

# President Trump and the Implications for the Australia–US Alliance and Australia’s Role in Southeast Asia

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The accession of Donald Trump to the US presidency has triggered serious discussion within Australia’s policy community over the future of Australia–US security relations and Australia’s role in Southeast Asia. During his first days in office, President Trump pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal, an integral part of his predecessor’s “pivot strategy” towards Asia and an initiative strongly supported by the Australian government. The United States’ withdrawal from the TPP has led various Australian commentators to question Washington’s commitment to maintain a viable economic and strategic presence in the Asia Pacific.<sup>1</sup> Such uncertainty is aggravated by Canberra’s growing disquiet over intensified tensions between China and the United States in the South China Sea. President Trump’s posture of challenging Chinese sovereign control over its man-made islands in the South China Sea has increased Australian concerns that it could soon face the nightmare of being compelled to “choose” between its largest trading partner — China —

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and its long-term security ally — the United States — if the two Great Powers were to clash militarily in Southeast Asia’s critical maritime littorals.<sup>2</sup>

### **ASEAN Fragility and Australia’s Concerns**

Shortly after Trump’s election victory, former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating called for Australia to “cut the tag” of unmitigated support for US foreign policies and recognize that “our future is basically in the region around us, in Southeast Asia”.<sup>3</sup> Since its inception in 2011, successive Australian governments had extended unqualified backing to the Barack Obama administration’s “pivot strategy” which was largely designed to reassure members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that Washington was committed to playing a vigorous and sustained strategic and economic role in Southeast Asia in the face of China’s rising power.<sup>4</sup> Trump’s decision to withdraw America from the TPP undercut Australia’s commitment to regional order-building by pursuing multilateral free trade arrangements and promoting an “inclusive” approach to shaping future rules for security conduct in Asia. Comments by Trump’s nominee for US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, during his confirmation testimony before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee — that the new administration would reserve the prerogative to resort to military force to oppose Chinese territorial claims and would ask US regional allies to provide “backup” for any such military operation — exacerbated Australian uncertainties about future US policy directions. Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop reiterated that her government’s position would remain consistent: the South China Sea dispute should be settled by international law. For the Australian government to respond to such “hypothetical situations” prematurely, Bishop noted, would not be appropriate.<sup>5</sup> However, Keating and other Australian critics warned that any such US action would be tantamount to initiating a Sino–American war that would disrupt Australia’s vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs), devastate its economy, and render global security null and void. Australia, he insisted, should tell the Trump administration from the “get-go” that it would not be a part of such “adventurism”.<sup>6</sup>

ASEAN’s brittleness in the absence of a regionally engaged United States ranks as perhaps Australia’s most fundamental concern about Southeast Asia. As ASEAN’s self-appointed “locomotive”, Indonesia’s willingness to push back against China’s maritime

expansion southwards — in conjunction with China’s territorial claims embodied in the so-called “nine-dash line” — is viewed by Australian policy planners as increasingly critical. While Indonesia is not formally involved in the South China Sea dispute, and its control of the geographically critical Natuna Islands has not been formally challenged by Beijing, some Chinese maps have demarcated Indonesia’s 200 nautical miles exclusive economic zone (EEZ) as being partly inside the nine-dash line. In March 2013, an Indonesian patrol boat faced off against Chinese coastguard units that intervened when the former attempted unsuccessfully to capture Chinese fishermen operating illegally in Indonesia’s EEZ.<sup>7</sup> Similar incidents subsequently occurred to the extent that by the end of 2016, Australian and Indonesian foreign and defence ministers were considering bilateral naval exercises in the South China Sea near the Natunas.<sup>8</sup> In fact, extensive US–Indonesian joint exercises had already been stepped up as part of Obama’s pivot strategy without designating a specific threat against which such manoeuvres were directed.<sup>9</sup> The combination of a Trump presidency with its seemingly erratic Asian foreign policy and a decision by a key Indonesian general to “temporarily suspend” various aspects of its defence relations with Australia (due to the misspelling of *Pancasila*, the founding philosophy of the Indonesian state, in an Australian military educational text) underscored the fragile nature of US–Australian–Indonesian defence relationship.<sup>10</sup> The absence of unmitigated US guarantees to remain involved in Southeast Asia reinforces Australian concerns about other large powers (i.e., China) employing divide and rule tactics against key ASEAN members.

Australia is also concerned over the reorientation of the Philippines from traditionally being a stalwart US ally towards gravitating into China’s orbit under President Rodrigo Duterte. Duterte and Trump, however, appear to have developed an initially positive chemistry, with the new US president having reportedly endorsed his Philippine counterpart’s ruthless war on drugs and downplaying previous US concerns about human rights abuses in that campaign.<sup>11</sup> Australia continues to sustain low-key participation in military training in the Philippines as reflected by the *Balikatan* counter-terrorism exercises and two annual bilateral exercises (one in each country) focusing purely on special forces operations and counterterrorism.<sup>12</sup> However, prospects for Canberra and Manila entertaining a common frame of security reference are distant as Duterte cultivates an increasingly independent foreign and strategic posture vis-à-vis the United States and its other Asian allies.<sup>13</sup>

