



# Counterpoint Southeast Asia

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## What Are the Implications of the 2024 US Presidential Election on Southeast Asia?

By Barbora Valockova

On January 20, 2025, Donald Trump will be sworn in as president of the United States (US) for a second time, eight years after his first inauguration. While the Southeast Asian leaders have sent their congratulatory messages and their countries have performed relatively well during the first Trump administration, the region braces itself for a bumpy road full of multifaceted challenges and shifting economic and geopolitical landscapes.

The most closely watched issue is tariffs. Trump has vowed to impose a 60 percent tariff on goods from China and a 10 to 20 percent tariff on goods from other US trading partners. Such a tariff-heavy foreign policy could

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significantly affect trade intensive Southeast Asian countries, especially those with high trade surpluses with the US such as Vietnam and Thailand, disrupting regional supply chains and investment flows.

The second pressing issue is potential recalibration of US military presence and security commitments in the region, such as in the Philippines. In addition, a shift away from Barack Obama and Joe Biden era's multilateral engagement approach is expected, which is likely to result in more bilateral deals and pressure on regional allies to increase their defence spending.

The third dimension to consider is the US-China strategic competition in view of Trump's plans to appoint several "China hawks" to key positions. A continuation and potential intensification of Trump's confrontational approach towards China may increase pressure on Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia to choose a side or risk losing defense cooperation. This would complicate their hedging strategies to counterbalance China's influence in the region.

Given this context, it is essential to discuss a core question: What are the implications of the 2024 US presidential election on Southeast Asia? Specifically, what are the main risks and opportunities for Southeast Asia stemming from a second Trump presidency? Will US foreign policy on Southeast Asia under the second Trump administration be very different and how

may it play out? To answer these questions, the Centre on Asia and Globalisation (CAG) invited four experts for its 13th Counterpoint Southeast Asia (CSA) public panel discussion on November 19, 2024 (view the [video](#) here): **Edcel John A. Ibarra** (University of the Philippines Diliman), **Muhammad Habib Abiyan Dzakwan** (Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Indonesia), **Hoang Thi Ha** (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute), and **Denis Hew** (CAG, LKYSPP, NUS).

**Edcel John A. Ibarra** argues that for the Philippines, Trump could withdraw military assistance and from the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), as well as from regional and global cooperation on non-traditional issues. However, even if these risks materialise, the Philippines could still benefit from a network of like-minded partners to fill the gap instead.

**Muhammad Habib Abiyan Dzakwan** provides an Indonesian perspective and contends that Indonesia has previously gained from investment shifts influenced by Trump's strategy towards China, despite the tariff threats arising from his focus on trade surpluses. However, it is important to consider that this situation may change, prompting Indonesia to seek solutions outside of the US for matters that do not align with Trump's interests.

**Hoang Thi Ha** examines key fears and hopes for Southeast Asia from the second Trump presidency. She holds that although Trump's second term brings uncertainty, Southeast

Asian nations, recognised for their pragmatic foreign policies and adaptability, are now more resilient and may find common ground with Trump's transactional approach at some point.

**Denis Hew** delves into the economic implications for the region, highlighting that Trump's second administration is expected to lead to a further re-structuring of global supply chains and increased geo-economic fragmentation. However, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) can address these challenges by strengthening regional economic integration to bolster its economic security.

A key takeaway from this issue of CSA is that both Donald Trump and Southeast Asia are better prepared. While Trump's first term did not foster a deep or consistent engagement with Southeast Asia, Trump 2.0 may be more empowered and unrestrained with a more transactional and nationalist agenda than Trump 1.0, depending on the composition of his cabinet. At the same time, Southeast Asian countries are now more prepared and resilient against Trump's unpredictability and protectionist US policies, having expanded relationships with like-minded middle powers such as Japan, South Korea, Australia as well as the European Union.

Therefore, Southeast Asia should expect headwinds, particularly concerning trade dynamics, security partnerships, and geopolitical positioning amid rising US-China tensions. However, it will withstand them and adapt to Trump's "America first" program if it

leverages its ability to capitalise on emerging opportunities while mitigating risks. This will require a flexible approach to Southeast Asian foreign policies, diversification, and deeper regional cooperation. Such strategic adaptation will allow Southeast Asian governments to enhance the region's position as an alternative manufacturing hub in the midst of geopolitical competition, and to maintain collective security frameworks; thus converting short-term challenges into long-term growth opportunities.

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