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IN 2024, ASIA'S DOMESTIC POLITICS WILL DECIDE ITS GEOPOLITICS

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“Geopolitics is back,” we keep hearing in Asia. Indeed, flashpoints and sources of tension in the region are on the rise, from the feared Taiwan contingency to the South China Sea disputes, Sino-Indian border skirmishes, and unwanted North Korean activities. This year is critical for Asia’s stability, as a large part of it, including some of its most consequential actors, are going to the polls. Even the seemingly distant U.S. election will have serious implications for the security of the region.

To start with, the recent election in Taiwan, closely watched by the whole world, has received much attention. Not only due to its democratic nature — a rarity in Asia — but also because of its strategic implications for the broader region and beyond. Framed as a “choice between war and peace” for the voters, the 2024 presidential election signifies the path that Taiwan chooses for itself in the face of continuous unification threats from Beijing. Despite receiving a relentless campaign of intimidation and inducements, the nearly 20 million voters opted for sustaining the status quo, as promised by the current Vice-President, now President-Elect, Lai Ching-te.

In a record election year, with nearly 4 billion people participating in a range of elections — presidential, legislative, regional and municipal — Asia takes the lead with approximately 2.2 billion people. This surpasses any other region in the world, making it the biggest exercise of basic democratic rights by sheer quantity. However, in terms of quality, a more challenging metric to gauge, there are concerns about the trend of democratic backsliding becoming stronger in the region. In many countries, the elections will neither be free nor fair, as exemplified by the Bangladeshi elections at the start of the year.

Ahead of us lies a number of crucial elections that will not only shape the future of those individual countries in the coming years but also the influence they have on their respective subregions. Take India, for instance, a major regional power that has recently

showcased a more engaged foreign policy, and heightening global anticipation for its growing strategic role. At the forefront, the United States and Western allies are hopeful for the reawakening of an elephant that can counterbalance China in Asia. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue involving India, along with the three treaty allies — the United States, Japan, and Australia — is a pinnacle of the rising expectations placed on New Delhi. Under Narendra Modi’s leadership in recent years, India has also aspired to become a leading voice for the Global South. However, these aspirations may have to yield to a more inward focus in this election year, particularly as [religious populist tendencies](#) have been steadily brewing and are unlikely to ease as voting emotions run high.

Similarly, Indonesia, the world’s third-largest democracy, grapples with its own version of populism and patronage. Long regarded as the informal leader of Southeast Asia, Indonesian voters may experience déjà vu with the candidacy of the current defense minister, Prabowo Subianto. A military figure allegedly responsible for [human rights abuses](#) from Papua to East Timor, Prabowo is a veteran contender for the presidential seat. Despite a haunting past, he seems surprisingly [popular among young voters](#) today and is currently the frontrunner, with [support from Jokowi](#), who aims to secure his legacy as his son becomes Prabowo’s running mate. If victorious this February, his presidency could not only revive a repressive legacy but also heighten the risk of internal instability, potentially further diminishing Jakarta’s appetite to play a leading role in ASEAN-wide matters, be it the crisis in Myanmar or the growing tensions in the South China Sea.

The threat of internal violence looms large in many of these countries, with varying degrees of risk. In Pakistan, this concern is particularly pronounced. Social unrest on election day or in its aftermath is not unprecedented, as evidenced by the military-led crackdown following [May 9](#) last year. Domestic instability poses an obvious risk to national security. During elections, this danger is exacerbated due to its dual nature: diverting attention away from constructive agendas abroad while often preying on the nation’s emotions concerning contentious or disputed issues nearby.

If foreign policy truly begins at home, then much of the shaping of Asia’s geopolitical landscape will take place at the ballot boxes. Often, these decisions have little to do with grand strategy, as geopolitical considerations rarely dominate voters’ decisions. Despite the region facing bubbling flashpoints, the geopolitical landscape will be shaped by more mundane factors such as the costs of living, [inflation](#), the housing market, taxes, economic prospects, food and energy security considerations, as well as ethnic and religious politics.

The projection of strategic influence in international affairs is impossible without a foundation of domestic stability. Only a domestically stable polity can effectively and constructively engage in external affairs. Thus, the already fragile stability of Asia depends on the decisions of each and every citizen. Geopolitical significance is not only for analysts to study; it needs to be educated and articulated to all voters.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

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ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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