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*The Rise of Trump and Its Global Implications*

## **Trump's Asia Policy, Two Months On**

*By Joseph Chinyong Liow*

### **Synopsis**

*How President Trump conceives of and intends to pursue US interests in Asia is of concern to Asians. However, there is some scope for relief after the initial bluster. Trade however is another matter.*

### **Commentary**

TWO MONTHS into the Donald Trump presidency, it is clear that - whatever our personal misgivings about the personality and mannerisms of America's 45th president - we in Asia will have to live and work with President Trump. What matters most for our region though, is not the polarising debates over his immigration ban, his Mexico border wall, or even his tweets about Obamacare. Rather, what concerns us most in Asia is how President Trump conceives of and intends to pursue American interests in Asia.

After two months in office, it remains a challenge to divine elements of an Asia policy in this new administration. While key foreign policy positions in the cabinet have been filled, there are hundreds if not thousands of positions across government departments that remain vacant. Indeed, until these officials are in place, it is impossible to obtain a clear sense of what American foreign policy is under Donald Trump. There are however some early signs, and several observations can be made in that regard.

### **Security and Foreign Policy**

First, we should distinguish between words and deeds. To be sure, the world is

seized with every word, or tweet, from Donald Trump. In keeping with this fascination, every offhanded or ill-informed remark has been well-documented and parsed. On the basis of words alone, the picture looked grim.

During the campaign trail, Trump took a cantankerous line on China, although this is hardly unusual for US presidential campaigns in more recent times (with the possible exception of Barack Obama's). More alarming however, were his comments suggesting reconsideration of America's security commitments to regional allies South Korea and Japan.

These were met with consternation not only in Seoul and Tokyo, but also elsewhere in the region where the U.S. had hitherto invested security equities and deepened defence relationships. And if these were not enough, receiving the phone call from the independence-leaning Taiwanese president, Tsai Ing-wen, followed by capricious comments about possibly reviewing Washington's longstanding One China policy, the foundation for Sino-US relations for more than four decades, was positively distressing. The appointment of China hawks to key positions on trade and commerce added further to the adversarial climate.

Yet, after two months of the Trump presidency, the administration's approach to regional security is actually looking fairly conventional. Relations with Japan were quickly placed back on an even keel, thanks in no small part to Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe, who was quickest off the blocks to engage Trump in order to head off any chance of the United States gravitating away from its traditional commitment to Japan.

Meanwhile, Secretary of Defence James Mattis made a successful visit to Tokyo, where he reinforced American commitment to Japan and to regional security, and to Seoul, where he reassured his hosts that the US would stand by them in the event of North Korean aggression. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson just completed his first Asia tour to Tokyo, Seoul, and China and Vice-President Mike Pence is expected to head to Asia in April.

### **Trump's Policy towards China and Japan**

On relations with China, Trump has pulled back from the brink and declared that his administration would abide by Washington's One China policy. All this indicates people need not make too great a play of President Trump's tweets. This may be common sense - Trump is, after all, now a politician - but it is worth repeating.

Second, set aside his antipathetic tone and we realise that Trump's call for America's allies to assume a greater share of their security is hardly new. In their own ways, presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama had also pushed for greater burden-sharing.

The simple reality is that the US can no longer afford to underwrite on their own the security of all their friends and allies. But even on that score, it is notable that, as senior Japanese diplomats involved in the meetings confided, Secretary Mattis did not raise the subject of burden-sharing at all during his visit to Tokyo. Equally significant, there was no attempt by Trump to question or undermine the messages

Mattis sent on his trip to South Korea and Japan after the fact. If anything, President Trump reinforced Mattis' message during his own meeting with Prime Minister Abe.

Third, we need to recognise that insofar as national security and foreign policy are concerned, President Trump has surrounded himself with very strong and competent personnel, most of whom are in the mould of traditional national security and foreign policy senior officials.

