



# 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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**Counterpoint Southeast Asia** is published regularly by the Centre on Asia and Globalisation at the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. It seeks to answer major questions of strategic significance for Southeast Asia by bringing in diverse voices from around the region. Each issue will tackle one question from three different perspectives.

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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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## Guest Column

# This is Fine: What Lies Ahead for the Philippines under Another Trump Term

By Edcel John A. Ibarra

*On balance, for the Philippines, Donald Trump performed better than expected during his first presidency, which suggests that the Philippines will probably be fine under another Trump presidency.*

The first Trump administration offered security guarantees on the South China Sea the Philippines sought but never received under President Barack Obama. Trump officials declared that armed attacks in the South China Sea, including those by paramilitary forces like the Chinese maritime militia, fall under the Philippines-US Mutual Defense Treaty. They also abandoned the US' previous stance of neutrality on the territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea, siding with the Philippines' maritime claims as affirmed by the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration award (though remaining neutral on territorial issues). These policy shifts translated into more US freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea during Trump's four years than Obama's eight. Moreover, for the first time, the US had imposed economic and visa sanctions against Chinese companies and individuals involved in land reclamation and militarisation in the South China Sea. Beyond the South China Sea, the US assisted the Philippines in retaking



Image Credit: flickr.com/US Indo-Pacific Command

Marawi City from Muslim militants in 2017 and in rehabilitating it.

However, worries remain that Trump's transactionalism could mean new costs for the Philippines. At risk is the additional USD 500 million in military assistance the Biden administration has pledged to Manila this year. Yet, experience from Trump's first term suggests that his demands for payments were targeted toward wealthier allies in Europe, Northeast Asia, and Oceania. Still, Trump's free pass for Manila was not because he saw the Philippines' strategic value to the US: Trump was willing to let go of the Philippines-US Visiting Forces Agreement if it reduced Washington's expenses. Perhaps Trump acknowledges that military assistance to the Philippines is relatively cost-effective. For example, the USD 500 million aid package, a one-time payment, represents just 1 percent of the USD 34 billion the US spends annually on its bases in Japan and South

Korea. Moreover, the 2014 Philippines-US Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement did not re-establish US bases in the Philippines, and the actual facilities require much lower maintenance costs.

Moreover, even if a second Trump administration reduces US military presence and assistance and withdraws from security trilaterals and minilaterals, the Philippines could still rely on fellow US allies. During Trump's first term, worries persisted that his unpredictability might drive US allies in Asia to bandwagon with China. The Philippines tried this under President Rodrigo Duterte. But instead, US allies began bolstering their partnerships with fellow US allies and like-minded countries, a trend that continued under President Joe Biden. For example, Japan, Australia, and South Korea have provided military and economic assistance to and have forged strategic partnerships with the Philippines, counterbalancing China's growing influence in the country. This spoke-to-spoke cooperation has transformed the San Francisco System of US bilateral alliances in Asia, with Japan and Australia now elevated into regional hubs.

In the economic domain, US allies have succeeded in reviving the Trans-Pacific Partnership after Trump withdrew the US from the deal. The revived agreement, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), shows that US allies can step up when the US backs down.

Yet, risks remain for the Philippines. Trump could be lured by China to reduce US military presence and assistance by offering a deal he could not refuse, such as if Beijing makes major economic concessions. If this does happen, Manila must rely on its own burgeoning maritime capabilities or increase joint patrols with like-minded countries in the South China Sea.

Trump will also likely abandon the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and retreat from regional and global cooperation on non-traditional issues, especially climate change. If the US withdraws from IPEF, the Philippines could double its efforts to join the CPTPP as an economic hedge. At the least, Manila must position itself to benefit from another potential round of US-China trade conflict, as it had missed out on the gains from friendshoring during Trump's first term. For now, the Philippines can rely on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), its recent free trade deal with South Korea, and existing economic agreements with Japan and the European Union.

