

## CHAPTER 2

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# Multilateralism's Challenges and Opportunities in an Era of Diminished Hegemony: The United States and ASEAN in the Asia-Pacific

*Alice D. Ba*

### Introduction

To read the headlines, multilateralism faces an uncertain future. Great power tensions stymie longstanding global governance institutions. Heightened US economic anxieties about US competitiveness have translated into US unilateralism and protectionism. The election and re-election of Donald Trump and his willingness to levy unilateral sanctions on partners and rivals alike add to the fragmenting pressures on multilateral trading regimes that have supported a system of global trade. These concerns play out especially acutely in East and Southeast Asia where states are especially dependent on international trade and where regional supply chains and geographic proximity make them especially sensitive to US-China tensions and threats of decoupling.

How can states manage such divisive and disruptive scenarios that threaten economic and security livelihoods? And how can multilateralism at global and regional levels weather the great power challenges? In East and Southeast Asia, questions focus especially on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), an organization of smaller and medium-sized powers that have provided an important, albeit unexpected, locus for institutional activity in Asia. Developments challenge the model of inclusive great power engagement that has defined ASEAN frameworks. They also challenge the regional integration trends and incentives of the last 30-plus years and that have provided important foundations for more institutionalized multilateralism. This is to say nothing of the diplomatic mechanisms that have served to sustain regional relations despite occasional periods of acute tension between states.

Despite the challenges, however, there are opportunities. In Asia, these opportunities can be found in non-great powers and multilateralism itself. To illuminate these opportunities, this paper offers an alternative conception of multilateralism that is less dependent on major power initiative and leadership. Specifically, it highlights the development of multilateralism in Asia that has taken place alongside expanded regional relations in response to great power uncertainties, especially recurrent concerns about US leadership in Asia. And while the election and re-election of Donald Trump, US protectionism, and US unilateralism now threaten regional relations and multilateral platforms, there nevertheless remain opportunities for non-great powers to sustain and advance multilateral practices and collective rule systems; moreover, these opportunities have, in part, been created by multilateral practices.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, it begins by revisiting some longstanding arguments about hegemonic leadership and multilateralism. It gives special attention to the changing nature of US power in Asia and how it relates to the past, present, and future of multilateralism in Asia. It then turns to three related subsequent adaptations and changes related to multilateral and multi-actor cooperation in Asia: 1) heightened interdependence; 2) the availability of non-great power, regional platforms; and 3) the elevation of non-great powers as agents that can shape and condition great power developments. Importantly, these developments are not distinctive to the moment but are instead reflective of decades long processes of change and adaptation to US uncertainties. The final discussion considers these changes in relation to multilateralism's challenges and opportunities in 21<sup>st</sup> century Asia. Special focus is given to ASEAN and specific Southeast Asian states.

## **Hegemonic Leadership and Diminished Hegemony**

Hegemonic—and at least large power—leadership has long been associated with multilateralism. By serving as providers of public goods and as enforcers of common rules, large powers, for example, help ease transaction costs that can hinder collective action and cooperation.<sup>1</sup> Great power collaboration/concert and at very least, great power agreement is also seen as especially necessary to functioning cooperative regimes. These assumptions underlie recent concerns about the “crisis of multilateralism.” Not only are US-China tensions at an all-time high but the election of Donald Trump (twice) calls into question US commitments to all sorts of multilateral and cooperative arrangements. The United Nations, World Trade Organization, World Health Organization, and global climate change negotiations are all seen as direct casualties of great power dysfunction and conflict.

Questions about the United States in Asia focus especially on the United States' diminished political will to lead, especially on matters regarding trade and multilateralism. For example, there is general consensus among analysts and scholars of Asia and US-Asia policy, that what the US needs to do to maintain influence in Asia is to rejoin trade negotiations. But despite this consensus, there has been no action from Washington. Even the Biden Administration which sought to reengage partners and allies following the first Trump administration made the calculation that the domestic political costs of entering into or re-opening trade negotiations were too high. Consequently, the Biden administration, from the start, avoided even pursuing Trade Promotion Authority which had expired in July 2021. TPA from Congress would have meant negotiated agreements required only an “up or down” vote (without amendments), bolstering the US president's credibility when negotiating trade agreements.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> US domestic challenges in mobilizing domestic support for trade agreements are not limited to the Trump and Biden administrations, as evidenced by the politics of KORUS in the United States, when the United States was unable to mobilize the domestic Congressional consensus to ratify it. See, for example, Yul Sohn and Min Gyo Koo (2011) “Securitizing trade: the case of the Korea–US free trade agreement,” *IRAP* 11(3): 433-460.

