

Post-election, will the US have an Asia policy?

Written by Nguyen tien think
Saturday, 05 November 2016 00:00

The Obama administration's [rebalance to Asia](#) has sought to energise US partnerships in the region, stabilise relations with an increasingly assertive China and embed the United States in the economic prosperity of the region. But as Obama's time in office comes to an end, the rebalance has been found wanting.



His successor's efforts will be gravely hampered by the challenges revealed during the 2016 presidential election.

Some of the challenges stem from the political complexities within Asian nations. [Allies in the region](#) like Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte seem to have momentarily jumped ship. Others, such as Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, have simply become

[more cautious](#)

China's influence is growing, and Beijing has become far less interested in compromise on some of the more difficult issues in the Sino-US relationship, most obviously maritime disputes with its neighbours and human rights.

But it is the United States' own commitment to the region that seems the most fragile.

Both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump have come out strongly against [the Trans-Pacific Partnership \(TPP\)](#), signalling a precarious future for the 12-nation trade pact that was to crown the Obama rebalance to Asia.

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Beyond the TPP, [Trump shocked the region](#) by arguing that US alliances in Asia, like those with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, no longer serve US interests. Japan and South Korea, [he argued](#), should be left to fend for themselves against a nuclear North Korea. Trump views these longstanding security arrangements not as part of a broader strategy, but as a transaction to be renegotiated at Washington's whim.

Clinton has been and continues to be a strong supporter of US alliances. She was [there at the creation](#), so to speak, of the Obama rebalance to Asia. Yet while her election may reassure allies that a break is not imminent, a Clinton presidency will need to contend with the damage caused by the threat of alliance abandonment.

Trump's characterisation of US interests may be inordinately parochial and his calculus of cost-benefit crude, but these questions about free trade and alliances are not completely new in US politics. There has always been a clamouring for greater market access abroad and anger at the manufacturing jobs that have been taken from Americans and given to overseas workers.

The call for greater allied burden-sharing too has ebbed and flowed. Frustrations emerged first with the United States' recovered European allies in the 1960s, and again in the 1980s when Japan became the world's first 'economic superpower'. Now Trump wants to resurrect that call for renegotiating alliance equities.

His claims come at a time of increasing pressure on the United States to demonstrate its resolve as China, Russia and an ever more pugnacious North Korea put pressure on US allies and their neighbours. US allies today are concerned about Beijing's intrusions into their airspace and waters, and are looking to Washington to lead in defending freedom of navigation and peaceful commerce in the region. And for those that confront China's growing use of military force in [assertive maritime claims](#) in the East and South China Seas, their ability to defend their nations depends heavily on a strong and sustained US military presence in Asia.

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