



JANUARY  
2025



# The Indo-Pacific and Trump II In Uncle Sam's Brutal Embrace

Center for Asian  
Studies

Edited by Marc JULIENNE

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ISBN: 979-10-373-0973-0

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**How to quote this publication:**

Marc Julienne (ed.), “The Indo-Pacific and Trump II: In Uncle Sam’s Brutal Embrace”, *Asie.Visions*, No. 144, Ifri, January 2025.

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# Abstract

In this collective analysis, the research team of the Center for Asian Studies presents a synthetic and non-exhaustive assessment of the relations taking shape between the United States (US) under the Trump II administration and some of the main players in the Indo-Pacific.

Under the Trump II administration, US strategy in the Indo-Pacific is likely to be part of a bipartisan continuum, marked by strategic competition with China. The emphasis will be on economic pressure, notably *via* new trade sanctions, and increased military and technological engagement to counter Beijing. Washington's allies and partners in the region, such as Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Australia, will continue to be mobilized to strengthen their posture against China, while pressure to increase their military spending and purchase US armaments will continue.

However, external factors such as political instability in South Korea and rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait could complicate the implementation of this strategy. In Southeast Asia, the delicate balance between economic dependence on China and security provided by the US remains a major line of tension.

In sum, the Trump II administration is likely to pursue a determined, sometimes brutal, policy of engagement with its partners in the Indo-Pacific, while stepping up pressure on Beijing and adapting its priorities to emerging geopolitical challenges.

# Résumé

L'équipe du Centre Asie de l'Ifri présente dans cette note collective une évaluation synthétique et non exhaustive des relations qui se dessinent entre les États-Unis sous l'administration Trump II et certains des principaux acteurs de l'Indo-Pacifique.

Sous l'administration Trump II, la stratégie américaine dans l'Indo-Pacifique devrait s'inscrire dans une continuité bipartisane, marquée par la compétition stratégique avec la Chine. L'accent sera mis sur la pression économique, notamment *via* de nouvelles sanctions commerciales, et sur un engagement militaire et technologique accru pour contrer Pékin. Les alliés et partenaires de la région, tels que Taïwan, le Japon, la Corée du Sud, les Philippines et l'Australie, continueront d'être mobilisés pour renforcer leur posture face à la Chine, tandis que des pressions pour augmenter leurs dépenses militaires et acheter des armements américains se poursuivront.

Cependant, des facteurs externes, tels que l'instabilité politique en Corée du Sud et la montée des tensions dans le détroit de Taïwan, pourraient compliquer la mise en œuvre de cette stratégie. En Asie du Sud-Est, l'équilibre fragile entre la dépendance économique à la Chine et la sécurité fournie par les États-Unis reste une ligne de tension majeure.

En somme, l'administration Trump II devrait poursuivre une politique d'engagement déterminée, parfois brutale, avec ses partenaires en Indo-Pacifique, tout en intensifiant la pression sur Pékin et en adaptant ses priorités aux défis géopolitiques émergents.

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# Introduction

As Donald Trump re-enters the White House, Asians and Europeans alike are apprehensive about his characteristic unpredictability and the potential upheavals he could cause.

Yet Trump's policy towards the Indo-Pacific region during his first term from 2017 to 2021 proved to be not only consistent but also in step with those of his Democratic predecessor and successor, Barack Obama and Joe Biden. Some of his strategies, such as taking the competition with China into the technological arena, have become largely bipartisan.

Thus, Donald Trump marked less a turning point in American policy towards Asia and the Indo-Pacific than a change in style. The Trump style is rudimentary and indiscriminate (some would say crude), yet effective. It is based on a balance of power – political, military and commercial – which he imposes on his competitors as much as on his partners, with an instrument to which he devotes a cult-like devotion: tariffs.

In this collective analysis, the research team of Ifri's Center for Asian Studies presents a synthetic and non-exhaustive assessment of the relations taking shape between the United States (US) under the Trump II administration and some of the key players in the Indo-Pacific.

## ***The fundamentals of the Indo-Pacific strategy remain intact***

Strategic competition with China will remain Washington's top priority. The coercive technological measures put in place by the Biden administration to curb Chinese innovation are likely to continue. However, Trump could further attack what is today Beijing's main vulnerability: the economy. The application of new trade sanctions targeting exports is likely to weaken a Chinese economy already in crisis. In such a scenario, the reactions of the Chinese authorities are difficult to predict, as are the consequences for the global economy.

Under Trump II, the US will not disengage from the Indo-Pacific region. The injunctions to increase military spending are aimed less at breaking alliances and abandoning allies and partners than at selling them more armaments and reducing the cost of maintaining the many American bases in the Western Pacific.



Allies and partners are already under pressure from the US to increase their defense budgets, reduce any trade surpluses and adopt a firmer stance towards China. Many of them have begun to toe this line. Japan is undergoing a military makeover; the Philippines is beefing up its posture and strategy; Taiwan is moving towards a strategy of asymmetric defense in line with Washington's demands; Australia is investing heavily in modernizing its military.

Taiwan will remain an indispensable partner in US strategy. The island has a strategic geographical position as a lock in the first chain of islands, limiting the People's Republic's access to the Pacific Ocean. Moreover, Taiwan has skilfully made itself indispensable to the technological primacy of the US, thanks to its cutting-edge semiconductor industry.

Nor should the US relationship with India be called into question, given the strength of the partnership, which, in fact, grew stronger under the Trump I administration, and the personal affinity between Modi and Trump.

### ***Factors of change***

Despite these fundamentals, exogenous changes in US policy could upset Washington's strategy in the region.

South Korea finds itself in the middle of the road: caught between a nuclear-armed North Korea and an increasingly coercive China, it is going through a serious political crisis. Seoul has questions about its future, including the possibility of strategic emancipation through the development of nuclear weapons.

In Southeast Asia, with the exception of the Philippines, which strengthened its alliance with Washington in 2023, most of the other states remain in a state of limbo, torn between their economic dependence on China and their attachment to an American military presence to maintain stability in the region. It is, therefore, in everyone's interest to maintain a balanced strategy between the two great powers in the hope that the status quo will endure for as long as possible.

