



**ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK**

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

## The Korea Times

### MANAGING REGIONAL SECURITY AMIDST DC DISCONNECTS

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9 April 2025

The second Trump administration's Asia approach suffers from increasingly evident policy disconnects. While US allies and partners hope these contradictions will eventually be resolved and greater coherence will emerge, they must still plan on the basis that this distracted DC represents the new status quo. Developing greater self-reliance and multilateral approaches not conditioned on US approval should be priorities amidst this tumult.

The global tariffs announced by the United States on April 2 were of a magnitude unexpected by its economic and security partners, and even much of Wall Street. The shock of this overnight historic shift in US economic policy – and its effects in throttling international trade and likely provoking a global recession in 2025 – can only be explained by understanding President Trump's personal economic views. Through this lens, a US trade deficit with another country is America losing at a zero-sum game. Sweeping protectionist tariffs will build a new US economy which features external trade balances or surpluses. Declines in American and international stock markets and living standards are acceptable costs to pay toward this goal.

This perspective is damaging in itself, but it also undermines other simultaneous US policy priorities. By wielding such a blunt instrument, the Trump administration threatens allies and partners with the same economic volatility or even recession that it seeks to impose on US rivals. Senior levels of the politically appointed US foreign and defense policy apparatus are planning a rebalancing of political and military commitments toward prioritising East Asia. However, such a shift – including demands for greater defense expenditures by US allies – requires deep trust and mutual understanding of a shared objective. The tariffs undermine not only efforts to develop

this trust, but also the actual ability of states to make real defense investments and grow their capabilities when their fiscal pie is shrinking. This illustrates one disconnect within the administration, in which Trump’s apex-level emphasis on tariffs conflicts with senior officials’ focus on geostrategic repositioning.

Even if Trump decides to reduce tariffs for selected countries or condition them on desired policy changes, this will not necessarily resolve the tension between the two imperatives. This could also reinforce regional perceptions that US commitments are increasingly unreliable, further weakening the trust necessary for its new Asia pivot to succeed.

A second disconnect lies in the apex-level drive to reduce the functional capacity of the US government to articulate and execute its foreign and defense policies. The DOGE’s de facto “cancellations” of USAID and federal spending commitments have left few elements of US policymaking untouched, especially as the workforce remains distracted, fearing their office or positions may be next. The same staffers who keep the engine running now face additional pressures from the roving apex anti-DEI campaign, which has already counted the Department of Defense’s Office of Net Assessment – a previously invaluable resource for conceptualising US Asia-Pacific strategies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – as one of its casualties.

Senior policymakers must propose policy options drawing upon the expertise of these staffers, while also relying on them to effectively implement and clearly communicate decisions to external partners and audiences. Their herculean efforts to continue fulfilling these roles amidst the campaigns targeting them are unlikely to fully compensate for the severe losses to their basic capacity to do so. This means that even if more coherent US policies toward the Asia-Pacific emerge – including a potential resolution of the tariff-pivot contradiction – the US ability to deliver on these policies will remain in question.

These realities must be faced squarely. As regional allies and partners seek to persuade Washington to climb down from its new tariffs, they must also plan around the likelihood that these measures – and the other conditions described above – have become the new status quo. To develop new, durable sources of economic growth, they must advance trade and investment agreements with each other, regardless of whether the US joins. The disruptions in DC will still necessitate higher defense spending as the uncertainty surrounding US commitments deepen. However, defense planning, as well as new systems and technologies, will likely need to feature fewer US components as critical architecture, and more national or like-minded partner elements instead. A new regional multilateralism, less reliant on US impetus and resources but still committed to many of the same goals, will ultimately form a stronger foundation for ensuring the Asia-Pacific remains peaceful through the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In a way, this outcome would paradoxically achieve the Trump administration’s preference for greater partner economic and defense burden-sharing in upholding regional order. However, the eventual form of this new regional multilateralism will be affected by its origins as a reaction to perceived US apex-level decisions that target allies’ prosperity and national interests, rather than as an initiative developed through US consultations grounded in deep trust. The Trump administration should recognise the long-term consequences of the turmoil it has unleashed and undertake a dramatic – but not impossible – course correction. Its regional allies and partners, however, should plan on the basis that it won’t.

*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.*

*This commentary was originally published in the [Korea Times](#), and on the [APLN website](#).*

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The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (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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