

# Trump in Asia: Where he'll visit and what he'll hope to achieve

When American Presidents want to give a big speech in a public square, they go to Europe. When they want feel-good photos surrounded by adorable children, they go to Africa. And when they want to do business, they go to Asia.

## Japan

Donald Trump is no exception. His first Presidential trip to Asia November 5-14 will be all business. Following a stopover in Pearl Harbor to visit the U.S. Navy's Pacific Command, his first international destination will be Japan. There he's sure to be talking up the threat from North Korea as he pushes Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to splash out for more U.S. missile defense systems.

Riding high on a landslide election victory, Abe is expected to use his super-majority to push through changes to Japan's pacifist constitution. That can only be good news for U.S. arms exporters. Despite its Article 9 constitutional stipulation that "land, sea and air forces as well as other war potential, will never be maintained," Japan is ranked number seven in the world for defense spending, and it relies heavily on U.S. equipment.

Abe's renewed mandate gives him the opportunity to shape Japan's next five-year defense spending plan, which will cover the years 2019-2023. A 25% boost in defense spending would catapult Japan ahead of Russia to the world number three slot, behind only the U.S. and China. Increases on that scale are unlikely, but the fact that Japan is within striking distance of Russian spending levels shows just how powerful pacifist Japan really is.

## South Korea

November 7 it's on to South Korea, where the big issue will unavoidably be North Korea. South Korea's President Moon Jae-in is not a defense hawk-like Japan's Shinzo Abe, but with North Korea threatening, he does have to keep Trump on side.

But with Trump spending only one day in Seoul, including a speech to the South Korean National Assembly and a mandatory visit to U.S. troops, it's unlikely that there will be much time for deal-making.

## China

The highlight of Trump's trip is sure to be his November 8-9 diversion to Beijing to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping. Like Abe, Xi is also riding high on the wings of domestic political triumph, in Xi's case the successful conclusion of the once-in-five-years National Congress of the Communist Party of China. And as with Moon, the top item on Xi's agenda is likely to be North Korea.

An unlikely pair, Trump and Xi got on famously well at their first meeting in April at Trump's Mar-a-Lago retreat. Trump seems relatively unconcerned about China's poor human rights record, while Xi seems willing to accommodate American sensitivities on trade. And both want to avoid an outbreak of war on the Korean peninsula, nuclear or otherwise.

Xi has recently reconciled himself to South Korea's need to host a US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system, taking this contentious issue off the table in preparation for Trump's visit. Next up: the future of North Korean "supreme leader" Kim Jong-un himself. Breaking all precedents, last week the Kim regime attempted a political assassination inside China—and during Xi's all-important Party Congress. Xi is likely to view this as confirmation, if any is needed, that North Korea is spinning out of control. Expect a strong (and genuine) statement of cooperation from Xi and Trump on efforts to put the North Korean genie back in the bottle.

## Vietnam

November 10 will be the largely symbolic Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders' summit in Da Nang, a bustling tourist town in central Vietnam, followed by a November 11 official visit to the capital, Hanoi. There Trump will meet with Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang.

Top of the agenda is likely to be the threat from China. Trump and Xi may see eye-to-eye when it comes to North Korea, but that doesn't stop the United States from pursuing a containment policy around the rest of China's borders.

Remarkably, Vietnam has already agreed to host a U.S. aircraft carrier visit in 2018, and the U.S. is angling to wean the Vietnamese military off its reliance on Russian hardware. With China expecting to launch its third aircraft carrier in just a few years, it's no wonder that Vietnam is looking for options. Vietnam is locked in a series of maritime disputes with China and needs all the help it can get.

### The Philippines

Finally, Trump will travel to the Philippines on November 12-13 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the 40th anniversary of U.S.-ASEAN official ties. These celebrations will be all ceremony, but Trump's first meeting with Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte will be all business. Trump has been roundly criticized for failing to condemn Duterte's dismal human rights record. Behind the scenes Trump may be setting the stage for a rapprochement between the U.S. and the Philippines.

Duterte may have gone on record about his "separation from the United States," saying that "America has lost" to China, but the military advisors helping him defeat Islamist rebels on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao are U.S. special forces, not Chinese. Trump is likely to take a firm line with Duterte on support for U.S. priorities. The simple fact is that the Philippines is economically and militarily irrelevant to the United States, but Duterte relies on America for his very survival.

Trump will surely demand that Duterte stop cozying up to China. It's hard to see how Duterte could resist. Contrary to popular perceptions, when the game gets competitive it's still the U.S. that holds all the cards in the Asia-Pacific. With the pathological exception of North Korea, none of China's neighbors is concerned about the presence of a U.S. aircraft carrier in the region. All of them are concerned about Chinese aircraft carriers.

### Balancing act

The trick for Trump is to encircle and isolate China while still engaging with China on North Korea, trade, intellectual property, and investment openness. That's not as difficult as it sounds, because although China's rise potentially threatens all of its neighbors, it doesn't really threaten the United States. That leaves the U.S. free to play both sides.

Xi will deal with Trump on North Korea because he has to. He'll deal with Trump on trade and investment because there's money to be made. Like other U.S. Presidents before him, Trump will soon discover that he doesn't have to work to contain China. China's neighbors will do the containing for him.

*Salvatore Babones*

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