



Showing Up Is Not Enough: Trump's First 100 Days in the Asia-Pacific

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In its first 100 days in office, the Trump administration has surprised many by continuing the Obama administration's intense pace of high-level diplomatic engagement with partners across the Asia-Pacific region. But despite that attention—or perhaps in part because of it—the Trump administration has also unnerved allies and partners in the region with a series of damaging policy moves and undiplomatic public comments. After the first few months of Trump's presidency, this issue brief provides some thoughts on how the administration is doing so far in Asia, with a grading system as follows:

- **Pass:** A job well done.
- **Satisfactory:** Acceptable, but real concerns exist.
- **Fail:** Unacceptable. They must stop what they're doing.

Overall, the administration receives a Satisfactory/Fail grade: It has done a good job of dedicating significant time to the region early on, but the policies behind that engagement are severely lacking and, in some cases, dangerous. Below, the authors provide brief assessments of the following areas: personal engagement; regional security; economic engagement; alliances; Southeast Asia; China; India; and climate.

Personal engagement: Pass

The Trump administration deserves credit for a high-level and intense pace of engagement with partners in the Asia-Pacific region in the first 100 days. In this region, showing up and meeting face to face with counterparts is essential to getting things done, and so far the Trump administration has taken the time to prioritize the Asia-Pacific. Trump hosted Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping for summits at Mar-a-Lago; Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and Secretary of Defense James Mattis have all made trips to the region; and Secretary Tillerson will be hosting the 10 foreign ministers of the member countries of the

Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, in early May in Washington. While the substance of some of these engagements has raised serious concerns about Trump's Asia strategy (see below), the impulse to engage early and often is essential to a successful regional strategy over the long run. Without articulating a vision for U.S. policy in the Asia-Pacific, however, showing up will not allay intense concerns in the region about this administration's policies.

Regional security: Fail

The Trump administration has talked a big game about getting tough on the two main security challenges facing the United States in Asia—North Korea and the South China Sea—but has nothing to show for its bluster after 100 days. In recent weeks, President Trump and his team have escalated the rhetoric about North Korea—even implicitly threatening unilateral U.S. military strikes.¹ But with little apparent strategy backing it up, playing chicken with a nuclear-armed state is a recipe for disaster. During the campaign, President Trump mentioned the South China Sea repeatedly as an example of American weakness in dealing with China,² and during his confirmation hearing, Secretary Tillerson threatened to block China's access to the outposts it occupies in the South China Sea.³ This aggressive rhetoric has disappeared—which is a good thing—but so too has the issue. It no longer appears to be on the administration's list of priorities in Asia, even as China continues to strengthen its outposts and regional concerns continue to grow.

Economic engagement: Fail

One of President Trump's main campaign themes was trade. Then-candidate Trump insisted that the United States was negotiating terrible trade deals and that China was “raping” the United States economically.⁴ Trump's voters were rightly frustrated that globalization and insufficient economic recovery had left them a raw deal, and they demanded major changes to the way the United States handled trade relations with Asia. But Trump has failed to deliver on all fronts. His abrupt withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, or TPP, trade deal in Asia in his first days in office was accompanied by a lot of bluster but no serious effort to fix any of the challenges underlying U.S. economic engagement in Asia. To make matters worse, Trump supplemented the withdrawal from TPP by backing down from his tough trade talk on China and other nations. Although the contents of TPP itself did not do enough to address domestic economic concerns, TPP was a central pillar of U.S. strategic engagement in Asia, and the 11 other TPP member countries had been negotiating it in good faith with the United States for almost a decade.⁵ The sharp, undiplomatic pull-out

of the negotiations—with no apparent plan for how to engage critical allies going forward—has damaged U.S. credibility and sent allies and partners looking for strategic alternatives. What’s more, President Trump has offered no economic vision for a more level playing field for American workers and businesses.

Alliances: Satisfactory

Despite President Trump’s brash statements during the campaign challenging the basic wisdom of alliances, the Trump administration appears to have come around to the importance of maintaining strong ties with Tokyo and Seoul.⁶ With Japan, gone are calls for the United States to be paid to defend it in some sort of protection racket, and talk of the U.S. trade deficit has been notably mute. In their place, Trump has declared that he is “100 percent with Japan” and has ushered in one of the most intense periods of U.S.-Japan high-level diplomacy in history.⁷ In fewer than 100 days, Trump hosted Prime Minister Abe at the White House and Mar-a-Lago, and Secretary Mattis, Secretary Tillerson, and Vice President Pence each visited Tokyo, all focusing on traditional alliance issues.⁸ And despite the fact that South Korea currently does not have an elected president in place, Mattis, Tillerson, and Pence also each visited Seoul, as the administration has focused intensely on the North Korean threat.⁹ Nonetheless, Pence reminded South Korea of the unpredictability of the Trump era with a couple of parting tweets maligning the U.S. trade deficit with South Korea.¹⁰ Likewise, Trump undermined those reassurance efforts by falsely claiming that a U.S. aircraft carrier, the USS Carl Vinson, was on its way to Northeast Asia during a tense period with North Korea, drawing harsh rebukes from Seoul.¹¹ Remarkably, only a few days into his presidency, Trump managed to rattle the U.S.-Australia alliance, the easiest major alliance to manage in the region.¹² While Trump managed to get into an argument and hang up on Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull during their first conversation, Pence helped get things back on track with a rare early visit by a vice president.

