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By Abandoning Asia's Multilateral Organizations, US Empowers China



*TPP, CPTPP, APEC, EAS, ASEAN, RCEP – Donald Trump dislikes them all. What under Barack Obama had become known as the pivot to Asia, a deepened US commitment to regional multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific, has been put to an end by Trump. Through his decision to send a mid-ranking cabinet official to the East Asia Summit, marking the third straight year that Trump declined to participate personally, he made clear that multilateral institutions have no place in his highly touted Indo-Pacific strategy. However, abandoning Asia's multilateral organizations will only empower China, argues Prof. **James B. STEINBERG**, former Deputy Secretary of State to Secretary Hillary Clinton.*

Trump's disdain for multilateralism has been on display since the outset. By withdrawing the US from the TPP while announcing that the US would concentrate only on bilateral trade deals and refusing to appoint members to the WTO appellate body, the Trump administration turned its back on 75 years of bipartisan US support for multilateral trade. Just a week after refusing to participate at the heads of government level at EAS, the Trump administration announced its formal withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on climate change.

Nowhere is multilateral engagement more important than East Asia. In the face of China's growing economic and military power, the region's countries are eager to find strategies to counter its influence. Effective multilateral arrangements allow them to resist China's divide and conquer strategy without being forced into an either-or choice of China and the US.

Led by ASEAN, the region has evolved a variety of new arrangements over the past three decades, dealing with a range of issues from political and transnational concerns like public health and energy, at EAS, to security, at the ASEAN Regional Forum and the

Asian Defense Ministers Meeting, to trade, with Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and TPP. To be fair, these institutions have at best produced modest concrete results – the most notable of which was the TPP. The meetings are often derided as an exercise in just showing up.

Realists argue that participating – or not – in international institutions has little or no impact on how states behave in practice. It is certainly true that just attending summits does not guarantee a substantive commitment to the region. But regional leaders seeking to divine US intentions look to these decisions as a sign of US priorities. Without American participation, these arrangements have no chance of offering a viable alternative to a dangerous competition between the US and China – with no certainty that, when faced with a stark choice, the countries will side with the US.

Nowhere is this more apparent than the South China Sea. China has sought to advance its goals in this vital waterway by insisting on bilateral negotiations and trying to limit the role of the ASEAN Regional Forum – not least because the US is a member. The US has rightly insisted on the need for a multilateral approach to develop a code of conduct and prevent China from using its relative dominance to intimidate smaller countries. It is ironic that at the same time as the Trump administration criticizes China for using bilateralism, it is undermining the very institution that can counter China's ploy.

The East Asia Summit is a particularly valuable vehicle for US engagement. It is the only broad-based regional meeting which includes India and all of the US's key allies as well as China and Russia. The meetings not only offer an opportunity for a wide-ranging discussion of pressing regional issues but also provides a venue for individual meetings between the US president and important counterparts.

The US's disinterest in regional multilateral institutions is not the only threat to their viability. India's recent decision to pull out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership demonstrates that unilateralist sentiments are not confined to the US.

Chile's cancelling APEC in light of domestic turmoil is a further blow to an arrangement which is struggling for relevance. And while China touts its commitment to international institutions, it has flagrantly disregarded the Law of the Sea arbitral decision in favour of the Philippines, which said that China's claims on resources within the nine-dash line it has drawn in the South China Sea had no validity.

It is perhaps too much to hope that the Trump administration will rethink the costs of its cavalier approach to regional multilateralism. But US allies and partners can play a key role in keeping these efforts vibrant while using their influence in Washington to advocate for greater involvement.

Japan's leadership in pressing forward with the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership is a powerful example. Congress too can play a role, by raising its voice in support of US high-level participation in these institutions and sending high-level delegations to key regional meetings.

Building effective institutions in the Asia-Pacific is a daunting challenge, but the very effort to sustain them is a critical antidote to toxic US-China competition, which threatens the peace and prosperity of this crucial region.



Prof. **James B. STEINBERG** is University Professor of Social Science, International Affairs and Law at Syracuse University, where he was Dean of the Maxwell School from 2011-2016. Prior to becoming Dean, he served as Deputy Secretary of State, the principal deputy to Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton, from 2009-2011. From 2005-2008, Steinberg was Dean of the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. From 2001-2005, Mr. Steinberg was vice president and director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution. He was deputy national security advisor to President Clinton from 1996-2000. During that period he also served as the president's personal representative to the 1998 and 1999 G-8 summits.

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