However, there was no need for TPA in the absence of trade talks.

As for multilateralism, US participation in regional and global institutions have also increasingly been challenged. At the global level, the WTO and IMF (under multiple presidents), as well as the WHO and Paris Climate accords (under Trump) have been especially affected. Meanwhile at the regional level, US participation in ASEAN summits has been inconsistent. While the Obama administration made attending ASEAN Summits a priority, sporadic presidential attendance by both the Trump and Biden administrations underscores longstanding questions about US support for Southeast Asia's premier institution. Although many may debate how consequential presidential attendance is for policy outcomes, the US presidential absence is noted in ASEAN capitals, as well as in regional headlines, and adds to an overall impression of US dis-engagement. Similarly, while the United States, through the US Agency for International Development (USAID), has provided technical assistance to the ASEAN Secretariat, Working Groups, and individual member-states on prioritized areas (e.g., human rights, trade facilitation, and transnational crime), the USAID budget is also frequently vulnerable to domestic budget negotiations. This was shown to dramatic effect in 2025, when less than two weeks into the second Trump Administration, the United States implemented a wide-ranging freeze on foreign assistance. Included in that freeze were "stop work" orders that put on leave 60 career officials and furloughed or terminated nearly 600 other USAID contractors.<sup>3</sup>

Explanations for US changes, however, vary with most falling in one of three groups. The first and most prominent explanation is a realist one that highlights changes in US relative power and economic competitiveness and, in turn, changing cost-benefit calculations; that is, in contrast to an earlier period when the United States could "afford" to lead and when the benefits of leadership outweighed the costs, leadership has become too expensive for today's United States.<sup>4</sup> A related view correlates widened economic inequality with diminished support for US multilateral and international leadership.<sup>5</sup>

This explanation is countered, however, by the second interpretation's very different assessment of US relative power. Responding to "declinist" arguments about the US economy, they offer a vigorous defense of US power especially relative to China, as the key challenger to the United States. For example, they contrast China's government and government-associated investments against impressive statistics on US private investment and venture capital, as well as innovation and competitiveness in developing in both current and new technologies (digitization, the Internet, artificial intelligence,

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Lewis, Daphne Psadedakis, Humeyra Pamuk, "Hundreds of USAID internal contractors put on leave, terminated amid US freeze on global aid," *Reuters* (January 29, 2025).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Stokes, "Trump, American Hegemony, and the Future of the Liberal International Order," *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 145.

and biotech).<sup>6</sup> More recently, some have also highlighted the United States' privileged positionality as a measure of its continued centrality, relational and structural power, and hegemonic status. Such positionality is theorized by Malkin and He (2024) as "extraterritoriality" where the United States retains competitive centrality in supply chain and alliance networks.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, a third explanation focuses on specific individuals like Donald Trump or previously, George W. Bush. Both were known for their positions on US unilateralism, transactionalism, anti-globalization and securitization of trade, and anti-multilateralism.<sup>8</sup> Both have also been faulted for destabilizing not just the institutions the United States helped build, but also for undermining the legitimacy on which US authority and leadership has rested. As Vines (2018) characterized the significance of Trump's first presidency: "Ever since that earlier period immediately after the Second World War, the world has looked to continuing the US leadership. But the anti-globalisation agenda, which has swept the US, and the election of Donald Trump, mean that this outward-looking leadership is now no longer available."<sup>9</sup>

One problem with all three explanations, however, is that they tend to limit their focus only on the moment rather than situating developments against longstanding positions (as in the case of longstanding US views on regional multilateralism in Asia, for example). Most important, they neglect a longer trajectory of change in which multilateralism has been both an important outcome and response to questions about US commitments in Asia.

