoniously dismissed by Trump or left on their own accord when the proverbial writing on the wall became clear enough.

As the Heritage Foundation's *Project 2025* document, which served as the blueprint for Trump's presidential transition, makes clear, the officials who staff the next Trump administration would be picked for their unquestioned loyalty and obeisance to Trump rather than their proven leadership skills and policy know-how. (Interestingly, current cabinet members like Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio were harsh critics of Trump before their abrupt volte-faces.) [Fealty alone is not a viable recipe](#) by any measure for ensuring good policy, let alone good government – already confirmed by the litany of mistakes made by Trump's senior leadership ([which a former US official](#) has derided as "dumb"). But in a Trump administration driven by his "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) mantra, where ideology and tribalism come first, good governance seems to rank low, alarmingly so, as a priority.

Notwithstanding how unexpectedly good Trump 1.0 might have turned out for Singapore and other Asian nations, it is unclear whether they can do just as well, if not better, the second time around. Much will depend on the quality of ties between the region and the United States.

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