During the Trump presidency, Australia is likely to adopt a form of “hedging strategy” towards Southeast Asia that resembles what ASEAN members have been pursuing relative to the United States and China for many years. Trump’s decision to withdraw from the TPP will likely prompt Australia to affiliate more intensively with the ASEAN-led and China-backed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) once it is clear that salvaging a “TPP light” without US participation is impractical. Canberra is also likely to orchestrate a more even-handed posture towards integrating bilateral and multilateral economic and security relations with specific ASEAN members than previously. It will also be careful to ensure that any such relationships do not lead to an unintended severance of alliance relations with Washington but will generate a more independent and distinctly “Australian” foreign policy towards its ASEAN neighbours. Malcolm Turnbull’s government will be sensitive to avoiding the impression that it is a compliant “deputy sheriff” to the Trump administration’s regional and global interests in a way that resembles former Australian Prime Minister John Howard’s perceived policy deference to President George W. Bush’s foreign policy over a decade ago.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Turnbull’s government is already moving to upgrade its own leadership role. While still encouraging the United States to retain a substantial diplomatic, economic and strategic presence in Southeast Asia, it has offered to independently host an ASEAN leaders’ summit during that organization’s fiftieth anniversary, and has moved towards more autonomous security ties with other US bilateral allies and partners such as Singapore, South Korea, and, most importantly, Japan.<sup>15</sup>

### **ASEAN and a More Active Japanese “Spoke”**

As leader of the country whose security is most directly tied to the United States’ post-war “hub and spokes” regional alliance network in the Asia-Pacific region, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe moved rapidly to meet with President-elect Trump soon after the US presidential election. Although publicly expressing confidence that the US-extended deterrence guarantee would continue despite Trump’s campaign rhetoric insisting that Japan must “pay more” to sustain it, Abe has already moved independently to forge stronger ties with Australia and other regional maritime powers such as Indonesia in an effort to counterbalance what his own government views as increasingly aggressive Chinese behaviour in the East and South China.<sup>16</sup> During a visit to Indonesia in January 2017, Abe

proposed to Indonesian President Joko Widodo a joint pursuit of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” to counter China’s “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) initiative.<sup>17</sup> Widodo deflected Abe’s suggestion, however, by noting that Japan should become more active within the already established Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and underscoring ASEAN’s own determination not to become embroiled in any intensified Sino–Japanese geopolitical competition which could materialize in Southeast Asia. For similar reasons, it is unlikely that either Australia or India would now wish revive or support Abe’s 2006–7 “Quadrilateral Security Dialogue” initiative (involving Australia, India, Japan and the United States) and risk alienating China in the absence of the Trump administration offering a more concrete regional security posture.<sup>18</sup>

Initial uncertainty about the Trump administration’s long-term strategic tensions, underwritten by his “America First” geopolitical philosophy, and the ambiguous nature of a future US strategic presence in Southeast Asia’s key SLOCs and littorals, has led to speculation by respected independent security analysts that Abe could be instrumental in revising Japan’s regional security posture in ways designed to allow his country to play a more central role in regional security architectures. As Ian Storey and Malcolm Cook have surmised, various ASEAN countries could be pushed “to strengthen security cooperation with other potential security providers, especially Japan and Australia – and perhaps even India” as an alternative to succumbing to a rising China’s interests and preferences.<sup>19</sup> The traditional “spokes” in the US “hub and spokes” alliance network may become more “US-resistant” to agendas and regional power balancing strategies that would comply with Trump’s expectations that US security allies and partners “do more” in both financing and implementing security agendas in their own neighbourhoods.

## **Conclusion**

Australia’s burgeoning debate about the future of its American security ties relative to regional structural change in Asia — a discussion on the apparent “Trump revolution” unfolding in US post-war strategic thinking regarding future American strategic engagement within Eurasia and globally — will affect ASEAN’s security thinking and behaviour. The outcome of that debate will be shaped by how Australia adjusts to the prospect of sharpening Sino–American security dilemmas and trade tensions, how adroitly it

relates to a Japan preoccupied with reconstituting its now increasingly critical strategic identity in a region still sceptical of Tokyo’s policy motives and historical self-perceptions and, most importantly, how perceptive Canberra proves to be in relating to growing American populism and US preoccupations with its own domestic challenges. Australia may find that it is no longer enough to bandwagon with its traditional post-war “great and powerful [American] friend” as the ultimate insurance in future regional crises and conflicts. Australia must evaluate its relationships to core Asian powers in their separate efforts to shape a new regional order given a potential Trump-driven regional security approach inimical to Australia’s interests.

Most Australian policymakers and a substantial segment of the greater Australian body politic understand that this harsh reality is closing in on their country. Indeed, historical change is more powerful than any tradition, no matter how robust or appealing that history might be. Most evident is that Australia and ASEAN share a stake in confronting and managing their common destiny of operating in a world where the “American factor” will be diluted or dangerous in the Asia Pacific as promulgated and implemented by a new president that entertains priorities that could be substantially different from those that buttressed post-war US geopolitics. How sensitive and how nimble Australian and ASEAN elites prove to be in calibrating this potential change, and overcoming its capacity to intensify their own countries’ diplomatic, economic and strategic liabilities, will largely determine the relative impact of the Trump administration’s strategic behaviour in their region. Australia must now be a catalyst for alliance initiatives — a change which is an opportunity but also a risk given middle power resource constraints and its perceived faux-Asia credentials.

## NOTES

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