



Except for Trade and Human Rights, Trump Hasn't Upended U.S. Policy in Asia—Yet

Joshua Kurlantzick | Monday, July 17, 2017

In his first six months in office, President Donald Trump has appeared to reorder the foundations of U.S. foreign policy, alienated many traditional U.S. allies, remade the Republican Party and generally dominated American public discourse with his wild pronouncements and seemingly endless scandals. Outside the United States, however, it is a different story. In Asia especially, Trump's impact, though substantial, has been more marginal than in North America or Europe, where Trump has created a massive divide between Washington and the governments of major American partners like Germany and Mexico.

Overall, policymakers in Washington and across Asia have come away from the start of the Trump presidency somewhat reassured that he has not totally upended all aspects of U.S. Asia policy. To be sure, there is still considerable uncertainty about how the administration will handle North Korea, China and other challenges over the next three-and-a-half years. Trump himself has muddied the waters with public statements that seem more like vague threats than clear policy positions. And on trade and human rights—critical issues for many Asian nations—Trump risks seriously altering the existing order.

Yet on a range of issues, Trump's Asia policies don't differ dramatically from his predecessor, Barack Obama. Despite making some initial moves shortly after he won the presidential election that suggested he might be intensely confrontational with China, Trump's policy toward Beijing has been more mixed. He has pursued freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, but without as much fanfare as expected—although they still upset Beijing ([/articles/22547/trump-s-south-china-sea-policy-leaves-u-s-allies-perplexed-and-anxious](#)). He has publicly called on China to take a harder line toward North Korea, but also suggested he would step back and let China lead in dealing with Pyongyang.



President Donald Trump meets with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, right, and South Korean President Moon Jae-in before the Northeast Asia Security Dinner at the U.S. Consulate General in Hamburg, Germany, July 6, 2017 (AP photo by Evan Vucci).

Trump's turnaround on China was embodied in his warm meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in April. "I really feel that he is doing everything in his power to help us with a big situation," Trump said glowingly of Xi regarding North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

But the Trump administration clearly angered Beijing with a trio of recent measures: including China on the list of countries in the lowest tier of the State Department's Trafficking in Persons report; shifting gears on North Korea by publicly calling on China to take a tougher line and imposing sanctions on one Chinese bank; and selling a new arms package to Taiwan. Despite representing reversals for Trump, though, these actions still fall mostly within the bounds of his predecessors.

China's displeasure with the human trafficking report will likely ease, as it views such reports as less important than issues like the South China Sea and bilateral trade relations. The Taiwan deal does not really stray from previous U.S. policy on arms sales to Taiwan; the Obama administration approved an arms sale to Taiwan in December 2015. And Trump tempered his vague call on Twitter for China to "put a heavy move" on Pyongyang by again praising Xi, this time at the G-20 summit.

Beyond China and North Korea, Trump the presidential candidate has met the realities of being president in South Korea, too. Last year, Trump insisted that Seoul should pay more for its own defense. But as the crisis with North Korea has escalated, his administration has taken a different tack. In April, it agreed to pay for the advanced U.S. missile defense system being installed across South Korea, known as the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD. At a meeting in late June, Trump and South Korea's newly elected liberal president, Moon Jae-in, apparently agreed to take a relatively unified approach to North Korea, with both claiming they wanted to apply pressure on Pyongyang.

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The Trump White House has offered other measures of unexpected continuity to Asian partners. Last month at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, the premier Asian regional security forum, Secretary of Defense James Mattis outlined a South China Sea policy that was remarkably similar to that of his predecessor, Ashton Carter. Mattis proposed increasing arms sales and training for U.S. partners,

touted the need for all countries to follow international norms in the South China Sea, and pushed nascent regional security institutions to cooperate more effectively.

Mattis' statements followed earlier reassurances from Vice President Mike Pence, who visited the region in April and announced that Trump would attend the East Asia Summit, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit and the U.S.-ASEAN summit in November. These are important signs of commitment in a region that values having the American president attend its major gatherings—and they represent a degree of continuity with the Obama administration's rebalancing strategy. The Obama administration made attendance at the summits part of its Asia strategy, even though these meetings are often talk shops with few concrete deliverables. It seems that some in the Trump administration at least understand that, in Asia, it is important to show up.

But on other issues in the region—especially human rights and trade—Trump's policies are more confused, and potentially a bigger shift from Obama. Rhetoric about promoting human rights in Asia has been abandoned. Obama feuded with Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, criticizing Duterte's drug war and the extrajudicial killings that have accompanied it. Trump, by contrast, chatted warmly with Duterte over the phone and even invited him to the White House (</articles/22281/trump-s-bromance-with-duterte-is-a-risky-foundation-for-u-s-philippine-ties>), apparently thinking that because he and Duterte get along, any differences between Washington and Manila can be smoothed over. The same goes for Thailand, which Obama took a relatively tough line toward after the May 2014 coup. Trump recently invited junta leader Prayuth Chan-ocha to the White House (</articles/22514/thailand-s-junta-is-seeking-a-return-to-normalcy-with-the-united-states>).

Trump's shifts on trade are even more pronounced. After his inauguration, he immediately abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which Obama had positioned as the centerpiece of the U.S. rebalance to Asia. Trump has ordered investigations into numerous countries running trade surpluses with the U.S., many of them in Asia. He may impose tough new restrictions on steel and aluminum imports, which could hit China and Vietnam particularly hard and lead to punitive countermeasures, if not trade wars.

The response to both these shifts has been revealing. Trump's bucking of the consensus on human rights has given Congress an opportunity to step in to advocate for reform in Southeast Asia. In the Senate, in particular, pressure to uphold human rights in places like Myanmar and Cambodia will persist, no matter the Trump White House's position.

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like a planned high-speed rail line in Indonesia, have raised red flags. With the U.S. out of the TPP, Beijing is touting its own regional trade deal, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, or RCEP.

The remaining countries in the TPP recently met in Japan (<http://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/TPP-to-stay-largely-as-is-minus-US-members-agree>) and indicated that they still intend to complete the deal. They will lay out the plan for its future in November. Japan and the European Union are also rapidly pushing ahead on a free trade deal that would create one of the largest free trade areas in the world.

Asian countries may be satisfied that Trump has not yet dismantled the foundations of U.S. policy in the Pacific. But as he does tear apart trade norms and rules, they are preparing to push back hard—and cut their own deals.

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