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Donald Trump no isolationist after all as Mike Pence pivots to Asia



US Vice-President Mike Pence on the flight deck of the USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier at the US naval base in Yokosuka, Kanagawa, Japan, this week. TOMOHIRO OHSUMI



by [Lisa Murray](#)

For an administration that was going to turn its back on Asia, Donald Trump's team has spent an awful lot of time in the region since the new US President took office in January.

Standing aboard the USS Ronald Reagan in Japan this week, Vice-President Mike Pence said dramatically the ship's steel deck "literally signifies the ironclad alliance our country enjoys with Japan, and our enduring commitment to the Asia-Pacific".

Pence's comments echoed his assurances in South Korea and followed similar statements made by Defence Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who came before him, with all three stressing the US was "unwavering" and "100 per cent" committed to its alliances in the region.

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Six month's ago "unwavering" was not an adjective used to describe Donald Trump's commitment to the region. As a presidential candidate he asked whether the US should scale back its military presence in the region or at least force partners like Japan and Korea to bear more of the associated costs.



Vice-President Mike Pence looks at North Korea from Observation Post Ouellette in the Demilitarised Zone which has separated the two Koreas since the Korean War. AP

On his first day in office, he pulled the US out of the biggest multilateral trade deal ever negotiated, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which was the cornerstone of the Obama administration's pivot to Asia. The trade deal would have given the US more economic clout in the region to rival China. These policy signals prompted a wave of speculation about whether Trump would withdraw from Asia as he sought to "put America first".

But as he nears the 100-day mark in his presidency, clearly this hasn't happened.

"Trump is not shaping up to be an isolationist in Asia," writes research fellow at the United States Study Centre at the University of Sydney, Ashley Townshend - in his [recently released report](#) on the new administration's Asia policy.

"In fact, he may prove to be more forcefully engaged than many US allies and partners will like. Since the election, Trump has outlined hard-line positions on China, Taiwan, and North Korea, raising the spectre of greater instability in the region."

While Mattis and Tillerson "have moderated his more extreme pronouncements, the region can still expect a harder and more self-interested Asia policy from the United States".

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Pence with Indonesian President Joko Widodo at the presidential palace in Jakarta.

Rather than withdrawing from the region, Trump has been remarkably proactive. He has met Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe twice since being elected – giving him more face-time than any other world leader – and he also held a [summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping](#) at his exclusive Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach this month. It was confirmed this week Trump will attend a series of regional meetings later in the year, including the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation leaders meeting in Vietnam.

However, it's not all smooth sailing. Trump was forced to back down on his call for a review of the 'One China' policy, which recognises Beijing's claim over Taiwan. And this week, Pence's messages of reassurance were blunted by controversy over some misleading statements made by the White House on the whereabouts of a US strike group, supposedly en route to the Korean Peninsula.

While Pence addressed service members on the USS Ronald Reagan on Wednesday, the headlines were focused on a different aircraft carrier – the USS Carl Vinson. Trump claimed last week he was [sending a "powerful armada"](#) to waters off the Korean Peninsula. It has since emerged the USS Carl Vinson was sailing in a different direction at the time, to the Indian Ocean for joint exercises with the Australian navy.

An Australian port visit was cancelled and the strike group is now back on its way to the Korean Peninsula but the misleading statements from US officials were criticised across the region for sending confusing signals and stoking tensions.

The controversy threatened to overshadow Pence's trip and his overriding message of solidarity.

"Pence, Trump, Mattis and Tillerson have all now reaffirmed America's strong commitment to its alliances in Asia," says Townshend.

However, he cautions against taking that as an indication Asia policy will be business as usual, pointing out the Defence and State departments are yet to settle on their Asia teams.

And Townshend says there have already been significant policy changes including the US withdrawal from the TPP, and a general shift away from talking about a rules-

based-order in the region as Trump appears to favour a more issue-specific approach.

"It's really early days," says Townshend. "The Asia 'rebalancing' has been dropped at least as a bumper sticker. The message coming out of the Pentagon is that [the label] deprioritises other areas, such as the Middle East. The alliances across the region are intact, definitely, but I think it's premature to argue this administration is not changing its Asia policy."

For now, the focus is on North Korea amid concern dictator Kim Jong-un will mark Tuesday's anniversary of the founding of the military with another nuclear or missile test.

While in South Korea, [Pence warned Pyongyang](#) not to test Trump's resolve referring explicitly to recent military actions taken in Syria and Afghanistan. He declared the era of strategic patience was over but he didn't explain what would replace it.

Stephan Haggard from the school of global policy and strategy at the University of California is sceptical. He said in [a report for the Peterson Institute for International Economics this week](#) "such product differentiation is a standard practice of all incoming administrations before it gives way to a recognition that—in the President's now-classic words – "it's not so easy".

"Saying that there are military options on the table does not mean that those options are good," writes Haggard. "And saying that strategic patience is over does not mean that the administration has anything more coherent up its sleeve. After saying that strategic patience was dead, the Vice-President immediately pivoted to underline how the US was going to work with 'allies and partners', including China, to turn this around. No one thinks such a turnaround is likely to be particularly swift."

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