## Responding to Great Power Uncertainty

What happens to multilateralism under conditions of great power uncertainty and tension? What happens when large power support is either absent or diminished? Such questions have at different times, animated debates about European and trans-Atlantic institutions, as well as global governance institutions. However, past discussions also highlight outcomes that are less dependent on large power leadership and where regional states take greater initiative. In Robert Keohane's seminal work, *After Hegemony*, he described, for example, how supporter states can take greater initiative and assume the 'burdens' once primarily shouldered by the hegemonic state. In his and other analyses,

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<sup>6</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "The Self Doubting Superpower", *Foreign Affairs* (December 12, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Anton Malkin & Tian He (2024) The geoeconomics of global semiconductor value chains: extraterritoriality and the US-China technology rivalry, *Review of International Political Economy*, 31:2, 674-699. See also, William K. Winecoff (2020) "The persistent myth of lost hegemony," revisited: structural power as a complex network phenomenon, *European Journal of International Relations*, 26 (1\_suppl), 209-252.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Higgott, After neoliberal globalization: The "securitization" of U.S. foreign economic policy in East Asia, *Critical Asian Studies* 36,3 (2004): 425-444; Alice Ba, "Systemic Neglect: A Reconsideration of US-Southeast Asia Policy," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 31,3 (2009); Pak K. Lee, "George W. Bush's Post-9/11 East Asia Policy: Enabling China's Contemporary Assertiveness," *International Politics* 61, no. 3 (June 2024): 587-611.

<sup>9</sup> David Vines (2018), "The BRI and RCEP: Ensuring Cooperation in the Liberalisation of Trade in Asia," *Economic and Political Studies* 6(3): 338-48.

Western European states, especially, have a role to play in providing alternative leadership. A related argument is made by Eric Brattberg who describes middle power activism and even an “Alliance for Multilateralism,” especially by Western European states, in response to the failures of US leadership under the first Trump administration.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Europe, it is argued, can provide leadership and at minimum, serve as an “additional pole” in a multipolar world where the United States is less dominant.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to the emphasis on Western European initiative, it is interesting and perhaps revealing that IR scholars have not given the same serious consideration of that option in Asia or how Asian states might exercise their own agency outside of China or the United States. On the question of multilateral cooperation, for example, discussions tend to frame the answer to these questions in China-centric terms where China takes the United States’ place or alternatively, the United States returns to a more active leading role.<sup>12</sup>

There are at least two problems with this emphasis, however. First, it tends to ignore multilateralism’s conflicted relationship with large powers in Asia. For example, while it may be true that the United States has exercised multilateral leadership at the global level, both China and the United States are best described as late or reluctant joiners when it comes to regional multilateral processes. In other words, if they attach lower priority to ASEAN and regional multilateralism, this is not an especially dramatic departure from past practice. This said, China’s recent leadership in initiating new frameworks is notable. As for the United States, the previously mixed record on ASEAN multilateralism is not limited to Biden and Trump administrations. In fact, US interest and power have worked against multilateral and regional approaches in Asia. Instead, the United States has preferred a combination of more expedient unilateral and bilateral approaches that support its preferred outcomes. Consequently, the US displays a history of actively deterring, blocking, opposing, or preempting the creation of new frameworks—and not just by China. It has also worked against or worked to alter or preempt initiatives led by allies—Japan, South Korea, and Australia—and also by ASEAN states in Southeast Asia.<sup>13</sup> Most recently, this ambivalence has manifested in new minilateral initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Initiative (the Quad) and AUKUS. Minilateralism, compared to multilateralism offers the United States important advantages. It limits US bargaining and coordination only to the states most in agreement with the United States (i.e., the “like-minded” states). This assures the United States that its preferences and agendas will not be subverted or diluted by others.

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<sup>10</sup> Brattberg, Erik. “Middle Power Diplomacy in an Age of US-China Tensions.” *The Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 219–38.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, recent statements by Josef Borell, Vice President of the European Commission. Josef Borell (2021), “How to revive multilateralism in a multipolar world?” ([https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/how-revive-multilateralism-multipolar-world\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/how-revive-multilateralism-multipolar-world_en))

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Nick Bisley (2019), “Asia’s Regional Security Order: Rules, Power and Status.” *Aust J Politics Hist*, 65: 361–376.

