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Trump and Southeast Asia: Portents of Transactional Diplomacy

By Alan Chong

Synopsis

In the wake of three Southeast Asian prime ministers' visits to the Trump White House, a new pattern of diplomatic communication appears to be taking shape – transactional diplomacy.

Commentary

IT IS well known that the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States triggered a wave of privately expressed unease in many Asian capitals. In particular, Trump's inauguration speech spelt out the cornerstone of his foreign policy in simple terms: "We will follow two simple rules: Buy American and Hire American. We will seek friendship and goodwill with the nations of the world – but we do so with the understanding that it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first." In the course of three recent visits by the leaders of Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore to Washington, President Trump has demonstrated consistency in applying these 'rules'.

What one sees emerging out of the Trump White House is nothing less than transactional leadership translated into foreign policy. In the transactional theory of leadership, leaders produce compliance from followers by promising tangible carrots and sticks. In managerial settings, this is remarkably effective since followers expect the leader to specify clear key performance targets against which the former can measure their productivity if they are achieving or falling short of it. But in the world of international politics, transactional foreign policy may be complicated to the point of possible failure.

Good Foreign Policy or Shopping Diplomacy?

International politics involves more than merely trading tangible favours and threatening painful punishments. Navigating good foreign policy also requires empathy, compassion and the ability to float trial balloons for negotiation. Wiser counsels handling the foreign policy toolkit require the bluster of brinkmanship to convey clear diplomatic signals just short of tipping relations into full blown confrontation.

The problem with Trump's foreign policy is that he takes his 'America First' foreign policy too seriously. This has triggered a peculiar foreign policy overture manifested in the visits by Prime Ministers Najib Razak, Prayut Chanocha and Lee Hsien Loong to the White House recently: shopping diplomacy. Clearly, every Southeast Asian country wishes to curry favour with the new occupant of the White House.

During Premier Najib's visit, he made it clear to the media that he was bringing with his delegation a 'strong value proposition' to the US. It was announced that Khazanah Nasional and Malaysia's national pension fund, the Employees Provident Fund, would invest several billion dollars in equity and infrastructure projects in the US. Additionally, Malaysia Airlines was pledged to actively explore options for acquiring more Boeing jetliners and General Electric engines to the tune of US\$10 billion.

Not to be outdone, Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chanocha had an even longer shopping list to please Trump. Checking the military and high technology box, Premier Prayut promised the Thai military would acquire Blackhawk and Lakota helicopters, a Cobra gunship, Harpoon missiles and F-16 fighter jet upgrades, to be topped off with 20 new Boeing jetliners for Thai Airways.

Next, in an obvious nod to Trump's championing of the plight of US workers in the much bandied 'Rust Belt', Siam Cement Group agreed to purchase 155,000 tonnes of coal while Thai petroleum company PTT agreed to invest in shale gas factories in Ohio. To top it off, Prayut and Trump signed an MOU to facilitate an estimated US\$6 billion worth of investments that will purportedly generate more than 8,000 jobs in the US.

Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong followed a similar script by showcasing Singapore Airlines' (SIA) publicly televised signing ceremony with Boeing Corporation for buying 39 B787 and B777-9 aircraft with the attached tagline of generating 70,000 jobs in the continental US. It did not go unnoticed that Trump smiled broadly and jabbed jocularly at the Boeing CEO while uttering very audibly to the television cameras 'that's jobs, American jobs, otherwise don't sign!'

Time Honoured Art of Gift Diplomacy

Trump was not fooling around for the media. He meant to live up to his 'America First' rhetoric. Yet one hopes that Trump and his Cabinet appreciate that shopping transactions do not define a whole bilateral relationship. Each of the prime ministers from Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore had also sought Trump's friendship for multiple ancillary issues ranging from keeping US markets open to their businesses, or getting a lift for domestic politics.

All three countries too wished to keep the US military engaged in the region as a stabilising factor vis-à-vis the emergence of Chinese power. In the Malaysian and Singaporean cases, both countries share with the US a clear joint stake in the defeat of ISIS-inspired terrorism worldwide. The US remains a friendly global superpower as far as official stances go.

In the Southeast Asian strategic mentality, diplomatic relationships are always viewed in the long term. The US, with or without President Trump in the White House, is a naturalised political, economic and military presence in the region. Another time honoured diplomatic virtue practised by Southeast Asian governments is that of making gifts as a material representation of friendship. This was the way of ancient trading empires and cosmo-religious kingdoms.

Gifts need not be a sign of surrender, or of weakness on the part of the giver. It is indirect language for affirming respect, despite political inequalities between great powers and weak states. And it simultaneously signals durability of strategic partnerships painstakingly built up since the Cold War. Today, diplomacy by gifting has found a new frequency in dealing with the Trump White House.

Southeast Asian states will be more than well rehearsed for this chapter in US-Southeast Asia relations. Many pundits are also speculating that China will also follow the same tack by decorating President Trump's upcoming official visit to Beijing with even more dazzling multi-billion dollar energy and high tech deals.

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