

# Asia-Pacific under the Trump administration

The *Maritime Issues* conducts an interview with Bonnie S. Glaser, a senior adviser for Asia and the Director of the China Power Project at Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), on issues related to Asia-Pacific under Donald Trump's presidency.

The first months of Donald Trump's leadership has raised questions about the future of U.S. foreign policy in general and its approach toward the Asia-Pacific region in particular.

Given uncertainties associated with the Trump administration's foreign policy, the *Maritime Issues* has conducted an interview with **Bonnie S. Glaser**, to get valued insights into how the US under President Donald Trump has perceived the importance of Asia-Pacific and how it would act with regard to the maritime order in the region.

Ms. Glaser is a senior adviser for Asia and the Director of the China Power Project at CSIS, where she works on issues related to Asia-Pacific security.

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**QUESTION: In the context that the US is facing many internal problems, the slow progress of assigning administration jobs, particularly in the Department of State, how do those issues affect Trump's foreign policy in general and Trump's Asia-Pacific policy in particular?**

**ANSWER:** The Trump administration has been slow to nominate individuals for senior posts, including ambassadorships. The confirmation process is onerous, so once people are named, it

will take several more months until they are confirmed. At the State Department, Secretary Tillerson is apparently not meeting regularly with his senior staff and is instead relying on a handful of people for advice. The interagency process is also not functioning properly. For example, the deputies committee cannot work effectively until all the deputies are in place. The absence of undersecretaries is also hampering the interagency process. Either as a consequence or perhaps by design, the White House is playing a large role in foreign policy. The unusual role being played by the Trump family, especially by his son-in-law Jared Kushner, is not sustainable, and increases the likelihood of outcomes that are not necessarily optimal for American interests.

**QUESTION: What are most significant challenges to the US in the Indo-Pacific region? How will the crisis in the Korean peninsular affect the US attention to Southeast Asia? How would Trump's cooperation with China in the Korean peninsular affect its posture in the South China Sea?**

ANSWER: North Korea poses the most urgent threat to the United States. Rapid progress in its nuclear and missile programs will likely enable Pyongyang to achieve the capability to range the United States with a nuclear-tipped ICBM within the next few years. The Trump administration has made this issue a top priority and a litmus test of the US-China relationship. Maritime issues, including the South China Sea, remain important, but less urgent. The Trump administration has made clear that preserving freedom of navigation and overflight are essential. Privately, Trump warned Xi Jinping against further dredging and island building in the Spratlys. At the Mar-a-Lago summit, much more time was spent discussing Korea than was spent on the South China Sea, however. It is generally believed that Beijing is in a phase of consolidation, not advancement, in the South China Sea. China is unlikely to take provocative actions this year that would undermine its improving relations with the Philippines and the prospects for reaching a Code of Conduct that is not threatening to Chinese interests. If Beijing decides to deploy military assets on one or more

of its military outposts in the Spratly Islands, which could happen in the next year or so, the Trump administration may react far more aggressively than the Obama administration did.

**QUESTION: What are the achievements of Obama's rebalancing to Asia? Which elements of Obama's rebalance will continue under the Trump administration and which ones would be abandoned?**

ANSWER: The Obama administration deepened US involvement with Asia-Pacific institutions, especially the East Asia Summit (EAS). Alliances were a cornerstone of US policy, and US alliances were strengthened with Japan, Korea, Australia and the Philippines. President Obama personally attended the EAS, and the US successfully highlighted security challenges at EAS meetings. The US also strengthened ties with Southeast Asia and with ASEAN. US-ASEAN summits were held and the US expanded relations with most of the members of ASEAN. Vietnam became an important US partner during the Obama administration. The US launched an effort to enhance the maritime domain awareness of several key Southeast Asian nations, including Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia. The South China Sea assumed priority in US policy toward Asia under President Obama, with the US supporting international law and the establishment of a principled security network. US military presence operations in the South China Sea increased over the Obama administration, with over 700 sail days in the South China Sea in 2016 alone. FONOPs were resumed after a hiatus of several years.

