

## **Trump's Legacy in Southeast Asia**

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On Jan 20, the 46th president of the United States will be inaugurated on the steps of the Capitol building that was rampaged by Donald Trump supporters, on Jan 6, in their failed attempt to prevent the Congress from certifying president-elect Joe Biden's win.

With a few days remaining before the new administration comes in, it is important to analyse US-Southeast Asia relations and the Trump administration's legacy in the region.

To start with, Mr Trump's electoral victory in 2016 surprised and even shocked many in the region. Mr Trump had no background in foreign policy and had not talked much about the region during his presidential campaign. His particular focus on trade deficits and his "America First" approach had made the region leery about what was then viewed as his administration's transactional approach to foreign policy.

In the initial days of his presidency, the Trump administration pulled the US out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Washington's withdrawal from the TPP undermined its claim of support for free and open trade and created a leadership vacuum which was quickly filled by the Chinese president Xi Jinping.

The TPP agreement was originally conceived as the largest trading bloc in the world, which included four Southeast Asian countries -- Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam. The deal was comprehensive in its scope, including provisions related to the protection of intellectual property rights, labour and environmental standards, rules related to e-commerce and binding dispute resolution mechanism.

The TPP was largely seen as an anti-China economic bloc, but in reality, it was created to nudge China to improve its trade practices like protection of intellectual property and currency manipulation to gain unfair advantage in international trade. But the United States' withdrawal from the TPP not only rattled its allies in the Southeast Asian region but also provided a golden opportunity to the Chinese government to lay down the future rules of trade, at least in the region.

The recently signed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement -- which includes the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) plus China, South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand -- is eclipsing the TPP deal and it contains no strict provisions related to the protection of intellectual

property rights, labour and environmental standards and binding dispute resolution body. The US has missed the bus to write the future rules of trade under the Trump presidency.

The Trump administration's trade war with China has also harmed the economic interests of Southeast Asian countries. The US-China trade war and rising input cost have forced multinational companies to move their production chains out of China, to avoid the pernicious effects of the tit-for-tat tariff war. Many of these companies have shifted their production base to other countries, such as Vietnam. But the economic uncertainty engendered by the trade war and the disruption of the supply chain has adversely impacted the Southeast Asian region's economies. The export-dependence model of growth made matters worse for Southeast Asian countries. The Trump administration's multi-fronted assault campaign to ban Huawei from future 5G networks around the world delayed the roll-out of 5G and received a muted response from Southeast Asian nations.

Though the Trump administration launched its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy during the 2017 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) Summit in Vietnam and made the Southeast Asian region central to its FOIP strategy, the Trump administration has failed on the diplomatic and political fronts. The Trump administration's lack of participation in regional summits such as Apec or East Asian Summits (EAS) has undermined and or degraded the trust that Southeast Asian countries have had in US leadership.

The Trump administration's cosy relationship with authoritarian regimes around the world and its lack of concern for human rights have further aggravated the problem in the Southeast Asian region. Thailand has witnessed a decline of democracy and human rights in recent years following the last military coup in 2014. In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte's government has killed thousands of people and also targeted journalists for speaking out against the so-called "war on terror". Interestingly, Thailand and the Philippines are the two closest US allies in the Asean region.

The Trump administration's withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement was even more galling because of the salience attached to the non-traditional security threats like tsunamis or earthquakes by Southeast Asian countries. The Trump administration's lack of concern for human rights and climate change have deteriorated or further diminished the few remaining areas of co-operation between the US and European Union in Southeast Asia.

It can be assumed that the Trump administration's shortsighted or partisan and/or politically motivated decision to withdraw from the TPP deal rattled its allies in East Asia (including Southeast Asia) and pushed them toward signing the RCEP.

The elusive dream of exclusive East Asian-based regional political and trade institutions is taking shape. The emergence of East Asian-based regional institutions can now potentially divide the world into three major blocs ie, North America (under the North American Free Trade Agreement), Europe and East Asia (RCEP) and further erode the political and economic cohesion of the world, particularly the influence of the US in the region.

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