

Report

US Relations with Asia in the Trump Era

*Jonathan Berkshire Miller**

12 December 2016





Japan Reacts to US Election results in November 2016 [AFP]

Abstract

Washington's engagement in the Asia-Pacific has been prioritized in recent years, highlighted by the "rebalance" or "pivot" to Asia by President Barack Obama. The "rebalance" to Asia was premised on three planks: economics, diplomacy and security. While there were a number of achievements for US policy in Asia during Obama's eight-year tenure, there are also some key areas that remain unfinished – such as the ratification and entry-into-force of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. With the surprising election of Donald J. Trump as President-elect earlier this year, there is deep concern and uncertainty in the region on the future trajectory of US policy in region. Trump's protectionist and quasi-isolationist rhetoric during his campaign has US allies and partners in the region having doubts about Washington's credibility.

Introduction

When President Obama took office in 2008, he made it clear that it was overdue for the US to shift its strategic compass away from the Middle East and South Asia – where it was mired in long-running wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – and toward the rich and dynamic markets in the Asia-Pacific region. Part of this calculus was also premised on the desperate need and desire – amongst US allies and partners in the region – for a stronger and sustained presence of Washington in Asia. The geostrategic backdrop to this is the rapidly changing landscape in region with the economic growth of China over the past decade. While the region – especially Beijing – has benefited from economic prosperity and interconnected supply chains, it has also been susceptible to strategic mistrust as China rapidly develops its defense capabilities and aggressively looks to impose a new status quo in region, especially in the maritime domain.

In response to this dynamism in Asia, the Obama administration drove forward with its realignment of resources and political capital to the region. The Whitehouse articulated the strategic vision it attaches before Obama's ninth trip to Asia in 2015: "The United States seeks to preserve and enhance a stable and diversified security order in which countries pursue their national objectives peacefully and in accordance with international law and shared norms and principles, including: the peaceful resolution of disputes; an open economic order that promotes strong, sustainable, balanced and inclusive growth through a level, competitive playing field; and a liberal political order that promotes peace and human dignity, based on human rights and the rule of law."⁽¹⁾

Obama went on to note: "Our priority is to strengthen cooperation among our partners in the region, leveraging their significant and growing capabilities to build a network of like-minded states that sustains and strengthens a rules-based regional order and addresses regional and global challenges."⁽²⁾

Trump-Era Politics and Asia

The trajectory of the rebalance however seems in question following the election of Donald Trump earlier this year. Throughout the presidential election campaign, Trump made a series of incendiary comments on the value of US alliances in the region – especially those with Japan and South Korea. Essentially, Trump publicly called into question the amount of money that the US spends to guarantee the security of allies in Asia and effectively demanded that Seoul and Tokyo "pay to play". These remarks were met with by concern and bewilderment in Japan and South Korea – two allies that already provide a large amount of host-nation support for US forces in their countries. In fact, Japan pays nearly 75% of direct costs involved in the hosting of US forces in its country.

Trump also rattled cages in the region through his seemingly off-the-cuff suggestion that Japan and South Korea might eventually look at pursuing independent nuclear weapons capabilities in order to more adequately defend themselves in the region. The statement, which is contradictory to decades of US policy in the region including its non-proliferation commitment and extended deterrence pledges, raised concerns in Seoul and Tokyo that Washington might look to lift its "nuclear umbrella" guarantee. Trump's rhetoric further exposed deep uncertainties amongst US allies on the value of Washington's word in the region and the credibility of its deterrent commitments.

With regard to East Asia, Trump's election is more problematic for its uncertainty rather than his stated positions. Up until this point, there has been scant intellectual consideration from Trump – or his advisors – on Washington's strategy going forward in the Asia-Pacific. Nearly every respected expert on the region has stayed away from Trump in an almost allergic fashion due to his incendiary comments on the value of US

alliances in the region and his militancy against free trade agreements, namely the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The massive regional trade agreement involves twelve nations and nearly 40% of global GDP – including the key economies such as the US, Japan, Canada, Mexico, Australia and Vietnam.