The Trump administration's policy toward Asia is still evolving. There is early evidence that alliances will remain the centerpiece of US strategy toward Asia. Partnerships such as with Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia, will be strengthened as well. The military component of US policy is likely to be strengthened. Trump wants to increase defense spending and build more naval ships. The economic element of Trump's policy is very much uncertain. After the

withdrawal from TPP, the US has said it wants to strike bilateral deals, but this will be slow and cumbersome, and will lack the strategic impact of the TPP.

**QUESTION: What are your assessments on the past US's FONOPs programs? Have FONOPs been successful to change China's behavior or harden its assertiveness?**

ANSWER: FONOPs are only one tool in the US toolbox to influence Chinese behavior. FONOPs can help to deter China from taking actions that violate freedom of navigation, but they are unlikely to deter other kinds of Chinese provocations such as island building and militarization of the islands it occupies in the South China Sea. The Obama administration failed to develop an effective cost-imposition strategy against China in the South China Sea.

The US was slow in approving the military's plans to conduct FONOPs and adopted a lawyerly approach to them. This was in part because of the Philippines case against China—the US did not want to undertake actions that could later be determined as against international law. FONOPs were developed on the basis of a US assessment of the original nature of a land feature—low tide elevation (LTE) or rock. That left the administration open to criticism that it was granting China a territorial sea around features such as Fiery Cross and Subi Reef, which is an LTE but is located within 12nm of a rock that is entitled to a 12nm territorial sea. The Obama administration refrained from conducting a FONOP around Mischief Reef, even after the arbitral tribunal found that it was part of the seabed on the Philippines continental shelf. It is possible that the cautious nature of US FONOPs (combined with US emphasis on CBMs to strengthen safety between the two militaries in the air and at sea) was interpreted by China as evidence that Obama's top priority was avoiding US-China confrontation rather than changing Chinese behavior.

**QUESTION: How do you weigh the prospects for U.S.-China cooperation and conflict in the**

**maritime domain in 2017? Will friction increase? Will the US be willing to use economic leverages as proposed by Marco Rubio and Ben Cardin recently to stop China's expansions in the South China Sea and East China Sea?**

ANSWER: The U.S. and China will continue to implement CUES as well as their bilateral agreement on safety in the air and sea. The two countries may continue to negotiate an agreement on the implementation of CUES between their coast guards, but it may be difficult to finalize that agreement in the near term. Conflict in the maritime domain between the U.S. and China is not likely in 2017, although tensions will likely increase if the Chinese deploy military aircraft on their artificial islands in the Spratlys. It is unlikely that the U.S. will consider using economic leverage, for example by imposing sanctions on Chinese entities, unless Beijing undertakes dredging at Scarborough Shoal or another unoccupied feature.

**QUESTION: China and ASEAN recently made progress drafting a framework for the COC for the South China Sea. How will this alleged progress affect Trump's engagements with China and Southeast Asia?**

ANSWER: It is my understanding that China and ASEAN have agreed on an outline of the COC, but have not yet agreed on detailed content. It remains to be seen whether the framework accord that may be completed this year will be substantive. Yet the DOC, which called for a full COC, was signed 15 years ago. It is hard to comprehend why this has taken so long. This is not a difficult document to write. The DOC's shortcomings that need to be addressed in the COC are apparent to all. The only question is whether ASEAN will insist that the COC has teeth. It must be legally binding and include a dispute settlement mechanism in order to be effective.

Given the delay in appointments at the State Department, I doubt that the US has undertaken an

effort to shape the COC. This may be one reason that China is pushing to conclude the COC this year, along with the fact that China's relations with the Philippines has improved, and Manila is the ASEAN chair this year. A binding COC that is implemented by all the signatories is very much in US interest. I hope that the US will be actively engaged in shoring up a consensus within ASEAN in its approach to the COC./.