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5 on 45: Advice to Trump as he travels to Asia

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CONTRIBUTORS:

ADRIANNA PITA

RYAN HASS

David M. Rubenstein Fellow, Foreign Policy,

Center for East Asia Policy Studies, John L. Thornton China

(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

HASS: Hello, my name is Ryan Hass. I'm a Rubenstein Fellow in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution. Today I will talk about President Trump's upcoming trip to Asia.

In Washington the most valuable commodity is the president's time. It is a reflection of his priorities. In this respect, President Trump has shown himself in his first 10 months in office to place significant priority on United States' relationships with countries in Asia. He has conducted a high tempo of phone calls and hosted many visits with his Asian counterparts both in Washington and also in Mar a Lago.

He will build on these efforts with an ambitious 11-day, five country trip to Asia from November 3rd through 14th. While the president's recognition of Asia is important and commendable, several dynamics have challenged his efforts in the region. Specifically, his decision to abandon the transpacific trade partnership without offering any alternative approach, his initial instincts to skip the East Asia Summit, his transactional approach to relationships including with China which have put allies and partners a bit on edge, as well as Chinese President Xi Jinping's persistent efforts to position China as a steady and reliable alternative to Washington.

These dynamics have revived questions in the region about whether the U.S. remains committed to setting the agenda in Asian and playing a leadership role or whether the region is undergoing a power shift towards a more sino-centric regional order. This is not to suggest that the United States is somehow falling behind China in terms of national power or overall influence, but rather to point out that perceptions matter, and at this moment perceptions appear to be trending against the United States desire to be seen as the leading agenda-setter in Asia.

So this trip by President Trump presents an enormous opportunity to reset that narrative and to allay concerns about America's retreat. The president could do so by

showing in a credible way that he understands the issues that animate the people of the region, and that he is committed to working with leaders throughout the region to address the issues that are of greatest interest to their people and also to preserve stability and promote prosperity. For example, He could reiterate America's unwavering determination to uphold its alliance commitments. He could assure partners that he will take their security interests into consideration in his approach to security challenges such as North Korea. He could clarify what type of relationship he seeks over the long term with China, and he can make concrete proposals for working with partners in the region to unlock the talents of its peoples. All these steps would be low cost, high impact ways to reaffirm that the United States remains committed to playing a leading role in setting the agenda in Asia.

President Trump also will face certain challenges. He will need to lay out his thinking on his approach to North Korea, China, and trade issues. On North Korea, President Trump will call for greater international action to dial up pressure on North Korea. At the same time there will be close scrutiny throughout the region of whether President Trump pairs his calls for more pressure with an expression of openness for an eventual diplomatic path forward, or whether he continues to rely on threats and blusters to seek to intimidate Kim Jong-un into capitulation.

In my view, the more President Trump is able to leave the door open to a future diplomatic path the more success he will have in bringing along Japan South Korea and China in his efforts. And this is important, in part because it demonstrates that Kim Jong-un that the world stands united and that he has no possibility of driving wedges between the United States and its key partners in the region for dealing with North Korea.

When President Trump visits Beijing he will lean on his good working relationship with President Xi to try to coax China into applying more pressure on North Korea and offering more concessions on trade issues that would allow the United States and China to establish a more balanced trading relationship. I expect that President Trump's visit to Beijing will provide positive visuals but few breakthroughs in part because President Xi

will not feel particularly motivated at this point to make significant concessions to president Trump.

On regional trade and economic issues, President Trump will be competing during his trip with the likely announcement by the remaining 11 members of the TPP about their plan to move forward with the deal without the United States, and the possibility that China will continue to make pronouncements of the scale of their ambition to invest considerably in the region through their belt and road initiative. Given both the forward progress of regional trade initiatives and the integrated nature of Asian supply chains, there likely will not be strong enthusiasm in the region for negotiating bilateral free trade agreements with the United States. So if the core of President Trump's economic plan in Asia is to insist that countries negotiate bilateral free trade agreements with the United States on Washington's terms, then there is a risk that the region will move forward on its own while the United States stands on the sidelines. And this, I believe, is a metaphor for the broader issue as well.

Will the United States continue to play an active role in addressing major challenges in Asia, and setting the agenda in Asia, or will it increasingly stand to the side while the region coalesces to chart a common path forward? President Trump's trip will go a long way towards answering this question in the minds of leaders and observers throughout the region.

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