Stability in the Taiwan Strait remains a major concern. China has significantly increased military pressure in the Strait and around Taiwan in recent years. The new Republican administration could adopt a more assertive military posture than the Democrats in the East Asian theater, potentially leading to more tension and even friction.

Finally, another structuring transformation that the Trump II administration will have to face is the growing interconnection of the European and Asian theaters, accelerated by the signing of the Russia-North Korea alliance in June 2024 and Pyongyang's involvement in the war in Ukraine. The impact of this alliance on the strategic situation in Europe and Asia is still difficult to gauge. It could lead to greater trilateral coordination

between China, Russia and North Korea, or, on the contrary, create tensions between the three partners. The debate remains open, even among the authors of this note.

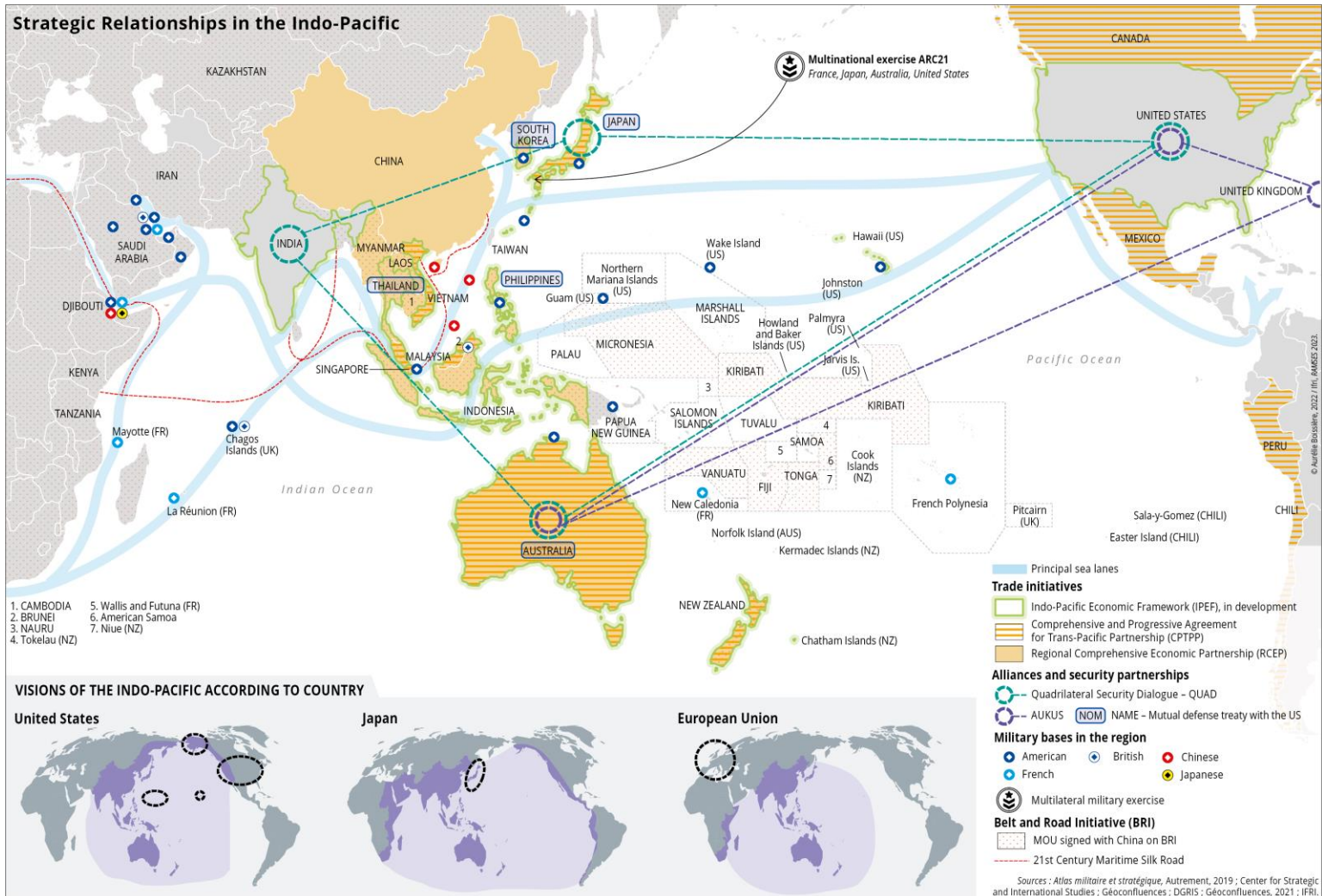
### ***What about Europe?***

Barring a stroke of madness, self-isolation or the sudden replacement of his entire entourage of ministers and advisers, it therefore seems that the Trump II administration will follow a familiar trajectory: that of competing with China and engaging, albeit harshly, with partners and allies in the region.

If this analysis proves to be correct for the Indo-Pacific, it cannot be applied to the rest of the world, in particular to America's Canadian and Mexican neighbors, as well as to Europe, which finds itself in an even more precarious situation than during Trump's first term. Donald Trump's choices regarding the war in Ukraine will have direct consequences for the security of the European Union (EU), whose ability to react remains deeply uncertain.

Despite its limited room for maneuvering, Europe has an ace up its sleeve when it comes to China. The likely trade war that Washington seems determined to wage will make the European market indispensable, if not crucial, to keep the Chinese economy afloat. The EU will thus be able to negotiate firmly with Beijing, provided that the course of European sovereignty and autonomy is clearly defined and widely supported.

## Strategic Relationships in the Indo-Pacific



Source: T. de Montbrial et D. David, Ramses 2023. L'Europe dans la guerre, Paris, Ifri/Dunod, 2022 © Aurélie Boissière/Ifri, 2022.

# China–United States: The fundamentals of the rivalry remain unchanged

***Marc Julienne***

Donald Trump is, not without reason, often accused of being unpredictable. However, in view of his first term and the direction his second is taking, we can anticipate a certain constancy in the fundamentals of the strategic rivalry between the United States (US) and China.

## ***Trump’s consistent anti-China line***

During his first term, Donald Trump distinguished himself by his hard line against China. As early as the 2016 election campaign, he hammered home the threats China posed to the US: a widening trade deficit, unfair competition and the country’s deindustrialization.

