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# Power Balance Towards China? Trump's Foreign Policy Towards Asia Pacific

¿Balance de poder hacia China?

La Política Exterior de Trump hacia el Asia Pacífico

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## Abstract

This article provides readers with context concerning Trump's foreign policy towards Asia Pacific, power fluctuations in the region and the main reasons behind them according to statements and forecasts of International Relations experts. It addresses Asia Pacific's current balance of power as it has become a controversial topic by demonstrating signs of alteration given Trump's Asian foreign policy and China's reaction, propelled by American withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP). Power fluctuations have been partially fomented by Trump and also by the consequence of Beijing's reaction in its own favor. China is taking advantage of America's foreign policy and its latent economic takeoff with the purpose of enhancing Chinese positioning in the region by acquiring even more power. It is important to clarify that this article states that the power balance issue in Asia Pacific relays in two major aspects: economic and military power and also in the alliances developed as a result of both. The research determined that United States provides allies with protection (military power) and China with investment (economic power).

In addition, power fluctuations are going to be captured through the present situation of some countries in the region, countries which have been visited by Trump so far, aside from China: Japan (visit: November 5-7, 2017), South Korea (visit: November 7-8, 2017), Vietnam (visit: November 10-12, 2017), and the Philippines (visit: November 12-14, 2017). Emphasis on these countries relays on the fact that they are the focus of the problem (militarism), by being strategic in the reinforcement of dominance in the Asia Pacific region. Given Trump's foreign policy, characterized by "America first" slogan, American foreign policy became a conundrum, especially for American allies. For that reason, Asian Pacific countries are showing symptoms of rapprochement to Beijing. The region's panorama relies on countries' efforts to balance their relationships with both powers while the region's power it tries to find its balance.

## Keywords

American foreign policy; Balance of power; Donald Trump; United States of America; China; Asia Pacific.

## Resumen

Este artículo proporciona a los lectores un contexto acerca de las fluctuaciones de poder en la región Asia Pacífico y las razones principales detrás de estas, según declaraciones y pronósticos de expertos en Relaciones Internacionales. El artículo aborda el actual equilibrio de poder de Asia Pacífico, el cual se ha convertido en un tema controversial al demostrar signos de alteración dada la política exterior de Trump en Asia y la reacción de China, impulsada por la retirada estadounidense del anterior del Acuerdo Transpacífico de Cooperación Económica (TPP por sus siglas en inglés). Las fluctuaciones de poder han sido fomentadas en parte por el mandato de Trump y también por la consecuencia de Pekín reaccionando a su propio favor; China está tomando ventaja de la política exterior estadounidense y su latente despegue económico, con el propósito de mejorar el posicionamiento chino en la región al adquirir aún más poder. Este artículo afirma que el equilibrio de poder en Asia Pacífico se basa en dos aspectos principales: el poder económico y militar, y también en las alianzas desarrolladas como resultado de ambos. Estados Unidos brinda protección a sus aliados (poder militar) mientras China brinda inversión (poder económico).

Adicionalmente, las fluctuaciones de poder se plasmarán por medio de la situación actual de algunos países de la región, países que ha visitado Trump hasta ahora, aparte de China: Japón (visita: 5 al 7 de noviembre de 2017), Corea del Sur (visita: del 7 al 8 de noviembre de 2017), Vietnam (visita: del 10 al 12 de noviembre de 2017) y Filipinas (visita: del 12 al 14 de noviembre de 2017). El énfasis en estos países se basa en el hecho de que son el foco del problema al ser estratégicos para reforzar el dominio en la región Asia Pacífico. Dada la política exterior de Trump, caracterizada por el lema “América primero”, la política exterior estadounidense se convirtió en un enigma, especialmente para sus aliados; por esa razón, los países de Asia Pacífico muestran síntomas de acercamiento a Beijing. El panorama de la región se basa en los esfuerzos de los países para equilibrar sus relaciones con ambas potencias, mientras que el poder de la región misma trata de encontrar el equilibrio.

## Palabras clave

Política exterior estadounidense; Balance de poder; Donald Trump; Estados Unidos de América; China; Asia Pacífico.

## Introduction

Since the Trump administration started in 2017, overall American foreign policy has suffered a drastic change. It is yet a foggy strategy that must still be defined by scholars and politicians as the mandate matures. What is evident about his strategy is that “(...) a new vision will govern... it's going to be only America first, America first” as Donald Trump mentions. “America First” was a slogan which emerged during Trump’s campaign; however, this phrase is undoubtedly reflected on American foreign policy as United States is prioritizing American interests over any region or allies’ interests in order to be “(...) responsible for the United States, not the world” as Trump states. Referring to Asia, American foreign policy has chosen a route, which clearly diverges from previous strategies such as Obama’s “Asian pivot”, or George Bush’s “preemptive war”. Given the somersault of American strategy towards Asia and especially towards Asia Pacific region. Other powers such as China are stepping stronger into the picture in order to fulfill the holes left behind by Trump.

