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The United States and Asia in 2017

The Impact of the Trump Administration

ABSTRACT

Early Trump administration initiatives upset regional stability, complicating the foreign policies of Asian partners and opponents alike. Subsequent pragmatic summitry eased regional anxiety and clarified the new government's security and political objectives. The administration's national security strategy, released in December, provided a well-integrated security, economic, and diplomatic strategy for Asia and the rest of the world.

KEYWORDS: Donald Trump, United States, North Korea, China, trade

A SURPRISING POPULIST UPSURGE against globalization and foreign engagement during the 2016 US presidential election campaign sidelined Republican and Democratic Party elites who supported continued constructive American engagement with the Asia-Pacific. Donald Trump rode the populist wave and overcame enormous odds to emerge victorious with a message of foreign interests being subordinate to "America First."

Most experienced Republican Asian specialists were alienated from the new president. There was little evidence of a clear and well-coordinated Asian policy strategy engineered by veteran policymakers. The outlook for a coherent Trump administration strategy remained clouded because of important differences among administration leaders, notably on economic policy, and because key policymaking positions dealing with foreign and defense policy in Asia remained vacant one year into the new government.

President Trump's unconventional personal style in foreign affairs added to the uncertainty. He strongly opposed President Barack Obama's predictable, transparent, and carefully measured policymaking, which had been broadly welcomed in the region. The new president favored unpredictability;

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he sought advantage in employing dramatic gestures and rhetoric, along with military and economic leverage, to benefit from the resulting tensions, just as he had done at the expense of more conventional candidates in the presidential election campaign. Notably, Trump repeatedly inserted himself in the policy process through bluntly worded tweets and other initiatives that exacerbated frictions at home and abroad over important issues in ways that appealed to his populist constituency but upset foreign partners and opponents.

President Trump quickly followed through on his campaign pledge to withdraw from the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership, which the Obama government saw as the centerpiece of future US–Asian economic relations. Then came the announcement that the Obama government’s overall Asian engagement policy, known as the rebalance policy, was ended, with little indication of the Trump administration’s regional approach. Both moves reinforced anxiety and dismay among US regional allies and partners over the direction of American policy.

The new president’s national security leaders, along with Vice President Mike Pence, led the administration’s reversal of candidate Trump’s low regard for US alliances, notably those with Japan, South Korea, and Australia. The officials’ travels to the region reassured allies and partners of US security commitments. But economic relations remained in question as Trump continued his complaints about the US trade agreement with South Korea and US trade deficits with China and many other Asian countries.

CRISIS WITH NORTH KOREA, PRESSING CHINA

North Korea’s threatening rhetoric, repeated ballistic missile launches, and nuclear weapons testing saw the Trump government adopt a new strategy accompanied by far more tension than the Obama government’s more moderate policy of “strategic patience.” Notably, Trump and senior administration officials repeatedly warned of unspecified US military options to deal unilaterally with the North Korean threat, while they markedly increased public pressure on China to use its influence to get North Korea to halt its nuclear weapons program. The president repeatedly criticized and disparaged the North Korean regime and its leader, Kim Jong Un. His public remarks on China’s willingness and ability to get North Korea to stop varied from optimism to warnings that the US was prepared to take unilateral military action.

The crisis over North Korea saw the US administration devote careful handling to relations with China. The Obama government remained positive about US–Chinese relations to the end of its tenure. However, the eventual Democratic presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton, who served as secretary of state in the Obama administration’s first term, sharply criticized a wide range of Chinese government actions. Republican nominee Donald Trump promised trade retaliation. Of the two, Chinese specialists judged that Trump was a pragmatic businessman who could be “shaped” to align with Chinese interests and would be easier to deal with than Clinton.

President-elect Trump upended these sanguine views when he accepted a congratulatory phone call from Taiwan’s president in December 2016. When China complained, he criticized Chinese economic policies and military advances in disputed islands in the South China Sea; he went on to question why the US needed to support a position of one China and avoid improved contacts with Taiwan. Trump eventually was persuaded to endorse—at least in general terms—the American view of the one-China policy. His informal summit meeting with President Xi Jinping in Florida in early April 2017 went well. The two leaders met again on the sidelines of the G20 summit in July and held repeated phone conversations over North Korea and other issues in the lead-up to the US president’s visit to Beijing in November. Despite serious differences between the two countries, both leaders seemed to value their personal rapport, with Xi promising Trump a “wonderful” visit in China.

After the Florida summit, the Trump government highlighted the importance of China using its leverage to halt North Korea’s nuclear weapons development. Planned arms sales to Taiwan, freedom of navigation exercises in the South China Sea, and other US initiatives that might complicate America’s search for leverage to stop North Korea’s nuclear weapons development were temporarily put on hold. The two sides also reached agreement on a 100-day action plan to further bilateral economic cooperation prior to the first US–China Comprehensive Economic Dialogue, set for July.

