

INTERVIEWS

President Trump's Strategy for Asia

Expert Perspectives

Interviews with Franz-Stefan Gady, Peter Feaver, Robert Ross,
and Avery Goldstein

President Trump's advisors have claimed that his foreign policy toward Asia will be guided by a "peace through strength" principle, a model employed by many leaders throughout history—most recently by fellow political outsider Ronald Reagan. Despite discernable differences in leadership style and a changed political and economic climate, will President Trump's Asia strategy resemble Reagan's? How will his approach be perceived in Asia? Is it possible that President Trump could use his much-vaunted negotiating skills to reach a "grand bargain" with China?

To garner a breadth of insight into these questions, four experts have provided their perspectives on Trump's Asia strategy and what we can expect from his administration over the next four years. The following features interviews with Franz-Stefan Gady, Peter Feaver, Robert Ross, and Avery Goldstein, which have been edited for clarity and length.

Franz-Stefan Gady: President Donald Trump's foreign policy in Asia will not resemble Ronald Reagan's "peace through strength" doctrine of the 1980s for two main reasons. First, the forty-fifth president of the United States has repeatedly questioned the value of American allies and alliances—one of the lynchpins of Reagan's "peace through strength" doctrine—throughout his presidential campaign and his first days of office. Trump's criticism of allies, based on a firm belief that they take advantage of the United States by not paying their fair share for American protection, goes back all the way to the 1980s. Indeed, in 1987 Trump placed a full-page advertisement in three major newspapers criticizing President Ronald Reagan's foreign defense policy, urging the U.S. government to "stop paying to defend countries that can afford to defend

themselves.”

Trump appears to neither recognize the importance of worldwide alliances for American security, nor consider the consequences of Washington reducing its diplomatic and military footprint in the world. For one thing, should he follow through with his campaign pledge and embrace a more isolationist foreign policy, the U.S.-led “hub and spoke” system in Asia, based on U.S. security guarantees to allies, will be in tatters and with it the entire post-World War II security architecture in the Asia-Pacific region. The result will be growing regional instability and a power vacuum likely filled by the People’s Republic of China.

Second, Trump harbors distinct mercantilist economic views underlined by a belief that the global economy is a zero-sum competition that is rigged against the United States. In that spirit, he withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a twelve-member free trade agreement whose members comprise about 40 percent of global GDP, in January 2017. Instead, Trump has pledged to negotiate bilateral trade agreements, a difficult task given that the president has also been threatening to impose tariffs on countries he deems to have an unfair trade advantage, which likely will be reciprocated by potential trade partners.

This stands in stark contrast to Ronald Reagan’s economic policies. While he imposed import quotas for steel and Japanese cars as well as a tariff on motorcycles during his presidency, Reagan nevertheless helped shape the global free trade system as we know it today. He facilitated the establishment of the World Trade Organization and laid the groundwork for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In 1986, President Reagan stated: “Our trade policy rests firmly on the foundation of free and open markets. I recognize...the inescapable conclusion that all of history has taught: the freer the flow of world trade, the stronger the tides of human progress and peace among nations.” No comparable doctrine can be attributed to President Donald Trump and, given past statements, he is unlikely to reverse course and embrace a free trade agenda anytime soon.

This still leaves the question: Which prior president’s strategy will Trump’s Asia security strategy resemble? It is difficult to predict Trump’s likely course of action in the Asia-Pacific region. While he pledged to rebuild the U.S. military, he appears to have no intention of combining the military buildup with the additional forward deployment of U.S. military assets. Indeed, he more than once questioned the value of American military bases abroad. Given Trump’s reluctance to permanently base U.S. troops abroad, what could emerge at the outset of his administration is a twenty-first century, Trumpian version of Teddy Roosevelt’s so-called “gunboat diplomacy” in which the United States will try to maintain its preeminent position in the Asia-Pacific primarily through naval power and the threat of military force—perhaps reinforced by the threat of economic warfare. Perhaps we will also see a form of offshore balancing in which the United States, underwritten by a strengthened U.S. Navy, will focus on strengthening security forces—in particular the navies—of regional allies and partners while reducing the number of overall American troops stationed in the region. Such a strategy,

combined with a pledge by allies and partner nations to increase their financial contributions to U.S. efforts, would appeal to Trump's isolationist tendencies and his transactional nature while containing China and checking North Korean aggression. However, the effectiveness of a larger U.S. naval presence maintaining the status quo in the Asia-Pacific while simultaneously reducing the U.S. military footprint in the region is uncertain at best.

