

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email your feedback to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Trump's Asia Visit: New Momentum in US-Asia Ties?

By Joseph Chinyong Liow

Synopsis

President Donald Trump's recent visit to East Asia did not accomplish much on security issues nor regional free trade. But it suggests a new momentum in US engagement in the Indo-Pacific region.

Commentary

THAT AMERICAN presidential visits to East Asia always assume special significance hardly needs to be said. After all, the United States has played the role of linchpin of regional peace and prosperity since the end of the Second World War. Even so, seldom has an American presidential trip to the region prompted as much apprehension as Donald Trump's recently-concluded 12-day tour: his first as president, and his longest overseas trip thus far.

Not unlike criticisms of his domestic policies, much has been made of Trump's missteps in foreign policy as well. The president has been taken to task for reneging on the Paris climate accords, cozying up to the Saudi regime, alienating European allies and engaging in petulant name-calling with North Korea's Mr Kim Jong Un. It was quite a surprise, therefore, that Trump decided to combine his visits to Japan, South Korea and Vietnam with three major regional summits - the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the East Asia and ASEAN Summits - which engaged all the major powers around the Indo-Pacific - although he skipped the EAS plenary session at the 11th hour.

What Has Trump's Regional Tour Accomplished?

What did Trump's first foray into the region accomplish? At first glance, perhaps not

much, since he failed to extract concrete commitments from China to intensify pressure on North Korea and was very much an isolated bystander as regional leaders pressed ahead on free trade talks in Danang and Manila. Nevertheless, despite this, the trip - and Trump's conduct - provided hopeful signs that there is some method to the apparent madness, at least as far as East Asia is concerned.

For starters, adjusting his schedule at the behest of his advisers so as to participate in the East Asia Summit - after expressing intent to skip the meeting - suggests he may actually listen to those around him. Further this is the longest that an American president has spent in Asia since George H.W. Bush passed out and vomited on his Japanese host during an exhausting tour of Asia in 1992.

Between January and November 2009, the first year of the Obama presidency, a total of seven visits were made by senior Administration officials. In comparison, 12 visits to the region (excluding India) have been made by Trump administration office holders since January this year.

In keeping with the president's penchant for personalising bilateral relationships, considerable attention was understandably given to rapport with his counterparts. Trump is known to have developed good personal chemistry with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and, intriguingly, also his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping. It is clear that he sets great store by these personal relationships, even if, especially in the case of Xi, their countries remain deeply at odds on a range of issues.

During Trump's "state visit plus" to Beijing, bilateral differences were kept at a prudent remove as he spoke effusively of Xi, calling him "a very special man". Rather than inveigh against China for "raping" the American economy as he did on the campaign trail, Trump instead shifted blame for the more than US\$350 billion (S\$476 billion) trade deficit with China to his predecessors in the White House.

In return, Xi proclaimed that bilateral ties were at "a new historic starting point", a view echoed enthusiastically in the Chinese media. Whether it was diplomatic sangfroid or an expression of genuine rapport, the fact is that both leaders acquitted themselves well despite the very real danger that discussions could have easily been derailed.

A New Asia Policy?

Progress was also made on the crafting of a strategic edifice around which Asia policy will be shaped. Thus far, the administration has yet to complete its national security strategy within 150 days of assuming office, as mandated by Congress. Following an initial announcement by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on the occasion of his own trip to India last month, Trump articulated a presumptive strategy for Asia predicated on the concept of a "free and open Indo-Pacific", which will likely displace Barack Obama's "Pivot to Asia" - in form if not in substance - in Washington's policy narrative.

American military activities have been ramped up, not only on the Korean peninsula but also in the South China Sea, with a stronger naval presence and greater frequency of freedom of navigation operations. Both these issues featured prominently in Trump's discussions throughout his Asia trip, and are likely to stay at the top of the administration's Asia agenda for some time.

Although Trump also offered to mediate the South China Sea disputes, it is not likely to be taken up. Meanwhile, the administration has expressed its intention to press for the lifting of the sequestration cap for defence so as to free up resources to support this enhanced military presence.

In contrast to the evident meeting of minds on a security agenda, Trump struck a discordant note at APEC when he rehearsed his protectionist proclivities on free trade even as the 11 remaining signatories of the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreed to move ahead on a new iteration of the initiative, sans American participation.

This mood even crept into the Danang Declaration, which included references to "importance of non-discriminatory, reciprocal and mutually advantageous trade and investment frameworks," "unfair trade practices" and "unfair trade subsidies".

That the Trump administration will continue to pursue a mercantilist approach to trade with little appetite for economic multilateralism, there should be no doubt. The president has assembled a team of senior trade officials who not only share his protectionist instincts, but are also working ceaselessly to translate them into policy.

Yet, cognizant of the potential game-changing effect of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, Trump and Abe also sought the opportunity of their Tokyo meeting to launch several infrastructure investment initiatives aimed at providing much-needed alternative financing for regional states starved of options and pulled slowly but surely into the Chinese orbit. How all this squares with a "free and open" Indo-Pacific then, will be something that will continue to exercise the region.

Unorthodox, But New Momentum Nonetheless

Another potentially significant strategic takeaway from the trip was the Trump administration's revival of the Quadrilateral Dialogue comprising the US, Japan, India and Australia, which met at the level of senior officials on the sidelines of the ASEAN summits in Manila.

When originally mooted by Japan in 2007, it was understandably viewed with suspicion from Beijing for its obliquely anti-China slant. Should the "Quad" succeed, it might also pose a diplomatic problem for ASEAN, for while some member states may quietly welcome it, the fact that it is being pursued parallel to existing ASEAN-led institutions raises the larger question of ASEAN's centrality in the regional security architecture.

A final issue bears reflection. The outcome of Trump's Asia trip hints at an emerging picture of a US pushback against growing Chinese assertiveness in the region in both the security and economic arenas, although in the latter instance, it is doing so without multilateral mechanisms. Whether or not this effort will succeed is, of course, a different matter. But, taken together with other issues, it does indicate that the Trump administration is aware it is in the American interest to remain active in, and attentive to, the region.

Much has been made of Asia policy drift and disconnect in the first year of the

embattled Trump presidency. To be sure, there is still much to be done, and indeed, American foreign policy-making under Trump might still remain unorthodox, even erratic. But even the harshest critic must admit that his Asia trip could have gone much worse. All things being equal, Trump's extended tour of East Asia has offered up the prospect of a new momentum to US engagement in the region.

Joseph Chinyong Liow is dean and professor of comparative and international politics at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Straits Times.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg