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Navigating Trump 2.0

Has the United States Gone Rogue? What Singapore Needs to Do

See Seng Tan

SYNOPSIS

Trump 2.0's abandonment of America's strong support for the rules-based order and its long-standing guarantorship of the global strategic order poses significant challenges for Singapore's economic and security well-being. In response, Singapore needs to maintain its pragmatic foreign policy, continue to proactively engage Trump and his administration, and play the long game in waiting for (and, where possible, helping) Trump 2.0 to self-correct its present course.

COMMENTARY

While still preliminary, "Trump 2.0" has already turned the international status quo on its head with President Donald Trump's [full-on weaponisation of trade tariffs](#) and – despite the US defence secretary's [recent assurance about Washington's enduring commitment to its Asian partners](#) – Trump's persistent disregard for America's allies.

Equally concerning is the amateurish and cavalier disposition of senior US officials. Nowhere was this more clearly spelt out – along with supporting emojis – than in the botched Signal group chat involving Trump's senior security officials in which sensitive military secrets concerning the planned US attack on the Houthi rebels in Yemen were openly shared and European allies derisively panned and pilloried. While Trump and his officials have sought to dismiss public concerns over the breach by blaming the affair on the Signal messenger app – and, incredulously, on Jeffrey Goldberg, the editor-in-chief of *The Atlantic* whom Trump's national security advisor Michael Waltz had inadvertently included in the group chat – the Signal affair reveals an alarming

degree of incompetence, puerility and unprofessionalism among Trump's senior officials.

This is the expected by-product of a leadership selection bias in favour of loyalty over proven leadership and policy experience. Add to it a readiness to protect officials from all accountability and culpability – through, among other things, the militant zeal of Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) at eliminating swathes of the federal government in the name of cost-cutting, including the post of the US Defense Department's inspector general, whose job it would have been to investigate [security lapses like the Signal fiasco](#). (To be sure, Trump's current penchant to defend his officials for the lapse does not preclude future attempts on his part to dispense with them when he finally tires of them, as evidenced by his behaviour with team members who crossed him during Trump 1.0.)

The egregious breach of basic security protocols raises all sorts of alarms for allies and partners, who may no longer be able to trust the Trump administration to safeguard their vital shared secrets. They include not only the members of the Five Eyes alliance (comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States) but more generally NATO members as well.

It surely matters as well to Asian allies, partners and friends of America that depend on US power and support in their efforts to hedge against China's preponderant presence and overwhelming influence. Singapore is neither part of the Five Eyes nor of NATO. Granted, Singapore is a known "[third party](#)" that works closely with Five Eyes and NATO members but the breach will no doubt be worrisome because of the [substantial security and intelligence cooperation it has with the United States](#).



In March 2025, a major security blunder occurred when US National Security Advisor Mike Waltz mistakenly added *The Atlantic's* editor-in-chief, Jeffrey Goldberg, to a Signal group chat discussing classified US military activity in Yemen. The egregious breach of basic security protocols raises serious concerns for allies and partners. *Image source: Pexels.*

How the Signal Incident Matters to Singapore

The Signal debacle is just a part of the wider problem that the Trump administration poses for Singapore. Granted, it is unclear whether Trump's evident dislike for his European allies extends to Asian nations, although his long-standing grievances against the latter for purportedly "free riding" off the United States and "cheating" on trade with the United States are well known.

If Trump's threats carry any weight, there are at least three broad concerns for Singapore. The first two interrelated concerns were alluded to by [Singapore's former prime minister Lee Hsien Loong](#), when he noted in early February that the international environment was "far less orderly and predictable" given that the "US is no longer prepared to underwrite the global order". According to this reading, a Trump-led United States has abandoned the twin roles it has long played as the world's foremost global power: firstly, helping to ensure a functioning rules-based order, while, secondly, serving also as the strategic guarantor for the international system. American isolationism potentially opens the world up to the predatory ambitions and expansionist designs of revisionist powers – a widespread concern in the Asian region, which the former Japanese prime minister, Fumio Kishida, gave voice to when he warned that "[Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow](#)".

There is a third concern: far from being the splendid isolationist, the United States has in fact shifted from security provider to spoiler. In prosecuting tariff wars with just about everyone and threatening the integrity of the global economic system, Trump 2.0 leaves open economies like Singapore's prey to the vicissitudes of a world in disarray. "Now the US is seen as a great disruptor", [as Singapore's Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen has conceded](#). "There is certainly a level of unpredictability there that hasn't been seen before – one hopes that doesn't lead to instability."

Policy Implications

How, then, should Singapore respond to a United States seemingly gone rogue under Trump? Three interrelated courses of action come to mind.

1. *Maintain a Pragmatic Course*

Trump 1.0 taught Asians that Trump's transactional approach could be managed so long as they persisted with their own pragmatic engagements of the United States. That said, for some, Trump's foreign policy during these early days of Trump 2.0 has gone [beyond the realm of the transactional](#). A transactional approach presupposes a level of rational self-interest that seems to be missing from Trump 2.0's haphazard approach to international diplomacy.

