

Donald Trump's Tour of Asia 2017: Evaluating the U.S. Asia Strategy

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President Trump's tour of Asia drew a great deal of attention as the world expected it to indicate the type of Asian strategy the Trump Administration will pursue. President Trump did not lay out a clear Asian strategy during his campaign as domestic agendas, particularly economic issues, dominated the last U.S. presidential election. The tour, which consisted of three formal state visits and three key regional summits, wrapped up on November 15. On the final day of the trip, President Trump articulated the three core goals of the tour: first, to unite the world in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue; second, to create a free and open Indo-Pacific; and third, to establish fair and reciprocal trade rules.

President Trump stated that his goal is to unite the world against the North Korean threat, not to find the "solution to the issue." He argued that the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear program has been steadily growing and now requires urgent attention. The term "free and open Indo-Pacific" was used by key cabinet members, including Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, even before the tour. President Trump stressed that America's greater goal is to strengthen its alliances and economic partnerships in a free and open Indo-Pacific comprised of thriving, independent nations that are respectful of other countries and their own citizens and safe from foreign domination and economic servitude. He also insisted on the realization of fair and reciprocal trade for the United States, which has an almost \$800-billion annual trade deficit with other nations. All countries that seek to do business with the

United States must follow the rules. President Trump delivered a clear message that the United States seeks to protect the values and security of the United States through fair competition in Asia.

Although it is still abstract, the major focus continues to be the United States' comprehensive Asian strategy. The term "free and open Indo-Pacific" can be regarded as an alternative to the Obama administration's "Rebalance to Asia" policy. With the region emerging as a key focal point for U.S. security and economic strategy under the greater goal of retrenchment, the Obama administration placed relatively strong emphasis on Asia and invested a greater amount of policy resources there. President Trump is presenting a concept of U.S. interest promotion that redefines the security and economic architecture of the Indo-Pacific region while emphasizing the security and economic situation in Europe and the Middle East.

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The term “Indo-Pacific” is a concept originally proposed in 2007 by Gurpreet Khurana, a former Indian naval captain and current executive director of the Maritime Foundation in New Delhi, India. Following several months of strategic dialogue between India and Japan, Prime Minister Abe used this concept in his address to the Parliament of India in 2007. Prime Minister Abe emphasized the Indian and the Pacific Oceans as the oceans of freedom and prosperity during his visit to India. The United States government began to use the term around 2010. Hillary Clinton, who was Secretary of State at the time, emphasized cooperation with the Indian Navy in the Pacific Ocean and with the Indo-Pacific region for global trade and commerce. Australia’s defense white paper of 2013 used the term “Indo-Pacific” to indicate its emphasis on the Indo-Pacific region for economic and military strategy. It is only natural that China understood this series of actions as part of a China containment policy. Accordingly, China has exhibited a vigilant attitude with regards to the formation of a containment network across the Indian and the Pacific Oceans.¹

China, as a rising global power, is now pursuing “Two Ocean” strategy across the Indian and the Pacific Oceans along with the “One Belt One Road” initiative. India, which has the third largest economy in Asia and the seventh largest economy in the world, has also turned its attention to Asia. It has shifted from the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy and has strengthened its economic and security relations with Asia. Japan is also strengthening its ties with Southeast Asian states while pursuing a security and economic strategy that draws it closer to India and Australia. In this context, the notion of the free and open Indo-Pacific region promoted by top U.S. officials warrants serious attention.

Secretary of State Tillerson mentioned the Indo-

Pacific region during his visit to India, expressing his view that the Indian and the Pacific Oceans are inseparable in terms of security and economy. While the key element of the concept of the Indo-Pacific region lies in the connection of both oceans, it also involves the perception that India must inevitably become a part of the Asian security and economic architecture. Yet, there is a long road ahead if India is to be incorporated into the Asian security arrangement, not least because the country is neither a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) nor the Nuclear non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It is also far from certain whether and how India, a conventionally nonconformist country in the international arena, would toe the line as part of a U.S.-led Asia strategy. These doubts are not unwarranted given that India, confident in its strength, wants to follow its own path in the competition between the U.S. and China.

