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What Does Trump 2.0 Mean for the US Party System and for Southeast Asia?

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SYNOPSIS

President-elect Donald Trump's resounding defeat of Vice President Kamala Harris marks a realignment of the US party system and change in the parties' social bases and issue cleavages. Trump 2.0 brings with it the possibility of an intensification of the competition between Washington and Beijing as well as new tariff levels not seen in nearly 100 years. Intensified competition will increase the asymmetry of US engagement in the region — one that is focused on hard power rather than economic engagement — and will increase the region's economic dependence on China.

COMMENTARY

Donald J. Trump, the 45th president of the United States, is once again the president-elect, becoming only the second chief executive after Grover Cleveland (1885–1889, 1893–1897) to serve two non-consecutive terms. The [twice-impeached](#) Trump overcame unprecedented felony convictions and two assassination attempts to defeat Vice President Kamala Harris in an election that was widely considered [too close to call](#). Trump, however, [swept all seven "battleground" states](#) en route to becoming the first Republican candidate to [win the popular vote](#) since George W. Bush in 2004 and [more than 300 Electoral College votes](#) since George H. W. Bush in 1988. Republicans also achieved a governing trifecta — retaking control of the Senate and retaining control of the House of Representatives — to provide Trump with [unified control of government](#) to push his agenda when he takes office next January.

The Scale of Republican Victory

Trump's victory was powered by a "red wave" — over 90 per cent of the country's 3,000-plus counties [shifted to the right](#), from red rural counties in Georgia and

Wisconsin, to affluent suburbs around Philadelphia and Washington, DC, and traditional blue urban counties in New York City and Chicago.

There was a gender gap in this election cycle — as there has been since 1980 — but exit polls showed Harris [underperforming among women](#) compared to President Joe Biden in 2020 and Hillary Clinton in 2016 despite running a campaign designed to woo women by defending abortion rights. That abortion may have run its course as a winning issue for Democrats is evident from the results in states that also had abortion rights initiatives on their ballots. In the swing states of Arizona and Nevada, the abortion initiative drew a [higher percentage of votes than Harris did](#); in Florida where the abortion initiative was defeated due to a super majoritarian requirement, it still handily outperformed the vice president. Voters in these states were willing to split their votes — protecting abortion rights while voting for Trump.

The election also saw Democrats continue to [haemorrhage support among Latinos](#), an influential and rapidly growing segment of the population. Harris won only 52 per cent of the Latino vote, compared to 65 per cent for Biden and 66 per cent for Hillary Clinton. Former president Barack Obama won over 70 per cent of the Latino vote in 2012. Harris did especially poorly among Latino men. Biden won Latino men by 23 percentage points in 2020, but this year, they flipped and broke for Trump by 12 points — a 35-point swing. Harris also [underperformed among African-American men](#) compared to both Biden and Clinton. Trump also made [further gains among working class voters](#), giving further credence to the idea that the American party system is undergoing a realignment. The parties' social bases are changing, as are the issues that matter to them.

The Democrats' Reckoning

It should be noted that this was an extremely challenging electoral environment for the incumbent, with many voters in a sour mood and seeking change. [Exit polls](#) showed that almost three-fourths of voters had a negative view of the country's direction. Two-thirds of voters said the economy was in bad shape, with almost half saying they were worse off than they were four years ago. Three-fourths of voters also said [inflation](#) had caused a moderate or severe hardship for them or their families.

When the short-term forces of the vote weigh so heavily against the incumbent party, it is unsurprising that voters might overlook whatever misgivings they have about Trump's character to cast a vote for him. Voters wanted change and Harris could not convince them that she was the candidate for change rather than an unsustainable status quo.

The scale of the Democrats' defeat, however, cannot be solely attributed to a tough electoral environment, and the finger pointing has begun. Bernie Sanders, an independent senator from the state of Vermont, accused Democrats of [abandoning the working class](#), only to face [pushback](#) from former speaker Nancy Pelosi, who [blamed](#) Harris' loss on Biden's delayed exit from the campaign and the lack of an open primary. Others [argue](#) that the path back to power requires tacking closer to the centre to shed the party's image of being "woke" on identity politics. The reckoning will be painful for Democrats and risks reopening old fissures between the parties' progressive and moderate wings.



Donald Trump attended the opening ceremony of an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Manila, Philippines, on 13 November 2017. What can the region expect from a second Trump presidency? *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

What Can Southeast Asia Expect from Trump 2.0?

Under the first Trump administration, Southeast Asian leaders complained of benign neglect as the mercurial president did not prioritise the region, only attending the 2017 ASEAN-US summit but cutting short his presence at the East Asia Summit and dispatching lower-level officials to attend subsequent meetings. Nonetheless, Southeast Asian countries adapted to Trump's transactional approach and benefitted from the United States' pushback of China's assertive claims in the South China Sea with increased freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS), allowing them to continue with their hedging strategy.

Hedging, however, can continue only if conditions permit, and Southeast Asian countries are concerned about a second Trump administration's China strategy. The president-elect has [selected Marco Rubio](#) to be his secretary of state. The senator from Florida is a China hawk, calling for Washington to be tougher on China both economically and militarily. China imposed sanctions on Rubio in 2020 for his support of pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. Trump also [nominated Representative Mike Waltz](#), another Florida politician and China hawk, who once declared that the US "is in a Cold War with the Chinese Communist Party", to be his national security adviser. Trump's [nominee for the US ambassador to the United Nations](#), Representative Elise Stefanik, is a China hawk who made countering Beijing's national security and economic threats a priority during her service in Congress.

US engagement with the region under Trump 2.0 will be complicated by the administration's [plans](#) to impose at least a 60 per cent tariff on all imports from China and an "universal" tariff of up to 20 per cent on all other goods entering the United States. One of the principal criticisms of US engagement with the region since the end of the Obama administration has been the lack of US economic statecraft after Trump pulled the country out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade grouping. The Biden administration's alternative Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) was

underwhelming — it did not provide market access that the region wants — and a poor second choice, but it kept the United States economically engaged in the region and it at least did no harm.

With the 2024 election results, however, it is now clear that the United States has no intention of backing further global economic liberalisation for the foreseeable future; “America First” protectionism is now the order of the day. This reality will further increase the asymmetry of US engagement in the region — one that is focused on hard power rather than economic engagement — and will further increase the region’s economic dependence on China.

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