

Trumping Asia

Nearly halfway through his term, what does President Trump's Asia policy look like?

By **Abigail Grace**

In a cavernous Manila exhibition hall, flooded with light, U.S. President Donald Trump stood flanked by members of his national security team to deliver remarks to the press in November 2017. Joking that the White House press corps would need a day to recover from his first Asia trip – which covered five countries – the president observed, “It’s been an incredible 12 days. I’ve made a lot of friends at the highest levels.”

After intense public back-and-forth over Trump’s attendance at the 2017 East Asia Summit in the Philippines, he departed immediately following the leaders’ lunch, but before delivering official remarks. Officials cited a tight schedule, noting that the summit was running behind. Then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was left behind to speak in the president’s stead.

Nearly one year later, onlookers are still seeking clarity about the Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy. Characterized by a newly declared strategic competition with China, “fair and reciprocal” trade deals, a free and open Indo-Pacific region, and increased emphasis on the Quad – a diplomatic grouping of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States – Trump’s approach is in some respects a predictable evolution of U.S. regional policy, while in other ways deeply disruptive. The administration’s ability to reconcile these competing forces into affirmative policy solutions will be the single largest factor that determines its relative success.

Undoubtedly, Trump’s business-like focus on interpersonal relationships has dramatically altered the landscape of the United States’ engagement with Asia. His emphasis on cultivating direct ties with foreign leaders upended conventional “bottom-up” bureaucratic models and led to fast decision-making with far-reaching ramifications – the president’s June Singapore Summit with North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Un being the most noteworthy example.

But Trump’s love-affair with Asia was far from assured during his candidacy. Tapping into deep-seated angst within middle America, Trump successfully painted globalization as the root of the struggling middle class’ woes. On the campaign trail, he railed against China, famously claiming that they were “raping” the United States’ economy. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an expansive multilateral trade pact that aspired to create a free trade network of 12 Pacific Rim countries, was a top target. Trump – along with Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton – pledged to withdraw the United States from the agreement, feeding long-standing concerns about U.S. reliability in the region.

In a shocking upset that rocked the Washington establishment and foreign capitals around the world, Donald Trump was declared the victor of the United States’ presidential race on November 8, 2016. Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was the first foreign leader to meet with Trump after his win, famously hopping on a flight to New York at a moment’s notice, bearing a golden golf club. Amid heightened international interest, Trump accepted a congratulatory call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen. While the U.S. reception to the call was generally positive, Beijing predictably responded by lodging a formal diplomatic

complaint with U.S. officials, underscoring that a “one China” policy was the basis of diplomatic ties. As Trump doubled down with tweets defending his decision, it seemed evident that a fundamental reset in the U.S.-China relationship was on the horizon.

As Trump was sworn into office, a parade of international leaders swarmed the United States for official meetings, convinced that only direct contact with Trump himself would aid their understanding of the unconventional new leader. With a limited institutional framework and few staff in place due to hiccups during the presidential transition, Trump’s team dove into “leader-led” diplomacy, launching into meetings with British Prime Minister Theresa May, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and a famous Mar-a-Lago summit with Abe within the first month of assuming office.

Abe’s February meeting began to calm some regional concerns about the Trump presidency. A North Korean ballistic missile test gave the two an opportunity to develop a coordinated U.S.-Japanese response within minutes of the launch. The summit’s joint statement was a strong endorsement of the U.S.-Japan alliance, reaffirming support for the U.S. nuclear umbrella and pledging to defend the disputed Senkaku islands in the event of a Chinese incursion.

Amid this flurry of early diplomacy came Trump’s first phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping, in which, according to a White House press readout, “President Trump agreed, at the request of President Xi, to honor our ‘one China’ policy.” Pledging to continue further talks with “very successful outcomes” in the future, the initial tension in the U.S.-China relationship seemed quelled – if only for the moment.

Concurrently, Trump’s team turned to implementing its domestic policy priorities – slashing tax rates and removing regulations championed by the Obama administration. The foreign policy apparatus, still adapting to Trump’s unconventional approach, which tied together trade and security policies, struggled with presidential statements linking the U.S. trade deficit with China to the campaign to maximize pressure on North Korea. According to the *New York Times*, the approach was both anathema to career foreign policy professionals trained to “stay in their lanes” and sharply divergent from the conventional diplomatic playbook employed by the United States in the post-Cold War “pax Americana.”

During this domestic turmoil, Trump invited Xi to their first summit meeting – a secluded and highly choreographed weekend at Mar-a-Lago, Trump’s “Winter White House.” The format afforded them – and their teams – time to bond and discuss the creation of four dialogue mechanisms: the Diplomatic and Security Dialogue, the Comprehensive Economic Dialogue, the Cybersecurity and Law Enforcement Dialogue, and the Social and Cultural Issues Dialogue. At the time of publication, there has not been a single meeting of any of the four mechanisms in 2018.

