

Xi, Trump, Asian disorder

US President Donald Trump's extended swing through Asia underlines the deep difficulties in sustaining the present order in Asia. At the root of the Asian instability is the changing dynamic between the traditional hegemon, America, and its challenger, China. That Washington and Beijing need each other is not in doubt. What is in play, though, is the terms of a new economic and political settlement between the two. For all the sweet talk by Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping this week, there is no clarity on what a potential accommodation might look like. On its part, Delhi should stay the course on managing its problems with China and deepening ties with the US and key Asian actors, Japan, Korea, the ASEAN, and further afield, with Australia.

On his extended Asian tour, Trump is participating in two major regional summits — the forum for Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation in Vietnam and the East Asia Summit in the Philippines. In the current tour, Trump has also had bilateral visits to Japan and South Korea. Trump's visit to Beijing was undoubtedly the most important element of this tour. Trump's exchanges with Xi are also emblematic of the new complexities driving Asian politics. These include America's demands for "fair" rather than "free trade" with Asia and the problem of accommodating China's rise without abandoning its long-standing allies and friends in the region.

Before Trump set out, his senior aides laid out the three broad objectives that the president intended to pursue. One was to get greater reciprocity in the commercial engagement with Asia. The second was to strengthen US alliances and partnerships in the region. A third was to get a better fix on North Korea's nuclear weapons programme. Trump has begun to discover how difficult it is to advance on the three fronts.

On their part, the Asian leaders were happy to pander to the now familiar vanities of the American President. The Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, and the South Korean President, Moon Jae-in, played up the theme of "making America great again". China's Xi rolled out a thicker than usual red carpet in what was billed as a "state visit plus" welcome to Trump. The US president, in turn, joined Xi in raising the "flattery quotient" in the US-China engagement. While saying nice things is always part of public diplomacy, Xi and Trump have taken it to new levels. However, while flattery certainly generates the right mood music, it is not enough to resolve structural problems.

Consider, for example, the trade friction between the US and China. Beijing resorted to the familiar trick of wrapping a package of commercial deals with American companies amounting to \$250 billion. While the big number grabs the headlines, sceptics point to the fact that many of these "deals" are MoUs rather than commercial contracts. Many of them will take a long time, if at all, to fructify. And this does nothing to resolve Trump's political problem with America's massive trade deficit. Trump's decision to drop his hostile rhetoric against China in Beijing and his move to blame past American presidents for the burgeoning deficit with the US, has got many to jump to the conclusion that trade ties may be on the mend between America and China.

Nothing of the sort. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson suggested that Trump's remarks blaming past presidents was "tongue in cheek". "In the grand scheme of a \$300- to \$500-billion trade deficit, the things that have been achieved thus far are pretty small," Tillerson said. He insisted that "there's lot more work to do" in redressing the trade imbalance with China. On his part, Trump is happy to pocket the deals that Xi has to offer, but continued to press him on the problems with China on market access, demands for technology transfer, cyber security, and the larceny of intellectual property. While Trump has softened his words on the trade deficit, he can't be seen as walking back on the promise to his core domestic supporters that he will deal firmly with the Chinese threat to American jobs.

On the question of political relations, Trump and Xi had nice things to say about the need for greater cooperation and engagement. But there was no apparent breakthrough on the question of North Korea that was at the top of Trump's agenda. Trump publicly reminded Xi about the need to stop arming, financing and trading with North Korea — most of which takes place from Beijing. At the end of his talks, Trump tweeted that he looks forward to “an even STRONGER relationship” with China in the coming years. (The capital letters are Trump's.)

Xi was even more effusive in emphasising the partnership with America. He declared that “the Pacific Ocean is big enough to accommodate both China and the United States”. He insisted that Beijing and Washington need to “jointly” promote peace and stability in Asia. This is one of Xi's core demands on Trump — to share the leadership of Asia on Beijing's terms. Trump, or any other US president, will have a hard time ceding America's long-standing primacy in Asia. Before he landed in Beijing, Trump warned the region not to test American resolve and promised to sell lots of advanced arms to its Asian allies.

As Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) heads to the Philippines to join the East Asia Summit, three things stand out: America and China will continue to jockey for political primacy in Asia; the tension between Washington's traditional commitment to economic globalisation and Trump's “America First” policies is unlikely to be resolved any time soon; and most countries in the region are beginning to diversify their security partnerships. The rise of China and the turbulence in American domestic politics have created great disorder under the heavens. But they have also opened up much room for creative Indian diplomacy in Asia.

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