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How Trump is losing Asia

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The United States has dispatched two aircraft carrier strike groups to the South China Sea to contest China’s creeping annexation of the maritime region. It is one of the bluntest expressions of U.S. hard power in years.

Yet the very fact that such a dramatic step was even necessary indicates how the power balance is shifting in China’s favor. China’s long-term and methodical attempt to dominate shoals and islands in the region is a reflection of both U.S. domestic distractions and its loss of prestige throughout Asia.

While the United States is half a world distant from Asia, China is Asia’s geographical, demographic, economic and military organizing principle. Asians simply cannot escape the Chinese. For them to align with the United States in the face of China’s immovable presence has always required faith in the word and commitment of the United States to this vast region. But for the first time since World War II, a U.S. president has shaken that faith to its core.

Donald Trump began his presidency by abrogating the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the years-in-the-making trade, investment and political cornerstone of a U.S.-led liberal order in Asia. Trump tore up this historic framework in the face of China’s own grand strategy for Eurasia: the Belt and Road Initiative. While China was promoting a vision, however imperfect and coercive, the United States deliberately has had nothing to offer.

It gets worse.

The basis of Asian security since World War II has been the United States-Japan treaty alliance. By anchoring the United States to Asia’s second-strongest nation, Washington elegantly contained Beijing, allowing states from Japan south to Australia to get rich off China’s economic growth, while the United States provided for their security. No nation had to choose between the United States and China. And no nation had to fear Japanese militarism ever again.

Yet, since before he was inaugurated, Trump has questioned the very foundation of the treaty alliance: providing for Japan’s defense. This has terrified the Japanese, and the region, to a degree unprecedented in the post-World War II era. The United States’ standing in Japan and the region has been demonstrably weakened.

Meanwhile, Japan has been mired in a vicious trade war with South Korea for a year now — a conflict that has its origins in contentious World War II history. Another administration might have dispatched an assistant secretary of state to Tokyo and Seoul to conduct vigorous shuttle diplomacy in order to quickly extinguish the issue and repair the alliance. But the Trump administration has done relatively little.

There is now a feeling of exposure and loneliness among the United States' Asian allies. For the first time since President Richard M. Nixon went to China in 1972, the United States' bilateral relationship with China is both hostile and unpredictable, even as Washington has provided its friends in the region with less reassurance than at any time since the Korean War 70 years ago.

China's pulverizing repression of the Turkic Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang province, followed by its security crackdown in Hong Kong and its continued aggression in the South China Sea, suggests that Taiwan may be next in Beijing's sights — as a nation bordering the South China Sea and the only part of historic China yet to be forcibly brought to heel. Taiwan, like West Berlin during the Cold War, is an outpost of freedom in stark opposition to the authoritarian mainland. Its symbolism should not be underestimated. Were Taiwan's independence ever compromised, it would signal the end of the United States' preeminent influence not only in Asia but far beyond.

Taiwan is not about to be invaded by China. Yet it is unclear how much it can rely on the United States in a crisis. Alliances depend on deterrence. Deterrence, in turn, rests on an unshakable moral commitment to a common strategy. Yet we are witnessing unprecedented Chinese aggression coupled with unprecedented doubts about U.S. intentions. Rather than lead an alliance, Trump has emerged as merely a transactor for whom nothing is sacred. It will take more than two aircraft carriers to repair this impression and the damage it has caused.

What is now tethering the United States' Asian allies to Washington is less confidence in the United States than outright fear of China. But if this situation goes on, what may start to emerge is a creeping Finlandization, in which the United States' erstwhile Asian allies are careful not to interfere with Beijing's objectives, while they continue to pay lip service to Washington. Like the case with Soviet influence over Finland during the Cold War, their foreign policies will no longer be wholly independent.

Consider Vietnam, which has both a land border with China and a bloody history with it. Vietnam's vulnerable geography makes it prone to greater Chinese influence were Trump to become even more unreliable. The case is similar with the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore. We can never take these countries for granted.

It is all about geography: China's very size and proximity make a sturdy and unquestioning U.S. regional order essential for the power balance in Asia.