While Trump and Xi’s initial summit did not succeed in creating long-lasting bilateral architectures, it did spark the beginning of what has been described by both leaders as a “close personal friendship.” And, with that, began Trump’s sharp distinction between his assertive policies vis-à-vis China, and his enduring respect for Chinese President Xi. Based in Trump’s belief that close personal ties could rectify even the most extreme structural differences, the fate of the most consequential bilateral relationship in the world was left to the personal affections of two men. It would take until September 2018 for Trump to acknowledge that “maybe President Xi isn’t my friend anymore.”

While Trump’s personal diplomacy was continuing apace, senior U.S. officials embarked on tours of Asia. Vice President Mike Pence’s late April 2017 trip to South Korea, Japan, Indonesia, and Australia was met with positive reception. The National Security Council’s

senior director for Asia participated in China's inaugural Belt and Road Forum in May 2017. Later that same month, Secretary of Defense Mattis delivered his first address at the Shangri-La Dialogue, where he pledged that the United States has a "deep and abiding commitment to reinforcing the rules-based international order." The administration's Asia policy – even if it did seem overly focused on addressing the threat from North Korea – was becoming clearer.

In late June 2017, the shine from Trump's initial summit meeting with Xi began to wear off. Within the span of a few weeks, the administration conducted its first freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea, and its first arms sale to Taiwan, while Trump directly criticized China's contributions to the campaign to maximize pressure on North Korea. Each of these actions are routine in today's climate of frosty U.S.-China relations, but according to news reports from *CNN* at the time, the swift pace of these actions caught many, including leaders in Beijing, off-guard.

Amid heightening tension in U.S.-China relations and the seemingly never-ending flurry of ballistic missile tests from North Korea, the Trump administration turned to diplomacy with Southeast Asia for the months leading up to the president's November 2017 trip. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, and Malaysia's then-Prime Minister Najib Razak all visited the White House within a few short weeks of one another in fall 2017. All three visits featured strong trade and investment packages, new commitments from each country to "do more" on North Korea, and burgeoning language on the United States' commitment to the "Indo-Pacific" region, a term that would define Trump's forthcoming trip to the region.

On November 3, 2017, Trump and a slew of officials boarded Air Force One and embarked on the longest presidential tour to the region in over 25 years. Having foregone an initial trip to Asia at the start of his term in favor of receiving more visitors in the United States, the president had yet to visit South Korea and Japan – the United States' strongest treaty allies in Northeast Asia, and key partners in the North Korea crisis – yet had also publicly committed to visiting China and attending three large multilateral summits: APEC, ASEAN, and EAS.

With lavish state dinners, breathtaking cultural performances, and stoic troop reviews, Trump's hosts spared no effort in showcasing the most storied aspects of their cultures. Nowhere was this truer than in China, where the Forbidden City was opened for a customized, intimate performance for Trump and Xi. For China's leadership, this "state-visit plus" added to the growing veneer of friendship between the two men.

The following day, Trump delivered what is considered to be the fullest expression of the administration's Asia policy on the stage of the APEC CEO Summit in Da Nang, Vietnam. Yet the speech struck a contradictory tone – replete with famed stories of Southeast Asian history, including Vietnam's own Trung sisters, but also sharply protectionist and nationalistic in its description of U.S. trade priorities. Trump's audience was left unsure of how to proceed.

The president's announcement that the administration would be willing "to make bilateral trade agreements with any Indo-Pacific nation... that will abide by the principles of fair and reciprocal trade" encouraged some. Yet a year later, aside from initial discussions of free trade agreements with Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam, there is little substantive progress to show. The absent economic component fuels the administration's critics, who belie a "free and open Indo-Pacific" as nothing more than a transitory bumper-sticker for the United States' regional security posture.

Only a few weeks after Trump's return from his inaugural trip to Asia, the president's 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) was unveiled. The document is best known for its

declaration that the United States is returning to an era of strategic competition and is facing near-peer challenges from China and Russia. Unsurprisingly, Chinese officials depicted the document as a return to “Cold War mentality” and decried the United States for labeling Beijing as a revisionist power.

The NSS’ findings were bolstered by a U.S. Trade Representative report authorized by Section 301 of the arcane Trade Act of 1974. A stunning indictment of China’s forced technology transfer practices, the rigorously researched Section 301 report built the policy foundation for the beginning of the U.S.-China trade war.