<sup>13</sup> Alice D. Ba, “The United States and ASEAN: Bilateralism and Regionalism in a Changing Asia,” *Routledge Handbook of US policy in the Indo-Pacific*, eds., Oliver Turner, Nicola Nymalm, and Wali Aslam (Routledge 2023): pp. 357–370.



A second problem with US and China centric discussions is that it ignores how both multilateralism and regional initiative in Asia has evolved despite great power disinterest and in response to great power neglect. Reflective of its dominance in post-World War II Asia, questions about the United States, in fact, have provided one of the more regular triggers for expanded intra-East Asian relations, including regional multilateralism. Such recurrent dynamics are thus an argument to take a long view. A long view illuminates not only a historical process of regional initiative and adaptation to great power uncertainty but also material, psychological, and normative changes that have been decades in the making rather than a product of the contemporary moment.

Such changes go back as early as the mid-1960s when changing US and UK commitments provided a great power backdrop for a reconsideration of regional organization in Southeast Asia, which came in the form of ASEAN, whose institutional development would continue to display sensitivity to US and great power changes.<sup>14</sup> The Nixon shocks (Washington's surprise rapprochement with China and its abandonment of the Gold Standard) followed. Then, Richard Nixon, a different "maverick president" facing a different moment of domestic stress and diminished economic competitiveness in the face of emergent economies (then, it was Japan), called for a "new structure of peace" that depended less on the United States and expanded security and economic burden sharing by allies.<sup>15</sup> In addition to facilitating the US withdrawal from Vietnam, the Nixon shocks freed and incentivized regional states to normalize their own relations with China, as well as with each other. The Nixon shocks were followed by the Plaza Accords in the mid-1980s, when the United States sought to reduce its trade deficit with Japan, as well as Taiwan and South Korea, via monetary policy and measures. The result was an appreciated Japanese Yen, which, in turn, incentivized and spurred new regional investment from Japan and laid the groundwork for today's contemporary supply chains and regional economic integration. In the late 1980s and 1990s, US trade pressures extended to Southeast Asia. Those pressures plus new threats of Western protectionism incentivized the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement.

ASEAN and Southeast Asian states took on more prominent roles between 1989 and 2005, when regional cooperation then took on more institutionalized forms. This period was characterized first by new questions about US post-Cold War security commitments, additional US trade pressures, as well as an Asian financial crisis in which US and global responses proved lacking. What followed were expanded efforts by individual states to engage widely and beyond the United States, as well as a range of new regional frameworks and arrangements associated especially with ASEAN. These included the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Plus Three, as well as APEC and expanded "ASEAN+1" cooperation between Southeast Asian states and individual dialogue partners, especially China and Japan. Other frameworks followed, including the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Defense Ministers

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<sup>14</sup> Alice D. Ba, *(Re)Negotiating East and Southeast Asia: Regions, Regionalisms, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Taesuh Cha and Jungkun Seo, "Trump by Nixon: Maverick Presidents in the Years of U.S. Relative Decline," *Korean Defense Analysis* 30, 1 (March 2018): 79-96; Michael Schaller, "The Nixon 'Shocks' And U.S. - Japan Strategic Relations,"

Meeting Plus and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum. Strategically, regional frameworks offered a way to supplement longstanding US arrangements/commitments that were called into question. They also offered a way both to engage China and to offset Chinese influence, and more generally, to diversify partners. To borrow from Cheng-Chwee Kuik's discussion, regional relations offered a "hedge" and means by which to manage both the risks and opportunities associated with less-than-dependable patrons and partners.<sup>16</sup>

This also has implications for today's multilateralism in Asia. What is important to note is that the leading actors in initiating and supporting multilateral and institutional cooperation were not the United States or China but instead non-great powers, especially those in ASEAN. And while these are also the frameworks that many see as now challenged by both great power competition and great power disinterest (especially by the United States), their effects go beyond specific frameworks and these effects create incentives, avenues, opportunities, and necessity for non-great power initiative in support of multilateral rules and stability.