To be sure, the region is in for a geopolitical rollercoaster over the next year. The TPP – the economic leg of Obama’s “rebalance” policy – is now effectively dead, as Trump has publicly admonished the deal as affront to US jobs growth at home. Trump also pledged, in his first video as President-elect, to withdraw the US from the TPP as a first priority during his new administration. While Hillary Clinton also railed against the TPP, her dissent was more strategic in nature and there remained hope for a compromise or potential ratification via the lame-duck period if she won the election. This hope is now lost and Japan – and other states in the region – now have to move on and reorient their strategies to sustain deep economic engagement with the US despite the TPP’s looming death. The TPP’s almost certain failure will be a crushing blow to Abe and also to other key regional states in Southeast Asia – such as Vietnam and Singapore – who viewed the deal as the litmus test of American commitment to Asia. Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong put it best on the potential of the TPP failing: “It is your credibility as an ally (that is at stake). How can anyone believe in you anymore?”⁽³⁾

Uncertainty Reigns

In early December, Trump conducted a phone call with Taiwan’s president Tsai Ing-wen and discussed common interests – in economic, political and security terms – with Taipei. The phone call also offered Tsai an opportunity to congratulate Trump on his election victory. Normally such a call would be benign, but due to the delicate relations between Taiwan and the US, as well as the rest of the world, the call has raised alarm bells on the clarity and caution by which Trump will conduct his foreign policy in the region. Having direct exchange with the Taiwanese leader broke with decades of US precedent and deference to the “one-China” policy. Adherence to this over the years has been bipartisan and not breached even during the low points or inflection points in Washington’s ties with Beijing.

The approach to Taiwan is an example that further clouds which way Trump might govern US interests in Asia. That said it is important not to overstate any shifts. Trump’s victory is a total game changer – but there still are some checks and balances on him. While it is true that Trump also is emboldened by taking majorities both the House and Senate, he still will have constraints if he tries to fundamentally upend US foreign policy in Asia. Indeed, most Republicans traditionally have very strong ties to Japan and South Korea – Washington’s two key East Asian allies – and key figures in Congress, such as Sen. John McCain, would push back against attempts at US retrenchment in the region.

Second, while Trump's current foreign policy team is very much an unknown – there is a good possibility that a number of capable Republican "Asia hands" might join in the coming months and help provide balance and inform the incoming administration. Trump, the campaigner, had a loud bark at the region – especially towards US allies – but it remains unclear how – or even if – he has the intention and ability to push through some of his campaign talk as president. This uncertainty is causing anxiety in Asia – as evidenced by the gyrating financial markets post-election and the cautious words of congratulations to President-elect Trump.

There are a host of other ramifications – especially on US-China relations. Beijing might believe that it is getting a reprieve from a potentially hawkish Clinton administration. The state-run Global Times appeared to exhibit cautious optimism at the stunning result. Following the election, Global Times editorialized: "Trump looks tough, resolute and unconstrained. But his leadership won't be a full reflection of his personality. Although the Republicans are in control of both houses, it doesn't mean there will be an easy road ahead for Trump. Trump has no deep connection with political circles, and his relationship is strained with the entire elite, even among his own party. It will be particularly difficult for him to employ his governing philosophy within the system."⁽⁴⁾

In reality, China should be careful what it wishes for as Trump has repeatedly slammed Beijing's economic practices. His advisors also appear to support a tougher line on cross-strait ties and – in theory – China's maritime assertiveness in the East and South China Seas. How this plays out in reality is a floating target, especially with the burden-sharing line. There is no question that Obama's rebalance had significant issues, but his support for allies was a strong point. Perhaps the weak link in the chain was his ability to adequately deal with regional security issues, such as North Korea and an incrementally aggressive posture by China. Trump may eventually prove tougher on these areas, but the fact of the matter is that he also has the chance to further erode Washington's reputation in the region due to his insular and protectionist rhetoric.

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* **Jonathan Berkshire Miller** is founding director of the Council on International Policy and is a senior fellow on East Asia for the EastWest Institute. Miller is also an international affairs fellow with the Council on Foreign Relations.

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