How Washington can restore strategic reassurance in Asia

Donald Trump has been the US president-elect for about a month now. Without a solid foreign policy and Asia strategy team in place, his initial interaction with regional leaders has caused the prevailing mood of uncertainty to deteriorate.

Over the weekend, Trump spoke to Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen on the phone. It was the first publicly reported call between a US president (or president-elect) and a Taiwanese leader since 1979.

A few days before, Trump talked to Pakistani Nawaz Sharif during which he reportedly said he was "willing to play any role" the prime minister wanted and accepted his invitation to visit. Much like the unprecedented call with Tsai, no US president has visited Islamabad since 2006.

The problem is that just as cross-strait relations have got ten worse since May this year, India-Pakistan relations have chilled since a September attack on an Indian Army camp in Kashmir by militants, which left 19 Indian soldiers dead. Trump's moves are unlikely to smooth these two strategic frictions.

While less dramatic, some have also criticized Trump for inviting his daughter Ivanka, instead of State Department officials, to meet Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe three weeks ago. Meanwhile, a White House invitation to the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte might tacitly signal acceptance of his extra-judicial killings of suspected users that has claimed thousands of lives.

While a full picture of Trump's Asia policy has yet to clearly emerge, these incidents suggest a basic skepticism to have been drawn.

Colorful rhetoric aside, the president-elect seems willing if not eager to dismantle decades of American global strategy that has rested on military alliances, regional organizations and trade. Since at least Franklin Roosevelt, different US presidents have balanced and leveraged these three tools: some effectively used all three while others only focused on one or two.

However, Trump appears willing to abandon all three in favor of yet-to-be-known "bilateral deals". Nevertheless, many of Trump's unilateral impulses will seemingly be exacerbated by his policy ignorance and dysfunctional staff politics.

In any case, an extra dose of uncertainty does not bode well for a region already brewing with strategic rivalries, unresolved territorial disputes, rising populism and patchy regional architecture. What we need, instead, is a shot of strategic reassurance in Asia.

According to James Steinberg and Michael O'Hanlon in Strategic Reassurance and Resolve: US-China Relations in the Twenty-First Century (2014), one of the benchmarks of strategic reassurance is the bolstering of the credibility of good-intention claims by reducing, as much as possible, the ambiguity and uncertainty associated with unilateral policies.

Put differently, unilaterality breeds uncertainty, which undermines claims of good intentions.

So when behaving unilaterally – as seen in the post-9/11 Bush years, for example – Washington should not be surprised if the region questions the credibility of its commitment in spite of an expanding military presence. In fact, bolstering a military presence – which some Trump advisors equal building a 350-ship US Navy – is only one possible answer to Washington's credibility problem in Asia.

For one thing, the US Pacific military presence has waned and waned. For another, while some allies and security partners may have privately asked for a more robust US military presence, others in the region believe such moves increase US-China military tensions and turn the region into another playing field for great-power politics.

As such, for regional countries, including Indonesia, a credible US commitment to Asia is not just about military power. It is also about investing in regional organizations and multilateral trade agreements – in building the broader regional architecture, in short.

The East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in this regard have the potential to be the premier forums for regional order building, if given the proper political and diplomatic investments.

Such support, however, requires Washington to abandon seeing Asian multilateralism as another realm to compete with China. As Thomas Christensen notes in The China Challenge (2016), it is only natural for Asian states to have some groupings that exclude the US and it is not necessarily a signal of an anti-American conspiracy or a great boon for China when they do.

Taken as a whole, these different ideal pathways to bringing strategic reassurance back to Asia, unfortunately, depend on whether and when Trump and his foreign policy team can quickly "professionalize" themselves upon assuming office.

The writer is a researcher at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Jakarta.