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Double hedging in the Indo-Pacific



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As President Trump approaches the halfway mark of his second term, America has lost its reputation as a consistent international actor.

Deep fault-lines have emerged in the Atlantic alliance. The Middle East is again sapping the political energy of an American president.

In the Indo-Pacific, the damage is less obtrusive, but America's allies and partners are no longer just hedging against China but against the United States as well.

What are their problems with the United States?

First, India.

From early in this century the United States elevated its relationship with India to a strategic partnership driven largely by mutual apprehension about China.

Since 2025, things have gone bad. Two rounds of American tariffs on India hurt. And following clashes between Indian and Pakistan in May 2025, India perceived a United States tilt towards Pakistan.

As a result, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or QUAD, through which the United States, India, Japan and Australia work together with common regional objectives, has run out of puff.

And the term "Indo Pacific" - designed to include South Asia and the Indian Ocean in the same strategic construct as Northeast and Southeast Asia which was accepted by the first Trump administration - is no longer part of the administration's lexicon.

The Indo-Pacific Command in Honolulu has reverted to its earlier title, "Pacific Command."

True, the Americans are not about to abandon the Indian Ocean. But nomenclature and symbols count - particularly when changed or removed.

Second, East Asia.

When the United States talks about East Asia, it tends to mean Northeast Asia. The Vietnam War aside, it has never placed the same emphasis on Southeast Asia.

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

The United States' focus is on China and the Koreans and the so called First Island Chain - which runs from Japan through Taiwan and the Philippines - touching Vietnam.

In most of Southeast Asia, including its engine room, Indonesia, and its intellectual hub, Singapore, the United States has been seen in recent years as missing-in-action.

But lately both subregions - Northeast and Southeast Asia - have had cause to feel unappreciated.

For one, uncertainty about the direction of United States policy towards China worries them both.

In a recent visit to Southeast Asia, the United States Under-Secretary for Defense, Elbridge Colby, urged a greater contribution to regional security by America's allies and partners.

This message was unsurprising. It was akin to that given to European allies.

However, the timing was unfortunate. A few days later, the United States announced the temporary withdrawal from the region of its one Pacific based aircraft carrier, The USS George Washington, to relieve the USS Abraham Lincoln in the Gulf.

Taiwan is still awaiting presidential approval of a \$US14billion weapons package.

Tokyo resented Trump's second term tariffs. It was also concerned that the Americans did not defend Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi after Beijing attacked her for comments she made last November about defending Japan's interests should China invade Taiwan.

Trump's recent decision to scale back military exercises with South Korea (ostensibly because of that country's unwillingness to be involved in hostilities against Iran) not only worried the South Koreans but disturbed others in the region.

This pattern of regional concern has led a two-fold shift in the region.

First, there has been a trend towards greater self-reliance.

Japan under Takaichi has been the most notable example. It has increased expenditure on defence - now about 2 % of GDP - and is pushing domestic production, including drones and long-range weapons.

South Korea is building an independent defence industrial base. An important development will be its planned domestically produced nuclear powered submarine.

India has always adhered to a doctrine of strategic autonomy. But it is now becoming more assertive in preserving that autonomy.

Second, there has been an increased disposition by countries in the Indo-Pacific to solidify intra-regional relationships.

Japan has put its relationship with South Korea, sullied by Japan's occupation of the latter between 1910 and 1945, into a better state of repair.

A visit by Takaichi to India in July encouraged Japanese investment in that country. Several defence and technology cooperative initiatives were announced.

India has put more substance into its long-heralded push into Southeast Asia. It no longer talks of "Look East", but of "Act East."

An outcome of a visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Indonesia in July was an agreement to sell Indian missile systems to the latter.

Australia is now looking more to the region for answers to its strategic quandaries.

In October 2025, Australia and Papua New Guinea signed a mutual defence treaty. Accords have also been concluded by Australia with Fiji and other Pacific countries.

The Keating/Suharto treaty with Indonesia of 1995 - the "Agreement on Maintaining Security" abrogated during the Timor Crisis - was in practice revived in February 2026 with the "Australia-Indonesia Treaty on Common Security".

Takaichi's visit to Australia this May focused on defence, energy security and supply chain resilience. These policy directions were reinforced by the August visit to Australia of Japanese Defence Minister Koizumi.

Bollywood bling apart, outcomes of Modi's visit to Australia in July included an agreement on the export of uranium to India and a joint declaration on defence and security.

The bulk of all these regional moves has been driven by a concern to hedge against excessive Chinese influence.

The Americans largely support increased self-reliance and stronger intra-regional ties amongst its allies and partners. Many of the above developments would have occurred had Kamala Harris won the presidential election.

But much of the momentum in the Indo-Pacific behind both self-reliance and intra-regional bridge-building comes not only from the need to cope with China, but also from concerns about Trump and who and what will follow him.

Regional countries are, if you will, double hedging.

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