This article identifies present power fluctuations in Asia Pacific grounding on the region’s most relevant countries, in terms of alliances: Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and the Philippines, as they make their way into the power balance conflict in Asia Pacific by choosing the best ally between United States and China. In order to be able to choose an ally, the countries previously mentioned have to take into account their own economic and military interests, their historic relationships with both powers and the region’s future. In the meantime, they struggle by balancing their relations with both powers whereas United States and China expose their animosity between each other. Additionally, the article aims to expose China’s deterrent economic power in Asia Pacific, its present influence on the region, even over longtime American allies, and how it is surpassing American dominion given United States lack of clearness in its foreign policy.

In order to do so, the article attempts to describe Trump’s foreign policy towards Asia Pacific by contrasting it with previous American strategies, namely by Obama and Bush, in order to provide readers with a background. Once the background is clear, the article proceeds to give context on American-Asia Pacific and Chinese-Asia Pacific relationship by establishing a sort of comparison between past and present relationships

among Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and the Philippines with both powers. The purpose of delimiting the changes in the relationship highlights the power fluctuations in Asia Pacific.

The relevance of this article roots on developing a more comprehensive understanding of the present balance of power in the Asia Pacific region, and the role of the world superpowers as this situation is a key factor in the emergence of future conflicts and rapprochements, therefore being a reason for investigation. Additionally, the article contributes with a compilation of chronological news appearing on the daily, which can be analyzed in the future in order to mark behavioral patterns of Washington, Beijing and the Asia Pacific region. Furthermore, forecasts can also be carried out. The study is based on a qualitative methodology through the analysis of papers, books, and articles of academics, scholars and politicians who are experts in American-Asian relations, foreign policy and the Asia Pacific region; a process that was also nurtured by current affairs data provided by well-known international journals and news portals. The research had an important limitation regarding the information available: due to Trump's recent administration, it is too soon for deeper academic developments and for that reason most of the data collected was from articles in journals.

## **A chronological glimpse of American foreign policy**

As it was previously stated, American foreign policy towards Asia made a somersault in comparison with preceding strategies. Back in the Bush mandate (2001-2009), The United States' interests were fully placed on the Middle East and European countries. American foreign policy had three vertices: democratization, dominance of the Middle East, and most importantly, "preemptive war" against terrorism. The last vertex was implemented by American government in 2001 after 9/11 terrorist attacks, Bush decided to start military action given the imminent threat made by Afghanistan, one of the "axis of evil", according to him.

Afterward, during Obama's presidency (2009-2017), American foreign policy transcended, as there was a re-balance of strategies, American interests were redirected towards Asia with the "Asian pivot". American-Chinese relationship was intensified by American impetus given the relevance in their trade relation. Obama's administration understood that Asia has become the world's new economic center of gravity, meaning the economic center mass of the world (Erdmann, 2014). This indicates that global economic power has shifted from the United States to Asia forasmuch as Asian countries power has been boosted due to the rapid growth of their economies and fast urbanization. In addition, the "Asian pivot" was an extension of America's military rebalancing. Overall, the strategy-benefited United States the most as American economy was amplified by helping Asia Pacific to develop its own economy. "Asian pivot" permitted United States to promote its economic agenda whilst endorsing economic development in the region.

Nevertheless, since the Trump administration took place, the "Asian pivot" was left to be forgotten in a drawer the day that the American president decided to withdraw United States from the TPP, one of the most important multilateral agreements with 13,4% of the global economy without the US (Pérez et al., 2018). This agreement was composed by twelve Pacific economies as a "pathway initiative" from APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) and was negotiated between 2010 and 2015. On February 2017, United States left the TPP behind, due to the fact that, for

Trump, the agreement was a “(...) horrible deal” because it would severely affect American jobs overseas and additionally, it would be a tool that could be used by other country members in order to take advantage of United States. Moreover, after the American withdrawal, the agreement was transformed into the CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) gathering the eleven remaining countries: Mexico, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, Japan, Chile, Canada, Brunei Darussalam, Australia, and New Zealand (Pérez et al., 2018).

Since Trump’s presidency took place started in 2017, United States started a reduction of its global role. The country has withdrawn from various trade partnerships, trade agreement negotiations, defense treaties, and it has also shifted from its traditional allies; some scholars have described Trump’s strategy as an “offshore rebalancing”. Trump stated that American foreign policy should be reduced and only focused on three core national interests: “(...) fight against terrorism, renegotiation of trade deals and a new emphasis on America’s military power” (Spatafora, 2017).

