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The New Wind Blowing from Trump's America



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As Australia's next government seeks to navigate the shoals of President Trump's New World after the election on 3 May, it will behove us to think beyond our tariff concerns and AUKUS and focus on Southeast Asia.

We now understand that the United States is not the same comforting behemoth it may once have seemed. Some aspects of Trumpism will pass. America may again see better angels. But they will not be the same angels. It will be a different country.

We used to talk of "the west" as the group of like-minded developed democracies extending from North America to Europe and including in our region Japan, South Korea and Australia.

The photo-shoot of President Trump and his co-bully Vance berating Ukrainian President Zelensky in the Oval Office brought home that there are now two "wests", the United States on the one hand and the rest of us on the other.

There has always been a tension in our international policy between the demands of our alliance with the United States and our regional aspirations. The task of reconciling the two is about to become harder.

First, on the alliance. We need it. The Trump Administration's handling of Ukraine and its treatment of NATO has raised concerns as to whether American allies in this region -Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Australia-will be treated similarly. Thus far, the Administration has claimed that its security commitments are solid.

But the fear remains that either the Americans could be attracted to a deal with China to the exclusion of the interests of other regional powers or that they could go after China and provoke a kinetic reaction from the latter.

Neither course would suit Australia or our neighbours. But notwithstanding doubts in the region about American reliability, we are better off with the American alliance structure than without it. It might not, in the end, protect allies. But while it exists it offers a measure of reassurance to those in the region -allies or not-who fear Chinese military power.

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

And even those who are sanguine about China's regional role welcome a United States security presence because it helps maintain a balance of power. This enhances stability.

While we and friends like Japan might aspire to greater military self-reliance and work towards more effective military cooperation within the region, the only effective counter to Chinese military power -at least in the short and medium term -remains American military power.

Second, on the region. Here's the thing. The Americans have not paid enough attention to the Southeast Asians. America's Asian focus has traditionally been on Northeast Asia, where the interests of the major East Asian powers intersect. Even the important exception –the Vietnam War- was premised essentially on fears of the spread of Chinese and Soviet control and influence.

Trump's recent tariff explosion targeted Southeast Asian countries more than any other single group. The latter reacted with pragmatism. Vietnam, the second hardest hit on "Liberation Day" -immediately offered the United States zero tariffs. Indonesia quickly sent a senior team to negotiate with Washington.

But that pragmatism does not mean that the Southeast Asians are relaxed about Trump's policies. They are likely to suffer from both the direct effects of tariffs on themselves and the indirect effects of tariffs on China. This will affect their regional and world views.

Southeast Asia is the area of strongest contestation between the United States and China. As such, Trump's tariff penalization of most of the Southeast Asians enables Beijing-without having to try - to portray the United States in a bad light. President Xi-Jinping, touring part of the region, has done just that.

The impact of soft -or reputational -power is often moot. Indeed, Trump's transactional, as opposed to values driven, approach to international policy would be attractive to many in the Global South, including in our region. However, the sum of the damage Trump is likely to do to regional economies, the effective abolition of USAID, and the hypocrisy many perceive in Trump's approach to Gaza, suggests that America's powers of gentle persuasion are unlikely to enjoy a renaissance any time soon.

Where then does this leave Australia?

The Southeast Asians say they do not want to choose between the United States and China. Put this another way they want to be able to work with both and choose how to do so.

The most legitimate criticism of Southeast Asian countries as regional actors is that they are often too cautious in pursuing their own interests, having recourse to somewhat old-fashioned notions of non-alignment or sheltering under the carapace of ASEAN solidarity.

The Southeast Asians - except possibly the Philippines - are not going to be on our team and most don't want to be on the Chinese one either. But continued American policies which harm them could tilt some of them more in the direction of China.

The Southeast Asians need the ability to pursue their own interests, in their own way, with vigour. If they can become a more viable political force in the wider region as individual countries or under the ASEAN banner, it will be a plus for us.

The roles of Japan, which has strong regional reputation, and of India, which is intent on expanding its interests and preventing Southeast Asia from moving to the Chinese side of the ledger, will be important in encouraging such a process.

The best course for us – and the other friends of Southeast Asia - is to reinforce policies around trade, investment and technical and defence cooperation to help them pursue their own interests with a greater sense of their own agency.

Getting back to America, our envoys to President Trump's Court will no doubt be urging that together we genuflect at the altar of AUKUS. The more important message should be: "If you want to balance China, get Southeast Asia right."

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