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What Trump's First 100 Days in Office Have Shown Southeast Asia

By Kevin Chen

SYNOPSIS

With a chaotic start to Donald Trump's second term, the United States has shown that its interests are unlikely to overlap with Southeast Asia's.

COMMENTARY

In the [100 days since his return to the White House](#), United States President Donald Trump has been busy. He has overseen a dramatic reshaping of the federal government and America's ties with the world, with over 140 executive orders signed so far. Indeed, it would be challenging, if not impossible, to summarise all his policies and their implications.

Less so when it comes to his policy [consequences for Southeast Asia](#), and what we must know to navigate through the next four years – or even his next 100 days.

Most notably, his tariffs and aid cuts have important implications for our region, undermining the systems that helped us thrive and imperilling those that are preparing us for a sustainable future.

Tariff Turmoil

Putting aside the [sheer scale of President Trump's "Liberation Day" tariffs](#) – surpassing anything seen in US policy in nearly a century – or their erratic rollout, the more poignant concern for policymakers and businesses is what his end goal is.

Trump has argued that tariffs can bring manufacturing back to America and balance America's trillion-dollar trade deficit. Yet he has also floated using tariffs to replace

taxes as government revenue and using them as a negotiating tool, sometimes in the same interview.

These goals do not naturally support each other. If he succeeds in reindustrialising America, tariff revenue would fall alongside imports. If he seeks deals, other countries will find creative ways to satisfy him instead of making a potentially risky investment in American manufacturing.

Without a clear explanation of how these goals are prioritised, countries are still left with the challenging task of guessing what Trump wants.

In some cases, a deal may not be possible. White House Trade Advisor Peter Navarro told CNBC that even [if Vietnam eliminates tariffs on US products](#), it would be insufficient due to “non-tariff cheating” measures such as implementing a value-added tax. There is little any country can offer an administration that sees itself as a victim of what others call normal economic practices.

This pervading uncertainty is wreaking havoc with global trade, the very system that was created by America and upon which many Southeast Asian economies depend to fuel their growth. Even if the trade war does not escalate further, the region will still face a bumpy road ahead as supply chains realign and businesses are forced to adapt.

Dwindling Credibility

Still, tariffs are but part of a broader group of factors that accelerated the erosion of US credibility in Southeast Asia during Trump’s first 100 days.

US economic influence in Southeast Asia has been waning since 2017 when Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) during his first term. The agreement was supposed to anchor the US’ role in the regional trading system. Instead, the recent tariffs show that the US not only rejects a role in this system but rejects the system itself.

In addition, many of the platforms showed that the [US humanitarian commitment to Southeast Asia](#) have been effectively shuttered. The dismantling of foreign aid agency USAID has compromised the operations of demining organisations in Cambodia and refugee camps in Myanmar among other local causes that governments cannot or will not support.

These cuts were compounded by the US’ withdrawal from Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs) with Indonesia and Vietnam, impacting over US\$3 billion of commitments in the form of commercial loans to help the countries transition to renewable energy sources.

US pledges to complete a pivot to Asia have also met with mixed results in terms of security. Trump officials had signalled that his administration would shift its strategic focus away from Europe. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth even told a press conference in Manila during his first visit last month that the US would “truly prioritise and shift to this region”.

However, resources are still being taken out of Asia to reinforce US interests elsewhere.

The Carl Vinson carrier strike group was transferred from the Pacific to the Middle East amid an escalating campaign against the Houthi rebels, while a Patriot air defence battalion and a THAAD anti-missile air defence system were transferred to ostensibly support Israel against Iran. Defence officials are warning that munitions stockpiles are being depleted, raising questions about American readiness for a crisis in Asia.

Immediately following the 2024 US presidential election, some Southeast Asian leaders were hopeful that President Trump would live up to his reputation as a dealmaker and approach the region through a pragmatic, reciprocal lens. Even the biggest optimist should now have been disabused of that hope.

Southeast Asia Will Continue to Hedge

All countries are expected to maintain a balance of pursuing their interests and compromising with their partners on the international stage. Yet, in just 100 days, the new Trump administration has not only shown us its single-minded dedication to pursuing his self-interest, but its seeming disinterest towards the concerns and needs of other countries.

With Chinese President Xi Jinping having just made a well-timed visit to Vietnam, Malaysia and Cambodia to portray China as a steadfast partner amid the US' growing unpredictability, some might assume that Southeast Asian countries would naturally gravitate towards China.

They'd be mistaken.

Governments in this region still value their agency and independence. While they may embark on more cooperative projects with China, they will also hedge against coercion by engaging other partners, including Japan and the European Union.

The major difference is that Southeast Asian governments may need to account for both an unfriendly United States and an assertive China.

If Trump's first 100 days are any indication, we should expect more challenges and turbulence in the remaining 1,361 days of his second term.

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