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Asian leaders charm Trump — too much, critics fear

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Danang, Vietnam—Asian leaders, following in the footsteps of the Saudis and the Poles, have figured out the fastest way to defang President Donald Trump when it comes to international affairs: Roll out the royal treatment.

So far, Trump has been treated to a “state visit plus” by Chinese President Xi Jinping, which featured a display of military might that Trump proclaimed “magnificent” and a video montage of Trump’s greatest moments in Beijing, complete with clips of his granddaughter, Arabella, singing in Mandarin.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in gave a speech in which he congratulated Trump on the record-breaking rise in the U.S. stock market. “You are already making great progress in making America great again,” Moon said, lifting the president’s signature phrase.

And in Japan, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe wooed Trump with a round of golf alongside special guest Hideki Matsuyama, one of the top professional golfers in the world.

The flattery from world leaders appears to have charmed the president, who has long craved validation on the international stage in the aftermath of a political campaign that many high-ranking foreign officials ridiculed and dismissed. Trump has bragged throughout the trip about his newly minted status as a close friend of Asia’s ruling class.

“We’ve had a tremendous period of time,” he said at an event Friday in Danang. “Last night’s celebration in China was something the likes of which few people have ever seen before. So we’ve had a very exciting time.”

The president has in turn reined in much of the bombastic rhetoric that skyrocketed him to the presidency — and, Asian leaders hope, his intention to launch trade wars.

The jarring shift in tone from a president who prides himself on being politically incorrect is seen by some as part of a natural maturing that any new U.S. leader would undergo as the nuances of international diplomacy come into focus. But others worry Trump is being steamrolled. By signing up you agree to receive email newsletters or alerts from POLITICO. You can unsubscribe at any time.

"Unfortunately, for the United States, President Trump's trip so far in Asia has just reinforced the view in Asia of President Trump as a paper tiger. He talks a big game when it comes to China — whether it's hitting them with tariffs or urging them to crack down on North Korea. But when

he's face to face with Xi, he has nothing but praise for him," said Michael Fuchs, a deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs in the Obama administration. "Foreign leaders, especially in Asia, always want to put on a good show for the U.S. president. But I think they increasingly realize the key to a good relationship with President Trump is to roll out the red carpet," added Fuchs, now with the left-leaning Center for American Progress. Some Asia experts offered a somewhat more forgiving analysis, saying Trump's words matter less than U.S. actions.

"Trump is a flatterer and foreign policy neophyte. He's going to say some stuff that Xi will like and make experts gnash their teeth. But look just a little below that surface and you'll see an approach to Asia largely the same" as the Obama administration's Asia policy, tweeted Eric Gomez, an Asia policy analyst with the libertarian CATO Institute. Gomez noted that a joint U.S. military exercise with Japan and India earlier this week is "a far more important bellwether of U.S. policy."

In an address Friday to the Asian-American Pacific Cooperation summit, Trump laid out his vision for an America First trade policy, decrying multilateral agreements he said helped destroy American manufacturing and specifically inveighing against intellectual property theft and forced technology transfers from American companies.

But he stopped far short of laying out a policy for dealing with those ills, instead blaming past U.S. administrations for failing to stand up to countries that he described as taking logical advantage of the situation. And Trump never brought up human rights or environmental abuses, let alone the hard-fought climate targets negotiated by the Obama administration with Xi. The speech echoed Trump's comments in Beijing, where he muted past threats to slap China with heavy tariffs and he avoided blaming Beijing for what he has called its predatory trade practices. His administration also acquiesced to the Chinese government's demand that Xi and Trump not take questions during a joint statement on Thursday.

And in a restrained address to the South Korean national assembly, Trump replaced threats of annihilation with offers to negotiate with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un in exchange for abandoning his nuclear weapons program.

The Asia trip echoes the over-the-top welcome Trump got on his first foreign visit as president in Riyadh, where a five-story image of Trump's face was beamed onto the luxury hotel where he stayed and King Salman hosted a sword dance and a ceremony involving a glowing orb. Poland also rolled out the red carpet for Trump, giving him a platform for a major speech and reportedly busing people into Warsaw to ensure that Trump would be greeted by cheering crowds.

It's a long way from the cold shoulder Trump got from Western European leaders on his repeat visits to the continent, first in May and then in July.

Trump wasn't given any special accommodation this past May at the G-7 in Brussels, where leaders were sharply critical of his decision not to explicitly reaffirm the U.S. relationship with NATO and brushed him off at public events. Trump, who was criticized earlier in the spring for

failing to shake hands with German Chancellor Angela Merkel when she paid him a visit in Washington, responded by describing the U.S.-German trade relationship as “very bad for the U.S.”

Merkel later fired back, saying that Germany could no longer “fully rely” on others — a comment widely seen as a dig at Trump.

The exception: French President Emmanuel Macron, who invited Trump to celebrate the 100th anniversary of U.S. entry into World War I on Bastille Day in Paris this past July.

Trump appeared to support Macron’s rival, nationalist candidate Marine Le Pen, during the French elections in April, tweeting that a terrorist attack shortly before the vote would probably help her, but was actively courted by centrist Macron after his win. He gave the U.S. president and First Lady Melania Trump seats of honor on the dais to watch thousands of French and American troops march down the Champs-Élysée during a two-hour parade, which included armored personnel carriers, tanks, missile launchers and dozens of military planes and helicopters.

The display impressed Trump, who said in September ahead of a meeting with Macron on the sidelines of the annual United Nations General Assembly that he was considering throwing a similar event on Pennsylvania Avenue next Fourth of July.

“We may do something like that on July Fourth in Washington down Pennsylvania Avenue, if I have your approval,” Trump said, gesturing toward Macron as the two men laughed and smiled. “I don’t know. We’re gonna have to try and top it, but we had a lot of planes going over and a lot of military might, and it was really a beautiful thing to see.”