



Trump Has an Opportunity to Reduce Tension Between America and North Korea

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Donald Trump's marathon trip to East Asia is off to a good start. Trump's time in Japan was characterized by the warm personal relationship between him and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who reaffirmed the approach of applying maximum pressure on North Korea via sanctions and increased military cooperation to force Pyongyang to denuclearize.

However, the trip is far from over and there are lingering questions about whether the North Korea crisis will escalate and about the trajectory of the U.S.-China relationship. Trump's visits to Seoul and Beijing will provide important information about the administration's approach to these two pressing regional security issues.

South Korea: Damage Control or More Fuel for 'Fire and Fury'?

Trump's speech to South Korea's National Assembly is an inflection point for the ongoing crisis on the Korean Peninsula. Frequent North Korean ballistic missile tests, the test of an alleged hydrogen bomb in September, and a steadily escalating war of words between Pyongyang and Washington have created an astoundingly dangerous situation. Both sides appear to fear preemptive military action by the other, and the risk of a minor dispute or accident spiraling out of control is very real.

The crisis is largely one of Trump's own making. His "fire and fury" comment in early August was a poorly constructed deterrent threat that was imprecise about both what it was trying to prevent and what punishment the United States was willing to inflict.

The next month Trump made matters worse when he called Kim Jong-un a "Rocket Man . . . on a suicide mission" at the UN General Assembly. First, it suggested that Kim is an irrational actor who cannot be negotiated with or deterred. Second, Kim took the insult personally, which makes it harder for Pyongyang to come to the negotiating table, and he regarded it as a sign of Trump's weakness, which could make other U.S. statements less effective. Kim is not blameless in the current crisis, but the United States is already accustomed to bombastic rhetoric from Pyongyang. Trump's decision to fight fire with fiery rhetoric has only made the situation worse.

Trump's speech to the National Assembly is an opportunity for the president to do some much needed damage control or pour fuel on the "fire and fury" rhetoric. His statements in Japan were firm but mostly boilerplate diplomatic speak about working closely with an ally to apply pressure

on a shared threat. Greater pressure on Pyongyang will not necessarily result in denuclearization or other successful outcomes, but a rhetorical shift away from “fire and fury” could calm down the war of words and somewhat reduce short-term tensions. Trump’s military and diplomatic advisers have likely prepared a National Assembly speech that emphasizes cooperation with allies and a firm but measured pressure campaign against North Korea. Trump could improve the situation in the Korean Peninsula by sticking to the speech and not hurling impromptu insults or vague, sweeping threats toward North Korea.

China: Storm Clouds Ahead?

A number of policy decisions early in the Trump administration created a perception among many American China-watchers that his time in office would be a gift to Beijing. This viewpoint contends that America’s withdrawal from multilateral initiatives such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and Paris Agreement diminish U.S. prestige and influence in the world, allowing Beijing to portray itself as a responsible global leader. Moreover, some U.S. analysts have expressed concern that Trump’s focus on North Korea could lead to a less confrontational policy toward China in areas like the South China Sea or Taiwan in order to get more help from Beijing.

It is unlikely that Trump will do much damage to the U.S.-China relationship while in Beijing, but Trump’s visit to Japan and statements by high-ranking administration officials in the lead up to his trip hint at a downward turn in the relationship in the near future.

A White House press statement summarizing the results of Trump’s visit to Japan points to deeper U.S.-Japan cooperation on regional economic and security issues that are not in China’s interests. A press release noted that Japan and the United States will cooperate to create a “free and open Indo-Pacific region” with the aim of providing “infrastructure investment alternatives” to other countries in the region. The implied target of this effort is China’s One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative, which uses massive infrastructure investment throughout the region to extend Chinese influence. Trump also praised Japan’s defense cooperation with the United States and called for more sales of high-end U.S. military equipment to Tokyo. Neither of these initiatives is a gift to China.

Several public statements by high-ranking administration officials shortly before Trump left for Asia suggest that the results of the Japan visit represent a new normal in the administration’s approach to China. In an early October hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Secretary of Defense James Mattis said, “Regarding [OBOR] . . . there are many belts and many roads, and no one nation should put itself in a position dictating ‘One Belt, One Road.’” Approximately two weeks later, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson outlined the administration’s approach to U.S.-India relations, calling India a “pillar of democracy” and pushing for greater cooperation in regional economics and security. High-profile criticism of OBOR and support for India, a major geopolitical rival to China, point to a more adversarial U.S.-China relationship in the offing.

Trump’s diplomatic odyssey in East Asia will produce important insight into his administration’s strategy toward this pivotal region. A strong showing in Japan offers a solid foundation for the president to build upon, but there are many more stops to make before he returns home. He should not pass up the opportunity to rein in the dangerous crisis on the Korean Peninsula, and he should clearly state a coherent strategy for U.S.-China relations before returning.

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