In 2017, the Trump I administration promoted the strategy for a “free and open Indo-Pacific”, largely based on the balance of power and aimed at countering the rise of China, which was described as a “strategic competitor”. This strategy is nevertheless in line with President Obama’s “strategic rebalancing towards Asia”.

In 2018, Trump declared a trade war with China. He imposed ever-higher tariffs on Chinese products, giving rise to a Chinese riposte of lesser measure, but nonetheless painful for the American economy, particularly agriculture. In 2019, Washington and Beijing began negotiations leading to the signing of the “Phase 1 Deal” in January 2020. However, the agreement failed to achieve its objectives, and the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted world trade.

In 2019, against the backdrop of the deployment of 5G telecoms infrastructure, a market from which the US is absent, Trump took strong, restrictive measures against Chinese tech companies: ZTE, Huawei, then SMIC, WeChat and TikTok. This marked the beginning of the technology race that remains the epicenter of the rivalry between the two powers and on which the Biden administration’s offensive has focused.

From this retrospective of the Trump I administration and in view of the first appointments and statements of the Trump II administration, there seems to be little doubt that the new leadership team will apply the same methods to deal with a China considered to be the main strategic threat of the US.

In the new team, Michael Waltz, National Security Advisor, and Marco Rubio, nominee for Secretary of State, are political veterans known for their extremely tough positions on China. Senator Rubio, in particular, who has been involved in every battle with China – including the Uighurs, Hong Kong and Covid-19 – has twice been sanctioned by Beijing. The appointment of Elbridge Colby as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy also indicates the prioritization of China on the military front.

The trade front is dominated by Trump loyalists, champions of protectionism, tariffs and *decoupling*. The nominee for Secretary of Commerce, Howard Lutnick, Peter Navarro's appointment as an adviser on trade and industry, and Jamieson Greer, a disciple of the no less influential Robert Lighthizer, as US Trade Representative make up Trump's team, which is already announcing a shock treatment against China.

It's true that Elon Musk, head of Tesla and with major interests in China, is a new figure who stands out from the rest of the team. However, despite (or because of) his financial, industrial and media clout, it is unlikely that Musk will be able to counterbalance Trump's entire inner circle.

Trump is a *deal-maker*, but like his first term in office, the lure of the *deal* should not take precedence over the threats posed by China, as identified by the majority of his entourage and the American strategic community.

### ***China: fearing a new trade war***

From Beijing's point of view, Donald Trump's return to the White House is viewed with some trepidation, against a backdrop of the country's great economic vulnerability.

With the real estate sector as sluggish as consumption, the economy is now driven by exports, thanks to the high competitiveness of Chinese products and a highly efficient production base. A further increase in tariffs in 2025, as announced by Trump, could further weaken the Chinese economy.

China is seeking to avoid this scenario by first strengthening the other pillars of growth. The authorities have indicated that the priority is on consumption, but the measures taken so far are still too timid to bring about a return in household and business confidence. Beijing is also preparing countermeasures, such as restrictions on exports of critical metals. An embargo "in principle" has already been imposed on exports of gallium, germanium and antimony to the US. However, these measures may prove a double-edged sword for Beijing, as they encourage American and European derisking policies.

Even if Trump seeks to negotiate a new trade agreement with Xi, along the lines of the "Phase 1 Deal", it's a safe bet that he'll apply maximum

pressure beforehand in order to sit in an advantageous position at the negotiating table, as he did in 2019.

On the ultra-sensitive issue of the Taiwan Strait, Beijing will want to continue asserting its coercive military posture, but may face an American military less inclined to dialogue and more to a show of force than under the Biden administration. This will pose challenges for both sides to respond without provoking escalation.

# Taiwan: An indispensable partner for Washington in its rivalry with Beijing

***John Seaman and Marc Julienne***

The Trump I administration has arguably been the most outspoken supporter of Taiwan since Washington severed diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1979. As such, we can expect a degree of continuity in relations between Taipei and Washington, despite the usual sources of pressure to which Trump is accustomed, notably on trade.

## ***A renewed commitment to Taiwan since Trump I***

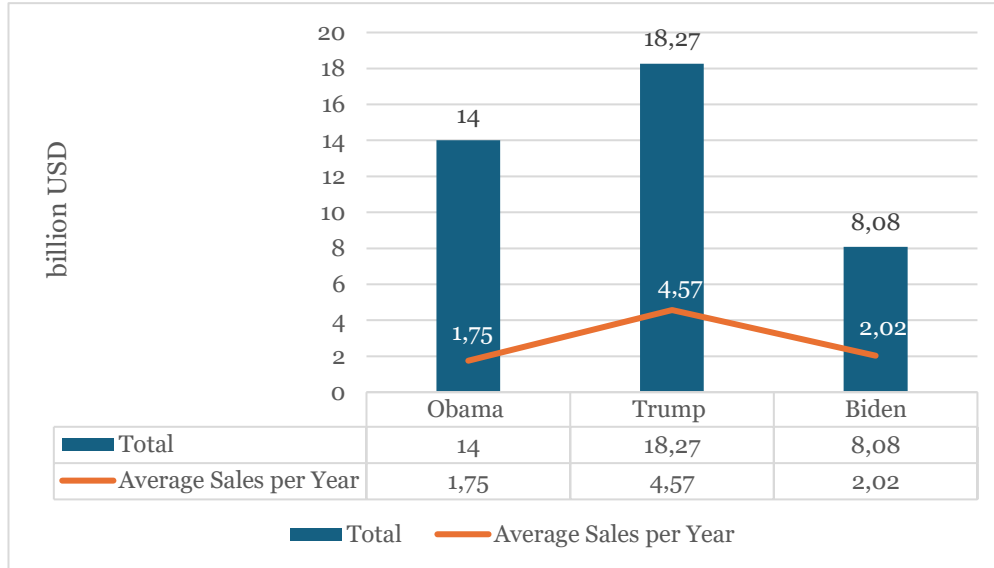
On the diplomatic, military and commercial fronts, the United States (US) under the first Trump administration stepped up its engagement with Taipei amid growing tensions with Beijing.