The present American strategy has a domestic approach instead of an international one, contrary to what has been witnessed in the past. This strategy makes emphasis on the American middle class, which, according to Trump, has been deeply injured by globalization. Given the dramatic alteration in the American foreign policy and its fogginess, Trump’s administration is representing “(...) the injection of the highest level of uncertainty to be seen in the world order since the end of the Cold War” (Mt. Fuji Dialogue). This program also highlights the status of Asian countries, which are in a state of anxious waiting given the conundrum in Trump’s foreign policy (Tanaka et al., 2017), which might actually “(...) alter the core values and principles of the United States” (Erdmann, 2014). This situation has become a risk because Asian countries have to figure out Trump’s intentions towards the continent basing on the policies applied to other Asian countries such as China and North Korea, as Bridget Welsh stated in “Trump’s Foreign Policy in Asia” seminar from “Istituto Affari Internazionali” (Spatafora, 2017).



## Trump's foreign policy towards Asia

As Trump's international political game is being progressively unmasked, it has been clear that his administration will make drastic changes regarding "(...) many long-standing presumptions about the role of United States in the world" (Slaughter & Rapp-Hooper, 2017), which is worrisome, mostly for American allies. Since 2017, there is anxiety in the Asian scene, coming predominantly from two longtime American allies, Tokyo and Seoul, given the "(...) lack of any replacement with a proactive trade policy or economic agenda (...)" according to Amy Searight in "President Trump's Trip to Asia" press conference from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS, 2017). Japan and South Korea present the uppermost interrogates given the fact that they are depending on Washington's defense (military power). Nonetheless, their panorama is still over casted. Arne Westad (2016) stated that Beijing has worried also, mainly because of the imposition of trade and investment restrictions, Chinese worries core is the country's economic growth dependency on exports to United States.

Bridget Welsh (2017) describes Trump's foreign policy in Asia, specifically in Southeast Asia, as absent, transactional, uncertain and contested (Spatafora, 2017). For professor Welsh, Trump is giving the impression of not having any interest in Southeast Asia, going in the opposite direction to Obama. Furthermore, he has not declared his policy towards the South China Sea, instead he has been passively withdrawing United States from multilateral deals of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), disregarding the fact that in the past, the United States has played an active role by promoting the share of information, national and regional mechanisms, involvement in the East Asia Summit, and former membership of the TPP. Likewise, Trump's business-style approach is being reflected in his foreign policy. Given his past as a successful businessperson and his cabinet's power struggle mix between conservatives, confrontationists and capitalists' members, a clear strategy is being averted. Moreover, it is veridical to argue that Trump has all of his efforts directed to North Korea's nuclear development, American military presence enlargement, and to mitigate Chinese influence and power diffusion across the world, especially in the Asia Pacific region.

Currently Washington's behavior regarding bilateral and multilateral agreements has Asian countries on the fine line because of the vulnerability that they are becoming victims of United States' presence in the region creating a "star network" (Slaughter & Rapp-Hooper, 2017).<sup>8</sup> The analogy between "Star network" and Asian scenario indicates that Asian countries are directly connected to United States, which functions as the region's "central computer" or center of the system. Moreover, Asian countries are not connected among themselves, meaning that any resilience of Washington would lead to turmoil and to a possible shutdown. Nevertheless, Victor Cha argues that Asian connectivity diffusion will be positive for the region, as it will encourage for a new security structure addressed to a multilateral Asia.

## Trump's foreign policy towards Asia Pacific

Trump's foreign policy towards Asia Pacific has two emphases: first, reinforcement of American military power and second, reinforcement of economic and trade alliances. According to Susan Thornton (2017) during a press conference, Trump's strategy has abandoned the "Asian pivot" (Qing, 2017). Nonetheless, it would not abandon its strategic emphasis on Asia Pacific as American government states its enduring commitment "(...) based on strategic interests and on shared values" as stated by James Mattis, the US Secretary of Defense.

<sup>8</sup> "Star network" topology is system regarding computers in which all the nodes of a network are connected to a central computer, but are not connected among each other. A failure on the central computer will cause a complete shutdown. (Business Dictionary, n.d.)

Liu Qing enlisted three key features of Trump's foreign policy towards the region (Qing, 2017); the first is "America First". In Asia Pacific, Trump has been mulish regarding Washington's budget directed to American allies' security. He has publicly demanded American allies, Seoul and Tokyo, equally share the economic burden from defense spending by monetary contributing as prompt as possible.

Second feature is American quest of peace through strength; Trump has managed to increase American military and economic power in Asia Pacific in order to secure the United States' hegemonic dominance and he has not hesitated to use that power in favor of American prosperity and security.

