



**MEMORANDO OPEX N° 216\*/2017**

**SUBJECT: THE TRUMP FACTOR ON ASIA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC\***

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**DATE:** 10/04/2017

**Panel:** ASIA-PACIFICO

<http://www.fundacionalternativas.org/observatorio-de-politica-exterior-opex>

*\*Abbreviated version*

Depósito Legal: M-54881-2008

ISSN: 1989-2845



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The elected President Donald Trump and his new administration at the White House sowed confusion and alarm in Asian and India-Pacific by broadcasting ambiguous and disconcerting signs about the American new policy towards the region. The later steps taken recently point to a certain return to the traditional parameters of Washington's Asian policy: the alliance with Japan and South Korea, and a firm attitude to China in commitment to dialogue, at the same time confirmation of Asia's strategic importance for the American fundamental interests.

Since the campaign trail, Trump had already hinted at abandoning the pivot policy on military, commercial and diplomatic terms. Just three days hereinafter his assumption of power, the ambitious and highly contentious Trans-Pacific Partnership was ditched, which spread great dismay among the Trans-Pacific partner countries. To add, the One-China policy, respected by all the Republicans and Democrats since the historical Shanghai Communiqué in 1972, was threatened due to Trump's phone call to the Taiwanese President, Tsai Ing-wen, during his first days in office. Would Trump presidency actually redraw the geopolitical landscape in Asia?

Firstly, Washington did not take much time to module its voice: Trump called Xi Jinping to assure his respect to the One-China policy, as well as the commitment on bilateral relations. The two leaders are currently holding their first summit encounter at Trump's Mar-a-Lago retreat (Florida) in order to enhance conversation on importante issues such as the China-US trade ties, reins in nuclear-armed North Korea neighbor, Taiwan, among others. In last February, the American President also hosted the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to reaffirm their traditional alliance. In the same direction, Trump's new Secretary of Defense, General Mattis, held a brief visit to Seoul and Tokyo to provide reassurance that the US remains a reliable ally.

Besides, probably the most dangerous conflict in the region is the disputes and rising concern over Chinese military activity and expansionist ambitions in South China Sea. In spite of the Permanent Court of Arbitration's judgment in July 2016 in which the Philippines won over China's violation of sovereignty rights in its exclusive maritime zone, unilaterally denominated by China as the "nine-dash line", Beijing reacted to this ruling by rejecting it strongly and stated that their creation of island, military buildings, airstrips and sea-base missiles, would be not affected by the verdict. In this context, the recent announcement of President Donald Trump to submit an increase in military budget, the warnings to China and the assured alliance granted to Japan and South

Korea lead to maintain, or even increase, the Chinese containment strategy in Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

In general, the region is facing a complex geopolitic panorama. **China** has been implementing its expansionist policy in order to be the first world leader not only in economy but also in other fields. One of Chinese ambitious projects is “One Belt, One Road” presented in 2014 by Xi Jinping to create a new Silk Road and become the dominant actor throughout Eurasia. With no doubt, Xi Jinping and his team will keep strengthening the Communist Party’s dominant power, in the face of the upcoming XVIII Congress by the end of this year and of serious challenges in socio-economic, ethnical, environmental terms and finally political control. From its side, **Japan** under Shinzo Abe’s leadership has been showing its desire to recover its once-time national pride after the 1945 defeat by proposing a possible constitutional reform of the militarization article, currently opposed by a large part of the Japanese population. From its side, **Japan** under Shinzo Abe’s leadership has been showing its desire to recover its once-time national pride after the 1945 defeat by proposing a possible constitutional reform of the militarization article, currently opposed by a large part of the Japanese population. This initiative was settled before the conflictive situation on the Korean peninsula, threats from Pyongyang ballistic missile attacks and THADD system, the disputes with South Korea on historical reasons, also the conflict with China on Sensaku island (called Diaoyu by China). Besides, the important civilization **India** is reaching a huge economic and population development in recent years. The “Act East” policy is now implemented with an ambitious and proactive external policy. In the meantime, since India faces the long-lasting conflict with Pakistan since 1947, a challenge for Narendra Modi’s mandate is the strategic alliance of China and Pakistan. Moreover, the Chinese geopolitical theory “String of Pearls” in Indian Ocean, the Himalaya borders problem and the seeking of influence over Nepal, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka represent an increasing rivalry between India and China. The other Eurasian giant **Russia** looks also to recover its power since the Soviet Union’s collapse. As the main leading actor in Asia, Europe and Middle East, Vladimir Putin’s government could confront China in the future, taking into account the two key points: Siberia and Mongolia, and Central Asia with the new Silk Road, each one with its own geopolitical interests. Finally, the **ASEAN** has gone through lights and shades during its regional integration. However, its geopolitic ambition in centralizing the internal mechanisms of security and regional cooperation with the implementation of ASEAN+3, ASEAN Regional Forum or the East Asia Summit is nowadays facing a critical moment due to