On non-traditional issues, a US retreat would open space for other powers, even ASEAN, to demonstrate leadership. True multipolarity could emerge from this opportunity.

A second Trump administration will probably continue or even intensify US assistance to the Philippines. If not, the Philippines and its partners in the region are

more prepared now to support themselves  
and each other.

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## Looking Beyond the United States for Trump 2.0

By Muhammad Habib Abiyan Dzakwan

*Indonesia has previously benefitted from investment relocation opportunities driven by Trump's China strategy, despite facing tariff threats stemming from his obsession with reducing trade surpluses. However, this dynamic may change, and Indonesia should prepare for this by seeking partnerships beyond the United States (US), especially on issues that are outside of Trump's interests.*

### Unpacking Trump's Approach

Since his first term in office, certain defining traits of Trump's leadership style have become evident. Not only is he inward-looking, but his international engagement is often shaped by personal ties and narrow economic indicators. Foreign countries are viewed favourably only if they purchase American goods, increase investment in US' stock markets or industries, or open their markets to American exports. International institutions focused more on dialogue than on delivering concrete benefits are unlikely to capture his attention. Economic statecraft tools such as tariffs, funding cuts, and the suspension of preferential treatment are his favorite methods for pursuing his so-called national interests. His determination to maintain America's primacy and outcompete



outcompete China is fierce, whereas his commitment towards climate cooperation is mild, if not nonexistent. Unfortunately, there is no immediate sign that these attitudes will shift in his second administration; if anything, they may worsen.

### Giving up Expectations

As Indonesia braces itself for another Trump term, it should be prepared to relinquish certain expectations. First and foremost is the expectation of having flexible policy options. Whether it pertains to President Prabowo Subianto's critical mineral down-streaming agenda or his food self-sufficiency vision, it is no longer feasible to implement blanket industrial policies or protectionist trade measures without considering international concerns and standards regarding environmental, social, and governance issues. What is more concerning is Trump's potential dismantling of relevant initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic

Framework (IPEF) or the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP), which could ease Indonesia's burden in addressing these concerns and standards.

The second expectation is the ability to partner with China to meet the US market demand. As the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and the Entity List (EL) indicate, the focus of the ongoing great power rivalry has shifted from 'country of origin' to 'company of origin' measures. This trend could escalate further if the US Congress enacts the Restoring Trade Fairness Act that would suspend normal trade relations with China while imposing duties on China-made high-tech products such as semiconductors, electronics, mineral fuels, and aviation components. Such a shift presents a challenge for President Prabowo's ambition for 8 percent economic growth, as exports from Indonesian companies with substantial Chinese ownership might lose their access or competitiveness in the US market. At the same time, Chinese investors might reconsider their expansion plans in Indonesia or reduce their demand for Indonesian materials due to these geopolitical barriers.

### **Looking Beyond the United States**

In such an uncertain environment, Indonesia must avoid placing all its eggs in one basket. Strengthening partnerships with non-US industrialised economies in the G7, such as Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the European Union, is a practical way to garner support, even if it does not necessarily grant Indonesia greater room for policy

rmanoeuvring. Indonesia's decision to continue participating in G7 outreach sessions is already a strategic move, as it provides valuable insights into how US allies are anticipating and responding to a second Trump term. While advantageous, this should not be the primary focus of its engagement. Rather, the main priority should be advancing domestic reforms by adopting best practices from the group.

Partnership with China must also continue. However, supply chains with a significant Chinese footprint could be re-focused to serve Indonesia's domestic market or to meet the demand for affordable products in other developing economies. Together with China and the other ASEAN members, Indonesia has the opportunity to tap into growing markets across Africa, the Pacific Islands, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. Within our own region, promoting better utilisation of existing platforms such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) remains an urgent priority.

Lastly, it is not the intention of this piece to advocate for a more revisionist agenda towards the international system. The proposal to look beyond the US must not be construed as a call to replace the US altogether. Instead, it identifies issues where both countries could make the most progress and where they should manage expectations under Trump's incoming presidency. Trump's return does not change the fact that the US remains, and will remain, an indispensable partner for Indonesia in its pursuit of becoming a high-income country



by 2045.

