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Trump – The Barbarian at Asia’s Gate



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To say that Trump is ungainly and ungraceful, unlike his night-haunting former President Barack Obama, both physically and intellectually, is to state the obvious. One only had to watch the awkward, blundering, gaffe filled 12 days of Trump in Asia to get all the verification that one would want of this man, to be the caricature of the historical western ‘barbarian’ to the protocol and tradition sensitive Asians that hosted him; except of course to the ‘fellow-boor-in-arms’, the rude, lawless, self-indulgent boor (*Trump of the East*) Rodrigo ‘Rody’ Roa Duterte, President of the Philippines, who apparently hit it off with his soul-mate, the real Donald J. Trump.

But one could forgive Trump’s ungainliness if he was a true master negotiator that outwitted his adversaries in business, trade and military threats to America, and came out winning without giving up a lot. But that didn’t happen, this prolonged Asia trip, in spite of Trump trying to portray it as the ‘most successful trip ever’. And as to restoring America’s respect in Asia, he obviously doesn’t see himself as most of the World does - the one most responsible for the loss of it in the first place, and as the supremely inept, stumble-prone character ‘Inspector Clouseau’, immortalized by the British actor Peter Sellers in the ‘Pink Panther’ movies.

In arriving in Japan, the very first stop, the historically ignorant and culturally insensitive Trump, warned all rivals of America to beware of what it does to its adversaries, ‘they don’t do so well’, he proclaimed. And although the open threat was mostly directed at North Korea, the main topic of concern, in his consistent enthusiasm for appearing tough, Trump was oblivious to the fact that he was in Japan, one of the famed former adversaries of America which had been totally destroyed, and had to, at the point of American invading guns and nuclear bombs (*2 already dropped*), humiliatingly accept ‘unconditional surrender’, and sign a American drafted, hog-tying, ‘Pacifist Constitution’, transforming

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Japan from a former far-eastern military and economic ‘Super Power’, into a militarily neutered subordinate vassal-state that had to be re-built economically with the help of the United States.



These historical undertones were beyond Trump’s ken as he proclaimed America’s destructive power, standing on the ground of a formerly destroyed and forcibly restrained Japan – now a sensitive close ally, at the very start of his Asia trip. Beyond that inauspicious beginning

Trump did not make any significant policy advancements in Japan but went through the obligatory golfing and the feeding of the Koi, which he ended with a rather inelegant flourish. His exhortation to the Japanese automakers to ‘try and manufacture their cars in America’ was another ‘gulp’ moment as he seemed blithely unaware that almost all major Japanese auto manufactures already build their cars in the U.S., and have been since the 1980s. Gulp!!

In South Korea, the critical topic of concern was of course the threat of a nuclear North Korea, and as there isn’t much anybody can do about it except for all the efforts already underway, the big question going in, in fact the only question was - if Trump would visit the heavily defended DMZ (*De-Militarized Zone*), the front line between North and South Korea. After playing coy for weeks, Trump took a pass and did not go to the DMZ because of fog or perhaps it was the old bone spur acting up.

After criticizing South Korea for months for the trade imbalance between it and the U.S., he tried to be ‘Presidential’ and praised the industrial progress South Korea had made in the last past decades. Not exactly informative or strategic discourse expected from a U.S. President that was going to bring North Korea and Kim Jong-Un quickly to heel, with the statement ‘it ain’t happening’, to their missile tests. As that didn’t happen and North Korea retaliated to the threat with accelerated testing, Trump could come up with no significant new strategy on curbing North Korea, or for that matter improving the trade imbalance in a constructive way.

The visit to China was the ‘biggie’ this trip. In trying to stop North Korea from its nuclear ambitions and in terms of trade, China is to Trump the most important ally and adversary.



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In China, the only real threat to America’s global dominance, one that Trump had mercilessly castigated for being America’s nemesis during his election campaign, the simpleton ‘Barbarian’ was easily seduced by the austere and long-range thinkers and strategists of President Xi Jinping, who awed Trump with pomp and ceremony, thick flattery, seductive prizes as promises of deals, iffy MOUs that mostly wither and die over time, and promises of change to business regulations that are easily reversed and manipulated by the Chinese authorities.