Furthermore, in the long run, neither gunboat diplomacy nor offshore balancing will be a substitute for more comprehensive engagements with allies and the strengthening of existing security arrangements as well as the forging of closer economic ties between allies and like-minded Asia-Pacific countries for a number of reasons. For one thing, Roosevelt-like gunboat diplomacy does not address transnational threats, including terrorism, and offers no tangible benefits for U.S. military forces currently fighting in Afghanistan. In addition, Roosevelt's "speak softly and carry a big stick" approach might appeal to the bullish nature of the forty-fifth president. However, it promises to be an unmitigated diplomatic disaster in the long run and would unnecessarily militarize state-to-state relations in the region.

There is still the possibility that the United States will maintain its existing system of alliances with little or no changes. However, with a president who takes pride in his own unpredictability, it should be clear to everyone that no options are off the table. While a twenty-first century reiteration of Teddy Roosevelt's policy might seem far-fetched, Trump's promise to increase the size of the navy could make this a viable policy option. Nevertheless, should the United States under Donald Trump wish to continue to play a proactive role in shaping political and economic events in the Asia-Pacific region, it will inevitably have to abandon its isolationist stance and continue to comprehensively engage allies in order to reinforce its position as the security guarantor of the existing regional order.

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Peter Feaver: It is simply too early to tell what President Trump's Asia strategy will be and how it will integrate into his larger grand strategy. We know the label he intends to give his grand strategy: "America First." We know that he has a long-standing view that the rise of China is the biggest long-term geostrategic challenge facing the United States (whereas the biggest near-term threat he has identified is terrorism inspired by

militant Islamist ideology), and we know that he believes the current geopolitical realities call for a more confrontational policy vis-à-vis China. But beyond that, there is still too much unspecified to make strong predictions about how it will all play out. None of his major national security appointments thus far would be considered “Asia hands,” and he has yet to flesh out the sub-cabinet appointments, particularly those responsible for Asian policy. Personnel is policy, so once those positions get filled, it will be possible to make more confident predictions.

Even then, we should be wary of making straight-line projections. President Trump clearly sees himself as an unconventional president, one whose success has come in part because he surprises. This is most evident in his strategic communications: his tweets, his statements in interviews, and his dominance of the news cycle. Our allies, partners, and rivals in Asia will have to get used to a very different style. They undoubtedly recognize this already and are likely to take a cautious wait-and-see approach, with the possible exception of North Korea, which may be tempted to conduct its own pernicious variant of surprise diplomacy.

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Robert Ross: President Reagan’s strategy in Asia was premised on competing with the Soviet Union with a major defense build-up. Ultimately, that was a successful effort insofar as it contributed, in part, to the demise of the Soviet Union. [With President Trump], it will be a very different experience. President Reagan benefitted from the great strength of the American economy that was still growing at a rapid rate, as well as from the strong industrialization and technological development of the United States. In a similar way, he benefitted from the ultimate economic catastrophe of the Soviet Union and its failed economic model.

In the contemporary era, we have a very different situation. In many ways we face an unprecedented situation in American diplomatic history in that for the first time we face a country—namely China—that can pose a threat to American maritime supremacy, which has been a cornerstone of American security for the last seventy-five

years or more. President Trump faces this challenge with a very different economic situation in the United States than President Reagan faced when he assumed office in 1981. The United States economy is growing at a much slower rate and our budget is severely constrained by extensive social welfare benefits, limiting our ability to spend on defense. In addition, the already significant deficits in the American economy make it difficult for the United States to continue deficit spending to fund a defense buildup. Meanwhile, the Pentagon, after nearly twenty or thirty years of blank-check defense spending, has developed an overly costly and inefficient weapons acquisition program. The high cost of benefits, including salaries and benefits for our soldiers, makes it very difficult for us to have an extensive weapons acquisition program.

