

President Trump's "pivot in Asia" by
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It was bound to happen. With one brief phone call to Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, President Donald Trump has replaced the rulebook that has governed Thai-US relations over the past decade with a new playbook that is likely to redirect US geostrategic aims in Asia over the course of his administration. While his predecessor, President Barack Obama, was noted for rebalancing US resources and interests from the Atlantic to the Pacific, famously known as the "pivot to Asia," Trump's geostrategic turn may be dubbed a "pivot in Asia."

Under Trump, US geopolitical preoccupations remain unchanged, dominated by the Middle East quagmire, Islamic State-inspired terrorism, the European Union's tribulations, and hotspots and headline news elsewhere. But while Trump's focus on Asia has been confined to North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, his dial-up of Prayuth in conjunction with similar calls to Philippine President and current ASEAN Chair Rodrigo Duterte and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong signal an overdue rebalancing of US interests and values.

Trump is unlikely to be as fixated on human rights and democracy as was Obama, whose government repeatedly called on Thailand to return to elections and popular rule as soon as possible. After Thailand's latest of 13 successful coups in 85 years transpired in May 2014, led by Prayuth, a four-star general who was army chief at the time, the Obama administration responded with sanctions and a general downgrade of the bilateral treaty alliance, triggering similar reactions by other democratic countries, including Japan. Although it remained cordial, the relationship between the US and its oldest friend in Asia of more than 180 years was conspicuously strained. Obama met with Yingluck Shinawatra, Thailand's last elected leader, more frequently than Prayuth, who only saw his previous US counterpart occasionally on the sidelines of larger leaders' meetings.

But Prayuth's new opposite number is proving different. In his inauguration speech last January, Trump said that "we do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone" in reference to foreign countries. Trump's pivot in Asia centers on this shift between interests and values. It is not as if human rights and basic freedoms will be abandoned altogether in favor of US interests in Asia but the ordering sequence and policy nuances will follow a different tack. As Trump himself has been accused of violating civil liberties at home with

authoritarian tendencies, he is not well positioned to preach about rights and freedoms abroad.

The prioritizing of US interests over values chimes with the election victory last year for Duterte, whose strongman instincts and strong-arm tactics in a deadly war on drugs and governing style have allegedly violated human rights and fundamental freedoms. As US criticisms of his human rights record mounted, relations between the two countries degenerated into vulgarity when the tough-talking top man in Manila called Obama a "son of a bitch" in September 2016, and followed up with the same jibe to the European Union last March.

As the Philippines and Thailand are the US treaty allies in Southeast Asia, Duterte's showmanship and rough methods have produced an authoritarian dividend for Prayuth. Suddenly, Thailand's military government was not the only one in the region with a shoddy human rights reputation. In fact, the death toll of more than 7,000 in Duterte's drugs war dwarfs the Prayuth regime's several hundred detentions of dissenters and critics for "attitude adjustment" at military barracks before they were released within a week, although such a comparison is analogous to two rotten fruits.

However, it is consequential for how Trump will deal with Southeast Asian countries and ASEAN as a whole. Trump's calls to Prayuth, Duterte, and Lee were designed to rally US allies and partners in ASEAN as Washington further isolates North Korea and weighs options in responding to Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs. Trump also reached out to Chinese President Xi Jinping with regular contacts, culminating in a tete-a-tete in Florida last month. When it comes to Asia, Trump's attention is still all about the North Korean nuclear threat to South Korea and Japan, another pair of US treaty allies in Asia, and to the US homeland which Kim Jong Un seeks to reach if his missile development can rocket that far.

But ASEAN is looming larger on Trump's rearview mirror. Both Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Vice President Mike Pence have openly courted ASEAN's cooperation to politically ostracize and economically cripple the Kim regime in a squeeze that could see Kim ousted from within or coerced into changing his ways on nuclear and missile development. Pence also assured ASEAN recently that Trump will visit the region for the ASEAN-led summits in November.

ASEAN thus will only grow on Trump. His attention and the efforts of his administration bode well for ASEAN's search for its own new regional balance in view of China's virtual takeover of a string of islets and reefs in the South China Sea and building them into artificial islands with weapons installations. Although the Philippines won a landmark, comprehensive ruling by the Permanent Court of

Arbitration in July 2016, Duterte has gambled by putting aside his country's legal victory under international law for a bilateral deal with China, even excluding it from the recent joint statement after the 30th ASEAN Summit in Manila, which he chaired. Central to this bilateral deal is China's willingness to agree to a set of rules for regional maritime behavior and actions, known as the Code of Conduct (CoC) on the South China Sea. If China reneges or dilutes the CoC deliberations to the point of ineffectiveness, Duterte will have miscalculated.

Either way, there is ample space for the US under Trump to help the regional states rebalance their collective weight vis-à-vis China. ASEAN states welcome a working relationship between Trump and Xi but they do not want a US-China agreement that undercuts their interests in maintaining regional autonomy and territorial integrity. Trump's pivot in Asia, from rebalancing values and interests to reaffirming ASEAN's role in Washington's geostrategic calculus, could ironically be the real rebalance Southeast Asia has been looking for.

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