More starry-eyed foreign businesses have foundered on Chinese promises than trying to sail around the Cape of Good Hope in the old days of wooden ships, and yet Trump chased the willow-of-wisps throughout the trip, distracted and awed by Chinese displays of grandeur while basking in their incessant ego stroking. China was, and is, Trump’s greatest challenge overall, and rather than taming them, as he had often belligerently threatened, they had him collared and on a tight glittering short leash. And apart from threatening total annihilation of North Korea with a pre-emptive nuclear strike, which has U.S. Senators back home spooked enough to explore ways to restrain Trump’s ability to launch a nuclear strike, Trump’s only real strategy to curb North Korea is to implore and pressure China to do something. So China was his most important stop.



China, conversely, has figured out how to tame Trump with no damage to itself. It has adopted a campaign of overt pampering of Trump while giving away nothing important. This simple strategy has won the Chinese a number of important concessions and high profile public victories, while silencing Trump on China-sensitive issues of human-rights and South China Seas.

Firstly, Trump no longer berates China as a ‘currency manipulator’ and after Xi’s incessant stroking, seems to have forgotten about it altogether, purring effusive praise of Xi instead and giving him ‘credit’ for taking advantage of America, all the while slamming ‘previous Administration’ for having ‘horrible’ relations with China.

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Secondly, Trump used to constantly berate the former American Presidents for allowing China to ‘rape’ America and get rich solely at its expense. Since taking office, Trump and team have not taken a single concrete step to materially change anything in its Trade relationship with China, or curb it in anyway, except to politely ask it to reduce its Trade surplus with the U.S. ‘pretty please’. China has equally politely said it would think about it, while making some shallow challenges and promises that do not change the structural trade practices materially.

Thirdly, China has eagerly stepped into the global leadership role vacated by the self-imposed retreat of Trump’s America, with Xi stepping into the emptied U.S. President’s shoes as the de-facto World Leader at global forums such as APEC (*Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation*), one they both attended in Vietnam, this trip, and East-Asia Summit which Trump skipped, on critical issues of World Trade, Environmental Protection, and World Peace.

The Europeans have looked on askance at the abdication of leadership from America to China and Putin’s Russia, but because of the ‘strongman’ star-struck Trump, they are helpless in doing anything about it. For this gift of World-leadership, China didn’t have to give up anything. The gift of World leadership was freely given and readily accepted by Xi who probably can’t believe his good fortune in being handed the World on the proverbial silver platter, with ‘TRUMP’ logo emblazoned on it, while Trump preened himself under Xi’s ever smooth stroking hand.



Since his inauguration as President about a year ago, Trump has tried energetically to get help from China to stop North Korea and Kim Jong-Un from testing their missiles and developing the nuclear program. But instead, since his Presidency, Trump has been openly challenged and repeatedly humiliated by Kim Jong-Un and North Korea as they accelerated their missile launches and carried out nuclear tests instead, in open defiance of his bellicose threats, and of U.N. resolutions. Kim Jong-Un in-fact ordered a frenzy of missile testing, reducing Trump to plaintively plead, ‘does this guy have nothing else to do but fire missiles all day’. And as to Trump’s bellicosity, Kim Jong-Un matched Trump threat for threat and insult for insult, openly.

At first Trump, while entertaining him at his resort in Florida Mar-a-Lago, appealed to President Xi, to use China’s influence on North Korea to curb their missile and nuclear

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program and in return promised to curb his own criticism and threats on China. Xi took Trump's concessions and did practically nothing with North Korea as Kim Jong-Un, fired-off more missiles than ever after Trump's and Xi's meeting, in greater defiance. Trump then tried to shame Xi into action by declaring that Xi tried but couldn't do anything. And when that didn't work on the unflappable Xi, Trump blamed him for North Korea's aggression. China calmly pointed out that North Korea was not its sole responsibility but the World's. Trump the self proclaimed deal maker, thwarted on all fronts, then fell to his knees (*figuratively speaking*) and was reduced to begging Xi for help in controlling North Korea. That posture is still maintained today, essentially, and post Trump's Asia trip, Trump again has entreated Xi to intervene, and try and curb Kim Jong-Un.