### **Multilateralism's Changes and Opportunities**

There are at least three outcomes or byproducts of the multilateral and regional engagements just outlined: 1) heightened interdependence; 2) the availability of non-great power, multilateral platforms; and 3) the elevation of non-great powers as agents that can shape and condition great power developments.

First, the expansion of regional relations has helped to make Asia into one of the more interdependent regions in the world. And while all states are interested in "derisking," decoupling would impose especially high costs. According to the IMF's Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva, for example, "As a highly integrated region, Asia would be the most adversely affected by runaway fragmentation," with the long term costs as much as 7% GDP.<sup>17</sup> And while some Southeast Asian economies have benefited from "China + 1" adaptations by companies and firms, their smaller size makes it more challenging for most to adapt or insulate themselves from disruptions. Put another way, compared to other states, East and Southeast Asian states may have larger incentives to work with others to offset fragmentation pressures.

A second consequence is the availability of multilateral frameworks and platforms for non-great power initiative. As noted, an important development of the last few decades has been heightened interest in regional relations and regional frameworks and means to offset the uncertainties associated with changing US commitments and policies. An important outcome is that states now have a range

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<sup>16</sup> See Kuik Cheng-Chwee, "Hedging as a Policy Without Pronouncement: What, Why, and How?" prepared for this issue.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/china-boao-forum-global-economy-trade-li-qiang-3387566>

of different platforms from which to pursue counter-fragmentation initiatives in support of more inclusive and less divisive multilateralism. These include ASEAN, extended ASEAN frameworks, sub-regional frameworks, as well as regional trilateral frameworks. This does not mean individual multilateral frameworks, including ASEAN's, will not be challenged, but they will still provide platforms for non-great power ideas and initiative, as well as opportunities for states to work with others in support of cooperative and common solutions whether it is via the institution as a whole or via a subset of states within an organization.

And finally, a third outcome is the elevation of non-great powers as agents that can shape and condition great power developments. Or put another way, multilateral and regional developments have produced a kind of multi-polarization in the sense that power has become more diffused. In addition to the heightened roles played by China and Japan, especially on economic and development fronts; multilateral platforms have also elevated the voice and agenda-setting powers, especially of Asia's smaller powers. Southeast Asian states have especially benefitted from ASEAN's multilateral platforms in that they served to legitimate states as security and economic actors, underscore Southeast Asian states' comprehensive security concerns, and expand states' relations and opportunities across defense, economic, and diplomatic fields. As an example, Lowy's Power Index factors in connectivity and states relative capacity to influence via their relationships and networks. In its assessment of 27 East, Southeast, and South Asian countries on measures of economic/diplomatic/defense networks and relations, multilateral power, and defense diplomacy, nearly all ASEAN member states ranked considerably ahead of South Asian states who do not have the same benefit of multilateral platforms.<sup>18</sup> There are also other interesting contrasts. On economic diplomacy, both Myanmar and Laos rank just above India, while eight of ASEAN's ten member-states rank above New Zealand and Russia on multilateral power.

Together, the three changes above heighten opportunities for non-great powers to exercise greater agency and "creative diplomacy"<sup>19</sup> in support of multilateralism and common rules at a time when larger powers are less able or less willing to exercise multilateral leadership. Three examples offer illustrations of ASEAN and Southeast Asian states making use of multilateral opportunities as means of countering fragmentation and supporting common rule systems.

#### *ASEAN's Outlook on the Asia Pacific (AOIP)*

The "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" illustrates an early ASEAN intervention and attempt to use the ASEAN platform to counter divisive pressures emanating from an intensifying US-China rivalry. In this instance, the immediate challenge came from the United States and the first Trump administration

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<sup>18</sup> The two exceptions tend to be Laos and Myanmar, whose relative isolation has more to do with the internal civil war taking place in that country. See Lowy Power Index 2024 Edition (<https://power.lowyinstitute.org/>)

<sup>19</sup> Indu Saxena and Stephen Nagy, *Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific Construct*. Nova Science Publishers, 2024.



and in the form of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP).” Characterized by an especially belligerent tone, the FOIP heightened Southeast Asian concerns about US-China conflict and its consequences for Southeast Asia. In this situation, Indonesia’s efforts were especially instrumental in pushing forward an ASEAN alternative. Based on ASEAN-led mechanisms, principles of inclusion, and priorities of common development, the AOIP served as a counter to the FOIP’s divisive effort to mobilize cooperation around “democratic values” and ideological opposition to China.

