

An itinerary in search of a strategy: on Trump's East Asia tour

Parsing Donald Trump's statements and Twitter posts through his 12-day, five-nation tour of Asia — the longest for a U.S. President in 25 years — to decipher a new American strategy towards the region can be taxing unless the idea is to cherry-pick and substantiate pre-existing notions.

'Terrific' China

One can read resistance to China's expansive ambitions in euphemisms such as 'freedom of navigation' and condemnation of 'predatory' economic practices, used along with America's commitment to democracy, human rights, and free trade. When you read them alongside the U.S.-Philippines commitment to "share best practices" to prevent illegal drug use, which is a "problem afflicting both countries", and Mr. Trump's desire to be friends with the "short and fat" ruler of North Korea, the emerging picture could appear confusing, if not outlandish.

In his interactions with reporters as he travelled back, Mr. Trump gave an overview of the "terrific" tour and the new friendships that he has developed, how he enjoyed the unprecedented reception in Beijing, conversations with the ["terrific" President Xi Jinping](#) and the special honour he received at the Forbidden City. What topped the list of achievements for him were the business deals — he put the figure at \$300 billion and hoped that it would exceed \$1 trillion in the coming months, though the actual numbers remain unclear. He said security partnerships with these Asian partners have also been enhanced.

Ahead of his travel, the White House had said his speech at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) CEO summit in Vietnam would elucidate his vision for the Indo-Pacific region, a term that the Trump administration has started using in a clear acknowledgment of India's prominence. Administration officials had been emphatic that his speech would demonstrate the U.S.'s continuing commitment to the region. His speech did not live up to the build-up, and may have actually added to the nervousness among traditional U.S. partners. Recalling the U.S.'s historical ties to the region, Mr. Trump said it is time the terms of engagement between these countries and the U.S. changed. In his reckoning, the U.S. has been taken advantage of by all countries and global institutions, particularly the World Trade Organisation (WTO). But he would not blame other countries or their leaders for this situation; it was all the fault of the U.S. administrations that preceded him.

"Those days are over," he declared. He was there "to offer a renewed partnership with America," the basis of which would be "bilateral trade agreements with any Indo-Pacific nation that wants to be our partner and that will abide by the principles of fair and reciprocal trade... I call it the Indo-Pacific dream."

What does he mean?

The U.S. has trade deficits with all the five countries that Mr. Trump visited and he told four of them that the U.S. would not tolerate this — putting China, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam in the same basket on this count. In the case of the Philippines, which has a small surplus with the U.S., the relationship is less about trade, he said, but more for "military purposes... it's called the most prime piece of real estate from a military standpoint."

What are the implications of Mr. Trump's statement that "those days are over?" First, America offers these countries technology, capital and access to its market. Second, America offers a

security guarantee and a predictable world order based on multilateral trade and security pacts. China has also been a beneficiary of this system, and the rise of China has added additional buoyancy for neighbouring countries. The friction between China and its neighbours heightened as Beijing's ambitions grew after the 2008 financial crisis. Vietnam, Philippines, Japan, and South Korea started to gravitate more towards the U.S., which was itself alarmed by the assertiveness of China. The Obama administration announced the Pivot to Asia strategy in response. Kurt Campbell, an Obama official who is credited with drafting the policy, described it as "a multifaceted approach that will involve a strong security component, working with allies, working constructively with China, a commercial dynamic that is about not shipping U.S. [jobs], but U.S. exports and services to Asia; a commitment to building institutions to multilateralism; bringing other partners into Asia, like Europe, working closely with Europe."

Like Mr. Trump, Barack Obama also wanted to open the Asian markets for American companies, but there was a broader blue print at play. Mr. Trump has knocked it down to a one-point agenda: buy our goods and services. His statement that countries in the "region [should] be strong, independent, and prosperous, in control of their own destinies, and satellites to no one," is a call for ending multilateralism. More than a newfound respect for the autonomy of these countries, it reflects American disinterest.

Mr. Trump also told his Asian hosts that they were free to pursue their interests solo, as he would pursue his. He hinted that America is washing its hands of any leadership role, making it clear that it could cut a deal with China on its own, regardless of its potential impact on other countries. China is the biggest trading partner of South Korea, Japan and Vietnam. Speaking after Mr. Trump at APEC, Mr. Xi presented a case for multilateralism and open trade. China is also willing to offer technology, capital and market access, on its terms under the Belt and Road Initiative.

Security concerns

Now, what is America offering for the security of these Asian partners? Mr. Trump asked them all to join hands with the U.S. in stopping North Korea's nuclear adventurism. But that apart, he told Japan, Vietnam and South Korea to buy "our weapons".

"We make the best," he told them and cited how Saudi Arabia was using them effectively. In one Twitter post during the tour, he also gave a carte blanche to the Saudi Arabian regime to chart regional politics.

Mr. Trump's "Indo-Pacific dream" may not appear to be much of a dream for most countries in the region. In 2006, Mr. Trump had said he was waiting for a housing market crash, and boasted about his ability to profit from a falling market. Conflicts in Asia, in the west and the east, could appear to be good opportunities for profit from the realtor's perspective.

We may be looking for a strategy that does not exist, perhaps. American economist Lawrence Summers, now a Harvard professor, and a key player in the American-led globalisation over the last three decades, described the challenge before America: "... (we) confuse a strategy with a wish list. Our strategy is that it is very important that they open their markets, that it is very important that they cooperate with us on this security issue... Well, that is a good wish list... And I do not think we as yet have a strategy for thinking about the management of the global economic system that is appropriately respectful of the scale and achievements of the Chinese economy."

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