China still refuses to take responsibility and action on behalf of Trump and America, instead, Xi sent an Envoy to North Korea right after Trump's visit to publicly reinforce the traditional friendship between the two countries (*China and North Korea*) calling the relationship 'valuable wealth for their peoples'; so much for winning deal making from Trump.

Finally, after this grand 'Asia' visit the Chinese strategists again exacted a concession out of Trump without giving up anything. They have gotten Trump to agree to 'dual suspension' rather than a 'freeze for a freeze' method for trying to constrain North Korea. What that means is that Xi got Trump to agree that America will withhold joint defensive military exercises with South Korea, in order for North Korea to agree to possibly curbing its missile and nuclear program. Trump has apparently agreed to such a condition, North Korea apparently hasn't, and may never, and China sailed through taking credit from Trump while risking or giving up nothing.

North Korea considers American/South Korean joint military exercises 'threatening aggression' while the U.S. calls them 'defensive in nature'. Never the twain shall meet.

As Trump completed the rest of the Asia trip by visiting Vietnam, where he wandered by the waiting Vietnamese Leader without recognizing him, and then caught himself just in time, and went on to give a full throated speech to the Leadership of the countries of APEC (*Asia- Pacific Economic Co-operation*), making it a point to call it 'Indo-Pacific', as if the change in name and the inclusion of India (*India does not belong to that group*) will contain China. It was not only naive but short on vision and any semblance of concrete long-term strategy that would ensure open trade, secure China's neighbouring countries, and guarantee the continued openness of the crucial South China Sea, most which was not addressed in deference to China.

Instead Trump elevated China, and through 'America First' insistence, put all Asian allies on notice to look to themselves, and to each other, to counter China's rising power. With America retreating China's importance lifts in everyone's eyes. It also didn't help that Trump effusively praised China's President Xi Jinping at every opportunity as a 'very special man', someone who was recently coronated as the most power leader in recent Chinese history. The Leaders of the other regional countries took note of the America's President's fawning respect for Xi.

In the global forums, the balance of power shifted as Trump publicly abdicated it. And with ne'er-a-thank-you, Xi Jinping easily stepped into the opening, talking, in his turn, about the need for global trade, inclusion rather than isolation, joint action on environmental protection, and the joint effort required towards World peace. Xi Jinping received a standing ovation for proposing all the things that Trump so loudly rejected and discarded voluntarily.

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At the ASEAN (*Association of East Asian Nations*) Summit in the Philippines, Trump flubbed the across-body-double-hand-shake, did not bring up the gross violations of human rights or the lawless extra-judicial killing of citizens by President Rodrigo Duterte, instead he admired his murderous methods openly, and again failed to address China’s aggression in South China Seas.



While Trump was strong on rhetoric, as usual, he was ultra-light to totally absent on specific policy on the key issues that were to be the core of his ‘Asia trip’. Trump by and large ignored his previous strong criticisms of China on currency manipulation, unfair trade practices, aggression and threat of closure of South China Seas, and human rights violations, but was clear and specific on heaping unlimited praise on Xi Jinping, while openly insulting America’s past Presidents.

With the other countries of East Asia, he was equally non-specific on changes to un-fair trade practices, defensive measures against North Korea’s nuclear threat, and China’s general aggression towards its neighbors and its bid to control the disputed areas of South China Seas.

As he pulled America out of the comprehensive multi-country TPP (*Trans-Pacific Partnership*), the other nations came together (*as in the Paris Accord*) and decided to move forward without the United States.

The Bi-Lateral Trade Agreements that Trump favors are yet to be negotiated as Trump stresses his ‘America First’ doctrine in isolation, while the World moves on. With Trump’s and America’s abdication, China and Xi Jinping have stepped-up and taken the mantle of World leadership at the various global forums while Trump and America played with name changes as a grand strategy, of ‘Indo-Pacific’ in a Summit to which India is not even a member, to throw China off. The shallowness of such strategy is stunning in a mature ‘Super Power’, but understandable in a severely mismanaged one, with an uncultured, unsophisticated ‘Barbarian’ at its helm.