**Diplomatic engagement:** Even before his inauguration in January 2017, Donald Trump accepted and made public an unceremonious phone call with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, congratulating him on his victory. In March 2018, the US passed the *Taiwan Travel Act*, which allows federal-level US officials to travel to Taiwan, and *vice versa*, and meet their Taiwanese counterparts. Visiting Taiwan in 2020 were Alex Azar, Secretary of Health and Human Services, the highest-ranking US official to ever visit the island, and Keith Krach, Under Secretary of State and the highest-ranking diplomatic official to make such a visit.

**Military commitment:** During Donald Trump's four years in office, the US also transferred more weapons to Taiwan (\$18.27 billion) than during the eight years of the Obama administration (\$14 billion), which had already supplied more weapons than previous administrations. Furthermore, in 2020, the US Navy sailed through the Taiwan Strait 13 times, the highest number in at least 14 years.

On the other hand, Trump is unlikely to call into question the strategic and industrial innovations implemented by the Biden administration, notably the Replicator program to mass-produce drones and the "Hellscape" concept aimed at saturating the Taiwan Strait with these drones in the event of a Beijing offensive on the island.

### US arms sales to Taiwan under the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations



Source: Forum on the Arms Trade, [www.forumarmstrade.org](http://www.forumarmstrade.org), accessed on December 20, 2024.

**Trade engagement:** Both Taipei and Washington have been seeking to reduce their trade dependence on China since 2016. For example, it was under the Trump I administration that Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation’s (TSMC) iconic \$65 billion investment in Arizona was negotiated. Semiconductors are at the heart of the strategic relationship between the US and Taiwan, and explain the former’s trade deficit with the latter, which stood at \$67 billion in 2024.

Donald Trump re-enters the White House against a backdrop of crisis in the Taiwan Strait, where China is considerably increasing its military coercion on the island. More than intimidation, these exercises of historic proportions are aimed at training and building up the strength of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to lead a potential future offensive. This increased coercion has put some pressure on the US policy of “strategic ambiguity” towards Taiwan, which has prevailed since 1979. On four occasions, President Joe Biden publicly stated that he would defend Taiwan, although each time, his administration made it clear that strategic ambiguity remained the only official line. Donald Trump has refrained from commenting on this point but is urging Taipei to spend significantly more on its defense, from 5 to 10% of its gross domestic product (GDP), compared with 2.45% at present. In the President’s entourage, Elbridge Colby, tipped as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, firmly supports this line and also considers that Washington should give priority to Taiwan over Ukraine in terms of arms supplies.



## ***Taiwan: Confidence that does not exclude vigilance regarding the new administration***

In view of the positive assessment made by Taiwanese political leaders of the Trump I administration, they are now confident about the incoming administration. However, with Trump's erratic temperament, they know that it is crucial to convince the American president of Taiwan's indispensability to the US. Traditionally, Taipei has put forward two arguments to ensure its American partner remains engaged on its behalf: the island is a beacon of democracy in the face of an autocratic PRC; its semiconductor industry is indispensable to global economic prosperity. While the democracy argument is unlikely to find favor with Donald Trump, the semiconductor argument will certainly be more convincing. Taiwan could also increase its defense budget and is already seeking to secure new arms contracts with Washington in order to appease Donald Trump. The Taiwanese are even interested in acquiring F-35 fighter jets and *Aegis* missile defense destroyers, which would undoubtedly arouse Beijing's ire if the Americans were to agree to such a sale.

Finally, the domestic political context in Taiwan places President Lai Ching-te in a delicate situation. His party, the Democratic Progressive Party, lacks a majority in Parliament (Legislative Yuan), and could see the opposition counter certain measures or use any form of tension with the US against him.

# Japan: Consolidating its status as a key ally

***Céline Pajon***

The US-Japan relationship was strengthened by Donald Trump's first term in office, thanks to the leadership of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who was able to forge a relationship of trust with the Republican president and demonstrate strong diplomatic activism. In 2025, Japan's head of government, Shigeru Ishiba, lacking a majority, will not have the same leverage with Trump. He can, however, capitalize on the track record of his predecessors, who have worked to make Japan a capable and reliable ally that the United States (US) cannot do without.

## ***A strong bilateral relationship under Trump I, driven by Abe's leadership***

During Donald Trump's first term, Japan skillfully navigated a period marked by the unpredictability of the US administration, even managing to consolidate its position within the alliance.

Abe was the first foreign leader to meet Trump even before his inauguration, enabling him to get his messages across and build a relationship of trust. Ahead of the new president's transactional approach, he highlighted the efforts made since 2013 to normalize Japan's defense posture: adopting an unprecedented national security strategy, boosting military spending (+12% between 2012 and 2020), which largely benefits the American defense industry (order of around a hundred F-35 fighters), and rebalancing roles within the alliance by allowing the Japanese Self-Defense Forces to exercise, within a limited framework, their right to "collective self-defense".

Shinzo Abe also promoted in August 2016 his concept of a "free and open Indo-Pacific", which would later be adopted by the Trump administration in place of the Obama-era "Pivot to Asia". In 2017, it was also under Abe's impetus that the Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue (Quad), bringing together Japan, the US, India and Australia, was relaunched, with the aim of sustainably strengthening ties between Washington and Asia while providing a counterweight to China.

In his first days in office, President Trump made the decision to withdraw the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a move contrary

to Tokyo's interests. In response, Shinzo Abe decided to take the agreement back into his own hands, ensuring its implementation without Washington's involvement. At the same time, he concluded an ambitious partnership with the European Union (EU) to preserve a liberal trade framework and counter Chinese ambitions.

However, Abe had to give in to US pressure by signing a bilateral agreement in October 2019 in order to avoid a trade war with the US, as Trump was prioritizing a reduction of the trade deficit – estimated at \$70 billion in Japan's favor.

### ***Japan's strategic posture strengthened, but political leadership weakened***

Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's attempts to meet Donald Trump before his inauguration were in vain, suggesting a less fluid relationship than with Abe. Ishiba, an expert in defense issues, will nevertheless be able to highlight the ambitious structural reforms that have considerably strengthened Japan's strategic position for its ally.

At the end of 2022, the government led by his predecessor, Fumio Kishida, pledged to double Japan's defense budget to 2% of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2027, marking a historic turning point in national defense policy. This substantial increase includes the development of counter-strike capabilities, notably through the acquisition of advanced weaponry, such as *Aegis* systems and *Patriot* missiles, supplied by the US.