While the AOIP has not put an end to US-China tensions or the threat of division, it has become a common speaking point and principle among non-ASEAN states, including China, India, Japan, as well as US-ASEAN Leaders’ statements. And while it can be seen as mere “lip service” to ASEAN principles, it also keeps in play ASEAN concerns and makes the AOIP a measure of the acceptability/legitimacy of certain initiatives. It can also have indirect effects as in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) whose security content has become less confrontational and controversial due its accommodation of ASEAN’s concerns and security priorities. Similarly, the a la carte approach adopted by the US Biden Administration’s Indo-Pacific Economic Framework was designed largely to bring in Southeast Asian states whose participation was seen as important to the IPEF’s efficacy and US standing in Asia.

To make one additional point on US minilateralism. As noted, the US turn to minilateralism partly reflects its dislike and frustrations with regional multilateralism in Asia. This move is sometimes characterized as reflective of US preferences for “coalitions of the willing” approaches that limit participation only to those that mostly share US priorities.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, US minilateral moves can be viewed as fragmenting and as a development contrary to multilateralism. However, there are at least two additional dynamics. First, US minilateralism represents an expansion beyond the United States’ historic bilateralism in Asia. Thus, while it is less than multilateralism; it is also more than bilateralism. The Quad and AUKUS can also be viewed as part of a larger trend by which the United States shifts more security burdens to its allies. Second, despite their tensions with ASEAN’s multilateral processes, the QUAD illustrates how US minilateralism can also offer platforms for non-great power agency and initiative and in working against some of the more divisive and fragmenting inclinations promoted by US administrations. While Japan has played the most prominent role in, for example, ensuring that ASEAN states are also engaged, India has also pushed back against the QUAD becoming more confrontational in its stances against China. Of course, time will tell how durable these groupings are and whether they move beyond being ad hoc coalitions of the willing and toward more institutionalized platforms.

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<sup>20</sup> Alice D. Ba, “The United States and ASEAN: Bilateralism and Regionalism in a Changing Asia.” *The Routledge Handbook of US Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific*, Routledge (2022).

### *RCEP*

At the height of US-China tensions during the first Trump administration and in response to US protectionist and unilateral tariff threats directed at a range of East Asian economies, ASEAN states redoubled attention to the China-inclusive Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Building off ASEAN's platforms and ASEAN+1 free trade agreements with partners—China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and India (before its last-minute withdrawal)—RCEP offered a regional and geopolitical, as much economic, effort to stabilize intra-Asian regional supply chains. Chan Chun Sing, Singapore's Minister of Trade and Industry, was even more explicit about RCEP's significance for multilateralism. As Chan put it, "RCEP is more than just an economic agreement. It is a strategic signal to the rest of the world that this part of Asia continues to believe in upholding a global, multilateral trading order."<sup>21</sup>

While some question the extent of ASEAN's influence over RCEP's content<sup>22</sup>, the point here is that ASEAN provided a critical platform and performed a convening role that others might not have been able to play. Without ASEAN's platforms, it is not clear that a similar kind of "RCEP opportunity" would have existed, for example.

ASEAN's RCEP efforts have also been compared to Japan's efforts in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). There, too, "The Trump administration's economic nationalist agenda...served as an impetus for middle powers to defend the multilateral trading system."<sup>23</sup> In that instance, the Trump administration's decision to withdraw the United States from the original TPP threatened the collapse of a major trading agreement and additional threat to the regional trading system. Thus, Mireya Solis echoes the views of Chan Chun Sing. As she puts it, given failed US trade leadership, "the two mega trade agreements—the CPTPP and RCEP—acquired new meaning: as safe-harbour for middle powers to advance trade liberalisation and provide regulatory certainty for supply chains."<sup>24</sup>