It is yet to be understood what the content of Trump’s “free and open Indo-Pacific region” will be, or what strategy he will pursue specifically. In the joint statement given by Japan and the U.S. following the summit talks on November 6, Japanese Prime Minister Abe referenced the Indo-Pacific region, welcoming countries that want to join the initiative. The general impression undoubtedly is that the U.S. is playing a supporting role in Japan’s regional strategy. Still, it is difficult to imagine that Japan’s top priority in its regional initiative is to encircle China and keep the country in check. While President Trump said during the press conference that China was an excellent friend, it appears that Japan will be keeping a close eye on U.S.-China relations, and more specifically the Trump-Xi partnership. At the moment, President Trump is stressing cooperation with China on bilateral economic relations and the North Korean nuclear issue. Trump would not want an Indo-Pacific regional initiative to arouse anti-Chinese sentiment under these circumstances. Japan is also hinting at building a better relationship with President Xi, who is more actively

¹ Gurpreet S. Khurana, “Trump’s new Cold War alliance in Asia is dangerous,” *The Washington Post*, November 14, 2017.



seeking “a new type of international relations” as well as regional partnerships in the wake of the Chinese Communist Party’s 19th Party Congress.

As for now, President Trump’s vision of an Indo-Pacific region is largely economic. This was clearly spelled out in his remarks at the CEO summit in Danang, Vietnam on November 10, which was held on the sidelines of the APEC summit meetings. He said that a free and open Indo-Pacific region is where independent, sovereign states share diverse cultures and visions while dreaming about development in peace, freedom and prosperity. In a way, this “Indo-Pacific Dream” may become a U.S. alternative to the China Dream. Emphasizing at length America’s historical bond with Asia, President Trump highlighted the U.S. relationship with India and Southeast Asia as well as Northeast Asia. He was generous in his praise while congratulating India on the 70th anniversary of its independence, noting its status as the biggest democracy in the world with astonishing economic growth. Of particular focus here are economic issues. That is, at the core of prosperity and security for the U.S. and Indo-Pacific nations is the principle of equity and reciprocity. Denouncing the deficiencies of the World Trade Organization (WTO), President Trump pointed to the damage they did to U.S. interests. He stated that the U.S. would put its interests first as all other countries do. In the end, the U.S. vision of the Indo-Pacific reflects first and foremost the reasoning that the U.S. will share its prosperity only with the countries that agree to uphold rules that promote U.S. interests.

Upon observing the abovementioned points, one can summarize Trump’s notion of a “free and open Indo-Pacific region” into four points. First, his emphasis on the phrase “free and open” cannot be seen as spontaneous and ephemeral; rather, it is likely to be maintained. This regional notion is not only shared among the United States, Japan, and India. European countries must also consider it important to link the Indian and Pacific Oceans as the trade volume

between Europe and China expands and China pursues its “Two Ocean” strategy and “One Belt One Road” initiative. Furthermore, more countries are now recognizing the importance of maritime security issues, freedom of the seas, and maritime transport.

Second, due to the particular nature of the Trump administration, it is difficult to interpret the notion of a “free and open Indo-Pacific region” as a concept that has been intricately woven in terms of regional strategy. President Trump is currently facing domestic political challenges, such as allegations of collusion in the Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and needs to gain ground at home by bringing about economic recovery and job creation. Because the situation is too urgent for Trump to be able to ensure a successful presidency through the pursuit of a global and regional security strategy, he should at least seek short-term economic gains. Moreover, Trump’s personality is too different from those of previous presidents for him to give serious thought to the long-term linkage between geopolitics and geoeconomics and the very foundations of U.S. hegemony. The notion of an “Indo-Pacific region” has been suggested as the key concept behind a revival of the U.S. economy. It is more likely to be connected to bilateral economic negotiations with countries that are in agreement with President Trump on his trade principles. Under the current system in which multilateral economic architectures such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) are nearly collapsing, it remains to be seen how the United States will shape its policy on the Asian regional economy without multilateral cooperation.

Third, the U.S. has postponed, or rather, avoided, situating China in its discussion of devising a comprehensive future strategy. While President Trump emphasized the North Korean nuclear problem and U.S.-China economic relations during the press conference after his visit to China, he failed to mention anything about the important regional security issues surrounding the South China Sea and East China Sea.



It is unclear whether an awareness of the possibility of strategic competition and clash between the United States and China, as illustrated in Thucydides' trap, has been factored in at all. Because Trump is primarily concerned with ensuring the promotion of U.S. interests among other tasks facing the country, the key issue at hand is to promote U.S.-China trade and investment agreements, currently valued at \$250 billion, and free trade with China. As of right now, it is difficult to foresee how the Trump administration is drawing a strategic blueprint regarding the future direction of the U.S.-China relations.