In contrast, China is not the Soviet Union. The Chinese economy is still growing at six or seven percent a year and might continue to do so for the next decade. It is an economy that is growing three times faster than the United States, with a lean national budget, a lean military, and the ability to spend more, particularly on defense. It also has a considerable ability to increase defense spending faster than the United States can. Thus, President Trump assumes office with a very ambitious agenda, and in short, without the resources to carry it out.

In regards to [how Trump's strategy will be perceived in Asia], I think there are multiple aspects to that. One aspect is that the region would welcome an America that can strengthen its defense presence in the region in order to maintain a long-term balance of power with a rising China. At the same time, the region doubts America's ability to carry through on that objective. We can see the region beginning to improve relations with China in the expectation that the relative shift in power over the next ten years will continue to benefit China. We see that most obviously with relations between Malaysia and China and with the Philippines and China, but we see it elsewhere in the region as well. So the region, on the one hand, would welcome it, but they doubt that the Americans and resources will follow through.

Second, much of the region is just unsure about how Trump views the security of other nations in the region and whether he takes their interests seriously. Will he simply focus on relations with China, without consideration for the regional consequences? Will he focus on relations with China at the expense of other countries' security interests? This could happen in two ways—first, excessive U.S.-China conflict that puts pressure on these countries to take sides, or second, in the case of Taiwan in particular, the question is whether Trump simply views these countries as bargaining chips, in which he is prepared to sacrifice their interests in order to reach a U.S.-China bargain that benefits the United States.

The idea that there could be a grand bargain in which the United States maintains the status quo in its relationship with Taiwan in exchange for Chinese concessions on, say, North Korea or economic relations is, simply put, absurd. There is nothing China values more than security in domestic politics and, in its foreign policy agenda, its relationship with Taiwan and its commitment to "One China." There is no trade off that could feasibly require China to make sacrifices on its Taiwan policy in exchange for

something else. In this regard, should the United States decide to change the status quo with its own policy toward Taiwan—that could be very destabilizing. We need to recall that in 1996 there was a significant maritime confrontation between the United States and the Chinese over President Bill Clinton’s policy toward Taiwan. Today, China is much more capable and confident than it was in 1996, so one would expect that the repercussions of a changed U.S. policy toward Taiwan, of a reconsideration of the U.S. commitment to its “One China” policy, would be far more serious than they were over twenty years ago.

President Trump seems to think that the threat of a trade war with China will compel China to make compromises in its economic policies. This too, I think, is a reach. China has significant leverage over the United States, and the United States has significant leverage over China. It is not clear which country would be best able to incur the cost of a trade war, and who would be hurt the most from a trade war. We have already seen China signal its intention to retaliate against sensitive American industries, including the American automobile industry in China. Beijing can also quietly put pressure on other American products in China, including Apple, soybeans, or aircraft, all of which have significant implications for the health of the American economy and the rate of American employment. China has signaled its resolve to engage in that kind of tit-for-tat economic conflict. It is not at all clear how President Trump can reshape the U.S.-China relationship and also avoid significant costs to the U.S. security and economic interests or to regional stability that would surpass the benefits.

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Avery Goldstein: These are complicated questions because, of course, we are only guessing how Trump will actually approach his Asia strategy once he moves beyond the general principles he laid out during the campaign. I would expect that President Trump’s approach to Asia policy will differ significantly from the Reagan approach of “peace through strength” in dealing with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. I think it’s pretty clear that President Trump has a fairly idiosyncratic governing style.

It's a lot more public, it's a lot less formal, and it seems as though he engages in less deliberation with his advisors before making public policy statements.

He definitely does believe that a strong American military presence around the world can ensure American interests, so that is a very general similarity to Reagan's approach. But I think it still remains to be seen exactly how that translates into his Asia policy, because there were some signals that he sent during the campaign that he was going to be more demanding of American allies, especially the Japanese, in terms of burden sharing. The important questions are, to what extent is he going to insist on these allies making changes, and of course, are these countries willing to go along with his proposals on alliance policy?