### *DEPA*

Finally, the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA) offers one of the more recent efforts to sustain and advance multilateral negotiations in the face of great power tensions and disfunction via minilateral and plurilateral action. Misra and Valencia, for example, characterize DEPA as "exemplary

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<sup>21</sup> Speech by Minister Chan Chun Sing at the Asia and ASEAN Forum, August 29, 2019 (<https://www.mti.gov.sg/Newsroom/Speeches/2019/08/Speech-by-Minister-Chan-Chun-Sing-at-the-Asia-and-ASEAN-Forum>)

<sup>22</sup> See Mueller, Lukas Maximilian. 2019. "ASEAN Centrality under Threat – the Cases of RCEP and Connectivity." *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 8 (2): 177–98.

<sup>23</sup> Brattberg, Erik. "Middle Power Diplomacy in an Age of US-China Tensions." *The Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 219–38; Fukunari Kimura (2021) "RCEP from the middle power Perspective", *China Economic Journal*, 14:2, 162-170; Shimizu, Kazushi. 2021. "The ASEAN Economic Community and the RCEP in the World Economy." *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 10 (1): 1–23.

<sup>24</sup> Mireya Solis, "The Heyday of Asian Regionalism?", ERIA Discussion Series No 435 (August 2022).

as the first digital economy agreement.” DEPA began as negotiations among three states – Chile, New Zealand and Singapore. Since negotiations began, DEPA has also attracted interest from other states, including South Korea which became DEPA’s fourth member in May 2024. China, along with Canada, Costa Rica, Peru, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), El Salvador and Ukraine have also expressed interest in joining.

In this process, Singapore’s role is significant. While it is the only Asian state negotiating in DEPA, it is also party to other negotiations on the digital economy in CPTPP and data regulation in RCEP. Singapore is also party to the ASEAN E-commerce Agreement, which went into force in December 2021 after gaining the requisite ratifications.

## Conclusion

The return of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States raises questions about both the durability of US commitments and predictability of US actions. If the United States has served as a stabilizing force in Asia, it has been due to more than reasons of relative power but also the content of its foreign policy which have been an important source of foreign policy continuities despite personnel changes in the White House.

At the same time, as this paper highlights, there is a recurrent pattern involving interactive US and regional adjustments. More broadly, the prospect of US retrenchments incentivizes states to reconsider their regional relations, including relations with China.<sup>25</sup> This pattern is also not unique to Southeast and East Asia. In other world regions, as well, regional governance prospects are often heightened by global uncertainties and questions about global relationships. For example, some characterize DEPA and the ASEAN’s E-Commerce Agreement as part of a larger global trend of regionalist responses to the challenged WTO-Doha process.<sup>26</sup>

All this underscores several points. First, China has been given too much credit in driving changes. Second, questions about US leadership and US commitments in Asia are not new; nor are they limited to any one administration or political party. Thus, while it’s true that in the current context, multilateralism in Asia is no doubt challenged, it is not because US views have significantly changed. As highlighted, unlike its past support for global level institutions, the United States has never been a particular promoter of regional multilateralism. If anything, it has played obstructionist and spoiler roles. This said, US changes on global multilateralism are important for regional multilateralism. This is especially true on the trade front. But if past patterns provide a guide, US and global multilateral

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<sup>25</sup> On Southeast Asia’s early engagement of China and states’ sensitivity to US uncertainties, see Ba 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Mishra, Neha, and Ana Maria Palacio Valencia. 2023. “Digital Services and Digital Trade in the Asia Pacific: An Alternative Model for Digital Integration?” *Asia Pacific Law Review* 31 (2): 489–513.

uncertainties can also incentivize and catalyze regional initiative and frameworks.

Third, past patterns additionally teach us that agency and leadership need not come from hegemonic actors or even larger powers but also can come from non-hegemonic and smaller powers. At a time when neither China nor the United States seem equipped or able to lead Asia in achieving prioritized goals of national resilience, economic development, or regional stability, there is both a widened opportunity and intensified imperative for initiative by smaller, as well as middle, powers. Smaller powers—because of their numbers—also perform critical roles in legitimating the actions and power of other states.