Impact of the US Election on the Asia-Pacific

1 DECEMBER 2024

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Topic: US Election Implication on American Security Policy towards the Asia-Pacific

The recent re-election of Donald Trump as President of the United States has left the international community uneasy due to his "America First" rhetoric. It is expected that Trump will mostly shift his foreign policy to focus on the Asia-Pacific instead of Europe. This article will introduce the challenges facing the region today and present what we know about Trump's stances on the issues at play.

A Changed Landscape for Trump's Second Term

During his first term as President, Donald Trump adopted a hardline stance against the People's Republic of China (PRC). He attempted to negotiate with Kim Jong Un, leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, also known as North Korea), though his two meetings with Kim did not yield any significant results. Ties between the US and its two closest allies in the region, Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK, also known as South Korea) were strengthened during Trump's first term, and Trump and then-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe even developed a close personal friendship.

Four years after leaving office, Donald Trump will return to power with a changed geopolitical landscape in the Asia-Pacific region. The countries the US is aligned with – Japan, the ROK, and the Philippines – have had a change in leadership, but have also shifted closer towards the US during the Biden Administration. President Trump will face several challenges in the region, firstly, a potential annexation of the ROC by the PRC. President Xi has instructed his country's armed forces to be ready to invade the island by 2027, the third year of Trump's presidency. The US and the Republic of China (ROC, also known as Taiwan) have a mutual defense treaty, which would likely be triggered were an invasion to occur. The rise of the PRC sets the conditions for the Thucydides' Trap, further leading to fears of a potential conflict between the two nations. Some fears arise from the fact that the PRC has surpassed the US in some areas of military strength. Admiral John Aquilino, Commander of the United States Indo-Pacific Command until earlier this year, has, however, stated that the US will be ready for any possible future confrontation against the PRC.

The second major challenge that President Trump faces is the PRC's aggressive actions in the South China Sea, where it seeks to claim territorial sovereignty over many island territories belonging to the Philippines. Recently, PRC military vessels have rammed ships from the Philippine Navy within the Philippines' territorial waters. President Bongbong Marcos of the Philippines has stated that these aggressive acts by the PRC would be considered an act of war if they result in the death of a Filipino citizen. This could have implications for the US, which has a mutual defense treaty with the Philippines.

Lastly, the DPRK poses a threat to the US with its continuous nuclear and ICBM testing. Moreover, the recent developments in the DPRK's sending troops to fight on the frontline in the Russo-Ukrainian War might further complicate any efforts to negotiate with Kim.

What a second Trump Administration could do

Despite his campaign rhetoric, President-elect Trump has indicated certain hawkish views toward the PRC, namely by appointing China hawks to key positions in his cabinet. It remains to be seen how he would react to a

military confrontation with the country, however, given his desire to end all wars that the US is engaged in, and his appointment of others who are skeptics of US foreign interventions. Trump has signaled that the US would aid the defense of the ROC if the island nation paid the US more, highlighting his transactional view of defense policy.

In the final months of the Biden Administration, the US and the Philippines signed a new military treaty. The Philippines appears more bullish than the ROC, with the Filipinos believing that Trump will not request payment to defend the country from acts of aggression. Trump himself has not appeared to have commented on his view of the US-Philippine alliance at any point during his campaign, so it is hard to predict what may come from his administration in this regard.

Trump has selected a career State Department official who specialized in the DPRK as his Deputy National Security Advisor, which could signal that dealing with the DPRK is a priority for the President-elect. However, Kim Jong Un recently stated that his meetings with Trump ended up confirming the hostility between the two nations, and seems uninterested in the prospect of further negotiations.

It is difficult to predict what Donald Trump's second term could mean for regional security in the Asia-Pacific. On the one hand, Trump appears to understand the importance of the role of the US in the region by looking at some of his hawkish cabinet picks. On the other hand, antiwar and MAGA picks raise concerns about whether Trump will let the US lead the fight or rather watch from a distance as the PRC continues its aggressive behavior in the region. Only time will tell what Trump's second term means for the Asia-Pacific region. His return to the arena will be influential, but the question is how. If he listens to his more moderate national security team, he has the potential to keep the US' status as a superpower that stands up for liberty and democracy. If he leans towards his isolationist views, he may allow the PRC and other hostile nations to get the idea that they can act aggressively towards their democratic neighbors with little punishment. Regardless of Trump's decisions, it will be compelling to observe developments from the region during his second term in office.