

Prospects & Perspectives



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Trump and the Axis of Disorder

By Michael Mazza

When President-elect Donald Trump takes office for the second time, the Indo-Pacific will look quite different than it did during his first presidency. There have been a number of promising developments for the United States and its allies and partners even as storm clouds gather. Indeed, the region may be teetering on the edge of a far more violent future. The president-elect has an opportunity to avert that future. But to do so, he will have to cast aside his most



counterproductive predispositions.

Eight Years of Peril and Progress

In important ways, China is a far more imposing power than it was when Trump first took the oath of office. In 2016, Hans Kristensen and Roger S. Norris estimated that China had approximately 260 nuclear warheads. Now, according to the U.S. Department of Defense, China has approximately 500 and is on track for 1,000 by 2030. The stockpile may reach 1,500 by 2035. China's navy, air force, and army have all grown more formidable in the intervening years as well.

Those military advances have occurred as a new international axis has crystallized. Although Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea have all shared decades-long mutually beneficial relationships, those relations have coalesced in the years since Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine. All are working—sometimes in coordinated fashion, sometimes not—to sow global disorder. In Asia, China and North Korea are more dangerous than they would be as solo actors.

And there is plenty to make their neighbors nervous. Pyongyang, having likely more than doubled its nuclear stockpile since 2016, has taken a series of steps leading some seasoned observers to conclude that Kim Jong-un is preparing for war. Xi Jinping has spent the past 18 months picking a fight with the Philippines, a U.S. treaty ally, and has effectively destroyed the status quo in the Taiwan Strait with a combination of military action and aggressive political warfare.

But there are bright spots as well. The Axis of Disorder must grapple with what U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan calls a new “lattice-work” of overlapping institutions, alliances, and partnerships “that all add up to genuinely new architecture for the Indo-Pacific.” The United States has layered the so-called Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States) and AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States) over America's traditional bilateral relationships, with new trilateral groupings taking firmer shape as well: notably, U.S.-Japan-South Korea and U.S.-Japan-Philippines.

All of these countries are working more closely together even as they invest more deeply in their own self-defense capabilities. The United States is



supporting a number of its partners, including Taiwan, in their efforts to do so, while also working to optimize its own defense posture to prepare for possible conflict in the region.

This coalition is evolving at a time when China (along with Russia and, as is ever the case, North Korea) is facing significant economic headwinds. A stagnating China is still a powerful China, but it is also one whose internal challenges are soaking up substantial attention and resources.

A Bright Future for the Indo-Pacific...

The first Trump administration re-conceived of the U.S.' relationship with China as one of "strategic competition" and introduced the concept of a "free and open Indo-Pacific." The Biden administration embraced much of this framework and build on its predecessor's successes. As Trump takes the baton back from Joe Biden, similar progress is possible.

With Republicans in control of both houses of Congress and the presidency, significant defense spending increases could be in store. Earlier this year, Senator Roger Wicker, who will take over as chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, called for military spending to grow from 2.9 percent of gross domestic product to 5 percent within the next seven years. An increase of that size could redress vulnerabilities in the U.S.' defense-industrial base; boost the size of the Navy, which is at a significant numerical disadvantage compared to China's; enable the speedier development of next-generation capabilities; and ensure that the U.S. nuclear deterrent is sized, structured, and postured to deal with emerging nuclear threats.

Greater defense spending, compared with effective diplomacy, could also accelerate the U.S.' defense posture initiatives in the Indo-Pacific. More dollars are required to fulfill the promise of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, in which the Philippines has granted U.S. forces access to a number of military sites across the archipelago. The Trump administration could also drive progress in new and expanded basing and access arrangements in Australia, Japan, the Pacific Islands, and elsewhere.

As China's threat to Taiwan grows sharper, the Trump administration could be more amenable than its predecessor to more robust arms sales, more



substantive joint military training, and more regular bilateral engagement of all kinds. These efforts would enhance deterrence vis-à-vis Beijing, both by signaling American commitment to Taiwan and by contributing to Taiwan's self-defense capability.

...Or a Dim One

Altogether, this collection of policies would contribute to a balance of power favorable to the United States and its allies and partners. These steps are all necessary to hold at bay China and its fellow autocracies in the Axis of Disorder.

But they are likely insufficient. During the first Trump presidency, the United States never embraced a positive economic agenda for the Indo-Pacific. Despite some modest efforts, President Biden never corrected this mistake. It is a mistake that may prove fatal. As China's economy sputters, the United States has an opportunity to step up its role as an engine of regional economic growth. But because Washington refuses to promise Indo-Pacific countries prosperity in addition to security, the United States effectively boosts China's regional influence instead of undercutting it.

Given Trump's hostility to free trade and his enthusiasm for tariffs, he is likely to continue cutting U.S. Asia policy off at the knees. Given his distaste for multilateralism of all kinds, he is likely to undervalue regional institutions, which are key arena in which the U.S. and China vie for influence. And given his belief that longstanding U.S. partners are, in general, seeking to take advantage of the United States, treaty allies and new groupings like AUKUS could come under significant strain.

Over the next four years, President Trump will have an opportunity to set the United States on the road towards victory in its competition with China. He can take important steps to ensure that Asia remains prosperous and peaceful and that the United States remains the region's preeminent power. On the other hand, his instincts may lead him astray. The U.S. and Asia's shared future may depend on President Trump getting out of his own way.

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