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Commentary: Ambitious Asia trip for a US president leaves region longing for more

US President Donald Trump's highly anticipated Asia trip had a packed agenda and was closely watched by many in the region. Yale-NUS College's Chin-Hao Huang discusses whether it has lived up to expectations and what it bodes for the future.



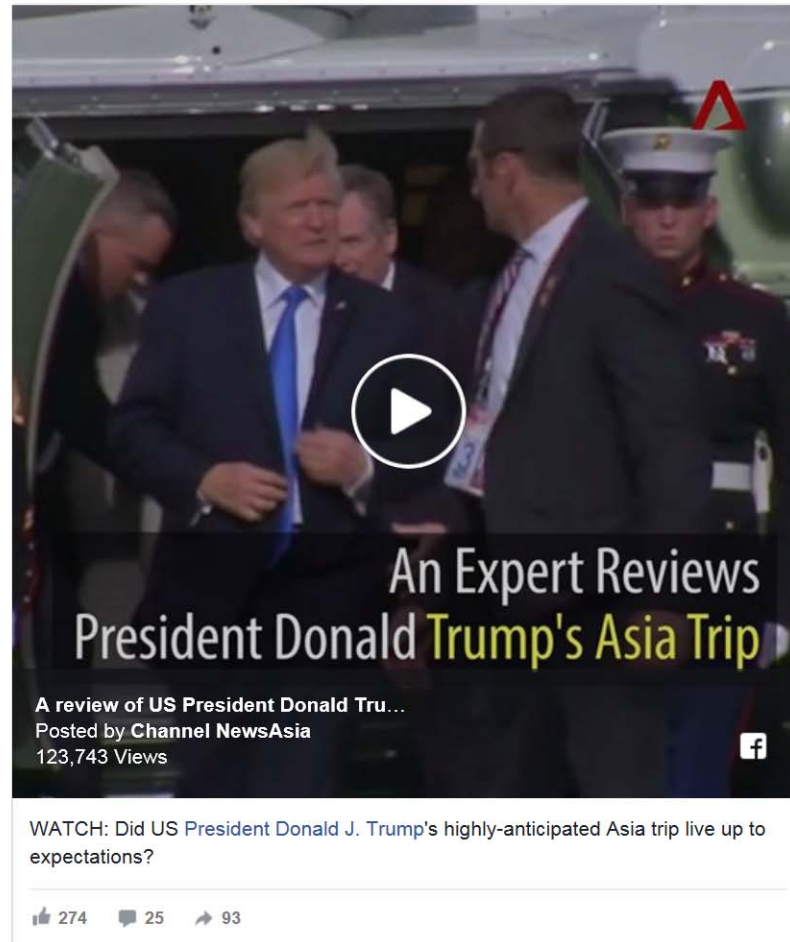
What has come out of US President Donald Trump's trip to Asia? (Photo: Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)

SINGAPORE: With five countries in 12 days, US President Donald Trump's Asia visit was ambitious. He managed to check off some of the [key items](#) he wanted to address, especially on airing concerns about unfair trade practices and the North Korean crisis, but on the whole his visit [fell short](#) in providing a coherent vision on a number of important, strategic issues.

For starters, there was limited clarity on US leadership and what it stands for in this part of the world.

Although Trump had already signalled US withdrawal from the Trans Pacific Partnership before he entered office, he missed the opportunity to articulate and convey a credible alternative in this trip to reassure partners on how future trade relations with the region will be affected, and what a rules-based order for a more balanced economic partnership might look like.

The economic nationalism he championed did not square with the message that the US wants to engage Asia in an open and competitive manner. Righting the US's trade imbalance will be difficult to accomplish in a relatively short period of time and will probably not come to fruition during his presidency. He gained points from his domestic constituents, but in so doing may have sacrificed US standing as a proponent for free and open trade in the region.



THE US-CHINA RELATIONSHIP

Trump's visit to China had a lot of anticipation from external observers and those watching from the US.

Optics matter, and the fact that Trump was able to announce nearly US\$250 billion worth of commercial deals and bilateral investments with China was an important achievement.

Where the US-China trade deficit ranks around US\$500 billion last year, securing a deal that amounts to half of the trade deficit reflects his business acumen, as well as his promise to his base supporters and those affected by the hollowing out of manufacturing in the US rust belt.

But it is a pyrrhic victory at best, one that reflects a short-term, uncertain gain that comes with some cost.

This is a one-time deal with no guarantee of continuation into the future. It is also unclear how much of that US\$250 billion will trickle back into the US economy or provide new employment opportunities for US workers.

At the US-China bilateral summit, it was left to China President Xi Jinping to articulate the message and idea that the Pacific has enough room for two great powers to engage in a friendly, cordial and strategic competition.