Southeast Asia: Satisfactory

In Southeast Asia, the Trump administration has sent strong signals about the importance of the region as a whole, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as an organization. In a first for a secretary of state, soon after assuming his position, Tillerson hosted the 10 ASEAN ambassadors for a meeting at State Department headquarters and has invited the 10 ASEAN foreign ministers to Washington for a meeting in early May.¹³ Vice President Pence followed suit, visiting Jakarta, Indonesia, on his trip to Asia and including a stop at the ASEAN Secretariat, and he announced that President Trump would travel to the Philippines and Vietnam in the fall for the East Asia Summit, the U.S.-ASEAN summit, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit.¹⁴ Unfortunately, the substance of the Trump administration’s engagement with

Southeast Asia has caused concerns. With the withdrawal from the TPP, the region is wondering what the United States brings to the table in terms of economic engagement. Trump's Muslim ban, while it did not include Southeast Asia's Muslim-majority nations, is reinforcing long-held assumptions that the United States is at war with Islam.¹⁵ And in the lack of problems in U.S. relations with the Philippines and Thailand—as well as with Malaysia and Cambodia—there's a dirty secret: These countries' leaders know that the Trump administration seems to care little about human rights and the rule of law.¹⁶

China: Fail

The administration has stumbled repeatedly in its dealings with China. The White House needs to address problematic Chinese behavior, ranging from trade and investment relations to the situation with North Korea and China's new restrictions on U.S. think tanks and other nongovernmental organizations. Instead of focusing on these high-priority issues, President Trump squandered substantial political capital by challenging the One China policy, which has been a pillar of U.S. policy toward China since the Nixon administration. Trump then had to back down from that position, thus launching his relationship with China by looking like a “paper tiger” who talks loudly but quickly backs down once challenged.¹⁷ Similarly, the administration has been all talk and no action with China on trade.

Rhetoric from President Trump and Cabinet-level officials suggests that the administration either does not have a China strategy or is formulating one without relying on solid China experts. First, when Secretary Tillerson visited Beijing in March, he parroted one of President Xi's favorite talking points,¹⁸ describing the U.S.-China relationship as a “very positive relationship built on non-confrontation, no conflict, mutual respect, and always searching for win-win solutions.”¹⁹ President Xi first made that statement at a time when China was ramping up its military activity in the South China Sea, and many American experts on China view the statement as a call for the United States to sit back and let China do what it wants, regardless of how China's actions affect U.S. interests.²⁰ Second, in April, shortly after the first Trump-Xi presidential summit, Trump stated that he was willing to give trade concessions to China in exchange for positive Chinese action on North Korea.²¹ This suggests that he is willing to trade one core U.S. interest for another instead of pressing Beijing to make concessions on both fronts.

India: Satisfactory

Despite being the world's second-largest country and a top 10 global economy, President Trump has not appeared to focus much on India in his first 100 days. The highlight so far was a trip by national security adviser H.R. McMaster to India as part of a trip to South Asia, where McMaster appeared to sound all the right notes about the importance of the

U.S.-India partnership.²² But Trump's attempt to enact his Muslim ban at home—while not directly targeting Indians—his inflammatory rhetoric against Muslims, and acts of violence in the United States directed against Indians and Indian Americans have caused serious concern in India.²³ Those dynamics are already having an effect on relations between the two countries and how people in India view the United States.

Climate: Fail

On climate change, the Trump administration has already ceded global leadership to the Chinese.²⁴ Regardless of how the administration frames its approach to the Paris Agreement, the fact that the Trump administration is ignoring scientific facts and rolling back Obama administration clean energy and climate policies makes it nearly impossible for the United States to play a leadership role on this issue. That undermines American interests on multiple fronts.²⁵ First, the United States is gearing up to lean back on clean energy technology at the same time as China is leaning forward to supply a rapidly growing global market. The Paris Agreement is expected to generate \$19 trillion in new demand for clean energy technologies, and if the Trump administration undermines U.S. clean energy sectors to support fossil fuels, there is a good chance that the world's clean energy technologies will come from China.²⁶ Second, if the United States either downgrades or fails to meet its own Paris target, that gives Beijing an opening to slow-walk its own emission reductions while still claiming a global leadership mantle. A China-led process may result in watered-down implementation. For example, Chinese negotiators have been pushing for a bifurcated transparency system: The United States and other developed nations would have to provide high-quality data on what they are doing to achieve their reductions, but China and other developing nations would not.²⁷

Conclusion

So far, Trump's approaches to North Korea, China, regional economics, and beyond are damaging U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific region. The Trump administration quickly needs to realize that showing up is not a substitute for effective policies. It must begin crafting effective strategies for the key challenges and opportunities in the region.

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