While the bureaucratic wheels turned to implement a tougher policy on China, little did officials know that an unexpected change in the region would provide additional maneuvering space. North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Un’s New Year’s Day Speech, combined with South Korean President Moon Jae-in’s unstoppable fervor for inter-Korean dialogue, marked a watershed moment on the Korean Peninsula. At Moon’s behest, the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics provided a venue for high-level political rapprochement. Only months later, Moon hopped across the border at Panmunjom to set foot in North Korea before hosting Kim for a summit on the southern side of the demarcation line. In June 2018, Singapore hosted an extravagant summit between Trump and Kim. As Trump would later tell it, the two “fell in love.” Implicitly, China’s cooperation in the campaign to “maximize pressure” on North Korea was no longer as valuable.

In spring 2018, Trump and his economic team began unleashing round after round of tariffs targeting China. Today, roughly half of U.S. imports from China are affected by the tariffs. China has responded in kind, targeting politically sensitive U.S. constituencies to generate domestic turmoil in the United States prior to the November 2018 midterm elections. In particular, a paid Chinese advertisement in the *Des Moines Register* was designed to appear as a legitimate news source. The insert lambasted Trump and spotlighted the economic harm that Chinese retaliatory tariffs caused for Iowan farmers.

In recent weeks, speculation has emerged that Trump and Xi might accede to a trade war truce of sorts on the margins of the G20 in Argentina at the end of November. While it is possible they will come to a temporary agreement lessening some of the immediate tension, a single meeting will not mark the end of a sharper relationship between the United States and China. The fundamental tensions in the bilateral relationship are structural, exacerbated by Xi’s emphasis on state-owned economic entities, and will not see permanent resolution without further economic and political liberalization in Beijing.

Pence’s October 4 Hudson Institute speech laid bare the United States and China’s divergent world views. The vice president’s remarks are undoubtedly the most authoritative and comprehensive statement from the Trump administration assessing the Chinese Communist Party. While many of the speech’s testier components were previewed at lower levels in the preceding months, the decision to dispatch an official as senior as the vice president to unleash such a powerful indictment of Beijing’s overreach signaled the beginning of a new chapter in the United States’ reckoning with China’s ideological and geopolitical expansionism.

Although the speech was portrayed in the press as heavily focused on Chinese influence operations, Pence covered an array of issues, including the ongoing crisis in Xinjiang and the difficulties U.S. businesses face when operating in China. The vice president’s multidimensional approach underscores that the new China approach is anything but a ploy to gain votes ahead of the U.S. midterm elections. This speech is the beginning of a permanent course correction from Washington.

Critics of the speech have noted that Pence's remarks were short on solutions for the U.S.-China bilateral relationship. Undoubtedly, the administration has been channeling its attention into operationalizing and fleshing out the free and open Indo-Pacific strategy, at times seemingly in lieu of developing a comprehensive solution to the China challenge.

At the July 2018 Indo-Pacific Business Forum, which featured speeches from Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross, Secretary of Energy Rick Perry, and USAID Administrator Mark Green, administration officials focused their remarks on highlighting new regional initiatives, such as the Digital Connectivity and Cyber Partnership, and Asia EDGE (Enhancing Development and Growth through Energy), which aims to promote regional energy security and access by boosting United States exports, such as liquefied natural gas (LNG).

Pence's upcoming trip to represent the United States at APEC, the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the U.S.-ASEAN Summit will provide an opportunity for the administration to continue building on initiatives previewed at the July 2018 Indo-Pacific Business Forum. The emergence of cooperative trilateral initiatives, such as the U.S.-Japan-Australia and the U.S.-Japan-India infrastructure working groups, enable the region's most capable democratic actors to develop smart alternatives to China's Belt and Road. However, despite the announcement of these collaborations, there has been little evidence of concrete deals resulting from the consultative bodies. If Pence is able to successfully make the case that U.S. engagement in the region extends beyond *pro forma* government-to-government memoranda of understanding and into on-the-ground work that tangibly improves people's lives, that will be a win for U.S. presence in the region.

Another important metric for the success of the vice president's trip will be movement on Trump's November 2017 commitment to bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs) with countries in the region. The announcement on the margins of the 2018 United Nations General Assembly that the United States and Japan will open negotiations on a bilateral free trade agreement has the potential to jumpstart U.S. economic discussions with other partners in the region.

However, relegating trade discussions to Northeast Asia will not be a winning approach for a U.S. strategy predicated on closer ties with the Indian Ocean Region. Announcing the start of FTA negotiations with the Philippines or Vietnam would signal continued U.S. interest in the economic future of Southeast Asia. For the United States, increasing economic cooperation with the Philippines would have the additional benefit of enriching the two countries' alliance, which has been tested by current President Rodrigo Duterte.