During his visit to Washington in April 2024, Kishida and President Joe Biden proclaimed a “new era” for the US-Japan alliance, characterized by closer, more integrated and institutionalized cooperation. At the same time, Japan has strengthened its strategic partnerships and quasi-alliances with key players in the region, including Australia, India, South Korea and the Philippines. By positioning itself at the center of an interconnected network of partnerships, Tokyo not only supports American influence in the Indo-Pacific but also helps to anchor the US in this strategic region.

However, the Trump administration may demand even more from Japan when it renegotiates its contribution to maintaining the 50,000 American troops on its territory in 2026. Moreover, Elbridge Colby, appointed Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, has repeatedly urged Tokyo to increase its defense spending to 3% of GDP.

Differences could also resurface on the North Korean issue, as Trump has in the past sought an agreement with Pyongyang that is out of step with Japanese priorities. Finally, on the trade front, Japan is likely to be on Trump's tariff list and is furthermore likely to suffer the collateral effects of the Sino-American technology war.

# **South Korea in the face of Trump's return: Strategic challenges and national uncertainties**

***Céline Pajon and Françoise Nicolas***

Trump's return to the helm of the United States (US) poses a major challenge to both the Republic of Korea's security and its economy. While Seoul has gradually moved closer to the US line on China, concerns remain about Trump's attitude towards North Korea and his commitment to the alliance.

Donald Trump's first term in office was experienced as a test for South Korea. The American president's protectionist policy threatened South Korean exports to the US, while the trade war launched by Washington against Beijing – and which Seoul was eager to follow – jeopardized trade with China on which South Korea was dependent.

On the defense front, Trump threatened to withdraw US troops from South Korea (28,500 personnel) unless Seoul quadrupled its contribution to base operating costs. Discussions remained deadlocked until an agreement was reached with the Biden administration. Anticipating further difficulties under Trump's second term, the US and South Korea reached a new five-year agreement at the end of 2024 on sharing the costs of maintaining US troops. Starting in 2026, the two countries agreed to increase Seoul's contribution by 8.3%.

## ***An unprecedented South Korea–US alignment with Yoon Suk-yeol***

Conservative President Yoon Suk-yeol, elected in May 2022, opted to strengthen South Korea's international role, consolidating its alliance with Washington and asserting closer alignment with American interests. This has resulted in the adoption of an Indo-Pacific strategy and a firmer stance towards China, marking a departure from an approach focused on the Korean peninsula. Seoul also took an important step towards Tokyo, facilitating a historic trilateral summit in Washington in August 2023 and paving the way for institutionalized security cooperation between the three countries.

The Yoon administration also deepened its economic commitments to Washington by joining the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) proposed by the Biden administration and the “Chip 4” dialogue between semiconductor manufacturers, including Japan and Taiwan. It has supported investments in the US by South Korean companies such as Samsung, LG and Hyundai in the strategic battery sector. In October 2023, this enabled Seoul to obtain a waiver from the Department of Commerce for Korean chipmakers subject to US export controls (Samsung Electronics and SK Hynix), allowing them to send certain equipment to their semiconductor plants in China.

By 2023, South Korea had moved from a trade surplus to a trade deficit with China, while the US had become its main trading partner, with which it continues to record a surplus. The Korean economy therefore remains highly exposed to the protectionist measures evoked by Trump, and import restrictions on South Korean products such as steel, aluminum and solar panels, imposed under the Trump I administration, still remain in force.

At the same time, South Korea's attitude towards Beijing has hardened: Yoon was the first Korean president to attend the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Madrid in 2022 and clearly denounced any “attempt to change the *status quo* by force” in the Taiwan Strait. Still, Yoon also strove to maintain a stable relationship, facilitating a China–Japan–Korea summit in November 2023.

### ***Uncertainties over Seoul's future positioning***

Agitated by Trump's unilateral attempts in his first term to negotiate a deal with North Korea, the next government in Seoul will no doubt demand to be closely involved in such moves. Under the Conservative government, the possibility of South Korea acquiring nuclear weapons in response to an overly conciliatory policy by Washington towards Pyongyang and fears of American disengagement was no longer considered taboo. It remains to be seen whether the opposition would also be in favor.

The announced departure of President Yoon, following his attempt to impose martial law in December 2024, plunges the country into uncertainty. A return to power of South Korea's Democrats could jeopardize the positive dynamics of relations with the American ally and neighboring Japan in a country where political alternation has a major impact on foreign policy. The Democratic Party, known for its rather conciliatory stance towards China and its openness towards Pyongyang, could take a back seat on the Taiwan question to appease Beijing.

# North Korea: A new strategic reality

**Léonie Allard**

Elected in 2024 as the candidate of “peace through strength”, Donald Trump stressed on his Truth Social network that there would be “no softening” of his approach to North Korea. After an initial phase of tension, the Trump I administration had raised hopes with its strategy of securing a temporary freeze on North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile tests in preparation for a longer-term agreement that would see Pyongyang abandon weapons of mass destruction. But the two leaders finally parted ways in 2019 without an agreement. Since then, despite the world’s most crippling international sanctions regime, North Korea has continued to work towards normalizing its status as a nuclear state while seeking to break out of its isolation. In 2025, the incoming Republican administration faces a new order. It must now deal with North Korea in a context where the European and Indo-Pacific theaters are intertwined and also manage the increased possibility of simultaneous conflicts in these two regions.

## ***First term: the failure of the Kim–Trump summits***

The 2018-2019 sequence of negotiations offers lessons on the Trump method. A few months after his inauguration and in response to the nuclear and ballistic test campaign of 2016-2017, Trump threatened to bring down “fire and fury” and “totally destroy” North Korea. Then, in 2018, he finally accepted Kim Jong-un’s offer of a meeting *via* South Korea. The summits in Singapore in June 2018 and Hanoi in February 2019 were marked by a strong personalization of negotiations between Trump and Kim and the *de facto* abandonment of multilateralism in managing the North Korean nuclear crisis. Trump is likely to continue this bilateral approach, which could have implications for European interests due to the interlocking theaters.

