

Can Trump keep his balance in Asia? by Bates Gill

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During his first Asian trip as president, in 2009, Barack Obama said, “[t]here must be no doubt. As America’s first Pacific president, I promise you that this Pacific nation will strengthen and sustain our leadership in this vitally important part of the world.”

Following on that declaration, America’s so-called pivot to the Asia-Pacific aimed to bolster US influence in the region through deepened economic interaction, greater diplomatic engagement, stronger promotion of human rights and democratization, and an increased US military presence. The pivot toward the Asia-Pacific, or the rebalance as it has since become known, became one of the Obama administration’s most prominent foreign policy initiatives.

Seven years later, the policy has led to many successes. Stepped-up US engagement helped midwife the remarkable democratic transition in Myanmar; deepened US ties to states in Southeast Asia (including the unprecedented summit in California earlier this year between Obama and the leaders of the 10 member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations); and saw the expanded presence of US forces, ships, and aircraft in places such as Singapore, the Philippines, and Australia. The reason is simple. Engagement in the Asia-Pacific is not only a strategic imperative for the United States, but is also encouraged and welcomed by most of the region.

However, it has not been all smooth sailing. The past year has been an especially difficult one for US policy in the Asia-Pacific. Indeed, as the Obama administration winds down, the pivot appears to be increasingly in trouble.

The next administration

Looking ahead, President-elect Donald Trump will have a lot of work to do in order to sustain and fully realize the promise inherent in a deeper strategic engagement in the Asia-Pacific. Importantly, much of that work will need to be done at home.

In the region, challenges abound. Despite tightening sanctions, North Korea has doggedly pursued a nuclear weapon and the means to deliver it against regional neighbors – and against the United States. In 2016, Kim Jong Un’s government conducted its fourth and fifth nuclear tests and carried out multiple ballistic missile tests, including one from a submarine.

In spite of many technical setbacks, North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs have made significant progress in the

past year. Trump will come into office facing a regime in Pyongyang that owns a nascent nuclear-weapons capability and has next to no intention of bargaining it away. Meanwhile, Beijing has begun to show even greater reluctance to pressure Pyongyang to roll back its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. US options are growing narrower by the day. The Trump administration will likely face the highly unwelcome choice of either accepting North Korea’s rudimentary ability to deliver a nuclear weapon against US and allied targets, or doing something forceful to prevent that from happening.

In Southeast Asia, newly elected Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte declared his country’s “separation” from the United States and appears to have thrown in his strategic lot with Beijing. Domestic politics elsewhere in Southeast Asia – such as in Malaysia and Thailand – are likewise moving contrary to US interests. With the recent death of Thailand’s King Bhumibol, the Thai military looks all the more likely to govern, undemocratically, for the long-haul and has forged closer ties with China.

In Kuala Lumpur, the government of Prime Minister Najib Razak is dallying with hardline Islamists in order to buttress its diminishing popular support. Razak was in Beijing earlier this month and signed a deal to purchase littoral mission ships from China.

In the South China Sea, China’s initiative of building islands and then positioning military assets on them has gone largely unanswered. The sweeping rejection of China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea by the arbitral tribunal in The Hague has made little difference. Despite calls by the United States and others that China abide by the tribunal decision, Beijing over the past 12 months has achieved more in asserting its power and presence in the South China Sea than it could have possibly expected when the year began – all the more so as Duterte essentially trashed the Hague ruling and cut a deal with China in return for billions in Chinese economic assistance.

Across all of these challenges, China looms large as it plays an increasingly influential economic, diplomatic, and military role in the region. Setting aside tough talk from both candidates on the campaign trail about standing up to China, Trump will face the same question as previous presidents regarding US-China relations: How can Washington strike the right balance between cooperation and competition with China while avoiding a serious deterioration into crisis or conflict?

That task is not going to get any easier for President Obama’s successor. Beijing will continue to assert its influence and interests, using means of both hard and soft power, in ways that will seek to weaken US leadership around China’s periphery. It seems unlikely that Chinese President Xi Jinping would take any rash steps in the run-up to the 19th Party Congress at the end of 2017, when he will be given a

second five-year term as leader of the Communist Party of China and will install as many trusted acolytes for future leadership as he can. If Xi is successful, the US president may be dealing with an even more confident, risk-taking leadership in Beijing come 2018.

These are big challenges emanating from the region, enough to fill the plate of any incoming president. But in many respects the biggest challenges facing Trump in the Asia-Pacific arise not from the region itself, but from the US domestic political landscape. The presidential campaign has exposed a widening rift in the United States between those advocating deeper engagement in the world, including in the Asia-Pacific region; and those who argue that the United States is overcommitted and underfunded, and that an “America first” retrenchment is called for.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement (TPP), the economic cornerstone of the rebalance strategy, is dead letter. It is possible that Trump will be open to some kind of renegotiation in a year or two, but that seems highly unlikely at the moment. His opposition to TPP (mirrored by Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders) reflects a vocal minority of trade skeptics in the US who will continue to have political influence over the course of the Trump presidency.

Candidate Trump’s criticism of US allies generally and of Japan and South Korea in particular also reflected an emergent body of nativist opinion in the United States which eschews global commitments and belittles the strengths of the US alliance system.

Once in office, President-elect Trump will have little choice but to seriously rethink such positions. There remains a high expectation across most of the region of a continued US focus of economic, diplomatic, and security-related resources to the region. There is, overall, a gravitation toward the United States as Asia-Pacific players look to balance a more muscular China. A sustained, coherent, and carefully crafted US engagement strategy should take advantage of this clear demand for a stronger American presence.

In short, the challenges in the Asia-Pacific are simply too great to ignore – and so are the possibilities for positive action. Vigorous and effective engagement of the Asia-Pacific region will endure as a strategic imperative for the United States long after President Obama departs office. But unfortunately for the incoming White House resident, the hurdles in pursuing this strategic imperative are becoming more daunting, both in the region and at home.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.