ASIA 13.11.2017 | Mason Richey

Donald Trump's excellent Asian adventure

The White House circus comes to Japan, Korea, and China

When political leaders travel abroad and give major speeches, two things are true: they speak to multiple audiences, and expectations matter, as even good speeches can fail great expectations. These truisms are especially applicable to Donald Trump. No US president in living memory has had rhetoric so blunt, transactional, and ill-suited to simultaneously addressing both domestic constituencies and disparately complex allies and adversaries. Trump compounds this with an inflammatory, unprepared, and un-presidential demeanour. He has a low bar for success abroad.

Given all this, his swing through East Asia – including stops in Japan, South Korea and China – is both crucial and potentially dicey. His agenda included contentious trade relations with all three nations, geopolitical cooperation and competition with China, and the volatile North Korea nuclear weapons issue. The first stop, in Tokyo, was the easy part. Trump and Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe have a good rapport, and Abe is politically comfortable after his recent election victory. Trump's speeches in Japan largely hit their mark, bolstering US troop morale, signalling US commitment to its alliances, and taking a strong position on North Korea.

Of course, beyond the speeches, meetings, and golf with Abe, there were some gaffes. Trump's aggressive and misinformed comments on US-Japan trade relations caused the Japanese to bristle. And after calling Japan a 'warrior nation' representing a potential 'big problem' for China, Trump doubled down on needling Beijing by claiming, bizarrely, that Japan would again become the world's number two economy.

His attempts to cajole Japan into purchasing 'massive amounts of military equipment' from the US, including technology for 'samurai Japan' to shoot North Korean missiles 'out of the sky' came across as premature, ham-fisted, and confused about Japanese missile defence

capabilities. Nonetheless, these errors did not cost Trump credibility at home; nor did they particularly irritate Japan or China. On to the state visit in Seoul.

Success in Seoul

Trump has had a rockier relation with South Korean president Moon Jae In. He has persistently denigrated the US-South Korea free trade agreement (FTA), demanded greater South Korean burden-sharing for mutual defence, and made bellicose remarks on North Korea out of step with the Moon government and the Korean population. Moreover, South Korea and China have recently reached a détente over South Korea's missile defence cooperation with the US, the terms of which potentially weaken Seoul's ability to deepen future integration with Washington. With the US-South Korea alliance undergoing strain, the possibilities for disagreement were numerous.

Trump's touchdown in South Korea started well, at newly renovated Camp Humphreys, now the largest US military base overseas. President Moon even greeted him outside his official residence, the Blue House – the first time ever that a visiting foreign leader has been accorded that honour.

Trump's talk on both US-South Korea trade and the North Korea issue was less strident than anticipated, even alluding to 'some movement' by North Korea towards diplomatic engagement. Alliance reassurance and beneficial arms deals featured prominently.

The culmination of Trump's visit to South Korea was his highly flattering address to the South Korean national assembly, scheduled for the one year anniversary of Trump's election victory. South Korea's elites awaited the address with bated breath. It did not disappoint, and most of the intended recipients of Trumps' multiple messages should have walked away content.

He complimented the country's economic development, movements towards freedom and democracy, and the character of the people who made that possible. Trump repeatedly underlined the strength of the US-South Korea alliance, including the US's commitment to South Korean security extending from the Korean War to the present. Just as important was what Trump did not focus on: the US-South Korea FTA. The speech, which received high praise in South Korean media, was largely a diplomatic success.

The address at the national assembly also contained a message for the US

public: the US presence in East Asia is based on partnerships with allies like South Korea, but it is also in the US interest to be engaged in the region. This was also welcome.

To this effusive praise of South Korea and celebration of the US-South Korea alliance, Trump wedded a dark condemnation of its northern neighbour. Unexpectedly, he focused much attention on the Kim Jong Un regime's predatory nature and human rights abuses. But he largely refrained from the overt threats and incendiary rhetoric that have characterised his recent approach to Pyongyang. Importantly, Trump also evoked his administration's preference for resolving the North Korea nuclear crisis diplomatically.

Lack of tact

Concerning Pyongyang's interests in returning to nuclear negotiations, Trump's message to the North was long on sticks and short on carrots. Notably, he indicated that diplomacy should lead to denuclearisation – a non-starter for the Kim regime. And while Trump's unanticipated focus on North Korea's human rights abuses was welcome, his personalising of attacks on the country – saying that the current Kim's grandfather, North Korean founder Kim Il Sung, was a lying failure – was gratuitous and counterproductive. Unsurprisingly, North Korea reacted with scorn.

Finally, Trump called for China and Russia to fully implement UN sanctions against – and even 'to sever all trade ties' with – North Korea, and to isolate it diplomatically. Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin no doubt warily observed this challenge. This heightened demand reveals the truth of Trump's national assembly address in Seoul: achieving his North Korea aims requires more than US-South Korea defence cooperation. Other regional partners have heavy lifting also. Although his demand to 'sever all ties' is a non-starter, Trump's major stop after Seoul – Beijing to meet Xi – will prove critical, as Trump has pressed him to do more on North Korea. Xi is famously opaque, so we do not know what concrete measures Trump will manage to wring from him.

In the final analysis, Trump's East Asia trip had a low threshold for success, and he exceeded it. But on the North Korea front three fundamental facts remain the same: Washington demands an end to the dictatorship's nuclear programme, Pyongyang rejects it, and China's first priority for the Korean peninsula is stability. It remains to be seen if any of Trump's gambits – a tenuous olive branch extended to Pyongyang, challenging Xi and Putin to push Kim to take it – will actually work.



Mason Richey
Seoul

Mason Richey is associate professor of international politics at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (Seoul, South Korea), editor-in-chief of the *Journal of East Asian Affairs* and president of the Korea International Studies Association.