



BIDEN BIDS TO REINVIGORATE THE ALLIANCE, BUT THAI DOMESTIC POLITICS LOOMS

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The following is part of a post-election series on the impact of the Biden administration on US relations in the Indo-Pacific. Visit [here](#) for part one and [here](#) for part two.

Among Southeast Asia's governments Thailand's may most regret Donald Trump's departure from the White House. The government of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha has benefited from the Trump administration's de-emphasis of human rights and democracy in favor of geostrategic interests; the prime minister was even [hosted](#) at a White House reception in October 2017. A shift in emphasis will ensnare US foreign policy in Thai domestic politics. The pro-democracy side of the Thai political divide, led by the [under-40 generations](#), will be looking for international solidarity and support, while the royalist-military regime will try to keep a lid on protests at home and democracy voices from abroad at bay. As a result, US-Thai relations will experience more friction under Joe Biden compared to the rather smooth ride Trump gave the Thai military authorities.

Broadly speaking, many Southeast Asians have had a positive assessment of the Trump administration. While he was abrasive, ill-tempered, and showed disregard (if not hostility to) regional norms, much of the region approved of his policies. Trump was the first US leader to recognize and act on the breakdown of the post-war liberal international order. His administration understood that China posed a [fundamental challenge](#) to the regional status quo and pushed back against Beijing's attempts to change it in its favor. Freedom of Navigation Operational Patrols ([FONOPS](#)) undermined China's South China Sea claims, and the regular dispatch of warships kept strategic planners in Beijing off balance. Especially valuable were military exercises with regional partners and allies that built capacity and relationships.

Trump's trade and technology war embraced a "decoupling" strategy that pushed companies to reroute supply chains through Southeast Asia. Regional governments have been quick to seize that opportunity, offering incentives to attract new investment. Regional autocrats were happy that the Trump administration focused on Chinese misbehavior rather than their own.

While they bristle when asked to choose between the US and China, ASEAN states recognized that intensified competition between Washington and Beijing created room for diplomatic maneuver. Neither power was willing to antagonize a potential supporter or drive a government into the opposing camp. The region's importance was reinforced by the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept that guided Trump administration thinking: One need only look at a map to grasp the centrality of the region to US strategy. If Southeast Asia is critical to US policy, then Thailand, the largest country and sole US ally in the subregion, assumed even more significance.

Thais understand that US relations with Southeast Asia in general and Thailand in particular will undergo a qualitative shift in tone and direction under Biden. But they also want the Free and Open Indo-Pacific policy, or something like it, to survive the Trump administration. Barack Obama's "rebalance" to Asia also used the Indo-Pacific as its geographical frame, but Thailand and Southeast Asia more broadly

distinguish between it and the FOIP in one critical way: the rebalance was more talk than substance. Obama is credited with understanding Southeast Asia (having spent part of his childhood in the region) and engaging on its terms. He showed up at ASEAN-led summits and used lofty rhetoric that matched the region's own ambitions.

Yet there was a sense that Obama did not have the stomach for the rough and tumble of regional politics, especially when dealing with China. While regional governments believe in consensus-building and seek input on important decisions, they are also realistic. They don't want multilateralism to provide cover for a failure to stand up to revisionism. For Southeast Asians, the US version of FOIP meant [pushing back](#) against China with all instruments and available resources. Biden would do well to combine both the Trump and Obama approaches: tone down the rhetoric while standing firm against China and working with allies and partners to maintain regional peace and prosperity.

Thais expect Biden to pursue a more traditional foreign policy. They recognize that human rights and civil liberties will reassume weight and prominence in US posture. This is especially important for a country still struggling with the effects of the 2014 coup. Thailand is in the midst of an existential [internal conflict](#) over its political future. Once divided between red and yellow, urban and rural, today national divisions are generational: 40 is the dividing line. Younger Thais are eager to end political squabbling that has consumed their country for two decades and are ready to modernize the country's political institutions, particularly the military and monarchy.

For the most part, the international community has sat this out; Trump never spoke against the military government. A Biden administration may feel compelled to stand more publicly for democracy and human rights. This will create tension in bilateral relations at times, although it need not downgrade them, as occurred after Obama [suspended aid](#) in 2014 after the coup.

The US must not be silent but it shouldn't throw fuel on the fire. This is a Thai fight. Balance is key. Washington should be supportive of democracy and rights without lining up directly behind the student-led protest movement for Thailand's overdue reform. A focus on democracy and human rights is unlikely to drive Thailand into China's arms any more than is already the case. A victory for the students, perhaps manifested as reform and compromise, is likely to yield a Thai government more inclined to challenge the inroads China has made in the economy and the political influence it has gained as a result.

It is open knowledge that Thailand has been underperforming and underwhelming in its economic potential, foreign relations, and overall strategic heft because of navel-gazing and costly conflict at home. Accordingly, the Biden administration needs to bear in mind Thailand's struggle to arrive in the 21st century with a workable democratic system that subsumes a monarchy within it rather than a royalist political order that suppresses popular grievances.

The Biden government would do well to recalibrate and rebalance democratic values and geostrategic interests by standing up for democracy and basic rights while standing up to China at the same time. Biden does not have to be like Obama in posture and projection any more than he has to reject all that Trump has done. If Biden can be Biden, armed with democratic values without alienating regional states like Thailand, while taking China to task with muscle and resources on geostrategic battlegrounds from the South China Sea to mainland Southeast Asia, the US will stand in good stead in Bangkok and other Southeast Asian capitals.

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