What President Prabowo did by calling President-elect Trump, offering to meet him in person, and advocating for stronger participation by the domestic private sector in key economic initiatives, is indeed necessary. Nevertheless, these efforts will not be sufficient unless Indonesia works in concert with ASEAN countries to bolster its visibility in the eyes of the American public. Only by doing so can Indonesia make itself—and the region—indispensable to Trump 2.0 and beyond.

**Muhammad Habib Abiyan Dzakwan is a researcher at the Department of International Relations, CSIS Indonesia.**

## Guest Column

# Living in Trump 2.0: Southeast Asian Fears and Hopes with a Changed America

By Hoang Thi Ha

*While Donald Trump's second term introduces uncertainty, Southeast Asia is now more resilient and able to wield significant agency in shaping its own future.*

Trump's victory signals the desire among many Americans to pivot away from the global leadership that primarily defined America's post-World War II foreign policy; instead, they favour self-prioritisation and exhibit scepticism towards foreign entanglements and aid, particularly among Americans who feel economically marginalised or disillusioned by the unfulfilled promises of globalisation. American foreign policy under Trumpism not only adopts a transactional approach but also redefines America's identity on the world stage, from guardian of the global order to a staunch defender of its own self-interests, characterised by a sharp, unapologetic nationalism.

This structural change transcends Trump himself. While the Biden administration attempted to reconcile American foreign policy's liberal internationalist traditions with a more pragmatic focus on narrowly defined national priorities, it had also demonstrated a greater willingness to act unilaterally, when

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necessary, particularly in the realm of international economic policy making.

### Southeast Asia's Fears and Hopes with Trump 2.0

Historically, the four-year cycle of the United States (US) presidential election creates periodic uncertainties in Southeast Asia, prompting the region to adapt to the shifting dynamics under successive US administrations.

#### What are their fears?

Southeast Asia has endured and navigated through the challenges of Trump 1.0 relatively well, despite significant shocks and disruptions. However, Trump 2.0 promises to be even more emboldened and less restrained, raising two major concerns for the region.

The first major concern is the unprecedented strain on the globalisation model that Southeast Asian countries have relied on for decades to achieve economic prosperity. The region's economies are deeply integrated into global supply chains, importing a significant amount of intermediate goods from China for final exports to the US. Similarly, Chinese exports to the US also utilise commodities and intermediate goods sourced from Southeast Asia. Trump's threat to impose tariffs as high as 60 percent on Chinese-made goods, alongside 10 to 20 percent tariffs on all imports, if realised and implemented, would create severe disruptions to global trade and impair global growth. Thereby, sending shockwaves through the global economy. Estimates from the [OCBC Bank](#) suggests that such measures could lead to 0.7 to 1.3 percent decline in economic growth for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) economies and a 1 percent decline in China's economic growth.

Given Trump's obsession with US trade deficits, Southeast Asian countries with trade surpluses with the US will come under intense scrutiny and pressure. In particular, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia—whose exports to the US have nearly or more than doubled between 2017 and 2023—are likely to be the most vulnerable to such measures. Ironically, much of this growth stems from Trump 1.0's trade war with China, which positioned Southeast Asia as a key hub of supply chain relocations from China and as a transshipment point for relabelled Chinese goods to circumvent US tariffs.

On a [regional scale](#), ASEAN's imports from the US make up only 7.4 percent of its total imports, but its exports to the US is much larger at 14.9 percent, highlighting the significant trade surplus ASEAN holds with the US—the largest among its external economic partners.

