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The Rise of Trump and Its Global Implications

A Trump Presidency: Valuable Lesson and Opportunity for ASEAN

By Harry Sa

Synopsis

Donald Trump's election victory left Southeast Asia feeling uncertain about the future. Rhetoric from his campaign trail suggests a future of isolationism and protectionism. ASEAN states, which have long depended on the United States to hedge against China, need to strengthen ASEAN centrality.

Commentary

SINCE DONALD Trump's stunning victory in the US presidential elections, experts have speculated on what a Trump administration means for the Asia Pacific. As Trump's policies were never clearly outlined, the Asia Pacific countries are struggling to formulate a sensible response. A sense of unease is rippling throughout the region as Asian leaders wonder what the next four years will bring.

One can get some sense of Trump's Asia Pacific strategy by examining his campaign rhetoric; unfortunately, the direction of Trump's policies does not bode well for Southeast Asian states. However, beneath the pessimism and doomsday scenarios may lie an opportunity for ASEAN.

Asia Pacific Strategy from the Campaign Trail

Donald Trump's campaign was rife with hyperbole and vague positions, making it difficult to identify any concrete policies towards Asia. In fact, the only time Southeast

Asia was ever mentioned was in tirades against job theft. We do know, however, how he feels about certain issues in the region.

Firstly, Trump will reexamine existing alliances with Japan and South Korea. He has repeatedly shown interest in shedding more of the costs associated with maintaining the alliances. Secondly, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is now all but dead. Congress is determined not to ratify the TPP before the end of President Obama's tenure, passing the buck to the next administration.

After mercilessly targeting free trade deals throughout his campaign, it seems unlikely as ever that the TPP will be passed. And lastly, signs point to an economic showdown with China over its fiscal and trade policies. Trump has blamed the US for being weak in the face of China's currency manipulation, threatened tariffs on Chinese imports, and promised to prevent American companies from offshoring jobs to China.

Of course, it is difficult to discern just how much of Trump's rhetoric will be translated into policies. For example, Trump has not announced when he will begin negotiations over US bases nor has he clarified exactly how much more Asian allies are expected to pay. Only days after his victory, he assured South Korea's president that the US remains committed to its defence, and Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reportedly had a productive and cordial meeting with the President-elect. Nevertheless, any one of his many campaign promises becoming a reality will have negative implications for Southeast Asia.

ASEAN's Reliance on Great Powers

ASEAN, generally, has been interested in keeping the US in the region. For the past few decades, ASEAN's great power relations can be summarised in the following way: depend on China for development and prosperity, depend on the US for security. This, of course, is a gross oversimplification, but endless pages of scholarship have documented the hedging behaviour of Southeast Asian states precisely along those lines.

Despite the US' much vaunted "rebalance to Asia" policy, there were always the persistent concerns of American abandonment. For a time, the Obama administration did seem to make progress. The US increased its participation in ASEAN-led groups, strengthened its institutions, shifted a large number of strategic assets into the region, repaired ties with Myanmar and Vietnam, and was on the verge of ratifying the TPP.

It seemed ASEAN's bet on the US would pay off. However suddenly, after the fateful Tuesday night on 8 November 2016, all the progress made in the past eight years is under threat of being undone. So where can ASEAN go from here?

Only Answer: ASEAN Centrality

Trump's election is a reminder of the fickle and punishing nature of international politics, but it is also a clarion call to strengthen unity in an institution that has repeatedly failed to do so. Southeast Asian leaders have long harboured the

suspicion that the US is an unreliable partner, and the election results threaten to confirm this.

The void left by a hypothetical American retrenchment will almost certainly be filled by China, leaving ASEAN states with virtually no options to hedge against their economic dependence on their giant neighbour. There is only one feasible answer: strengthen ASEAN centrality.

Altogether, ASEAN comprises some 600 million people; roughly twice that of the US. It boasts a young and growing population that can double as a massive market and a diligent labour force. The region is blessed with an abundance of natural resources, and geographically, it occupies a strategic location that sees trillions of dollars of trade pass through its seaways each year. What ASEAN lacks, however, is a collective vision and the political will to strive towards it.

The territorial disputes of the South China Sea exposed just how fragile ASEAN unity was when, during its 2012 annual foreign ministers' meeting, it failed to issue a joint statement for the first time in history. In June 2016, ASEAN foreign ministers, once again, struggled to come up with a joint statement. Though initially issued, it was retracted due to dissent within the organisation.

With all the uncertainties surrounding a Trump presidency, ASEAN now has an opportunity to make a conscious effort towards a more unified and collective foreign policy. It needs to consider the possibility that the US will not always be there to act as a stabilising force. If there were to be any hope for any of the ten member states to work with China without succumbing to their overwhelming economic, political, and strategic influence, it will come from a firm and robust collective identity.

Notwithstanding all this, American withdrawal is not a foregone conclusion. There are numerous factors that will prevent or delay dramatic changes. Alliances are sticky. Interdependence still dominates and will mollify US-China relations. Campaign promises are, more often than not, mere rhetoric. Additionally, there will be thousands of hardworking civil servants and policy advisers on both sides of the Pacific trying to preserve what has largely been a productive relationship. Asia is too important a region for the US to ignore. A Trump presidency will not change that. Nevertheless, ASEAN has to respond to this wake up call.

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