In the end, the agreement reached at the Singapore summit allowed only one year of testing freeze, in 2018. The lack of consensus at the end of the Panmunjom meeting in June 2019 showed just how non-negotiable North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile program has become for the regime, while Kim Jong-un’s willingness to negotiate with Trump on similar terms has now probably fizzled out. This is borne out by statements in the

North Korean state media that Trump “did not bring about any substantial positive changes”.<sup>1</sup>

Trump’s appointments offer some clues to his future strategy. Richard Grenell, former acting Director of National Intelligence and former ambassador to Germany during Trump’s first term, is the “presidential envoy” on “high-risk zones, including Venezuela and North Korea”. A close friend of Trump, he has been conducting *ad hoc* missions on behalf of the future president for several months. Beyond Grenell, the guidelines of the first term are likely to be maintained by the return of personalities involved in drafting the 2017 Indo-Pacific Strategy, which remains the guiding thread for American activities in the region. Elbridge Colby, nominated Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, was involved, as was Alex Wong, who is chosen as Deputy National Security Advisor.

### ***Pyongyang’s assertiveness prompts Washington to adapt its strategy***

Since Trump’s first term in office, Kim Jong-un has enshrined nuclear power status into the North Korean constitution, strengthened its nuclear and ballistic technological capabilities and adopted a more coercive and offensive strategy. In response, the US Missile Defense Review (MDR) of 2022 promoted the logic of “deterrence by denial”, i.e., the enhancement of defensive capabilities through missile defense systems. The bipartisan Commission on the Strategic Posture of the US reviewing nuclear policy in 2023, as well as the former MDR editor under Trump I, Rob Soofer, also calls for a significant strengthening of ballistic missile defense during the second term.

North Korea has also been taking advantage of Russian weaknesses in Ukraine since 2022. In exchange for the supply of artillery, shells, missiles and now troops, Russia could support North Korea through the transfer of space and ballistic capabilities. This underlying trend is set to continue, as indicated by the mutual defense treaty signed by Putin and Kim in June 2024. The incoming US administration will, therefore, have to take greater account of its adversaries’ ability to coordinate and support each other’s interests in different theaters.

Thus, any future engagement between Kim and Trump will not be without impact on the transatlantic relationship and the war in Ukraine. Europe, and especially France as a nuclear-armed state and Indo-Pacific power, must integrate this new situation into its foreign policy. Taking into account North Korea’s support for Russia, as well as China’s, is decisive for the future of Ukraine and European security.

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1. « Whether Second Hand of DPRK-U.S. Confrontation Stops or Not Depends on U.S. Act: KCNA Commentary”, KCNA, 23 juillet 2023.

# **The US–Philippines alliance: The linchpin of Trump II’s Southeast Asia strategy**

***Juliette Loesch***

The strengthening of the alliance between the Philippines and the United States (US) illustrates Manila’s central role in American strategy in the Indo-Pacific. Begun during Donald Trump’s first term in office, this dynamic nevertheless raises questions about the leeway the Philippines will have in the face of the new administration’s choices. In contrast, other Southeast Asian states are adopting a more cautious approach to Washington, while stepping up efforts to diversify their partnerships, particularly with non-Western players.

## ***A stronger partnership between the Philippines and the US***

Relations between Manila and Washington have strengthened considerably since 2016, despite President Rodrigo Duterte’s (2016-2022) open anti-Americanism and efforts to draw closer to China. Criticism of Duterte’s pro-China policy highlighted the lack of support from within his administration: his defense and foreign affairs ministers expressed concern at Chinese harassment in the South China Sea, especially as the newfound closeness with Beijing hadn’t generated the hoped-for economic benefits. Moreover, these same ministers were sensitive to the inclusion in the “US Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea” (2020) regarding the conclusions reached by the Hague arbitral tribunal in 2016, finding in favor of the Philippines.

On the US side, the prospect of a rapprochement between the Philippines and China prompted the US to redouble its efforts towards its ally, whose importance cannot be minimized in the context of heightened Sino-American competition in the Indo-Pacific. On a visit to Manila in March 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo clarified the application of the mutual defense treaty, stating that any armed attack against the Philippines’ forces in the South China Sea would activate mutual defense obligations. Pompeo’s statement sent out a triple message: firstly, to China, urging it to exercise restraint; secondly, to Philippines’ leaders, who were meant to be reassured of the solidity of the alliance; and thirdly, to other Southeast Asian partners, eager for reassurance of America’s continued commitment to the regional security architecture.



This dynamic of rapprochement has been confirmed by the Biden and Marcos Jr. administrations, which have consistently reinforced Manila's place in the *lattice* of alliances forged by the US in the Indo-Pacific, whether through the extension of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), signed in 2023, or through the Philippines' growing involvement in the multilateral formats initiated by the US with Japan, Australia and South Korea.

Aware of its limited defense capabilities,<sup>2</sup> Manila is counting on the durability of the alliance under Trump II to ensure the protection of its interests, particularly in the South China Sea. The appointment of conservative figures to the key posts of foreign affairs (Marco Rubio) and national security (Mike Waltz) is therefore likely to reassure the Philippines' diplomats and military personnel.

The probable return to a transactional, unilateral approach is not without risk for Manila, however: unlike the Biden administration, which favored consultation, the Philippines' room for maneuver will certainly be reduced to strict alignment with their ally's positions in Southeast Asia.

### ***Southeast Asia tempted to de-prioritize relations with Washington***

The possibility of a more confrontational US policy towards China is causing great concern among countries in the region. Although the trade war between the two powers has opened up development opportunities, particularly for Vietnam, which has benefited greatly from the reorganization of production chains, the expected intensification of Sino-American rivalry over the next four years is likely to accentuate the pressure on Southeast Asian states for greater alignment. Such a dynamic could compromise their strategies for simultaneously developing relations with both rivals.

While most countries in the region continue to regard the security guarantees provided by the US as desirable, particularly against a backdrop of rising tensions in the South China Sea, some capitals are also making clear their intention to prioritize cooperation with non-Western powers. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has made no secret of his closeness to Vladimir Putin and is likely to seek to use Malaysia's presidency of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2025 to bring the Association closer to the BRICS+. The new Vietnamese and Indonesian presidents have also booked their first official trip to Beijing, ahead of Washington.

