

Big week ahead for Asia's politics and economy

Trade, North Korea and terrorism on agenda for regional meetings

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TOKYO -- Leaders from the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations will hold a string of meetings over the course of the next seven days in what is shaping up to be a week that could decide the future policy framework in the Asia-Pacific region. The biggest issue on the table is undoubtedly the North Korean crisis. While all countries agree on the threat posed by the rogue nation, differences remain on how far to push Pyongyang, and the leaders will be looking to find common ground on the issue.

Trade talks are also on the agenda, with negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement entering their final stretch. U.S. President Donald Trump, in Asia for the first time since he took office, will be pushing for his favored bilateral approach to international relations, while some interesting politicking behind the scenes is also on the cards.

Talks will kick off on Nov. 10 in Da Nang, Vietnam, where the APEC summit will be held, before moving on to Manila in the Philippines for the ASEAN summit and the East Asia Summit. Here are some of the things to look out for in what is certain to be a busy week ahead.

United front against North Korea

A considerable amount of time will go towards discussing North Korea's continued provocations. Defense ministers from the ASEAN nations -- all of which have diplomatic ties with North Korea -- met in Manila in late October, issuing a joint statement "express[ing] grave concerns over the escalation of tensions in the Korean Peninsula" and "strongly urg[ing] the DPRK to immediately comply with its obligations arising from all the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions".

This stance will form the basis of talks on the rogue nation during APEC and ASEAN meetings, with some powerful countries still differing over how far to ramp up the pressure on Kim Jong-un's regime.

The U.S. and Japan, on one hand, want to up the ante. "The era of strategic patience [regarding North Korea] is over," Trump said at a joint press conference with Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on Monday in Tokyo. "Some people said that my rhetoric is very strong. But look [at] what's happened with very weak rhetoric over the last 25 years. Look where we are right now."

On the other side of the argument sit China and Russia, relatively closer in geography and ideology to Kim Jong-un's communist regime. Trump visited Beijing prior to travelling to Vietnam, and asked Chinese President Xi Jinping to do more in the international community's struggle against the rogue nation. Trump is also expected to meet Russia's president Vladimir Putin in Vietnam, and to ask for his cooperation as well.

Whether Trump can convince his Chinese and Russian counterparts will be key to shaping the rhetoric on North Korea during both the APEC and ASEAN meetings.

Multilateral vs bilateral trade

Whereas the U.S. president will be aiming to promote his favored bilateral trade arrangements during his talks with APEC and ASEAN leaders, trade talks during meetings in both Vietnam and the Philippines will be more focused on multilateral deal making.

In Da Nang, on the edge of the APEC summit, ministers and leaders from the 11 remaining nations in the Trans-Pacific Partnership will meet in what they hope will be its last round of negotiations. Differences still remain within member nations -- the so-called "TPP 11" -- as to which provisions will be suspended since the U.S. pulled out of the deal, but the hope is that they can reach a broad agreement on the new TPP, which will be a statement of intent against Trump.

Over in Manila, the 16 nations participating in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, or RCEP, will hold talks. This will be the 21st time the member nations meet for talks, and despite the deal being not as ambitious or broad in scope as the TPP, talks have stalled in recent months, and any deal is unlikely to be struck during the Manila talks. It is nonetheless a multilateral deal, and again does not include the U.S.

Trump favors bilateral trade deals as he sees this as the easiest way of achieving "free, fair and reciprocal" trade, and addressing the U.S.'s trade deficit. But momentum for multilateral trade is high in the region, meaning Trump will have a hard time selling his idea.

Freedom of the seas

With North Korea an immediate threat to the region, the dispute over territory in the South China Sea has been pushed somewhat to the backburners. "The issue of South China Sea is not on the APEC agenda", Li Baodong, China's vice-foreign secretary, told reporters at a recent press conference. It will likely feature little during ASEAN talks as well. Tensions have cooled between Beijing and the affected parties in recent months, with ASEAN and China recently holding joint maritime rescue drills in the disputed waters.

But a wider confrontation could emerge with regards to China's increased presence in the region. Trump is scheduled to make a speech in Vietnam outlining the U.S. administration's new strategy on the Asian region, which might include words on a "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy.

The strategy, which was first put forward by the Japanese government, overlaps geographically with China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative and is seen as a direct competitor to Beijing's infrastructure program. It is also an attempt by Japan, along with its allies in the region, to hedge against the risk of Beijing unilaterally attempting to change the status quo in the region.

"[The] Indo-Pacific region, covering the vast area of Asia-Pacific through the Indian Ocean to the Middle East and Africa, is the growth center of the world," Japan's Abe told reporters at a joint press conference with Trump. "Maintenance and enhancement of the maritime order that is free and open is critically important for the peace and prosperity of this region. We concurred to strengthen our cooperation toward realizing [a] free and open Indo-Pacific."

Countries like India and Australia are ascribing to the Japan-led initiative, while Asian countries with closer ties to Beijing will be pushing for the OBOR. A tug of war behind the scenes is very much in the offing.

Tackling terrorism

A less contentious issue for the region's countries is tackling terrorism. Following the collapse of the self-declared Islamic State caliphate in Raqqa, Syria, experts have warned that Asia faces an increased likelihood of "lone-wolf" attacks from militants returning from the Middle East. Religious tension is also high in Myanmar's Rakhine State, where the Rohingya people, an ethnic minority that is predominantly Muslim, have been marginalized.

Tackling terrorism was high on the agenda during the ASEAN defense ministers' meeting in late October, according to Singapore's Minister for Defence Ng Eng Hen. "Marawi was a wake-up call to all ASEAN countries and a grim warning that the devastation that we see in Iraq and Syria can very well happen in ASEAN countries," he told reporters, according to Singapore media.

The Philippines, which had just ended a five-month battle with Islamic State-linked militants in the southern city of Marawi, is also keen to discuss the issue at the meetings, with the country's foreign minister saying in early November that President Rodrigo Duterte would discuss the issue of terrorism with its regional partners, including Trump.

The joint declaration of ASEAN defense ministers in October touched upon terrorism, but a further commitment to curbing extremism in the region will undoubtedly be on the cards during in this week's string of meetings.