

Why are Asians less concerned about 'Trump 2.0'?



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OPINION

Since Donald Trump announced his candidacy, various think tanks have been analyzing the potential repercussions of his return to power, and these analyses have taken on a more practical dimension as the inauguration approaches. As we draw closer to Trump's second inauguration as President of the United States, concerns among countries worldwide — especially among the US' Western allies — about the resurgence of his non-liberal policies have intensified. Numerous Western nations anticipate increased friction with the United States, particularly in the private sector. These anxieties have been exacerbated by the aggressive responses of American business leaders, such as Elon Musk. Within the United States, reactions to this situation have also emerged, along with proposed solutions. The journal *Foreign Affairs*, affiliated with the Council on Foreign Relations, suggests that Western countries could learn from the approach of Asian nations by examining the historical context of US relations with Asian countries. According to this publication, the United States' minimal interventionist policy in Asia, which has led to a redefinition of economic and political relationships based on mutual interests rather than shared values, could serve as a model for Western nations.

Taiwan's enigma

After the failure of the decades-long policy of "strategic ambiguity," Biden announced four times that the US would defend Taiwan against Chinese aggression, but Trump did not make such a statement. Throughout the 2024 election, Trump's views on Taiwan have shown that the issue falls within the framework of his broader views on allies and trade. He has set Taiwan at arm's length, stating that it should pay more for US support.

He has accused Taipei of stealing America's semiconductor industry, but the risk is that Trump may see Taiwan merely as a pawn in a larger game with China. If he mixes trade and security by including Taiwan in any potential deal with China, he will greatly increase the risks.

Trump has promised to bring an end to the war in Ukraine, a development closely watched by Asian countries, especially China. However, the geopolitical circumstances of Ukraine and Taiwan are not similar,

and China has made this clear. Taiwan is at the heart of the Chinese Communist Party's narrative of legitimacy, and any unsuccessful or stalled military action against Taiwan would be fatal to the party's rule. On the other hand, Biden's explicit support for Taiwan has created a sense of righteousness in Taipei and reinforced the idea that the US and its allies have no choice but to defend Taiwan. This has also led Taiwan to overestimate its strategic position in the global economy and overemphasize the role of TSMC in chip production. Although the company plays a significant role in the semiconductor industry, it is just a contractor, and there are others. However, the company has moved some of its operations to the US, Japan, and other regions, which may reduce Taiwan's long-term economic importance.

If Trump pulls out of Ukraine or takes steps to improve semiconductor production in the US, Taipei will realize it cannot rely on unlimited support from Washington. Such actions may prevent Taiwan's domestic politics from moving towards destabilizing independence, an action that could make Chinese military exercises around it or aggressive actions on the island of Taiping more likely. However, the regional impact of the Ukraine war should not be exaggerated. Countries like Australia, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea have taken a strong stance against Russia, but much of the region, especially Muslim-majority Southeast Asia, is ambivalent. These countries have seen Washington's double standard, condemning Russia's war while supporting or enabling wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Gaza. Many Asian governments are trying to weigh the costs and benefits of maintaining their national interests against the US, but China is the biggest problem. Even non-aligned countries like India, Indonesia, and Vietnam have moved closer to Washington due to concerns about China. This trend began during Trump's first term and expanded during Biden's.

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In search of leader

Asia's primary concern about Trump's return is his trade policy. Trump has repeatedly stated that "tariffs" are his favorite word, and foreign governments should take it seriously, especially if hardliners like Jamie Greer take key roles in US trade policy. Trump will likely impose new tariffs on China, which may also include countries like Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Beijing will retaliate in some way, but domestic economic problems, including declining confidence in economic management and a real estate crisis, will limit China's ability to respond. This could create a vicious cycle that further weakens China's economic growth and increases trade tensions with the West.

Alongside these challenges, the increasing competition between the US and China will

continue, although nuclear deterrence makes military conflict almost impossible. Many Asian governments will try to insure themselves against the uncertainties of China's economic policies and Trump's return by strengthening cooperation. However, the lack of strong leadership in the region is a significant challenge. Trump's decision in 2017 to pull out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership was a major shock to US allies, but Japan under Shinzo Abe's leadership managed to keep the pact alive. Today, the leaders of Australia, Japan, and South Korea have weak political bases, and the Indonesian president has yet to establish himself in a region that clearly needs strong leadership but lacks an obvious candidate.

