

A Busy Week of East Asian Diplomacy

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The busy week of East Asian Diplomacy between President Trump, President Xi, Prime Minister Abe and President Duterte went well. It was the age of the strongmen. All four were charismatic individuals, sometimes controversial and other times winning high public support rate. President Trump's ideas resonate with a strong conservative base of supporters that voted him into power from the hinterlands of the US. He remains popular with this voter base.

In East Asia, President Xi is a strongman who enjoys public support for his anti-corruption campaign. Prime Minister Abe was fresh from a supermajority victory and is the longest serving Prime Minister in recent times. President Duterte is a tough-talking strongman fighting a war against narcotics and recently lift a siege in Marawi against extremist and terrorist forces. All four have similar characteristics when it comes to practicing power in politics and perhaps that is what made this round of hectic diplomacy so successful.

President Donald J. Trump has successfully brought US attention back to the Pacific through his extended tour of East Asia, the longest trip by any US President since President George Bush Senior. Throughout the trip, he has made deals with different East Asian economies, including working with China to open up its financial sector to foreign ownership and selling arms deals with Japan. By some barometers, this is a successful trip when it comes to the art of the deal.

The current trip also represented a second wave of deal-making under the Trump administration. In the first wave, President Trump secured promises from Chinese entrepreneur Jack Ma to invest in the US and create jobs while getting agreement from Japan's Toyota to invest in the US. All these transactions were the Art of the Deal in practice or alternatively some have described it as 'transactional diplomacy'. In this aspect, all states without exception put their national interests first. President Trump reaffirmed all bilateral alliances with South Korea and Japan. President Trump became the first US president to address the South Korean National Assembly. He warned North Korea against provocative move and challenging the US. And also warned North Korea not to underestimate the power of the US. This was symbolized by his tough speech at Yokota airbase in Japan to a combined audience of US and Japanese servicemen. On a broader note, he has also redefined the geopolitical map of Asia by labelling it as the 'Indo-Pacific' rather than Asia Pacific to highlight a role for India.

In the same flurry of activities, President Xi Jinping's administration has also scored some well-deserved positivities. China has branded itself as the defender of free trade against protectionism in the

series of meetings from APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) in Vietnam Danang to the ASEAN Summit in the Philippines. China is also aiding this process through carrying out connectivity projects in the region, helping developing economies with infrastructure development. This appears to be a sector for Beijing to demonstrate its global leadership.

Chinese President Xi also met bilaterally with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to urge for better ties and resumption of Northeast Asian leadership meetings. It represents continued thaw in the relationship. During the busy week, China reached rapprochement with South Korea, ending a standoff over the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) missile system which was deployed to manage provocations from North Korea. Beijing reached a deal with Seoul where the latter suspended deployment of a second system and refrained from alliances against China while China removed all obstacles to K-pop products and Lotte retailing in China.

Perhaps, most importantly, President Trump's visit to Beijing went well. He was given a treat to Peking Opera, visited the Forbidden Palace and cloisonné conservation facility. President Trump also enjoyed royal treatment from the Chinese throughout his stay. The First Lady Melania was even decked out in the 2016 Gucci Qipao wear for state dinner with the Xis. It was good reciprocity as President Trump had treated the Xis well when they visited the US. This was high cultural diplomacy and symbolism in the making. President Xi clearly made an impression on President Trump this time.

Japan also benefitted from the hectic round of diplomacy. Prime Minister Abe managed to have a round of golf with President Trump. It built personal rapport between the two. PM Abe was the first foreign leader to visit President Trump when the latter was a president-elect. Since then, the two had built up what some termed jokingly as a 'bromance' relationship, feeding kois together in this round of diplomacy. The Alliance between the two countries just got stronger between the two leaders. It is a good case study of successful personalized diplomacy.

In an age of backlash against globalization, ASEAN has actually achieved much. They have quietly formed the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) to promote economic regionalism. This by itself is an achievement. Of course, there is much work to be done sectorally and also in terms of movement of human resource. All these need time to reach fruition and strategic patience is very much needed.

In the ASEAN Plus Three summit (APT), President Duterte welcomed all stakeholders. He emphasized the idea of co-existence. He invited the Northeast Asian countries' leaders to give opening remarks. Premier Li Keqiang was invited for opening remarks, followed by the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Li said ASEAN Plus Three had shown momentum of moving forward economically and fostering cooperation after emerging stronger from the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis (AFC). But Premier Li warned of rising protectionism. This message echoed President Xi's advocacy of free trade against protectionism.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe thanks President Duterte for hosting the APT. Abe also talked about meeting the challenges from the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. The 20th anniversary of APT's formation was hailed. Abe was keen to emphasize predictability in regional economic management. Japan is a long-time beneficiary of free trade and is keen to keep the doors open for trade.

President Moon of South Korea also mentioned the ability of the region meeting and overcoming the 1997 AFC. He emphasized the power of solidarity and the vision of the East Asian community in overcoming protectionism. The functionalist and constructivist nature of President Moon's speech matches observers' characterization of his political and ideological inclinations. President Moon is often stereotyped as a liberal, left-leaning and social justice-advocating politicians.

Outside the halls of these important conversations, anti-globalization and anti-neoliberalism supporters were protesting against free trade. The roll back against globalization and trade neoliberalism had arrived at the doorsteps of meetings precisely organized against their advocacy.

Here is where Vietnam played an outstanding host of APEC. The Vietnamese leadership stressed the need to keep the doors of free trade open but at the same time recognizes the dangers of globalization leaving large groups of people behind, including those without digital skills, those who lack educational facilities and people lacking entrepreneurial opportunities.

The Vietnamese leadership wants Globalization 2.0 to be more inclusive and provide equal playing field for individuals to tap into Industrial Revolution 4.0. The Vietnamese leadership also urged countries to tackle a whole host of challenges such as aging population, protectionism, skills gap, etc. It was a progressive, visionary and far-sighted view of what the region needs to do to tackle rising global problems.

Meanwhile, amidst all these flurry of activities, ASEAN celebrates its vision in maintaining peace in the region, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the formation of ASEAN. ASEAN is open, loose and stable as an organization and this is conducive to regional development and peace. Its rules-based order can help to contribute to combating cybersecurity. For the near future, it wants to augment human capital and connectivity.

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