There's also the possibility that his economic policy and his military security policy in Asia could work at cross-purposes. He has decided to withdraw from the TPP, which was a major step, but it's also a question of whether there will be trade friction, not just with China, but also with American allies in the region. That certainly was not something that really troubled relations between the United States and its European allies when President Reagan was using a strategy of "peace through strength" against the Soviet Union.

Beyond that is the question of whether a strategy of "peace through strength" is one that will effectively deal with the Chinese in the same way that Reagan dealt with the Soviet Union. I think these are fundamentally different challenges for the United States. If President Trump does try to replay the Reagan approach with the Chinese, I find it implausible that it will be very successful. There are too many overlapping interests between the U.S. and China beyond their disagreements that are going to be compromised, and those kinds of considerations were not in play between the United States and the Soviet Union.

My take on President Trump's approach so far is that, because of his style of policymaking and making announcements about policy, it's like no other president's approach. There are some people who would draw a parallel with President Nixon's attempts to appear unpredictable. But clearly, President Nixon went through periods when he was engaged in very serious deliberations with his advisors, who were very experienced in government and foreign policy, whereas many of the people on the Trump team at this point are people with rather limited experience in foreign policy.

[As far as the likelihood of a grand bargain with China], it depends. A grand bargain is probably not in the cards because there are some fundamental disagreements between the U.S. and China that neither side is going to be willing to bargain over. There's not going to be a grand bargain over Taiwan because, for the Chinese, the bottom line is that Taiwan is something they are not willing to bargain about. It will be impossible for them to appear to be making concessions on Taiwan to get a better deal, for instance, on trade or the South China Sea/East China Sea disputes. Taiwan is not just a bargaining chip. It is a political entity that has support beyond Taiwan, especially in Washington. There would be resistance in the United States, especially from some in

Congress, if it looks like the U.S. is trying to strike a bargain with the Chinese that compromises the interests of the people in Taiwan.

I think that the idea of a grand bargain sounds like it fits with the president's style, and perhaps appeals to President Trump because it fits into his "brand" as a businessman who knows how to negotiate, but there are big differences between negotiating business deals and negotiating with other countries. The biggest difference is probably that the issues of nationalism and domestic politics on the part of your negotiating counterpart—in this case, the Chinese—come into play in ways that may lead them to do things believed to be against their own interest. The costs at home in terms of domestic political support, or even just support from elements within the political elite in the Communist Party and the military, may make it impossible for the Chinese to bargain over certain things.

During the election it was pretty clear that, no matter who won, the new president would be determined to draw a contrast between their approach to dealing with China, especially in the South China Sea. Both Clinton and Trump saw the approach of the Obama administration as too accommodating to the Chinese. President Trump's inclination at this point is to try to take a firmer stand. The Chinese understood, even before the election happened, that they were going to face that issue with any new administration. However, there have been some more worrisome developments for the Chinese that they most likely had not anticipated. First were indications that the Trump administration would rethink America's "One China" policy, and second was now-Secretary of State Tillerson's testimony about using American military action in the South China Sea to prevent the Chinese from accessing some of the land formations they already occupy. That has been very alarming. The Chinese reaction has been very strong, even indicating that the United States has to think about whether it is willing to risk a military confrontation. The Chinese aren't hinting about it; they are saying it pretty explicitly.

[In closing,] these are early days in the administration, and we are all extrapolating based on what we think the Trump administration is going to do. One of the possibilities we should keep in mind is that President Trump will change his approach if his style of relying on tweeting in the middle of the night results in resistance and problems that he could have avoided. I do not think it's likely; I think this is the way he is going to continue to behave. But it is possible that he would change his approach and abandon his Twitter account. Events have a way of forcing administrations to modify their approach. In fact, with every recent administration that has come to power, their Asia policy has changed over the course of the first couple of years. The first year is often rocky. That was true for President Clinton, it was true for President George W. Bush, and I think it's probably going to be true for President Trump. And even though U.S.-China relations during President Obama's first year in office went smoothly, shortly thereafter his administration also encountered serious difficulties. Thus, it is likely that whatever China policy the Trump administration ultimately embraces, his team will have to go through what is often a painful learning process about what it takes to manage this key bilateral relationship.

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