Nowadays, American power in the region resides on its naval supremacy. In the last year, Washington has enlarged its military arsenal, especially nuclear weapons, and it is rebuilding the country's armed force starting by broadening it. James Mattis declared in 2017 that a stability initiative in the region would be implemented. The main goal of this initiative is to place 60% of American military forces in Asia Pacific by 2020 (Qing, 2017). In addition, American president is reiterating and developing Asia Pacific's military alliances with countries such as South Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

Finally, the third feature is United States' "issue-oriented" approach as Washington is focusing on resolving grand scale problematics on the region grounding on Trump's priorities. First problematic is Pyongyang's crescent nuclear development restraint and future denuclearization; presently, if the United States is endangered in any shape or form by North Korea, Trump will not hesitate to intervene militarily as Pyongyang is a matter of national security. Second, the renegotiations of trade agreements as Trump's administration thinks that trade agreements in Asia Pacific are the cause behind American trade deficit and economic regression. He specially blames China, as according to Trump's point of view, Beijing is a hazard for American trade survival and development given the balance of trade. The overall result is that Trump is opting for a selective multilateral approach- for example American withdrawal of the TPP, and bilateral negotiations- for example renegotiations of the FTA with South Korea and future negotiations of a FTA with Japan. The third feature is Chinese expansion deterrent.

## The future movements of Trump's foreign policy towards Asia

Anne-Marie Slaughter and Mira Rapp-Hooper have developed diverse alternatives for future movements of Trump's foreign policy towards Asia. The first alternative augurs the total desertion of Obama's "Asian pivot", situation that will cause the abandonment of American allies in the region (Slaughter & Rapp-Hooper, 2017), consequently leaving Asia in disarray. The second alternative is related with the G2 (Group of two), United States and China, and dictates that the strategic partnership between Washington and Beijing will be strengthen, causing the merge of the world's two major economies, consequentially, both countries will lead the G20<sup>9</sup> (Slaughter & Rapp-Hooper, 2017). Finally, the third alternative foretells that Trump's foreign policy towards Asia will be completely attentive to a military strategy (Slaughter & Rapp-Hooper, 2017) enforcing American military presence in the region. This alternative seems to be the up-to-date movement of United States strategy in the Asiatic scenario.

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9 Group of twenty which includes: United States, China, United Kingdom, Russia, Germany, France, Italy, Brazil, Australia, Canada, South Korea, India, Argentina, Japan, Turkey, Indonesia, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, and the European Union.

## American-Chinese relationship during Trump's era

United States developed a solid position concerning tariff and non-tariff barriers, and exchange rates in Asia Pacific due to, allegedly, American trade deficit and economic regression. China is the most affected country in the region by this strategy as Trump has devoted itself to progressively imposing tariffs to imported Chinese goods. As a result, American-Chinese "tariff war" emerged and both powers are imposing barriers to each other goods as "tariff retaliation"- "tit-for-tat". Situation has strongly escalated, hence, negotiations between both countries' trade negotiators are taking place.

The last reunion occurred on August 2018 due to American administration's announcement of "(...) a new round of tariffs on \$ 16 billion worth of Chinese imports" (Collins, 2018). In the past, there have been two tariff waves, the first affected \$34 billion in Chinese imports and the second included 25% tariff (Collins, 2018); as reprisal China "(...) retaliated by slapping an extra 25 percent duty (...)" (Collins, 2018). Hence, financial markets in United States have been fluctuating disfavoring American companies over all; if this war continues, not only the United States will have to bear the costs, but China too.

Analysts like Scott Kennedy and Erin Ennis do not consider possible the prompt solution for this war, particularly because Trump has stated that negotiations will "(...) take time because China's done too well for too long, and they've become spoiled (...) they dealt with people that, frankly, didn't know what they were doing, to allow us to get into this position." (Wallace, 2018).

It is important to highlight the fact that China already overpasses the United States in terms of trade and investment as it has become the first commercial partner of almost all the countries of the world and it is the first investor and receptor of foreign investment on the planet. Additionally, Beijing has become not only an economic threat to United States, but also a military one; since 2017, military reforms took place in China in order to protect its interests around the world. Presently, Beijing is enlarging its military presence in Asia Pacific, emphasizing on its naval power. Chinese navy force, People's Liberation Army (PLA), passed to be an outdated fleet to place China as progressive world leader as it is leading Chinese military transformation (Brennan, 2018); "(...) the PLA navy launched two advanced warships designed for surface warfare, long-range air defense and anti-submarine operations, as the country's naval modernization continues apace" (Brennan, 2018). In sum, United States and China have become worthy adversaries in the region.

## Current standing of China in Asia Pacific region

Multiple tensions related to Beijing occur on Asia Pacific, some have a deep historical background as Tokyo and Seoul and some are current affairs; nevertheless, most tensions are regarding territorial disputes, natural resources such as oil and gas, or governmental decisions such as Pyongyang. Some countries have a negative opinion towards China as an international actor since it appears to be controversial; notwithstanding, Beijing has been notorious for being predictable concerning its Asian foreign policy by clearly exposing its intentions. At present, Chinese priority are Asian countries. Hence, Beijing is thoroughly involved in multilateral negotiations such as APEC, TPP, ASEAN and The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (OCS).

