

America and South-East Asia

MEET AND RETREAT

Donald Trump has friends, but few plans, in the region

AMONG recent guests to the White House, Donald Trump has welcomed Prayuth Chan-ocha, the Thai general who overthrew an elected government in 2014, and Najib Razak, the prime minister of Malaysia, whom America's Justice Department has accused of participating in the theft of as much as \$3.5 bn from a Malaysian government fund. Mr Trump has referred to Mr Najib as "my favourite prime minister". Mr Trump's presidency has coincided with a lurch towards authoritarianism around South-East Asia. Such matters seem to be far less of a concern to him, however, than they were to his predecessor, Barack Obama. For the region's democrats, the discrepancy stings.

On his visit to Asia next week, Mr Trump will call on Rodrigo Duterte, the president of the Philippines, who has boasted about killing people and has instituted a campaign against drug dealers and users that has led to perhaps 9,000 deaths. Mr Trump apparently commended Mr Duterte in a phone call earlier this year for doing an "unbelievable job" fighting drugs. Mr Trump will also visit Vietnam to attend a big international summit in Danang next week, ahead of which the Communist Party is repressing dissent especially fiercely.

Cambodia, Malaysia and Thailand are all expected to hold elections in the next year, which their current leaders are preparing to manipulate in various ways to prolong their grip on power. American pressure might have helped restrain them; the lack of it seems likely to embolden them. They can certainly count on China for support. As the region becomes increasingly illiberal, journalists and opposition politicians are suffering. Mere social-media posts land government critics in court and in jail.

Admittedly, America has never been especially forceful about promoting human rights and democracy in South East Asia. Its diplomats continue to condemn abuses in much the manner they always have. But these days, they say, they struggle to convince locals that their country cares.

American warships do still conduct freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, helping to resist China's expansive territorial claims there, points out Ian Storey of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, a think-tank in Singapore. But America does not seem to have a broader plan to counter Chinese influence in South-East Asia, or to promote its own values in the region. One of Mr Obama's tools for doing that had been the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal, which would have obliged Vietnam, for example, to allow independent trade unions. Mr Trump's first big Asian initiative was to withdraw from TPP. In its place, he seems to imagine a system of warm personal ties with the region's many strongmen.