



THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION AND THE ASIA PIVOT

BY IGOR KHRESTIN

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The incoming Trump administration will face a difficult global geopolitical environment, with the ongoing wars in Europe and the conflict in the Middle East. Additionally, a more assertive People's Republic of China (PRC) further complicates an already tense global dynamic.

The United States' policy "[pivot](#)" to Indo-Pacific, which several modern-day American presidents have pursued but none managed to achieve, remains relevant and consequential to preserving the global order that American power underpins. If the imbalance is not addressed by the next commander-in-chief, the coming consequences may be even more disastrous. Thus, the new Trump administration will have to make difficult decisions about the short-term allocation of US military resources among various theaters, while prioritizing the long-term and all-encompassing [China challenge](#).

What happened?

The heinous Oct. 7, 2023, attack by Hamas against Israel and the cycle of violence it engendered have turned America's weary eyes back to the Middle East. So much for US National Security Advisor's Jake Sullivan's [confident affirmation](#) a mere week before those attacks that "the Middle East is quieter than it has been for decades."

In the meantime, the Indo-Pacific has become a more urgent priority, not a lesser one. After the inauguration

of President Lai Ching-te in Taiwan in May, the PRC launched massive [live-fire drills](#) in retaliation for the Taiwanese people's democratic choice. The PRC launched these drills [again](#) after President Lai's Taiwan's National Day Address.

Beijing hasn't limited its malign activities to intimidating Taiwan. In fact, Xi Jinping is on a warpath against the West and its allies. The PRC has significantly [ramped up](#) its support for Russia's war in Ukraine, causing NATO to label it as a "[decisive enabler](#)" of Russia's aggression during its last annual summit in Washington.

The PRC routinely and unceremoniously [threatens](#) the Philippines' military and civilian vessels in the Philippines' own internationally recognized territorial waters. The Philippines is a formal US military ally through a longstanding mutual defense treaty that also applies to the "contested" islands in the South China Sea where these incidents are occurring. On a lesser scale, the PRC does [the same](#) with Japan, another formal US treaty ally. One more spark, and the US may find itself in an unpredictable cycle of major power conflict.

Then there is the urgent threat of a resurgent Pyongyang, emboldened by overt Russian support and likely with the PRC's quiet acquiescence. The news that Kim Jong Un is now [supplying troops](#), along with other materiel, to aid in Russia's war in Ukraine, should come as no surprise. Russia needs more manpower to achieve a strategic breakthrough in Ukraine. Because of the brutal nature of the regime in Pyongyang, Kim Jong Un considers human beings as dispensable as artillery shells. Russia is now thus a key to the regime's long-term survival. This is a win-win for both sides—and only underscores that the Ukraine war is now a global conflict, with [massive repercussions](#) for Asia's security.

So with this brave new world in mind, US policymakers must now ponder: who is to blame and what is to be done?

Who is to blame?

The simplest answer is the recent spike in violence in the Middle East is the fault of the usual suspects:

terrorist organizations, such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and their affiliates, all supported by the mullahs in Tehran, a regime whose long-standing public goal is the destruction of the state of Israel (“Little Satan”) and the United States (“Great Satan”). This is an existential concern that the United States [cannot afford to ignore](#), regardless of what’s happening in the Indo-Pacific. It is even more pressing because Tehran and its proxies are openly targeting not just close US allies like Israel, but US soldiers and civilians, often with [deadly consequences](#).

The more complicated answer is that it is also a crisis of our own doing. The United States is no longer willing to project power as effectively as it once has, which has emboldened our adversaries. In 2013, US “red lines” in Syria were effectively ignored without any consequence, leaving a vacuum for Russia to explore and intervene in 2015, thus saving the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad. In 2014, the US and Europe collectively shrugged their shoulders when Vladimir Putin annexed by force Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula and invaded parts of the Donbas region. In August 2021, the United States ignominiously departed from Afghanistan, leaving in its wake a trail of [broken promises](#) to Afghan society and strategic opportunities for our adversaries to explore.

In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has by now reverberated in every part of the globe and created a new Beijing-Moscow-Tehran-Pyongyang [axis of autocracies](#). The 10/7 attacks against Israel effectively drew the world’s attention (and more importantly, US resources) away from its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which Russia effectively exploited.

This permissive environment did not occur in a vacuum. The strain of US military commitments in the preceding decades, combined with a populist turn in US politics, undoubtedly played a role in our current geopolitical predicaments. But ultimately, the lack of US resolve to decisively deter our adversaries is what likely emboldened Hamas to launch its attacks on 10/7, for Iran to openly target Israel, and ultimately, for additional US military assets to be [deployed](#) in the Middle East, rather than the Indo-Pacific. And as a new administration takes office, these reverberative

effects should only demonstrate the need for more assertive US global leadership, not a retrenchment of our commitments.

What is to be done?

The short-term answer is that US resources are finite and need to be quickly and effectively deployed to where the immediate threat to American lives is greatest. The Middle East—a volatile multi-domain theater with acute threats to key US interests and directly to the U.S military—is where some of those highly prized US kinetic assets are needed today, and so that is where they go.

The longer answer is the more complex one and involves the primary determinants of US strength, or what we used to call “[the arsenal of democracy](#).” If the United States wants a real “pivot” to the Indo-Pacific, we need to [urgently re-build](#) our industrial defense base that has atrophied after the “peace dividend” of the Cold War. Importantly, we need to do so in close coordination with our allies, which the recently-announced [Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience](#) (PIPIR) envisions. We also have domestic initiatives, such as the authorities provided under the [Pacific Deterrence Initiative](#) and the [Asia Reassurance Initiative Act](#) which have regrettably been [underutilized](#).

Most importantly, the United States must prioritize efforts to comprehensively improve the domestic and global elements of US power, which are key to US long-term global strength, whether it is in the Middle East, Europe or the Indo-Pacific.

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