There is an Asia Pacific before and after American TPP withdrawal as it propelled changes on the region's balance of power as China emerged as

the, allegedly, strongest power. According to Westad (2016), this situation “(...) certainly has the potential for strengthening Beijing’s position (...) it has a historic opportunity for redirecting flows of trade and investment to China’s advantage”, besides, Ezra Vogel forecasted a scenario where Beijing will play “(...) a very positive role in international affairs, somewhat replacing the United States”; notwithstanding, “The more likely scenario is that the existing trade patterns will continue, including the major role the United States plays both as a market and as an investor in Asia” (Westad, 2016).

However, China has the opportunity to fill the “blank space” left by Trump in Asian Pacific trade. According to John McCain, American TPP withdrawal “(...) create(s) an opening for China to rewrite the economic rules of the road at the expense of American workers”, is meaning that China could enforce its economic agenda in the region. China is taking this situation as an advantage and is playing its “wild-card”, it is offering Asian Pacific countries a FTA, namely the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership), which conveniently exhibit less regulations and restrictive standards in comparison to the CPTPP; Beijing is rewriting and renegotiating trades and economic relationships. Additionally, China offers the prospect of a less protectionist view in order to bargain FTAs in comparison with United States who became a difficult party in the renegotiation of American-South Korean FTA. Washington’s “solo game” is turning the table positively for China. During Trump’s mandate, Beijing prioritizes the solidification and consolidations of international ties showing a gradual economic and political expansion, propelling its foreign policy goals.



## Asia Pacific’s Balance of Power: Trump vs. China

### Philippines

Philippines have been a strong American ally, more important, it has been a strategic country which enforces American military presence in Asia Pacific given the EDCA (Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement). It is an agreement between United States and Philippines which promotes humanitarian assistance and disaster response, maritime domain awareness, maritime security, interoperability, strengthening AFP for external defense,

and capacity building towards AFP modernization (Department of Foreign Affairs-Republic of the Philippines, 2014). In sum, EDCA granted permission to United States to have access to Philippine military bases. It was signed on 2014. However, Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte is known for his confrontational approach towards other world leaders. Duterte has taken the most drastic approach among all Asian Pacific countries regarding foreign policy towards United States. Beforehand, during his candidacy he promised that the Philippines would have an independent foreign policy from United States and its money. Finally, on October 2016, during his visit to China, Duterte announced Manila's "separation" from Washington.

Through that visit, Duterte was seeking to improve Manila's and Beijing's relationship, mostly in favor of economic assistance, which apparently is more important than Philippine-Chinese territorial dispute for the Spratly and Paracel Islands.<sup>10</sup> Both countries' relationship has actually prospered given the fact that in the same year China granted the Philippines \$24 billion destined to investment and loans, a big share of the money was directed to infrastructure development. Consequently, Beijing and Manila are new friends, situation that is a big progress for China because the Philippines are an imperative ally to counteract American military ambition in the region, as Rauhala argued (Rauhala, 2017).

Moreover, since Trump is president, Duterte saw the opportunity to have a fresh start with United States leaving behind his rocky relationship with Obama, but he does not cut his newly strings with China, nor Russia. Herman Kraft talking about Philippine divergence between United States and China said: "We have a tiny window when we can still play both sides." (Rauhala, 2017).

## Japan

Japan has been a historically ally of United States, "(...) U.S.-Japan Alliance is the cornerstone of U.S. security interests in Asia and is fundamental to regional stability and prosperity" (U.S Department of State, 2017). For that reason, back in 2016, "Tokyo proved to be the most concerned actor in the Asia Pacific after the November elections (...)" (Dian, 2017), especially because during Trump's presidency campaign, he stated that Japan was over relying on United States in order to fund Japanese defense by diffusing its budget obligations. Once Trump positioned, Japan's Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, was the first world leader to meet him. After the meeting, Shinzō commented that American president was a leader "(...) whom I can have great confidence in." (Spatafora, 2017) But there is uncertainty towards Washington's fulfillment of the alliance commitments, given America's unclear strategy. Tokyo is in the middle of a disjunction.

According to Dian (2017), there are two possible scenarios: on one hand, Tokyo can end up in a middle of a confrontation between United States and North Korea, in the case that Washington starts a preemptive war against Pyongyang. Japan will be immersed in an unwanted conflict due to its alliance with United States. On the other hand, Japanese-American alliance can suffer from desertion by Washington, probably due to Trump's impulsive movements. Either ways, Japan has led the communication among Asian Pacific countries and Washington given Tokyo's dual interests on American engagement in the region. Firstly, Japan aims for the continuity of close American-Japanese economic and politic relationship. For that reason Tokyo is attentive on preventing, through policy making, the closure of American market's door by applying a vis-à-vis strategy<sup>11</sup> by which Japanese policy makers contact personally

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10 Asian islands which are being disputed by China, Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Brunei, and Malaysia.