"As I said to the (US) president, the Pacific Ocean is big enough to accommodate both China and the US," said Chinese President Xi Jinping. (Photo: AFP/Fred DUFOUR)

Trump's predecessors normally emphasise this message when meeting with Chinese leaders to challenge and inspire China to live up to the expectations of a responsible stakeholder while welcoming China's role as a strong, confident country in the region.

Trump may have secured an impressive commercial deal, but the broader picture of how he intends to work with the world's second largest economy on a host of strategic issues of mutual interest was conspicuously missing.

For the most part, China will remain a reactive partner in this bilateral relationship. It cannot afford to prematurely challenge the US too assertively. Even as it begins to establish its own spheres of influence, it is mindful of addressing enduring regional scepticism of its newfound material power and capabilities.

This is all the more important as the Chinese economy braces for a tough transition. On the back of the 19th Party Congress' conclusion, there are high expectations for Xi to continue to deliver on economic programmes that bridge income disparity and provide more balanced growth. A stable and peaceful international environment is thus a strategic imperative for Xi to be able to deliver on these domestic priorities.



China's President Xi Jinping had set out ambitious development targets for China at the 19th Party Congress last month. (Photo: REUTERS/Nyein Chan Naing)

For Trump to address these issues in his summit with Xi would have been a welcome sign of a stable and mature US-China partnership, that the US is keen to work with China, help it become strong and prosperous, and reinforce a rules-based order in the economic and security domains.

Acknowledging China's rightful place in regional hierarchy is important and sends the right tone to the region that these two major powers are not heading toward a head-on collision.

US RELATIONS WITH KEY ALLIES

Broadly speaking, there were no major surprises in Trump's visits to key allies in the region. If anything, one takeaway is that leadership personalities matter in foreign policy decision-making processes.

The positive chemistry and relatability between Trump and his counterparts in [Japan](#), [South Korea](#), and the Philippines helped set the tone for a constructive working relationship in the bilateral alliances.

Each of the US allies probably came away having a better and first-hand understanding of this president's unique style. Trump is not a mainstream politician with whom these allies have been used to negotiating bilateral deals. His business oriented mentality is clear from the way he played down traditional values like [human rights](#) in US foreign policy for the sake of pragmatism.



US President Donald Trump made no mention of the Philippines' war on drugs when he met with Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte on the sidelines of the ASEAN summit. (Photo: AFP/Jim Watson)

Issues of importance in bilateral alliances may thus have to be framed in ways that identify more clearly with what is at stake for US interests in order to elicit Trump's attention.

ASEAN, SOUTH CHINA SEA

With regards to Southeast Asia, there was no clear follow-up to the US-ASEAN [Sunnylands working partnership](#) struck in 2016. The expectation that Trump would come to Asia and get everything right is perhaps too ambitious.

But, it was likewise a missed opportunity to reaffirm the importance of the region's only major security and economic architecture, especially as ASEAN marks its 50th anniversary this year.

The US was one of the first dialogue partners of ASEAN and the first outside of the region to appoint an ambassador to the organisation. For four of the first five decades, the US and ASEAN have been steadfast partners in the diplomatic, economic, security, cultural, and educational domains, and it would be at the US's own peril to minimise ASEAN's multilateral significance going forward.

The US in looking at the next steps to reinforce its longstanding influence in this part of the world will have to take into account Southeast Asian interests articulated through ASEAN more seriously.

The South China Sea is one such area of immediate concern and priority. The off-the-cuff comment about Trump's personal willingness to [mediate](#) on the South China Sea dispute was unscripted. That no regional leaders, especially those from the claimant states, immediately took him up on his offer is quite telling about regional preferences.



During a state visit to Hanoi, US President Donald Trump offered to mediate in the South China Sea dispute, telling Vietnam's President Tran Dai Quang he was a "very good mediator". (Photo: AFP/Kham)

Rather than accepting Trump's personal mediation in a highly contested conflict, Vietnam, for instance, preferred US's continued commitment to the freedom of navigation operations in the high seas. This appears to be the way the region would like to see continued US engagement and contributions to regional stability. The US will have to pay closer attention to regional consensus and preferences.

Doing so would not only ensure freedom of navigation in the contested waters but it would also help instil a sense of confidence in ASEAN as it enters the final and arguably most difficult stretch of working out the details on the [Code of Conduct](#) with China. The sticking point is whether the COC will be binding, which is Southeast Asian countries' preference.

It is important for the US to continue to ensure that Southeast Asian countries have the confidence going into the final negotiations with China, and that freedom of navigation operations are working in tandem with these regional interests.

Trump's Asia trip deserves an A for effort.

In terms of the trip's content and substance, it leaves one longing for more on a coherent US strategy and vision in Asia. This might seem consistent with Trump's style of leaving his audience in suspense on his next moves.

Regardless of whether the build-up of this strategic anticipation is planned or not, concretising US strategy in Asia will need to start with a more deft understanding of regional politics and priorities.

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Source: CNA/sl