James Mattis, H.R. McMaster and John Kelly are anything but "yes men". And while some are frustrated at Rex Tillerson's performance thus far, few doubt his professional qualities as a corporate leader. Simply put, if Trump intended to have his way or bulldoze foreign policy through, he would have appointed a very different cast of characters.

Of consequence too, amidst speculation swirling around Trump's approach to Moscow, is the fact that this key national security leadership all possess a sobering view on Putin and Russia. This suggests they are not likely to tolerate any capitulation of American interests to Moscow. This is not to say that the waters ahead will not be rough. There are three caveats.

### **Caveats: More Confrontational on China**

First, the State Department, presumably architects of foreign policy, has apparently been kept out of the loop on foreign policy discussions thus far in this administration. Part of the problem lies in the fact that while Rex Tillerson may be a veteran CEO, he is inexperienced as a government policymaker and is still finding his feet. Add to this the fact that many senior appointments have yet to be made, and you have a department in drift.

Second, there is concern that Steve Bannon, Trump's enfant terrible chief strategist and advisor, has been given a place on the National Security Council. There is good reason for this apprehension, for Bannon's appointment was an unprecedented move with disturbing portents, especially if he becomes a competing centre of power in national security policy-making.

Third, on China, this administration has signalled intent to be more competitive, and confrontational if necessary. Underlying this is the present administration's view that while it shares with its predecessor the objective of stable Sino-US relations, they differ on how best to achieve this.

In the minds of many a Trump official, the Obama administration was too soft on China. The objective now is to achieve stability by digging in rather than ceding American interests and influence in the hope that China could be persuaded to change course on any given issue, which is their view on their predecessors' China policy. This will likely be the new normal in Sino-US relations that Beijing and the rest of the region must prepare for and adjust to.

### **Rough Road Ahead: Trade and Economics**

While the story on the security front seems to offer up a refreshing degree of

continuity thus far, the same cannot be said for trade and economics. While President Trump is not an isolationist, he is an unapologetic protectionist and mercantilist. As if to drive home that very point, he made the withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) the first of his wave of executive orders.

In so doing, he sent a clear signal that he is not interested in multilateral trade agreements, which he feels disadvantage the US, and will only pursue bilateral agreements where, presumably, he will have more negotiation leverage.

Much has been made about the death knell that Trump sounded for the TPP. Two points should nevertheless be made in this regard. First, the TPP is not quite dead: not yet, anyway. Technically, the remaining 11 signatories can still salvage the TPP by amending the enactment rules so that US participation is no longer required for the implementation of the deal. Of course, while this may keep the TPP alive, the absence of the US will render it a less compelling trade agreement.

Second, the fate of American commitment to the TPP was already hanging in the balance anyway. Lest we forget, just about every presidential candidate opposed the TPP. This included Hillary Clinton, an architect of the agreement.

### **Serious Concern for Asia**

There remains legitimate concern that the US might indeed still be headed towards a trade war with China. While Trump's national security team can still be defined by continuity, his trade team appears intent on disruption on the back of rather bizarre macroeconomic logic that will see debt balloon even further because of increased spending, increased borrowing, and reduced taxes.

Indeed, the "America First" agenda is staring a massive current account deficit in the face. Yet, the Trump team comprises individuals who have made a career of anti-China protectionism, and they are intent on taking the US down this road. Because of this, relations with China will have to be managed carefully and strategically in terms of how the trade and security agendas can be reconciled in hopefully reassuring ways.

There is no doubt that the personality of the president and his unfamiliarity with the mores that govern the corridors of power in Washington has struck a discordant chord even within his own party. Indeed, the polarised atmosphere in American politics means that some people are cognitively predisposed to seeing and thinking the worst of him.

Yet for us in Asia, such frustrations that bedevil the American electorate should not be allowed to dominate discussion on the possible shape of the Trump administration's foreign policy in our region. On that score, Trump's bluster aside, the early signs do lend to some degree of relief especially on the security issues; but there is serious cause for concern when it comes to the trade and economics side of the ledger.

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