

Geopolitical uncertainty: Trump era heightens Asia-Pacific's tripwires

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Trump's victory magnifies geopolitical uncertainty in the Asia-Pacific region.

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The Asia-Pacific region is in for another challenging year, with a number of long-standing tripwires ripening during a period of great geopolitical uncertainty.

The stunning victory of United States president-elect Donald Trump earlier this fall only magnifies a number of these areas of concern, ranging from China's destabilising activities in the maritime domain to North Korea's relentless march towards a more potent nuclear weapons capability.

But, in addition to uncertainty about the incoming Trump administration, there are a host of other wild cards in the region.

Turmoil in the region

In South Korea, scandal has led to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye and clouded the country's political future. Meanwhile, the regime of Kim Jong-un in North Korea has been quickly moving ahead with the development of its nuclear and missile programmes and soon may provide a credible threat to the US continent.

While Trump may see China - as Pyongyang's only significant backer - as both the problem and potential solution, he would be naive to think he can force Beijing's hand on North Korea. It is a challenge that vexed all of his predecessors.

In addition to problems on the Korean peninsula, Russia continues to push for a more active role in the region and also develop its strategic relationship with China.

Meanwhile, in the Philippines, strongman leader Rodrigo Duterte has charted a drastically different course than his predecessors and has broken the recent warming of ties with its ally in Washington.

This has led to a volatile scenario where crumbling US credibility is combined with corresponding weakness among some of the US's most critical relationships in the region.

Will Trump trump East Asia?

Trump's rhetoric thus far on East Asia has largely been erratic and contradictory. On one hand, he has levied threats against China and its unfair economic practices.

And this month, Trump announced the appointment of Peter Navarro, well-known for a hardline approach towards Beijing, as his choice to lead the newly created White House National Trade Council.

Trump has similarly - but reactively - railed against Beijing's security posture in the region, especially in the South China Sea, where he accused Beijing of building a "massive military complex".

The president-elect subsequently called out China, via Twitter, for its seizure of a US navy unmanned underwater vehicle earlier this month, operating off the coast of the Philippines.

It is highly unlikely that Trump will do away with US alliances in the region - which have and continue to serve US commercial and security interests.

Finally, Trump has stirred concern in Beijing with his direct diplomacy with Taiwan and his suggestion that the long-standing "one-China" policy should not be considered as a given.

But prognostics of a looming US-China showdown under Trump may not be entirely accurate.

Trump will surely press hard on China economically and on trade - a bread and butter issue for him.

But, on the trade front, China will also look to take advantage of failed US leadership on delivering the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact and press forward on agreements that are either led or inclusive of Beijing - such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the China-Japan-Korea trilateral free trade agreement.

It is less clear that Trump will stand stout against China's growing assertiveness in the region, marked by efforts to forcibly change the status quo in the East and South China Seas.

Despite barbs on the South China Sea and promises to rebuild the US navy, most of Trump's known doctrine promotes a myopic "America First" worldview that likely will complicate Washington's established relationships with allies in the region.

Indeed, during his campaign, Trump accused allies, such as Japan and South Korea, of freeriding on US military support and promised a tougher approach to alliance burden sharing.

In reality, it is highly unlikely that Trump will do away with US alliances in the region, which have and continue to serve US commercial and security interests.

But, while Trump may not abandon allies, he will definitely take out the crude scalpel and look for trade-offs. This approach has already led to weakening faith among Washington's allies in the US deterrence commitments in the region, and that trend will only continue if Trump proceeds to treat alliance relationships in Asia in a transactional manner.

China's side of the game

China will push ahead accordingly and look to expose areas of vulnerability. In the coming year, there will be a number of areas that Beijing can retaliate to Trump's plans to turn the economic screws.

First, China could continue to up the stakes in the East and South China Seas and might look to be more overt and bold in its militarisation of reclaimed reefs in the latter.

Beijing may also look to use its newly placed military assets in the region to announce an Air Defense Identification Zone over the controversial "nine-dash line" in the South China Sea.

Similarly, in the East China Sea, Beijing may look to increase the presence of its maritime militia in the waters surrounding the Senkaku islands and further push into "grey-zone" situations - sensing Washington's lack of appetite to jump to Japan's defence.

China will also be keeping a shrewd eye on US policies regarding Taiwan and, depending on the direction that Trump goes, may look to press harder on Taipei through tightening the vice on trade and tourism flows and being more overt with its poaching of Taipei's diplomatic allies.

A more gloomy and dangerous scenario might see China ramp up military threats to Taiwan through missile tests and naval exercises in the Cross-Straits region.

It is time to buckle up for a bumpy road in Asia over the coming months.

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<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/12/trump-era-heightens-asia-pacific-tripwires-161226070400556.html>

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