



By: [Richard Haass](#)

# Did Trump's visit remove doubts about the US's commitment to Asia?



US President Donald Trump spent much of the last week of October in Asia. He managed to bring about ceasefires on several fronts of a trade war largely of his own making, after imposing tariffs on friends and foes alike.

What he did not do, though, was create enduring structures in the economic sphere or put to rest increasing doubts about the United States' strategic commitment to the region.

To be sure, there were some valuable accomplishments. Trump's **meetings in Japan**, arguably the most important US ally nowadays by virtue of its economic and military heft and its critical role in balancing a stronger and more assertive China, went as well or better than anyone could have hoped.

A hallmark of the Trump administration's foreign policy is to be tough on friends and allies, but Trump and Japan's first-ever female prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, got off to an excellent start.

It helped that Takaichi was closely associated with former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, the foreign leader who built the closest relationship with Trump during his first term as president.

It also helped that Japan is spending more on defense and is offering to substantially increase its investment in the US.

The US and South Korea also managed to put their economic relationship on a better footing.

Clearly, America's allies in Asia as in Europe have gotten better at managing the often-difficult diplomatic dance with Trump.

Flattery, gifts, and fanfare, packaged with increases in defense spending and investment in the US, can make for a successful visit.

## A truce in the US-China trade war

The positive tone of these meetings made for a strong backdrop to the bilateral session between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

The meeting produced something of a truce in the **US-China trade war** but did not resolve the underlying economic frictions or address the growing geopolitical tensions between the world's two biggest economies.

China will resume some modest purchases of American soybeans, has promised to rein in exports of chemicals used to make fentanyl, and will postpone restrictions on rare-earth mineral exports for one year.

### Trade issues could and probably will resurface

The US, for its part, will reduce overall tariffs on Chinese goods from 57% to 47%. A deal on the social media app TikTok appears close to being finalized.

New export controls limiting what advanced US technology can go to China seem to have been put on hold.

But a truce is not permanent peace. Trade issues could and probably will resurface, much as they recently have between the **US and Canada** when Trump was angered by a television spot put out by Ontario's government that quoted Ronald Reagan's criticisms of tariffs.

Moreover, owing to the dependence of many American companies' supply chains on access to Chinese minerals and components, China retains important leverage over the US that could be brought to bear amid any crisis.

## Progress is far from guaranteed

Perhaps more important, what did not emerge from the Trump-Xi meeting is any comprehensive rationale for this era of US-China relations, one that governs not just trade and investment but also geopolitical

differences.

No surprise, then, that these talks ended with no common understanding about Taiwan, while China's purchases of Russian energy and support of Russia's military will continue.

While these issues are sure to come up and even dominate Trump's announced visit to China next April, progress is far from guaranteed.

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There was a palpable sense of relief in the region that the US-China economic relationship emerged slightly more stable, as no one wants to be forced to choose between the two great powers.

For many, China is their largest trading partner and a military force to be reckoned with.

At the same time, many Indo-Pacific countries are dependent on the US for their security and economic wellbeing.

## The pivot to Asia

But not everything went well in the region during Trump's stay. US relations with Vietnam, like those with India, have taken a turn for the worse.

China will be the principal beneficiary of this distancing between the US and countries that could complicate Chinese defense planning.



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More generally, the US has hurt its standing with many countries in the region by refusing to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, the region's signature trade pact, and by Trump's liberal use of tariffs.

Many are also uncomfortable about developments within the US. The federal government shutdown reflects a country so divided that it cannot function effectively, a view already made widespread by the government's inability to deal with the country's ballooning debt.

Likewise, severe restrictions on immigration, reductions in federal research funding, and attacks on universities raise questions about long-term US competitiveness and reliability.

Most unnerving of all are trends in **US foreign policy**. American inconsistency toward backing Ukraine and its softness toward Russia have created fears that the US will choose a similar approach for dealing with Taiwan (and the South China Sea) and China.

Nor can America's friends and allies in Asia make sense of US military action off the coast of Venezuela in an effort that appears designed to bring down Nicolás Maduro's regime, the Trump administration's deployment of the National Guard in US cities, and pressures on Panama's government to cede control of the Panama Canal.

Announced intentions to reduce the number of US troops in Europe will add to the

impression of a US foreign policy in transition.

One could be forgiven for concluding that the pivot to Asia begun by President Barack Obama has been replaced by a pivot to the Western Hemisphere.

Needless to say, this is not the pivot America's friends and allies in Asia were and are counting on.

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