But like most, if not all, US presidents following a victorious electoral turnover, there is the expectation and pressure to distinguish their administrations in both substance and style from those of their immediate predecessors. Trump arguably is no different. Having just returned to the White House following the most divisive and explosive presidential election in recent memory, Trump's extremist policy and conduct reflect his personal predilections, his party's preferences as well as the interests of his "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) base. But as the toing-and-froing over his tariff policy or his minerals agreement with Ukraine suggests, a transactional cum reciprocal logic remains at work behind Trump's haphazardness and there might well be a method to his madness. It also implies that given time to settle and learn, the Trump administration would naturally course-correct itself from its chauvinistic, churlish and clumsy tendencies, or so it is hoped. For that to happen, it likely requires allies and partners to display good faith and allow the Trump administration time to find itself.

If the Europeans have erred on the side of principle and thereby incurred Trump's wrath, then Singapore all the more needs to stay the course on its vaunted pragmatism. It bears reminding that Singapore memorably earned the ire of China when – for all the right reasons – it held firm on principled grounds in its stance on the South China Sea dispute following the Permanent Court of Arbitration's 2016 ruling on the case involving China and the Philippines. China then responded through a series of provocations, including the 2017 impounding in Hong Kong of Singapore's Terrex armoured personnel carriers that were on their way back from Taiwan following military manoeuvres there. And there are perhaps good reasons why, at specific times and in particular contexts, prudence and discretion might need to take precedence over principle and vice versa, as highlighted in a public disagreement in 2017 between two of Singapore's most venerable diplomats over [how small states ought to conduct their foreign policy vis-à-vis big powers](#). More than ever, such care and concern need to be applied in Singapore's ties with not only China but also the United States. As always, the difficulty lies in discerning when and where is it best to do what.

For Singapore, its foreign policy pragmatism, flexibility and nimbleness have translated into doing what it can to service the United States in support of Washington's Indo-Pacific policy – insofar as it relates to Singapore's own interests. In opting to “buy more from the US than we sell” (in the words of its defence minister), [Singapore engaged in bilateral trade with the United States](#) that totalled US\$98 billion in 2024 alone. And, [as noted in Part I of this series](#), Singapore has consistently outdone most NATO members in defence spending as a percentage of GDP. Both moves hopefully put the city-state in America's good books. To be sure, Singapore is fortunate in that it is in a good position to be able to do not only what it must but what it can – a serendipity that it cannot take for granted.

2. Proactively Engage Trump

As Singapore's tireless efforts to prove its continued importance and relevance to the United States suggest, proactively engaging the Trump administration requires time, toil and possibly tears, which allies and partners of the United States eschew at their own peril. [According to former Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull](#), the best way for foreign governments to influence Trump is to build a strong relationship between their top leader – not a mere ambassador or even foreign minister, but their head of state or head of government – and Trump himself. Regional leaders will do well to take note of Turnbull's advice. Granted, this is a challenging proposition given the highly limited interest and bandwidth that Trump evidently has for countries and leaders whom he deems unimportant to the United States (or, more likely, to himself and his family's business interests).

Moreover, Trump's lack of interest in multilateralism and globalism has meant that the traditional institutional platforms and channels through which small- and medium-sized countries have typically engaged the United States have lessened considerably in importance, and the opportunities they once furnished for such engagements have precipitously decreased. If Trump 1.0 taught the Southeast Asian region anything, it is that Trump harbours little interest in and patience for ASEAN. This reality makes regional efforts to proactively engage Trump even harder. But it needs to be done.

3. Play the Long Game

Finally, it is a well-established fact that notwithstanding changes in presidents and administrations, whether Democratic or Republican, US foreign policy, with few exceptions, has [stayed largely consistent over time](#). For example, the George W. Bush administration's neoconservative bent might have shaped the US response to 9/11 and defined its Global War on Terror policy. But its unilateralism and penchant for pre-emptive war were neither unique nor revolutionary in the history of American diplomacy; [nor was Bush's foreign policy radically different](#) from his predecessor Bill Clinton's.

[Likewise](#), despite his rhetoric of change, Trump's engagement of Asia during Trump 1.0 retained many of the elements of President Barack Obama's "Asia pivot", whereas President Joe Biden also kept several of Trump's initiatives, including his vigorous balancing of China. What this suggests – as per the first recommendation on the need for Singapore to maintain its pragmatic focus and course – is that Singapore ought to exercise patience and play the long game, as it were, until such time as Trump 2.0 self-corrects its course.

Indeed, the preceding appeal for continued proactive engagement of Trump is important in helping to nudge Trump 2.0 towards course-correction. Long known for being [a trustworthy source of insight on the region](#) for the Americans, especially during Lee Kuan Yew's time in office, Singapore needs to play the useful guide that the United States requires (though it may take a while for the Trump administration to realise and acknowledge this role). In a sense, so long as America remains the world's foremost power – notwithstanding Trump's abandonment of the traditional leadership role Washington has played in the postwar era – there is little that Singapore, the incorrigible hedger, can do, short of throwing its lot in completely with China, as some ASEAN states appear to have done.

For all intents and purposes, America, for all its flaws, is still the indispensable power on which many Asian countries, including Singapore, rely as a bulwark against Chinese power and influence. "We are pragmatic", [as Bilahari has allowed](#). "There is only one America which plays a vital and irreplaceable role in balancing China and maintaining stability in Asia – a role that is now acknowledged by traditionally non-aligned countries like India and Indonesia and even old enemies like Vietnam – so we will find a way of working with whoever occupies the White House." And that obviously includes Trump.

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