Fourth, it is difficult to gauge the importance of alliance in the context of the U.S.'s Indo-Pacific regional strategy. The Obama administration's Rebalancing strategy was based on the key principles of alliance, strategic partnership with major countries such as China, the market economy, and democracy. The concept of a "free and open Indo-Pacific region" is generally not specific regarding the strategic resources on which the concept is based, and it is even less clear on the role of alliance. President Trump mentioned that countries that abide by the rules suggested by the U.S. will remain economic partners while those that do not will not. It is true that the old-fashioned sense of alliance in terms of collectively responding to common traditional security threats has faded as issues such as intellectual property protection, the prevention of unfair government subsidies, the eradication of cybercrime, and the amelioration of unfair competition are of utmost importance. While it should be noted that President Trump did acknowledge past alliances and emphasize their importance during his visits to South Korea and Japan, he did not outline a vision of a future alliance or the crucial role it will play in the U.S. relations with Asia. President Trump does not seem to have a clear conception of the essence of security threats. For example, he mentioned that it is not right to closely link economic security with national security, and then clearly stated that "economic security IS national security."

South Korea's main concern is how Trump's extensive tour of Asia will influence the future direction of the North Korean nuclear issue. Trump's five-nation Asia tour leaves the following points to consider regarding the North Korean nuclear problem. First, it is apparent that President Trump views the North Korean nuclear problem as urgent and serious as it now has the potential to directly affect the U.S. mainland. However, he does not fully recognize that North Korea's nuclear development is the geopolitical issue surrounding the Korean Peninsula and international politics in East Asia, which in turn are closely related to the future status of Korean Peninsula and North Korea's strategic position in the region. The North Korean nuclear problem is also not connected to the Indo-Pacific regional strategy. Trump seems to be focusing on isolating North Korea, maximizing pressure and sanctions on the North, and reiterating the end goal of denuclearization. In so doing, it has become apparent that Trump is more concerned about protecting the U.S. mainland from a North Korean nuclear missile attack rather than taking into account historical and strategic calculations regarding the division of the Korean Peninsula or the North Korean nuclear problem.

Second, the Trump administration has proposed a North Korea policy of maximum pressure and engagement. While he emphasized maximum pressure during his visits to Asia, he did not provide a concrete strategic blueprint for engagement with the North. Engagement is a concept that embraces various policy considerations including the future strategic position of North Korea, conditions for long-term peace with North Korea, and diplomacy toward denuclearization. Even though Trump's tour of Asia was a great opportunity for him to signal to Asian countries how the U.S. will develop its long-term strategic relationship with North Korea, he unfortunately failed to do so.

However, it does seem that the conditions for dialogue with North Korea have somewhat improved.



Although Trump did state that all options were on the table, he did not say it often. Furthermore, sanctions and pressure were emphasized as the main policy options while the military option was barely mentioned. As the date of departure for President Trump's tour of Asia neared, key cabinet members including the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense continuously highlighted the importance of dialogue with North Korea. This may also imply that the U.S. has more thoroughly and carefully evaluated the possible damages that the military option would inflict upon South Korea and Japan.

Fourth, Trump criticized the dictatorship and mentioned the current human rights situation in North Korea during his speech to the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea. Introducing the concept of the "thin line of civilization," Trump excluded the North from its sphere. This phrase may cause difficulties once official dialogue with North Korea begins in earnest. While sanctions for human rights violations are possible, future negotiation with North Korea based on cool-headed calculation of strategic interests is necessary. On the other hand, it is a positive sign that Trump's criticism against North Korea's political regime did not lead to a discussion of the possibility of using the military option.

Fifth, it remains to be seen how the U.S.-China dialogues set up to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue will translate into actual policy. Controversy over the 'freeze-for-freeze' initiative between the U.S. and China is already brewing, and China recently dispatched Special Envoy Song Tao to Pyongyang. Despite President Trump's visit to Beijing, the U.S. and China still have different positions on the North Korean nuclear problem. The gap between these positions is a challenge that will need a longer period of time to be resolved.

It is naïve to believe that Trump's recent tour of Asia signals the approach of a decisive moment for the resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem. The U.S. approach to the issue does not display a full

understanding or consideration of South Korea's concerns or China's strategic position. President Trump himself emphasized coalition and cooperation among relevant stakeholders rather than the resolution of the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea should closely monitor how the U.S.'s Asian regional strategy pans out and analyze its effects on South Korean national interests. On the other hand, the North Korean nuclear program should be considered part of the strategic problem surrounding the Korean Peninsula and North Korea in general. Furthermore, South Korea should be prepared to respond to future developments under a complex policy toward North Korea consisting of pressure, sanction, deterrence, engagement and North Korea's normalization. ■

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