American public functionaries in order to convince them that Japan will be a favorable partner for United States' economy and also to prove to them that "America First" will be injurious not only for other countries but for United States too. Secondly, Japan aims for American presence in Asia Pacific in order to restrain China's process of becoming the region's leading country; because of American "uninterested" position, China is progressively taking advantage by imposing its dominance. It can be concluded that Tokyo is strong-minded about maintaining American-Japanese tight relationship because of security and economy.

Chinese-Japanese relationship can be compared with a rollercoaster ride, a path full of difficulties. Hemmings and Maiko stated that both countries political warmth has been continually disturbed by mini-crises such as Senkaku/Diaoyu;<sup>12</sup> but this has not prevented the solidification of their strong economic bond. Their relationship is based on pure flirtation making the international community to ask, "(...) why is their contemporary relationship marked by rising political antagonism despite greater economic interdependence?" Nevertheless, "Despite geopolitical rivalry and clashes over historical narratives and territorial disputes, both countries are undeniably economic Siamese twins joined at the hips" (Peng Er, 2017) from about 1980s given the "grand bargain."<sup>13</sup> China superposed United States and the European Union regarding trade relationship with Japan. This economic bond needs to be preserved, and even reinforced, as according to *Shizō* Abe "(...) duties and mission that I must fulfill are pretty clear: namely, to regain a strong and robust economy and also to restore Japan's strong foreign policy capability."

Nonetheless, a new panorama regarding Chinese-Japanese relationship is looming because of a series of encounters between both mandatories. On November 2017, a reunion between *Shizō* and Chinese Prime Minister Xi Jinping was held in an APEC meeting in Vietnam. Xi was clear on his will to improve their relationship starting by cooperation regarding regional integration promotion. Xi mentioned *Shizō* that differences between both countries such as "(...) history, Taiwan, and other major issues of principle concerning the political foundation of the China-Japan relations (...)" had to be managed together in a "(...) constructive way (...)". As a conclusion of the meeting, *Shizō* publicly announced: "President Xi stated that the meeting represented a new start for Japan-China relations, and I completely agreed". In addition, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang has described the changes on the relationship as positive.

Eventually, Tokyo is giving the impression of properly balancing its relationship with China and United States; however, it is not clear which will be *Shizō* proceeds. Nonetheless, Tokyo's motivation towards foreign policy and International Relation is utterly influenced by economy. According to Hemmings and Kuroki (2013), *Shizō* purposes "(...) turning Japan into a normal power, one with allies, interests, and hard and soft power", and for that reason, Tokyo has to shape its relationship with other powers. On one hand, its relationship with United States has to become equal and balanced. On the other hand, its relationship with China has to become stronger, and at the same time Tokyo has to inhibit Beijing's growth in the region, making of Tokyo's policy towards China convoluted and nuanced.

## South Korea

South Korea and United States build a sturdy relationship since Korean War<sup>14</sup> by becoming key allies with conjoint goals and values. Both countries are bound in military and trade terms by three aspects. First, coordinated

11 Which means facing in English.

12 Asian islands, which are being disputed by Japan, China, and Taiwan. These islands possess vast oilfields.

13 Period during the 80s when Japanese's automobile and appliance industries moved their production to Mainland China. Japan benefited due to the reduction of production costs, labor costs. China benefited due to the management, investment, technologies, and organizational techniques from the Japanese (Hemmings & Maiko, 2013).

North Korean Policy as Washington has been a leading country in terms of imposing pressure and economic sanctions on Pyongyang; this has led North Korea to accept a meeting with South Korean president Moon Jae-in. Given to this historic milestone which took place in Panmunjom, Moon said: "I think President Trump deserves big credit for bringing about the inter-Korean talks (...) it could be the result of US-led sanctions and pressure." consequently, Trump has acknowledged this credit before the 2018 Winter Olympic Games: "If I weren't involved, they wouldn't be talking about the Olympics right now, they'd be doing no talking.". This "word exchange" can be understood as an attempt to reinforce the relation between Seoul and Washington through their common goal, which is North Korean denuclearization; South Korean-American relationship is at its best moment given their synchrony. Second, the Mutual Defense Treaty which is a treaty between both countries signed in 1953 with the purpose of defending each other against external armed attacks and enforcing the fabric of peace in the Pacific region (Yale Law School, n.d.); and third, the KORUS FTA (U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement) enhanced in 2012 (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2018).