Another concern stems from Donald Trump's repeated promises to increase tariffs for countries with which the US has a trade deficit, such as

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2. The Philippines' armed forces are among the least well-equipped in Southeast Asia, with an annual budget of \$4.38 billion for 2025 (around 4% of the total budget, up 6.4% on 2024).

Vietnam. New protectionist measures could further weaken the already underdeveloped economic cooperation with Southeast Asia, and thus hamper US efforts to maintain its influence in the region.

# India–US: Towards new heights?

***Sylvia Malinbaum and Isabelle Saint-Mézard***

During his first term, President Trump strengthened the strategic partnership between India and the United States (US). The solidity of this partnership, the convergence of Indian and American interests in the Indo-Pacific and, to a lesser extent, the affinities between President Trump and Prime Minister Modi, have made it possible to manage areas of friction while continuing to deepen the bilateral relationship. Delhi is, therefore, optimistic on the eve of Trump's return to power and is betting on strengthening ties with its American partner.

## ***India, an essential partner for the Trump administration***

While the Obama administration had already initiated a “pivot” towards Asia, Trump developed since 2017 his vision of a “free and open” Indo-Pacific space. This Indo-Pacific strategy, whose primary objective is to contain Chinese expansion in the region, led to intensified politico-military cooperation with India, seen as an indispensable counterweight to China. As early as 2017, the Trump administration convinced its Indian partner to relaunch the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with Japan and Australia.

The Indo-American relationship thus progressed significantly under Trump I. The Global and Comprehensive Partnership signed in February 2020 on the occasion of the US President's visit to India reflects the diversity of areas of cooperation, ranging from defense to new technologies, energy, health, culture and academic exchanges. Defense ties saw the most notable advances, with the creation of the Tiger Triumph joint exercise, the signing of two major defense agreements<sup>3</sup> and the easing of export controls on certain US weapons.

However, the Trump years were also marked by a resurgence of trade and migration tensions with India. The Republican president strongly criticized India for its protectionist regime, calling the country the “king of tariffs”. His administration subsequently withdrew India's status as a beneficiary of the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), which had given it privileged access

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3. The *Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement* (2020) gives the Indian Army access to secure communications equipment, while the *Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Cooperation* (2020) facilitates intelligence sharing.

to the US, its leading export market. The measures imposed or envisaged by the first Trump administration to limit the access of migrant workers to the US<sup>4</sup> also irritated New Delhi, despite the fact that three-quarters of H1B1 visa holders, reserved for highly skilled workers, are Indian.

### ***Deepening the Indo-American partnership***

While the Modi government fears a resurgence of tensions with the return of Trump, recent appointments to the future US administration are more a cause for optimism. Marco Rubio, appointed Secretary of State, Michael Waltz, appointed National Security Advisor, and Tulsi Gabbard, appointed Director of National Intelligence, are all in favor of strengthening the partnership with India.

Prime Minister Modi enjoys a good relationship with his American counterpart, and was among the first leaders to congratulate “his friend” President Trump on “his historic election victory”. Delhi is also delighted to have an interlocutor with less scrutiny than his predecessor over the conduct of its domestic policy. In particular, President Biden had expressed concern about the deteriorating human rights situation.

In terms of foreign policy, India welcomes Trump’s desire to find a rapid solution to the Ukraine conflict. His refusal to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been a source of tension with the Biden administration. India, which has significantly increased its oil purchases from Moscow since the fighting began, has a long-standing partnership with Russia, its main arms supplier. Delhi hopes that the Trump II administration will ease up on this issue, enabling it to regain some leeway in its relationship with Moscow.

However, the Modi government is not without fear of Donald Trump’s characteristic unpredictability. Fearing, in particular, an escalation of Sino-American rivalry and its potential consequences for regional security, India also fears coming under intense pressure to conform more systematically to US positions. A stronger alignment with the US would complicate the difficult relaunch of its bilateral relationship with China (underway since autumn 2024), in addition to undermining its multi-alignment strategy and its ambition to be the voice of the “Global South”.

Delhi is also concerned about the survival of the recent critical and emerging technologies partnership (iCET) signed under Biden, or at least fears that the new, more transactional US administration will demand more in return for any further US trade or technology concessions.

Finally, the criminal proceedings brought by the US justice system against a former Indian intelligence agent accused of masterminding the assassination of a Sikh separatist militant in New York constitute a sensitive

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4. The United States welcomes 2 million Indian immigrants and is home to 3.3 million Americans of Indian origin (2020).

issue, likely to “pollute” the bilateral relationship if not managed with flexibility and discretion.

# Australia: Locking in the strategic alliance with Washington

*Céline Pajon and Françoise Nicolas*

Donald Trump's first term in office, marked by intense confrontation with Beijing on trade and technology issues, as well as by the unpredictability of the American president not hesitating to bully his allies, was experienced with anxiety by the Australian government. Today, Australia is better prepared for Trump's return. The trade relationship is more balanced, and the alliance has emerged stronger from the AUKUS agreement. However, the progressive administration in Canberra finds itself in an uncomfortable position when faced with the illiberal political orientations of the Republican government in Washington.

## ***After Trump I, a better prepared Australia***

Australia adopted a pragmatic approach to Trump I, combining discreet firmness, polite disagreements in public and strengthening interpersonal ties between leaders. Liberal Prime Ministers Malcolm Turnbull (2015-2018) and Scott Morrison (2018-2022) had succeeded in forging personal links with President Trump, one drawing on their shared attraction to the transactional approach and the other on a climate policy unconcerned with international decarbonization targets.

Australia had been largely spared the punitive measures imposed on other countries such as Japan and South Korea, benefiting from tariff exemptions on steel and aluminum, thanks to its low volume of exports of these products and the lobbying of Prime Minister Turnbull.

Australians, therefore, appear relatively confident at the dawn of Trump's second term. The American policy of focusing on the protection of narrowly defined national interests to the detriment of its allies (America First) is now anticipated. What's more, Australia is likely to be viewed relatively favorably by the Republican president, given his political priorities. Canberra runs a trade deficit with Washington, sources a large part of its arms purchases from the US, cannot be accused of manipulating its exchange rate, and holds significant amounts of US Treasury bonds. Australia thus ticks all the boxes to be considered an ally to be spared.

