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Trump's Asia Trip: Inconsistent US Foreign Policy?

By Chia-yi Lee and Su-Hyun Lee

Synopsis

US President Donald Trump's recent visit to Asia and his speech at the APEC Summit reaffirmed his "America First" philosophy. At the same time, he seems to seek a wider Asia policy by replacing "Asia-Pacific" with "Indo-Pacific", particularly when it comes to security issues.

Commentary

TRUMP'S FIRST official trip to Asia has ended, leaving behind some questions about the direction of United States foreign policy. While visiting five countries and two international summits held by the Asia-Pacific countries, Trump displayed his diplomatic streak by lavishing praise on Asian political leaders and calling for peaceful resolutions of the North Korea and South China Sea issues.

At the same time, however, Trump strongly reaffirmed that his "America First" approach is still and will be the pillar of US foreign policy as he had promised in his presidential campaign. Does Trump's keynote speech at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit on 10 November in Danang, Vietnam shed any clue to a possible direction of US foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific region? Or are we not much the wiser?

Return to Trade Bilateralism

In a gathering of political, economic and business leaders, Trump praised the 10 Asian countries for their relationships with the United States as well as their miraculous economic growth over the past few decades.

But soon after, Trump's compliments turned into criticisms and attacks on America's trading partners and the multilateral trading system itself. He blamed countries that threatened the foundation of international trade by engaging in unfair practices, such as "product dumping, subsidised goods, currency manipulation and predatory industrial policies".

To Trump, these countries are the ones who widened the US trade deficit enormously and stripped "jobs, factories, and industries" out of the US that sticks to the WTO principles of fairness and reciprocity. He also slammed the WTO and the previous US administrations for not responding to "these chronic trade abuses".

Trump revealed a strong distrust for the existing multilateral trading system by saying: "What we will no longer do is enter into large agreements that tie our hands, surrender sovereignty, and make meaningful enforcement practice impossible." This implies that unlike his predecessors that embodied American values and interests from multilateral trade deals, Trump will rely heavily on bilateralism in reshaping US trade relations with other countries.

TPP Resurrected, *sans* US

Trump's rejection of trade multilateralism in his APEC speech contrasts starkly with Chinese President Xi Jinping's embrace of free trade. Xi said in the summit that economic globalisation should be made "more open, more inclusive, more balanced, more equitable and more beneficial to all".

While Trump's complaint about the "audacious theft of intellectual property" and unfair trade practices with the United States is not invalid, resorting to bilateralism cannot entirely resolve the problem and it may be more costly than multilateral measures.

Trump's advocacy of bilateralism also seems ironic with the resurrection of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) *sans* the US. The 11 countries remaining in the TPP have agreed to continue this trade deal, under a new name Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). While the economic gains will shrink without US participation, CPTPP is still promising as its members account for 14% of the global GDP. It is also open to potential new members, including Indonesia, South Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Thailand that have previously expressed their interest.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe tried hard to make the TPP alive in hope of bringing the US back to the pact in the future. While the US rejoining is not unlikely, Trump's strong distaste for the multilateral trading system makes America miss an opportunity to take a leadership role in the global trade regime, which may be taken over by China.

Engaging India, Countering China?

If Trump seeks to escape from an unfair trading system, how would he move away from the status quo? In his APEC speech, Trump announced his vision for the "free and open Indo-Pacific region" strategy for the first time. What he called the "Indo-

Pacific dream” centers on a series of bilateral trade deals that the US might establish with any of the countries in the region that are willing to participate in fair and reciprocal trade.

While Trump did not offer any details on the economic components of the Indo-Pacific strategy, there are a couple of issues to be considered. First, the Indo-Pacific label broadens the current scope of the Asia-Pacific region by including India. This makes it clear that the Trump administration would like to deepen engagement with India, the second most populous country in the world and the ninth largest trading partner of the US.

Second, Trump’s Indo-Pacific strategy goes beyond economic policy. It is highly pertinent to security issues. By including the Indian Ocean, a key maritime route between Middle East and Asia, Trump’s Asia policy is wider than Obama’s “pivot to Asia” policy, which focused on American rebalancing towards East Asia.

The quadrilateral meeting among senior officials from the US, Japan, Australia, and India on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit in Manila on 12 November shows that the US and its three democratic allies are interested in deepening cooperation to promote regional stability. They discussed and exchanged views on “counterterrorism and maritime security efforts in the Indo-Pacific” and how to curtail North Korea’s “nuclear and missile programs and unlawful acts”.

Third, Trump’s Indo-Pacific strategy is also a policy to counter the rising influence of China in the region. While the statement issued by the US Department of State after the quadrilateral meeting did not touch upon South China Sea, the meeting included discussions to ensure “freedom of navigation and overflight” and “respect for international law” which clearly refer to the South China Sea disputes. China was unhappy about the quadrilateral meeting, saying it is a failure to exclude “relevant parties”.

Two Divergent Asia Policies?

It appears that Trump’s APEC speech is self-contradictory and reflects two divergent Asia policies: economic bilateralism and security multilateralism. Trump reemphasised the “America First” philosophy when it comes to trade, while at the same time seeking multilateral cooperation over security issues, such as rallying global pressure against North Korea.

This dualism showcases the inconsistency and incoherence of US foreign policy under the Trump administration. While broadening US engagement in Asia is a smart move, Trump cannot detach trade from security. Economic and security issues, in fact, are closely intertwined.

The details of Trump’s Indo-Pacific framework are still unclear, but both economic and security ties with the US are important to countries in this region. Washington should pursue a more coherent foreign policy towards Asia; a return to protectionism or trade bilateralism is incompatible with its new Indo-Pacific vision.

Chia-yi Lee and Su-Hyun Lee are Assistant Professors at the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

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