



IS THE INDO-PACIFIC LOST IN TRANSITION?

The 10 member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are meeting for their 46th Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, which currently holds the Chair of the regional organisation. This particular meeting holds added significance as it transpires amidst Trump's tariff policies and the emerging discourse on how Trump 2.0 would approach the Indo-Pacific region. How the ASEAN as a bloc and the individual countries would navigate America's ongoing economic Cold War with China, besides the varying tariffs imposed by the Trump administration on them is a running theme in this year's summit. Moreover, the United States will be conspicuous by absence from the summit, as Trump's policies, by commission and omission, will impact the relevance of ASEAN centrality in Indo-Pacific affairs. Despite Trump's track record of officially recognising the term 'Indo-Pacific' in US strategy, renaming the Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command and reviving the moribund Quad in his first term, murmurs of neglect and attention deficit lurk the Indo-Pacific in his second term. What is the strategic reality behind such fear perceptions, what is Trump's national security and foreign policy team hinting at, and what it means for India's own outlook and strategy for the Indo-Pacific?

Is Indo-Pacific in the ICU?

The first 100 days have passed since Donald J. Trump decisively won the US presidential election of 2024. Trump's second innings at the White House has been different, both in substance and optics, compared with Trump 1.0. From reciprocal tariff policies to dealing with NATO partners, there is a significant churn. At a time when the world had started singing swansongs on American hegemony, and strategic commentaries and academic theories had spilled quite a bit of ink on "America's relative decline", the "Make America Great Again" moment and Trump's "America First" assertion have caught the world's eyes and ears.

In his early days behind the Resolute Desk, attempts at brokering peace in the Russia-Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas Wars have largely occupied Trump's primary attention. His first foreign visit after donning the Presidential suit, was to the Persian Gulf and not to the Indo-Pacific region, despite the latter being called the region of strategic priority for Washington. Although his Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and his intelligence czar, Tusli Gabbard undertook official tours to the region, the presidential focus towards the region seems to be missing.



Image Source: Association of South East Asian Nations

Of course, right after his inauguration in January this year, a meeting of the Quad's Foreign Ministers was convened by Secretary of State, Marco Rubio and President Trump is perhaps landing in New Delhi later in the year for the Quad's Leadership summit. However, the Trump administration's decisions to cut down foreign aid and assistance plus retrench institutions like the USAID is being seen as creating more strategic space for China in the region. Despite America's diplomatic, economic and security presence throughout the Indo-Pacific region, policy presence comes with Presidential attention. For instance, Washington's shifting focus from seeking retribution for the 9/11 attacks against Al Qaeda to nation building and fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan and to a disastrous misadventure in Iraq, created a blind spot in the Indo-Pacific, where its strategic nemesis, China was rising fast and unchecked. Therefore, force projection and diplomatic display has to go along with visible attention from the White House. Earlier in mid-April, President Xi Jinping's visit to a number of Southeast Asian countries, coupled with a "Central Conference on Work Related to Neighboring Countries", came with a message that Beijing aimed to provide stability and certainty to its neighbourhood.

The new White Paper released this month

by Beijing on "China's National Security in a New Era" aims at unifying "development and security" to ensure that "they are jointly planned, holistically deployed, and mutually reinforced." In recent times, Beijing, on a mission mode, has simultaneously advocated its Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI) and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) to reshape China's image as a provider of public goods in the international system. The Xiangshan Forum is being promoted, as a counter to the West-led Shangri La Dialogue on matters of the Indo-Pacific. Indo-Pacific's economic architecture, for instance, is clearly at the heart of the 46th ASEAN summit in Kuala Lumpur, and the spotlight is on the newly minted ASEAN-GCC-China Trilateral Summit, aiming to take coordinated efforts to address the impacts of US tariffs and the dynamic changes in the regional economic architecture.

The world at large and the Indo-Pacific stands a critical precipice of time, when Beijing projects itself as the defender of globalisation and calls out America for practising protectionist policies. Currently, ASEAN centrality seems low in the priority radar of President Trump, with his sights more fixated on winning the trade war with China. Although Defence Secretary Hegseth's trip to the region provided some new traction

and headlines, Washington's new approach to the security architecture will only become clearer once the unclassified portions of the US Defence Strategy becomes public. As of now, it is clear that Trump 2.0 would like to move on, from the Biden era "integrated deterrence", that aimed to recalibrate post-World War II hub-and-spoke alliance. However, how exactly, Hegseth's call to "re-establish deterrence" will pan out, needs to be seen. How some of the ASEAN countries will practice their "bamboo diplomacy", to maintain flexible foreign policies and not choosing sides between the US and China, will have strategic implications for India's Act East policy, and its Indo-Pacific outlook.

Can India Do More with Less?

India's capabilities and resources to shape regional outcomes in the Indo-Pacific, amidst the US-China competition is relatively limited. Therefore, New Delhi has to make up in intent and strategy, for what it lacks in relative capability. For one, New Delhi needs to fortify its ties with other Quad members, Japan and Australia who have equal stakes in the Indo-Pacific region, amidst shifts in Washington's policy attention and focus. India needs to develop a real time and better understanding of how to navigate the economic framing of Trump's security outlook in the region. In Trump's worldview, all foreign relations and security matters, in the final analysis, have to pass the single most important test: How would they benefit the American economy?

India is not a party to the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Indo-Pacific Economic Partnership (IPEF) being low on Trump's priority, New Delhi needs to recalibrate its regional and bilateral trade arrangements, while negotiating its own terms of agreement with the Trump team. India has the challenge of taking forward its growth momentum, while addressing the problems related to China's overcapacity and negotiating new terms of trade engagement with Washington. How to protect India's interest in a rapidly shifting global and regional value chains, is of paramount importance to India's strategic planners. Moreover, India's

policymaking elites and strategic community needs to keep a close watch on the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy of Trump 2.0. •

By Dr. Monish Tourangbam



Chintan
Research
Foundation

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1st Floor, Bharti Crescent Building, 1 Nelson Mandela Marg, Vasant Kunj Phase II, New Delhi - 110070



info@crfindia.org



+91 6358895955, +91 6358871398



www.crfindia.org