## ***A more integrated security alliance***

The transactional approach to alliances under Trump I had prompted Australia's strategic community to consider a "Plan B" for its security in the event of American default. Since then, Canberra has reinforced its posture by increasing its defense budget (with a target of 2.4% of GDP by 2033) and working to integrate its alliance with Washington. The challenge for Australia is to prove that it is a capable and useful ally to the US while securing the Trump administration's continued support for the AUKUS partnership, from which Australia hopes to obtain nuclear-powered submarines. Although Vice President Vance has said he is a "big fan" of AUKUS, Trump has yet to comment on the matter.

US shipyards are already under strain, and the Republican administration may choose to prioritize domestic needs. Canberra must, therefore, demonstrate that AUKUS is beneficial to American interests, not least by pointing out that it could bring \$250 billion to the US naval industry. Australia is also investing heavily in the expansion of naval and air bases to position itself as a key platform for American force projection. At the same time, Canberra is strengthening cooperation with its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, notably Japan, India, South Korea and the Philippines.

## ***Challenges ahead: a relationship at odds with values***

Anthony Albanese's Labor government, whose personality contrasts sharply with Trump's, could find itself in trouble in the face of certain illiberal orientations announced by the latter.

On the trade front, Australia, whose GDP depends on trade, will suffer from the Republican government's protectionist measures, the collateral effects of the trade war with China and attacks on the multilateral trade framework.

On the climate issue, Donald Trump's climate skepticism and his desire to withdraw again from the Paris Agreement are at odds with the interests of the Albanese government, which is resolutely committed to the green transition. The Albanese government has applied to host COP31 in 2026 and has sought to make climate and energy policy the third pillar of bilateral relations.

For the time being, Canberra cannot count on a network of solid, trusted relationships with Trump's new team. Pro-Australian figures from the first administration, such as James Mattis and John Kelly, are no longer present. Moreover, the enmity between Donald Trump and Kevin Rudd, former Prime Minister and current Australian ambassador to Washington, is common knowledge, with Trump having indicated that his time as ambassador under his tenure would be limited.

Australia's federal elections in the spring of 2025 could offer Trump the opportunity to exert further pressure on the US ally by promoting populist and "Trump-compatible" candidates.



# **Trump II and the Pacific Islands: Strategic continuity in the face of China**

***Christian Lechervy***

American involvement in the Pacific will remain a priority for Washington in the face of China, even if the modalities of action, notably financial and development aid, will be adapted.

## ***Trump welcomed in the Pacific Islands***

During the campaign to elect the 47<sup>th</sup> President of the United States (US), the leaders of the Pacific island states were careful not to express a preference for either candidate.

This caution is all the more welcome given that the American Pacific territories (Guam, Hawaii, Northern Marianas, and American Samoa) voted massively for Donald Trump. In the Republican primaries, the former White House occupant won in the Pacific with 100% of the delegate vote in Guam and American Samoa, 97% in Hawaii and 90% in the Northern Marianas. The successes of the spring were confirmed at the ballot box in the autumn. For the first time, all three representatives of the unincorporated territories in Congress are Republicans. In the Northern Marianas, Kimberly King-Hinds ended sixteen years of Democratic representation. In Guam, Republican support was not even dampened by President Trump's past comments that the territory "is not the United States" in response to reports of North Korean threats to it. However, in Hawaii, Kamala Harris was supported by 60.6% of voters and Democratic Senator Mazie Hirono was easily re-elected.

Beyond the Republican-Democrat divide, US policy towards Oceania will remain a bipartisan consensus in many respects. Indeed, the Micronesian states and territories had already been identified by the Trump I administration as areas of resistance to the assertion of Chinese power. Senior officials were regularly dispatched there, such as Vice President Pence (APEC summit in Port Moresby in November 2018), Secretary of the Interior Zinke (Pacific Islands Forum in Nauru in September 2018), Secretary of State Pompeo in Pompei in August 2019 and Secretary of Defense Esper in Palau in August 2020. In addition, Donald Trump received Micronesian heads of state in the Oval Office in May 2019, an unprecedented gesture. This high-level diplomatic engagement was continued by the Biden administration and

supported by significant financial commitments. The Pacific states hope that the new US administration will maintain this level of commitment, even if there are serious doubts about the sustainability of the budgets.

### ***Potential stumbling blocks between Washington and the Oceanians***

In 2018, the Trump administration had already attempted to cut US budget spending in the Pacific by 18%. Budget adjustments could thus be made to the financial package of the new Compacts of Free Association<sup>5</sup>. In March 2024, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Republics of Palau and the Marshall Islands were promised an unprecedented package of over \$7 billion dollars over twenty years. Downward revisions are also possible on other budget lines. Joe Biden announced a ten-year, \$810 million aid package for the Pacific states and territories, including \$130 million for projects to combat climate change, which has yet to receive final approval from Congress.

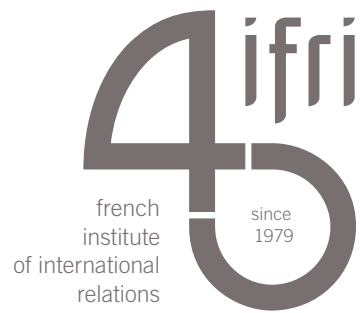
Many of the Republican president's political leanings, starting with his climate skepticism, conflict with the Pacific Islands Forum's (PIF) *Blue Pacific 2050* strategy and the expectations of a region where COP31 is due to be held in 2026. There is also growing dissatisfaction among Oceanians with the use of the Pacific as a battleground for rivalries between the US and China. In this respect, island leaders have recently expressed their deep concern about Chinese (September 2024) and American (November, December 2024) intercontinental ballistic missile launches.

More generally, the militarization of Oceania, particularly of its northwestern part with the redeployment of a contingent of 5,000 Marines from Okinawa to Guam and the modernization of military infrastructures, is of concern to populations and leaders throughout the Pacific basin. On a day-to-day basis, the Pacific island states' relations with the major powers have become a geopolitical and electoral issue. As early as 2025, general elections will be held in Vanuatu (January 16), FSM (March 4), Australia (by the end of May), Nauru (September), Tonga (by November), as well as provincial elections in New Caledonia by November 30.

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5. This mutual commitment to security and development, renewed in 2024 for two decades, gives US armed forces exclusive access to the territories of the three associated Micronesian states.





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