

Donald Trump, after a troubled campaign, is getting ready to lead the White House. From this position, he will be also in charge of managing the complicated chess game in the Asia Pacific that his predecessor “formally” began in 2011 with a famous speech (“Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament¹”). Despite some expressions used in that speech, such as <<Asia Pacific is a priority for the US²>> or <<the US are in the Asia Pacific to stay³>>, the US did not discover the importance of the Asia Pacific now or in 2011. The speech was important because it underlined the future commitment of the US in this region: since 2011 there have been many political and diplomatic moves from the US, and some of them have been very important from a geopolitical point of view. To remember some examples, from one side the US has “normalized” its relations with Vietnam, while from the other side the President of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, has repeatedly said that Manila should look for other partners. In any case, the Asia Pacific will be a crucial issue for the future agenda of Donald Trump.

The US and the Asia Pacific

It would be extremely difficult to consider the main issues in the Asia Pacific as a whole: it is better to reflect on the different problems from an US perspective dividing the areas of this region in three (North East Asia, South East Asia, and Oceania). It should be also considered that Russia and China, which formally are no part of the Asia Pacific, are two competitors that should not be overlooked in this complicated scenario. In the last weeks, China's behavior has been a target of some “special attention” of the president elect.

- North – East Asia: sitting between China, Russia and South Korea, North Korea is still a serious problem for the US. Its rather (apparently) bizarre behavior, from one side, limits the strategic options of Washington (it is unlikely to see an “aggressive” US behavior against North Korea), while, on the other side, North Korea is an useful tool to strengthen the relations with the traditional allies of Japan and South Korea, which also host a significant amount of US troops. At the same time, whenever we speak about North Korea there is the role of China that should be considered.
- South East Asia: in this very diverse mix of countries and identities, US policies should first face a relevant role of China, very active in defending (“enlarging” for some states) its positions in the South China Sea. The US has repeatedly criticized the “militarization” of this maritime space, the strengthening of the Chinese Islands and the future possibility to see any kind of limit or denial of the freedom of navigation in the area. The region is very complex, and while there has been a relevant rapprochement between Vietnam and the US (the US can now sell also weapons to Vietnam), new questions and concerns are arising about the position of the Philipino President Rodrigo Duterte. This flamboyant leader has repeatedly complained with the US, longing for an appeasement with China. It is quite unclear also the future of US-Thailand relations, because years of military dictatorship has frozen the traditional close alliance of the two countries⁴.
- Oceania: bilateral relations with Australia and New Zealand have been traditionally close, and especially Australia is engaged with the US through different military cooperation's and exercises.

1 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>

2 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-15715446>

3 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/17/obama-asia-pacific-address-australia-parliament>

4 Per un quadro più dettagliato, vedasi <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/15/politics/trump-asia/>

The first steps of Donald Trump

While Donald Trump was arriving to the White House, he already began to deal with some elements of Asia-Pacific policy, despite its hope of disengagement expressed during the electoral campaign. A classic refrain of the electoral competition has been the accusation to Japan and South Korea of exploitation of the US defence in order to keep low their defence budgets. When talking about budget constraints, Donald Trump also expressed his will to downsize the units deployed in the Asia Pacific, a comment that sparked doubts and questions both in Tokyo and in Seoul. But just a few days after the Republican victory have been enough to change direction: the US troops deployed in Japan and Seoul are still there, but immediately after his victory Trump spoke by phone with both President Park and the Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Abe has also been the first foreign leader met by Trump, the 18th November 2016, in an informal meeting in New York, in the Trump tower. The daughter of the president, Ivanka, was also present⁵. If the relations with Tokyo and Seoul seem more stable now, they are getting more complicated on the Chinese side. A phone contact between Trump and the president of Taiwan has angered Beijing, which is also the target of a complaint from the US President, precisely to “steal American jobs⁶”. About Russia, in comparison to the previous position of Obama, Trump's voice seems calmer, and, right now, there have been no references to the interests of Moscow in the Asia Pacific. On the military level, US presence in the Pacific seems *business as usual*, without interruption or stops. Beside these first steps, the engagement of Donald Trump with the Asia Pacific still needs to be developed, and it seems clear that the US will not retreat from this region so easily.

Analysis, assessments and forecasts

The first months of Donald Trump as president elect have been mainly focused on internal matters, and there have been not so many relevant steps ahead in the Asia Pacific, even if the president has begun to play a little. He will have to build a new “narrative” for this region, to reconcile with old allies, such as Thailand, to strengthen new partnerships, like Vietnam, to decide how to move on after the scrapping of the Trans Pacific Partnership or TPP and to counter China and its aggressive trade policies. Many other issues are still open – disputes, the North Korean nuclear arsenal, ISIS and terrorism – and they will also require some special attention from the US and its decision-makers. The campaign is over, and now it is time to deal with many issues open in this diverse region.

5 <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/17/politics/abe-trump-japan-meeting/>

6 https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/23/business/international/china-jobs-donald-trump.html?_r=0