the different criteria of its members toward the relationship with China, especially over the maritime disputes in South China Sea. It is now a crucial moment for the ASEAN to opt for going in depth in the integration and internal solidarity, instead of allowing the current fragmentation of its member states, which results on the association's incapacity of giving a firm response to China's ambitions.

It is worthy noting that the isolationist position of the US, or at least over the next months, on economic and commercial ties with Asia, could benefit China in short-term; additionally, a possible decrease of Washington's diplomatic presence in Southeast Asia, harmful to the ASEAN, would sadly favor military dictators and despots in those countries. Finally, in strategic arena, Washington will maintain its policy of containing China in the surrounding areas, continuing the current bilateral alliance with Japan, South Korea and Australia, a possible revitalization of military agreements with the Philippines and perhaps Thailand, and probably a strategic approach to key countries such as India, Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam, already initiated under Obama's mandate.

### **CONSEQUENCES AND LESSONS TO THE EUROPEAN UNION AND TO SPAIN**

From the European Union and Spain we should pay major and more active attention to the evolution of the aforementioned events in Asia and the Indo-Pacific in order to guarantee peace and security, to promote the social and environmental sustainability of our economical development, to support the political processes based on democratic values, to promote human rights, to protect women and men under risky conditions in Asia, as well as to condemn any form of discrimination between human beings.

In addition, we should take into account the vast, plural and complex facts that represent all Asian continent as a whole and each country itself, which leads to the needs of a vision which leaves aside the sectorial economism and the sinocentrism. A significant milestone already established between both continents since 1996 is the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), among others governmental forums such as ASEAN Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit, Shangri-La Dialogue, in their frame we should participate and push more effectively cooperation, intercontinental dialogue and reunite all the States, nations and people, not only bilateral but also multilaterally. The interest of Europe is to contribute its support for a polycentric Asia in their regional and subregional integration, in peace, security and prosperity, process that should not be conducted from Washington nor Beijing. Moreover, Europe can definitely share its own experience during its construction process of lights and shadows, in order to build a

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Pan-Asian regional order based on International Law and balance between the main Asian actors such as China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia or Pakistan, and the ASEAN members as a whole.

With respect to Spain, considering our public administration's limited material and personal resources which affects directly our bilateral influence in Asia, a realistic priority for us should be driving the Asian policy within the European Union, actively participating in its elaboration and implementation, on the parallel pushing it toward our interests but guaranteeing the internal cohesion. A further step could be the reestablishment of a Directorate General exclusively addressed to Asia and the Indo-Pacific inside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation (MAEC), formerly the Directorate General of Asia and Pacific; the creation of a coordination mechanism, probably in the heart of Casa Asia, which once promoted could be a coordinating channel between the Governments, other authorities, NGOs and the civil society, for our major presence in Asia as well as more knowledge about this continent in all fields. More we know about Asia, more possibilities for us to take advantage of numerous opportunities to be in relations with our immense and fascinating world built on friendliness, respect, interests and values.

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