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Trump's Asia-Pacific Visit: An Ineffective Attempt to Regain U.S. Initiative in the Region

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U.S. policy towards the Asia-Pacific region can be characterised by its many, sometimes contradictory, actions. The U.S. pulled out of the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), signalling decreasing economic engagement in Asia, and presents a variable stance on China. However, the increased U.S. military presence in the region suggests a possible attack on North Korea. The unpredictability of current U.S. policy worries its Asian partners. During President Donald Trump's visit to Asia-Pacific countries, he failed to convince them that the U.S. is ready for greater engagement in the region and as a counterbalance to China. For the American president, the key point of his trip was talks with China, which appears not to have compromised on trade issues or North Korea.

Trump has failed to present a coherent policy towards Asia-Pacific. His decision to withdraw the U.S. from the TPP and suggestions of the possibility of a pre-emptive strike on North Korea raise concerns among U.S. allies in the region. Trump's trip to Asia was supposed to convince them that the U.S. is not decreasing its commitment to that part of the world. On 5-14 November, the U.S. president paid visits to Japan, South Korea, China, Vietnam, where he attended an APEC summit, and to the Philippines, where he took part in the ASEAN and East Asia Summit. The trip too place amid rising concerns of U.S. allies about the future of American engagement in the Far East. The results of the trip prove that Trump did not succeed in ameliorating their concerns and manifest little readiness to increase U.S. activity in the region besides suggestions of a possible pre-emptive strike on North Korea.

Relations with China. The most important part of Trump's visit was his stop in China. The meeting of the leaders of the two countries occurred in different circumstances than in April 2017, when Chinese leader Xi Jinping paid a state visit to the United States. Since then, the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress has strengthened Xi, underlined the superpower character of his foreign policy, including the dogma of China's sovereignty claims over Taiwan and the South and East China seas. In the meantime, U.S. policy on China has remained incoherent: Trump started his presidency by questioning the "one-China policy" only later to declare a "great friendship" with China. Realistically, the U.S. has tried to reduce its trade deficit with China, which in 2016 was around $347 billion, force it to stop certain practices in trade and investment (e.g., mandatory technology transfers), and convince China to greatly commit to solving the North Korea problem. Most of the trade agreements signed by U.S. companies during the visit (totalling $253 billion on paper) will not make a real change in the countries' relations. Further, most of the deals were arranged at the very last moment and their finalisation is unclear. The constant changes in U.S. policy towards China meant that Xi does not take Trump's rhetoric of possible trade sanctions on China seriously. On the Chinese side, there also was not space made for real positive concessions on North Korea, symbolically represented by Xi's encouraging answer to a congratulatory letter by Kim Jong-un after the latest PRC congress. It was also visible in the Chinese authorities' attempt to enhance relations with South Korea. In reality, Xi is afraid

of a U.S. strike on North Korea, which would mean a regional crisis. He is aware that the U.S. military presence in Asia-Pacific is not being reduced and the so-called "freedom of navigation" operations (FONOP) in the South China Sea are still ongoing. Instead, Xi tried to convince Trump that China's strong position (underlined by its recent Party Congress) will help reduce North Korea's aggressiveness. The U.S. president's statements during his visit to Beijing suggest that Xi managed to achieve this goal.

Xi's strengthened position was evident during the APEC summit, where he presented—in contradiction to Trump—a vision of improved Chinese relations with the region. The U.S. president had criticised many U.S. trade partners' economic policies as "unfair." Xi suggested—based on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—his country was cooperating with other Asia-Pacific nations on globalisation and free trade. Trump failed to convince the APEC summit participants of the U.S. readiness to realistically engage economically in the region. This was visible in the declaration of the other potential TPP signatories to continue negotiations without the United States.

U.S. Allies. The lack of coherent U.S. policy towards Asia-Pacific influences the actions of regional allies, namely South Korea and Japan. Trump's TPP declaration came as a surprise to both countries, especially since they are trying to oppose China's economic supremacy in the region. Additionally, Trump's aggressive statements on North Korea increased uncertainty in South Korea and Japan, where the North's confrontational policy is the greatest challenge. That is why, aside from concerns about its dominance, both countries try to strengthen relations with China because it is also interested in restraining the North. Japan, despite historical and territorial disputes, such as East China Sea claims, works to develop a regular political dialogue with China. At the same time, South Korea has responded with interest to China's suggestion to "defrost" bilateral relations, offered at the end of October. Those relations worsened after the deployment of the American anti-missile system (THAAD) in South Korea. It was set up in response to the North's actions, but China perceives the system to be a threat to its own security. During his visit to South Korea and Japan, Trump confirmed the military alliances and guaranteed that the U.S. would not commit any military actions towards the North without consultations. However, his aversion to deepening economic cooperation (as a way to balance the Chinese BRI) was visible.

ASEAN partners. Members of ASEAN perceive relations with the U.S. as an element of balance against China's dominance. Because of the Trump administration's Asia and China policy incoherence, ASEAN views its relations with the U.S. with cautiousness. States from the association failed to work out a common stance on China, especially in the context of the South China Sea disputes. Countries like Cambodia or Laos (not engaged in the conflict directly) are counted as China supporters, while Vietnam and the Philippines (participants in the dispute) take a more measured position. Economically, the ASEAN countries are dependent on cooperation with China. In 2016, China became first in trade (15%), ahead of Japan (10.5%) and the EU (10%). Singapore has tried to strike a balance between the growth of economic relations with China and American security guarantees, but it resulted in the lack of an invitation to Singapore's president to the BRI Forum in May in Beijing. Further, the lack of coherent U.S. policy in the region forces ASEAN states to strengthen relations with China. Trump's visit only confirmed these connections since he did not suggest any additional cooperation mechanisms. He tried to convince the U.S. partners to coordinate their actions towards North Korea and reassure military cooperation with them, including with the Philippines despite the pro-China policy of President Rodrigo Duterte.

Conclusions. The president's Asia-Pacific visit did not change the situation in the region. China continues with its policy of *fait accompli* in relation to the South China Sea, restrains itself from using its full influence over North Korea, and relies on BRI to increase ASEAN dependence. Trump's success was to convince U.S. regional partners that the country is on the way to having its own strategy of containment of China's political and economic expansion. It was supposed to be underlined by the U.S. idea of cooperation on creating a "free and open Indo-Pacific," together with India, Japan, South Korea, ASEAN, and Australia, which Trump underlined in his speeches during the APEC and ASEAN summits. He also discussed the idea at a meeting with Indian, Australian, and Japanese prime ministers on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit. The main axis of this cooperation is supposed to be security, with economic relations moving forward through bilateral formats. However, it seems that not only has this concept been delayed but President Trump seems not so convinced. His dissatisfaction with it may be evidenced by the sudden cancellation of his attendance at a plenary session of the East Asia Summit and a small number of bilateral meetings on the margins of all the summits. The possible vacuum the U.S. is now leaving in Asia could be filled by the EU. For some time now it has strengthened its position in the region, materialised by the establishment of the EU delegation to ASEAN, finalisation of the declaration of an FTA with Japan (2017), signed but not-yet-ratified deals with Singapore (2014) and Vietnam (2015), and ongoing FTA negotiations with the Philippines and Indonesia.