It's always been America first

Asia's long experience with Washington shows that Trump is not a unique phenomenon. Large countries like the US tend to look inward more than outward. Trump's reluctance to engage in foreign commit-

ments reflects a current of thought that has existed in US foreign policy since George Washington's warning against permanent alliances in 1796. Before World War II, the US only intermittently engaged in foreign affairs, and it was the attack on Pearl Harbor and the Soviet threat after the war that drew Washington into sustained foreign engagement. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and despite the presence of China and Russia, the US has not faced a similar threat. Therefore, instead of searching for imaginary shared values, US allies and partners should view the second Trump administration as a return to America's natural position. They should learn to deal with Washington not as a superpower with unlimited willingness to defend them, but as an offshore balancer that selectively uses its power to advance its own interests.

The article first appeared in the Farsi-language newspaper *Vatan-e Emrooz*.



Presidential candidate Donald Trump (L) speaks about the threat of China to US agriculture at the Smith Farm in Smithton, Pennsylvania, on September 23, 2024. ● WIN MCNAMEE/GETTY IMAGES

War or peace ...

Gaza-Israel flashpoint

Trump's Middle East policies will reclaim the spotlight upon his return to the White House. A key and sizzling issue in the region, influenced by Trump's maneuvers, is the Gaza-Israel conflict and the simmering tensions between Israel and Palestinian factions. Trump's first term saw a staunchly pro-Israel stance, characterized by the 2018 relocation of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Al-Quds (Jerusalem) and the 2019 recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights. Yet, before his return to power, Trump played a pivotal role in defusing tensions and setting a deadline for a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas. However, the resulting cease-fire fell short of meeting all of Israel's expectations, provok-

ing discontent among certain Israeli extremist factions. This led to the resignation of Israel's Minister of Internal Security Itamar Ben-Gvir. Trump's White House comeback is likely to bolster support for Israel, but this may not necessarily fulfill the desires of all Israeli political camps.

Domino effect of normalization

A standout achievement of Trump's first term was the Abraham Accords, which paved the way for Israel's normalization of relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. These agreements, a departure from the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, sidestepped the Palestinian issue and rights. The architects of these accords believed that regional stability could be at-

tained even without addressing the Palestinian issue. However, events since October 7 have exposed the potential pitfalls of overlooking the Palestinian issue.

As Trump is set to begin his second term, he is expected to pick up where he left off, pushing for further normalization between Israel and Arab nations. Saudi Arabia, a prime target of this policy, is likely to witness intense diplomatic efforts aimed at fostering Riyadh-Tel Aviv relations.

Iran conundrum

Trump's Iran policy had two primary objectives: thwarting what he called Iran's nuclear ambitions and reining in Iranian-backed proxy forces in the region. In recent months, Iran has made huge strides in its nuclear capabilities, fueled

by direct tensions with Israel. Trump is likely to dust off the maximum pressure strategy to coerce Tehran back to the negotiating table and extract further concessions.

But this strategy might not bear the desired fruit. The new Iranian government, while keen on negotiations, has consistently maintained that it will only sit down for "dignified talks." Furthermore, Iran, well-versed in withstanding the so-called maximum pressure, is unlikely to cave in. If the maximum pressure strategy fails, calls for US military strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities could grow louder, particularly from Israel and hawkish voices in Congress.

Persian Gulf Arab states, having learned from past experiences, also lean toward a negotiated settlement of the Iran-US

crisis. The 2019 Houthi attacks on Saudi oil facilities and the 2022 strikes on the UAE, which drew limited US response, have convinced these countries that their security relies on de-escalation with Iran. Hence, Arab states are eager to prevent Iran from going nuclear and are pushing for a diplomatic breakthrough between Washington and Tehran.

Shifting sands in Levant

Trump's policies will directly influence developments in Syria and Lebanon. In Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which toppled Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, seeks to woo the US and attract Western support by establishing relative stability in Syria. In Lebanon, General Joseph Aoun, the former army chief, aims to strengthen military and security ties with the US,

curb Hezbollah's influence and secure more military aid. These shifts could disrupt the regional power balance and intensify the rivalry between pro-Iran groups and US-aligned factions.

Bottom line

Trump's return to the White House promises major shifts in US Middle East policies. His strategies could fuel rivalries, ratchet up pressure on Iran, rekindle the Israel-Arab normalization process and alter the power dynamics in Syria and Lebanon. The Middle East's trajectory during Trump's presidency may either witness continued maximum pressure on Iran, escalating regional conflicts, or a push for new diplomatic deals, each with its unique ramifications for regional security and stability.