Related to China, on October 2017, Chinese and South Korean governments announced their countries desire to route their relationship into a more positive pathway as both countries have a common interest: North Korean denuclearization. However, tensions were rising recently as Seoul has adopted aggressive security policies against North Korea due to Pyongyang's increasingly nuclear power development and threats and American influence; South Korea has increased its military cooperation with United States and Japan, as consequence Seoul agreed on hosting American THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense). THAAD is an American anti-missile system installed on 2017 in South Korea in order to intercept North Korean missiles and protect South Korea from them (BBC Mundo, 2017). Notwithstanding, Beijing did not welcome in a friendly manner Seoul security policies. On the contrary, Beijing proposed the strategy called freeze-for-freeze (Chinese strategy to de-escalate the tensions in the Korean Peninsula), which dictates that United States and South Korea have to cease their joint military efforts in exchange of North Korean ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons testing halting (McGuire, 2018) but unfortunately, for China, South Korea shared American position by rejecting Chinese effort. The main reason behind the proposal rejections is that this strategy will force United States and South Korea to cease their joint military efforts.

Nowadays, Chinese-South Korean tensions are being mitigated because both countries stated their aim to normalize their relationship. Seoul showed the first step when South Korean Foreign Minister, Kang Kyung-wha, publicly declared that South Korea is not going to be part of American missile defense network. It will not deploy the THAAD again and will not be part of the development of a military alliance with United States and Japan.

Further improvements were made on December 2017 when Xi and Moon meet in Beijing, both mandatories agree on the Four principles to secure peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula:

"First, war on the Korean Peninsula can never be tolerated; second, the principle of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula will be firmly maintained; third, all issues, including the denuclearization of North Korea, will be peacefully resolved through dialogue and negotiations and Fourth, improvement in inter-Korean relations will be ultimately helpful in resolving issues involving the Korean Peninsula" (Cheong Wa Dae, 2018).

This collaboration is a fresh start between both Asian countries in which prosperity, stability, and peace are the main goals.

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14 Military encounter between North and South Korean fractions, which took place from 1950 to 1953; result was the division of Korean peninsula in two: North Korea and South Korea. Southern fractions were supported by United States and Northern ones by China. (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018)

Overall, Seoul is proving respect for Beijing's security concern and has a clear aim to improve Chinese-South Korean relationship, for the good of the region. Notwithstanding, South Korea is aligned with United States in reference with North Korea. It is important to add that Trump's foreign policy towards South Korea has been related only to military affairs due to rising tensions with Pyongyang.

## Vietnam

On one hand, Vietnam and United States have had a distorted relationship where ties were severed a long time ago, but on May 2017, both countries moved forward in a mature attempt to construct a strategic relationship based on security cooperation; Vietnamese leaders are building a trust-based naval commitment with Washington. For the first time, since Vietnam War<sup>15</sup>, an American aircraft carrier visited the country; this is the biggest military presence that Hanoi has had. It is important to highlight that Vietnam is strategic for United States in order to coerce Chinese naval expansion. Further, American TPP withdrawal had grave implications for Vietnam given its status of "small country", Hanoi could have propelled its economy by having accesses to United States' domestic market, and unfortunately, the opportunity was completely lost. Notwithstanding, Prime Minister of Vietnam, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, remained positive regarding the region's multilateralism by favoring other trade agreements proposals.

On the other hand, Hanoi's relationship with Beijing has been presenting tensions given the dispute for South China Sea because China is claiming most part of the South China Sea, including maritime territory recognized by Vietnam. In this manner, due to American aircraft carrier Hanoi acquire a burden, as the situation seems to be an American-Vietnamese pressure on Beijing. However, China has remained silent probably because of Hanoi's fruitful diplomacy. Complexity of Chinese-Vietnamese relationship relays on Vietnam's aim to sustain a firm relationship with Beijing and Vietnam's steady position regarding South China Sea, creating a challenging situation, which has to be handled through diplomacy.

Furthermore, Trade between both Asian nations was \$93.69 billion worth in 2017, economist expect that in 2018 year it rise up to \$100 billion. Vietnamese exports, led by phone industry and multiple staple industries, to China are augmenting, approximately by 60% in comparison with 2016. Over last couple of years Chinese-Vietnamese economic relationship has been tightening, which is important because China is Vietnam's most important trade partner as most of Vietnamese exports are directed to. Hanoi is in need of improving its relations with China because its new naval partnership with United States will not provide economic advantages given Trump's foreign policy. Certainly, Vietnam aims for building regional economic alliances but American economic status has become weaker in Southeast Asia and its support to allies is unreliable. Consequently, Hanoi has to search for other trade and investment partners, such as China, which has proven to be a reliable prospect. During his visit to China, Vietnamese president *Trần Đại Quang*, publicly encourage Chinese and Vietnamese companies to be more innovative and proactive so both countries will engage in a bilateral trade agreement in a near future. Quang is in the need for Chinese investment in Vietnamese industries related to electronics, logistics, and infrastructure.