Diversifying export markets beyond the US is a logical solution for Southeast Asia, but it is easier said than done. Intra-ASEAN trade has remained relatively consistent at 20 to 23 percent for decades, and crucially, it is closely tied to the region's trade with major partners like the US and China. Meanwhile, the long-held hope that China might absorb more Southeast Asian exports remains unfulfilled, largely due to China's dominance in the manufacturing ecosystem and low domestic consumption, which drives its export of excess production capacity. As the US continues to restrict Chinese exports, the risk of China dumping more goods—already evident in sectors like solar panels, steel, textiles and other sundry goods—into Southeast Asia is increasing.

Trump's return serves as a stark reminder for elites around the world to rethink globalisation and recalibrate their economic policies to be more redistributive and inclusive, while remaining competitive and adaptable. Singapore's Transport Minister Chee Hong Tat [highlighted](#) this in his comments on the incoming Trump 2.0 and implications for the region; he emphasised that governments not only needed to “grow the macroeconomic pie” but also support

individuals and families at the micro level, helping them navigate these transitions.

The second major concern is the impending volatility in US-China relations, which will have profound implications for regional security and stability. This serves as a reminder that the shift in the US' China policy from engagement to strategic competition, which began under Trump 1.0, has now become a central organising principle of US foreign policy.

Trump's leadership style introduces significant uncertainty into this equation. His tendency to prioritise “deal-making” raises concerns—especially among US allies—that he might bypass them in favour of negotiating bilateral deals directly with China. In such an uncertain environment, Southeast Asia finds itself in a precarious position, caught between the escalating tensions of the US-China rivalry and the risk of being sidelined in key decisions due to Trump's isolationist and unilateral instincts. Moreover, infighting within Trump's team is likely to complicate matters, particularly regarding how best to compete with China.

### **Is there any hope?**

Southeast Asian countries, known for their foreign policy pragmatism, may find common ground with Trump's transactional and pragmatic approach at some point. By focusing on tangible economic exchanges, such as increasing imports of American goods and facilitating US investments, Southeast

Asian countries can potentially maintain good relations with Trump 2.0. Vietnam has already exemplified this approach by green-lighting a USD 1.5 billion **golf course and hotel project** by the Trump Organisation, while also courting investment from SpaceX, whose CEO Elon Musk may wield considerable influence in the Trump 2.0 administration. The **recent meeting** between Vietnam's party chief and SpaceX representatives in the US further underscores this potential alignment of interests.

The best hope for Southeast Asia under Trump 2.0 is that the region is now more prepared, resilient, and capable. Together with other partners, Southeast Asia now wields significant agency in shaping its own future. The region has already endured Trump's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and responded by not only revitalising it through the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) but also established the world's largest free trade agreement—the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—and is currently negotiating the world's first region-wide Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA).

While the US still plays a key role in Southeast Asia's success, the region has diversified its strategies and pathways, driven by its connectivity with other nations and its indigenous strengths, especially its young populations, growing middle class, and sustained economic dynamism.

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# Economic Implications of Trump 2.0 on Southeast Asia and the Regional Trade Architecture

By Denis Hew

*Trump 2.0 policies are likely to result in further reconfiguration of global supply chains and geo-economic fragmentation, which ASEAN can overcome by stepping up regional economic integration to enhance its economic security.*

When Donald Trump takes office in January 2025 as the forty-seventh President of the US, all eyes will be on his trade policy which is expected to double down on protectionist policies. These will address unfair trade practices and trade imbalances the US has with the rest of the world. These protectionist policies under Trump 2.0 will have serious implications on the global economy and on Southeast Asia.

During Trump's re-election campaign, he had often threatened to raise tariffs on Chinese imported goods by up to sixty percent and from ten to twenty percent on all other imported goods coming into the US. Given that Trump initiated the US-China trade war in his first term, there is a strong likelihood that he will carry out his plans. Tariff escalation could spark retaliatory actions by China and other US trading partners, affecting global trade flows and increasing economic uncertainties in the region.



In the worst-case scenario, economists are predicting that a new US-China trade war could significantly cut global GDP growth by as much as a third. Meanwhile, China, which will bear the brunt of US tariff hikes, could see a significant decline in economic growth next year, exacerbating the already faltering domestic economy.

