



LEADERSHIP IN THE NEW ERA: A SEAT AT THE TABLE, NOT A THRONE

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Photo: 32nd ASEAN - New Zealand Dialogue in Da Nang, Viet Nam. Source: Cambodian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

For decades, the United States stood at the helm of the liberal international order, championing democracy, economic liberalization, global security, and multilateralism. However, Trump's return to the political forefront has shaken the foundations of global leadership. From the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and WTO to

the near dismantlement of USAID, the US's retreat from international development and climate action has become increasingly apparent. On the economic front, tariff hikes threaten to undermine decades of free trade advocacy. Meanwhile, growing speculation surrounds potential reductions in US military presence in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. As US foreign policy becomes increasingly uncertain, unprecedented, and inward-looking, a pressing question emerges: Does the world need a new leader?

China's Bid for Leadership

Amid this leadership vacuum, China appears poised to assume greater global influence. It checks many of the traditional boxes of a major power, including economic scale, political influence, and military strength. Beijing is actively seeking legitimacy through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and its leadership role in BRICS. On climate, it has signaled an ambition to lead the global green transition with a pledge to carbon neutrality by 2060. In the security sphere, China has intensified its presence in the South China Sea, expanded military diplomacy, and launched the Global Security Initiative, which emphasizes sovereignty, dispute resolution, and dialogue.

The Waning Appeal of Global Leadership

If global leadership grants strategic advantages, why is the US stepping back? The more revealing question is: What does global leadership offer a nation? After World War II, US global leadership was virtually uncontested. The dominant position allowed it to spread liberal values, contain communism, expand markets, and extend its influence well beyond its borders, shaping political and economic systems worldwide.

But today, it is becoming more apparent that the benefits have dwindled. Liberal democracy no longer spreads as it once did during the Obama presidency. Globalization seemingly no longer yields consistent economic advantages for the US, especially as the trade deficit persists. The rise of alternative powers like China gives smaller nations the option to hedge or diversify their alliances. Leadership, once a strategic asset, increasingly

appears to be a costly liability. Trump's transactional approach crystallizes this view: countries are now viewed as what they can offer to the US. As the country is placing its national interest above global stewardship, the traditional model in which the "big brother" US oversees the global order has given way to a more selective and bilateral approach.

Is the Traditional Model of Leadership still Relevant?

This invites a deeper reflection: Will any major power, China included, continue to commit to global leadership once it no longer aligns with domestic interests? There is a possibility that the US story implies a trajectory for backing away from the role when leadership becomes less profitable or sustainable. Smaller-sized countries, in such cases, will again face uncertainty. This points to the need for a new paradigm of leadership - one that is distributed, collaborative, and inclusive, where the overwhelming 98% rest of the world takes their stance and becomes the agent of change. Additionally, the traditional hegemonic model where a single superpower sets the rules is likely to be outdated and increasingly incompatible with today's complex world, as global problems like climate change and AI governance necessitate shared leadership and collaboration, not domination.

The Rise of Regional and Collective Leadership

In this evolving landscape, middle and small states are stepping up to form coalitions and reinforce regional institutions. This strategy helps balance power dynamics with larger states and strengthen resilience against the whiplash of shifting global politics.

ASEAN offers a compelling case in point. In March 2025, Vietnam's Party General Secretary, To Lam, led the national delegation to the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta, a role in the past mostly performed by the Prime Minister. This signals an elevation of Vietnam's commitment to regional engagement. While no single ASEAN member is yet a major power, the association as a whole represents a significant economic strength, with a combined GDP of \$3.6 trillion in 2022, making it

the fifth-largest economy globally. Malaysia, as the 2025 ASEAN Chair, leveraged this strength by proposing the formation of a regional task force to coordinate responses to US tariffs in May 2025, signaling ASEAN's potential to act as a unified economic actor. Meanwhile, the Philippines, under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., is pushing for a legally binding Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, reaffirming its commitment to maritime stability and ASEAN centrality.

It is important to note that ASEAN does not claim leadership in the traditional sense, but through the provision of an institutional platform for cooperation, dialogue, and peacebuilding. Through mechanisms like the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Summit, it brings major and minor powers together on equal footing. Recent dialogues, including the ASEAN–New Zealand Dialogue in Da Nang and the US–ASEAN Dialogue in Siem Reap, further demonstrate that ASEAN, as a bloc, increasingly engages with global powers in a position of an agenda-setting partner and proactively shapes the conversation. The Association's influence lies in its norm-setting: consensus, inclusivity, and a commitment to a rule-based order. In a fragmented world, this stabilizing role may be an alternative to the hegemonic leadership.

A seat at the table, not a throne

Times of instability offer nations an opportunity to weigh their choice: to cling to old powers, seek or rise to become new ones. Increasingly, smaller states are choosing to stand together and write their own rules. The global narrative has focused too long on choosing between the US and China, while it is high time to shift focus elsewhere: how the rest of the world collaborates to shape the rules. As the US retreats and China steps forward, perhaps it is ASEAN and other regional partnerships that will shape the next chapter.