Overall, Vietnam is one of the few Asian countries, whose relationships with both, United States and China, were broken. Nevertheless, amendment of relationships is needed. Hanoi is in an uncomfortable situation, between a rock and a hard place. Current relationship with United States is for

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15 Armed conflict from 1955 to 1975 in which communist and American supported fractions of Vietnam confronted; North Vietnam was communist and South Vietnam was supported by United States. (CNN, 2018).

prevention because Hanoi is reacting towards China's hostilities due to their expansionist demands in the South China Sea, by collaborating with United States as a powerful military ally. In terms of security, China managed to push Vietnam into American arms. Nevertheless, even if there are pressures, as Le Hong Hiep states it can be assumed that "(...) Vietnam will only embrace the U.S. at a pace that does not cause an over-reaction from China." In addition, Vietnam embracement of United States will not overthrow the country's non-alignment policy.

## Conclusion

Trump's arrival to the United States administration has indeed redefined American foreign policy towards Asia, causing noticeable changes in the Asia Pacific strategic scenario. United States foreign policy towards Asia has passed from Bush's "preemptive war", to Obama's "Asian pivot", and finally, to Trump's yet to be defined foreign policy. His "America first" prioritizes American interests over other countries' interests, including allies, and portrays an impression of American isolation. Consequently, there is a high level of uncertainty in Asia Pacific. Asian countries of the region such as South Korea and Japan, long-time American allies, Philippines and Vietnam, and even Washington's rival, China, are trying to resolve a puzzle set by United States president. Trump's interest in the region is augmenting; nonetheless, his interest remains on security, aiming to increase the American military presence in Asia Pacific in order to maintain American hegemony. United States efforts in the region are concentrated on North Korean denuclearization, American military presence enlargement, and China's power expansion deterrent.

Consequently, certitude is being offered by China, and plenty of the region's countries are responding positively to its economic offer. Nevertheless, changes in the region in respect of China are not merely attributed to Trump's foreign policy. Some Asia Pacific countries have changed their behavior towards China because of Beijing's material pressure and as an attempt to forestall that pressure. Although, most countries in the region "(...) value their economic ties with China and do not want to be forced to make a strategic choice between Washington and Beijing." (Przystup & Saunders, 2017)

The breaking point for United States was its TPP withdrawal. After this situation, Asia Pacific countries do not want to give up on regional multilateralism, even if a power like United States takes not part on it. Instead, they are moving forward in order to find a new FTA that meets countries' interest the best. Before this goal is reached, Asian Pacific countries' strategy, for the moment, is to enhance their bilateral and multilateral ties in order to counteract current changes in the region. It is important to notice that Beijing is offering Asia Pacific countries attractive, even "ideal" proposals regarding trade, for future bargaining of course. Additionally, Beijing has become the most relevant transmitter of foreign investment in the globe, mostly related to infrastructure. China is betting all its economic odds in order to position itself as the cooperative power of the region.

TPP withdrawal seems to backfire United States in economic and political terms; this situation has not only had bad effects in terms of American exports of goods and services, foreign investment, and relationship with other international players, but has also leveraged Beijing's global empowerment, especially economic. In sum, United States economic, political and security influence is shaky, moving slowly towards a black hole of ambiguity. In contrast, United States black hole is China's shortcut to empower and secure its economic and future political agenda in Asia Pacific.

It can be stated that Asia Pacific is in the middle crossroad, United States is on one side and China on the other; emerging relevant questions are: which side is going to be chosen? In addition, by which countries? According to Baviera (2017) "Because of Trump, most countries want to hedge their bets and remain as flexible as possible (...) and right now, China looks like a more stable partner than the U.S." (Rauhala, 2017). However, Asian countries of Asia Pacific such as Philippines, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam have not adopted a steady decision regarding China and United States yet, given the fact that Beijing grants economic growth and Washington offers security but power fluctuations are latent as power itself is shifting from vessel.

Instead of choosing one side, are successively completely rejecting the other side. The countries beforehand mentioned are targeting for regional equilibrium by gradually collaborating, simultaneously, in various affairs with both powers trying to adjust to current Asia Pacific scenario. Like Vogel predicted in 2016: "A lot of countries in Asia...now feel there are two big powers that they have to power about: United States and China, and they will have to adjust to both.". For Beijing and Washington, present condition in Asia Pacific might seem as a zero-sum situation. For others, for example Manila, it is a win-win situation because it is possible to meet their interests at expense of both powers, while there are racing each other and on the search for stable and loyal alliances.

As a conclusion, instead of becoming victims of vulnerability created by Trump's foreign policy, and trying to resolve his conundrum, Asian countries should focus on building and fortifying the Asian linkage in order lose dependence of Washington's leadership and resources. They take advantage of their own economies by harmonizing Asian countries' efforts, and institutionalize an Asian security net in order to become resilient against Trump's decision making. However, for the moment, taking advantage of America-Chinese power battle seems to be the most convenient strategy, again, as long as the battle lasts.

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