Another possible outcome of Pence's upcoming tour is increased focus on governance issues in the region. The Trump administration, frequently criticized for downplaying human rights, has shown outward support for recent democratic elections in Malaysia and the Maldives, both of which resulted in the removal of pro-Beijing, corruption-prone governments. Furthermore, the administration has taken a more strident approach to Beijing's crackdowns on Christians in China and Muslims interred in Xinjiang's "re-education" camps.

Meanwhile, support for Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi in Washington appears to be fading, and the State Department – while not yet labeling the Rakhine state crisis "genocide" – moved to release a detailed report outlining the grave atrocities experienced by the Rohingya people.

While the Trump administration is unlikely to adopt a comprehensively principled approach to human rights in the Indo-Pacific, onlookers should expect continued focus on these issues when they are in alignment with broader geopolitical goals in the region.

As we near the halfway point in Trump's first term, there are aspects of continuity and change in the United States' approach to Asia. The free and open Indo-Pacific strategy is rooted in the same strategic realities that prompted the Obama administration's ill-fated "pivot" and then "rebalance" to the Asia-Pacific. Where the Trump administration's approach differs is its intense interest in integrating India into the region's architecture and the absence of a broad-based economic initiative, such as the TPP. However, the relative timing of global events, including the near-defeat of the Islamic State and the closure of the tragic Syrian Civil War, might enable the Trump administration to succeed in wresting the U.S. foreign policy "center of gravity" away from the Middle East, and toward the more strategically relevant Indo-Pacific region.

But the most consequential and memorable aspect of the Trump administration's regional policy will be the initiation of a long overdue strategic awakening about China's future role in the region. Gone are the days where U.S. policymakers could convince themselves that the Chinese Communist Party would choose to play the role of "responsible stakeholder" in the international community.

Instead, a bipartisan contingent is hunkering down for an impending strategic competition with a revisionist power dead-set on shaping international rules, norms, and systems in a way that favors continued CCP control and influence. Regrettably for all involved, Xi's current approach – championing the role of the Party, engaging in personal aggrandizement, and dashing hopes of further privatization and liberalization – raise doubts that the CCP will ever be willing to make the reforms required to address U.S. concerns.

The Trump coalition's contemporaneous attack on standards and norms has in some ways accelerated China's own attempt to portray itself as the standard-bearer of the international community. It has certainly exacerbated long-standing concerns about the United States' role in the world. No amount of State Department programmatic announcements, LNG sales, concessionary lending, or diplomatic assurances – even from the vice president himself – will be able to allay the Indo-Pacific elite's deep fears, which are compounded daily by a steady flow of media coverage documenting a White House in freefall.

Domestic political imperatives are creating costs for the United States' standing on the world stage. Despite the sincere need for institutional reform in long-standing international organizations, the United States cannot continue to have it both ways on the international stage. Demanding that China accedes to international norms and laws while simultaneously asserting the United States' own sovereignty and independence from these same institutions is ineffective at best.

In the near future, Southeast Asia will continue to be afflicted by the challenge of balancing a distant, inward-focused America and a resurgent, expansionist China. Both the United States and China will remain too overbearing to ignore, yet neither will independently be able to provide a comprehensive solution. More visible confrontation between the United States and China will be an inevitable reality of 2019. Despite likely future efforts from Washington, Beijing will attempt to create a zero-sum game in the region.

The good news for the United States' future regional presence is its growing emphasis on strengthening quadrilateral and trilateral mechanisms throughout the region. Anchored in a keen awareness at the policy professional level that "America Alone" will never be a winning solution for the Indo-Pacific, emerging cooperative approaches with capable partners such as Australia, Japan, India, Taiwan, and Singapore can provide the cooperative bedrock required to demonstrate the innate advantages of vibrant, free-market societies.

Developing a more durable and sustainable regional order will require emphasizing the role of

middle powers in regional strategy. Congruence in the United States' NSS and Australia and New Zealand's respective Defense White Papers is a powerful indicator that this strategic-level consensus is slowly emerging.

Despite this gradual shift toward an increasingly multipolar system, U.S. military power and security stability will be the only force capable of underwriting a stable Indo-Pacific region. Recommitting to innovating existing U.S.-led systems and norms, which have long enabled fair competition and regional growth while also including emerging voices, will be key to realizing a free and open order that values the inherent dignity and worth of all peoples.

America is no stranger to the concept of “creative destruction.” But sheer destruction without real policy innovation will be a losing strategy for the U.S. role in the Indo-Pacific region. In this dawning era of great power competition, the test that awaits Trump – and his bureaucrats – is the degree to which they are able to channel opportunities for U.S. leadership into smart, discrete, and affirmative policies. The Indo-Pacific is hungry for American leadership. Let's hope the American people are too.

The Author

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