## Trump 2.0 Policies Will Further Reconfigure Global Supply Chains

Given that most Southeast Asian countries are export-oriented economies, further escalation in trade tensions will certainly have an impact on their economic and trade performance. Furthermore, beneficiaries of the "China+1" strategy such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia could also be vulnerable to US policy action due to their trade surpluses with the latter. From 2017 to 2022, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) goods trade surplus with

the US has more than tripled to USD 162 billion.

Ongoing US-China economic rivalry have often put ASEAN in a very difficult position. Given the region's well-established manufacturing supply chains that are closely linked to both China and the US, ASEAN would prefer to do business with its top two trading partners rather than choose a side.

Over the past few years, multinational corporations (MNCs) have been diversifying their supply chains away from China through near-shoring or on-shoring activities to reduce their dependence on a single source or supplier, the so-called "China+1" strategy. However, Trump's "America First" policies may pressure MNCs to move more of their operations to the US, effectively shortening existing supply chains and increasing trade diversion. Given the business logic of how global supply chains work (i.e., outsourcing of production processes to minimise costs), extensive on-shoring activities will drive up operational costs and prices of products for consumers. This would clearly badly affect Southeast Asia's supply chains especially in the manufacturing sector.

### **Global Fragmentation and Implications on Regional Trade**

Concerns of geo-economic fragmentation in recent years will likely get worse under a Trump 2.0 administration and a new US-China trade war. There are considerable economic costs arising from global

fragmentation including higher inflation, segmented markets, diminished access to labour and technology as well as reduced productivity. All these costs will undermine global economic growth and widen income inequality.

There will also likely be less US engagement in Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific region. During Trump's first term, the country pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement (TPP) and the incoming administration will likely scrap the unpopular Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). This framework, which consists of four main pillars: i) trade; ii) supply chains; iii) green economy issues; and iv) taxation and anti-corruption, was seen as the US' efforts to re-engage with the region. Although three out of four pillars were finalised last year, negotiations on IPEF's most important trade pillar failed to be concluded in November 2023.

That leaves the region with the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership trade agreement (RCEP) that does not include the US but includes China and most of ASEAN's major trading partners. RCEP, which entered into force January 1, 2022, is considered the world's largest free trade agreement (FTA). Notably, despite their historical baggage, China, Japan, and South Korea joined RCEP because of ASEAN's strategic neutrality and growing economic clout (as the world's fifth largest economy if integrated). More importantly, RCEP's trade rules are designed to support regional supply chains. Its Rules of

Origin (ROOs) are easy to implement and has regional value content provisions that facilitate the expansion of regional supply chains. By offering businesses in the region greater market access, RCEP offers an attractive buffer against the rising tide of trade protectionism.

### **Stepping up Regional Economic Integration to Strengthen ASEAN Economic Security**

Against an increasingly hostile economic environment, ASEAN needs to carefully navigate these headwinds by accelerating regional economic integration through the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) initiative. The speedy implementation of the AEC to create a single market and production base, makes a highly connected Southeast Asia an attractive regional space to expand trade and foreign direct investments. Deeper regional integration will also bolster economic resilience in a challenging climate and secure peace and stability in the region.

As ASEAN policymakers finalise a new AEC strategic plan which is expected to be launched in 2025, they should ensure that the new plan addresses the emerging challenges facing the region. Aside from rising trade protectionism, digitalisation/AI adoption, climate change, rapid urbanisation, and demographic trends like ageing populations must be tackled. It is no longer business as usual. Given the economic uncertainties that lie ahead, there has to be greater sense of

urgency to come up with an effective strategic plan that is fit for purpose.

Given that the Trump 2.0 administration will most likely be less interested in engaging ASEAN, preferring a bilateral and highly selective approach with what the US considers to be strategic countries like Indonesia and Vietnam, there is more reason to strengthen regional economic frameworks. Deepening trade ties with China and other major trading partners through RCEP could be the best response to the challenges of a second Trump administration.

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