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What May Not Be in the President's Asia Briefing Book

by [Charles E. Morrison](#)

Senior Fellow, East-West Center

Note: This commentary originally appeared in The Honolulu Star-Advertiser on Nov. 2, 2017.

As President Trump departs for Asia, he will undoubtedly have briefing books filled with facts on the countries he's visiting, their leaders and the issues likely to arise. But more regional, subtle, and sometimes less comfortable aspects affecting US Asia policy are often hard to capture in such material. Let's consider this more general context.

First, the power balance has dramatically changed over the decades. The United States is still systemically the region's most important power, but no longer in the dominant position it once had. Americans now need Asian cooperation to achieve US goals (just as Asians need the US), and this puts a premium on listening, consulting, persuading and developing positions in partnership. In the past, the US has often been seen as demanding and failing to give due respect to the other countries and the complexity of their societies and politics. There is much less tolerance of this now.

Second, and related, successful US policies have been rooted in US national interests, but understand and work with positive regional trends. It is virtually impossible to force another government to do something it does not see in its own interests because its leadership is put in the untenable position of losing face or even office. It is more likely that government will win favor at home by rejecting US "demands."

The most effective US policies have been based on identifying and supporting favorable forces of change. For example, as developing economies acquire their own intellectual property, their business interests also want laws to protect it. Taiwan and Singapore, once notorious for intellectual property theft, now have strong rules, based on American models.

Third, effective US leadership requires a comprehensive set of tools – military, diplomatic, economic, and cultural-educational – and the political will to adequately and consistently resource these. The tendency to privilege the military and take other elements of power almost for granted fails to best use our many assets. US business, science, education and entertainment project influence in critically important and long-term ways.

Fourth, multilateralism matters. Asia-Pacific organizations, such as APEC, are voluntary and don't negotiate treaties. They are like clubs where leaders at different levels socialize, discuss significant issues and develop common values. APEC is the club for most socio-economic issues, and the East Asia Summit for politico-security issues. Leaders may bilaterally make deals on the side, but they are all expected to be committed club members in good standing and attendance. The president's challenge, as a new member, will be to learn the ropes. Later, he may want to suggest

changes.

Finally, in Asia even more than most regions strategic vision, gravitas, patience, respect for protocol and predictability are highly prized and expected in leadership. Historically, American leaders usually – though not always - projected these traits, and they remain expected today.

Building a coalition on North Korea, for example, requires a well-thought out and articulated strategy based on the damage North Korea is doing to the global non-proliferation regime. This needs to be presented not simply as an American security problem, but a regional and global one in which South Korea, China, Japan and others have equal or greater stakes.

President Trump has had successful meetings with many of the Asia-Pacific leaders he will see and telephone calls with others. More than in Europe, Asians have been giving the benefit of the doubt to the new president. They will be watching hopefully for new signs of affirmative US regional partnership and leadership.

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