As Trump registered dissatisfaction with China’s efforts on North Korea in June, the Taiwan arms sales and freedom of navigation exercises went forward. And the July economic dialogue reached no agreement on actionable new steps to reduce the US trade deficit with China but ended in obvious failure with a cancelled press conference and no joint statement. News leaks of senior US administration meetings showed the president rejecting the

compromises with China that were supported by senior administration economic officials, in favor of unilateral sanctions against adverse Chinese trade practices, which have yet to materialize.

The administration avoided harsh economic measures in the lead-up to the president's trip to China in November. However, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, usually positive in public comments about relations with China, averred in interviews prior to the president's trip that the administration was "expecting some movement" from China on longstanding disagreements on trade and North Korea. He and Secretary of Defense James Mattis also voiced the administration's first criticism of China's widely publicized Belt and Road Initiative, the centerpiece of Xi Jinping's foreign policy envisioning a China-centered economic order throughout Eurasia. And the administration objected to the World Bank's continuing practice of providing a couple of billion dollars a year in (subsidized) development loans to China, and it joined the EU in opposing China's market economy status at the World Trade Organization.

China's uncertainty over the American president added to reasons for Beijing to avoid, at least for now, its controversial expansion in the disputed South China Sea. Beijing also was loath to take serious expansionist actions at the expense of the Philippines' claims in the South China Sea, action that would most likely upset China's efforts to woo President Rodrigo Duterte away from the previous Philippines government's close alignment with the US to a position more favorable to China.

BUILDING CLOSE TIES WITH ASIAN LEADERS

The crisis over North Korea tended to overshadow the administration's progress in advancing diplomatic, security, and economic relations with other important Asian countries. As seen in the president's interaction with Xi Jinping, the approach featured summit meetings with President Trump, even with leaders previously shunned by the US because of American concerns over adverse trends in their countries regarding democracy, human rights, and corruption. These included the Philippine president's anti-drug campaign, involving thousands of extralegal killings by government forces, and the Thai prime minister's responsibility for the military coup of 2014, which halted normal democratic practices in the country. The Trump government made clear that it was less concerned with such matters and ready for pragmatic improvement of ties regarding more-tangible American economic,

security, and political interests. By and large, the Asian leaders responded positively to the high-level attention from the new US president, which many of them actively sought.

Japan's long-serving prime minister, Abe Shinzō, solidified a position as the American president's closest regional partner with a meeting in New York with the president-elect; the 90-minute session was the incoming president's first with any world leader. It was followed by a summit in Washington in February that included a full weekend at the president's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida. The two leaders remained on the same page throughout the tensions over North Korea.

Vice President Pence visited Indonesia during a trip to Asia in April 2017 and told officials that President Trump would attend the APEC summit in Vietnam and the US–ASEAN and East Asia Summits in the Philippines in November. The White House announced in October a planned presidential trip starting at the Pacific Command in Hawaii on November 3, with subsequent stops in Japan, South Korea, China, Vietnam (including the APEC summit), and the Philippines (including the US–ASEAN summit). Trump ended up skipping the East Asia Summit.

The vice president's stop in Australia helped set the stage for a cordial meeting in New York in May between President Trump and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull commemorating a World War II victory. The two leaders put aside their earlier heated argument, in a phone conversation in January, over whether the new administration should honor the Obama-era agreement to accept more than 1,000 refugees in Australian custody.

In late April, Trump called the leaders of Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand, inviting them to visit the White House. The invitations to the latter two and a separate invitation to the prime minister of Malaysia represented a break from the Obama government's arms-length treatment of these governments because of concerns over human rights and corruption. Tillerson and National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster hosted meetings with the ASEAN foreign ministers visiting Washington in May. The White House meeting with McMaster on May 5 did not include a personal appearance by Trump, who was at his estate in New Jersey.

Vietnam carried out previously agreed US visits by its senior leaders—the prime minister, the foreign minister, and the deputy defense minister. Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc was the first Southeast Asian head of government to meet with President Trump, in late May. The Vietnamese premier

strove to forge a personal relationship with Trump and meet US expectations halfway for a more balanced American trade relationship with Vietnam.

Following his election and quick inauguration in May, ending a South Korean presidential crisis caused by a corruption scandal, South Korean President Moon Jae-in traveled to Washington for a summit with President Trump in late June. Moon gave top priority to cooperating with the US president in dealing with the North Korean threat. The South Korean government also put aside anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea and worked closely in trilateral cooperation involving Japan and the US on the North Korean crisis. And it followed through with the deployment of the US THAAD anti-missile system in South Korea, despite unprecedented pressure from China.

In late June, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was warmly welcomed at the White House as the leader of an important world power and economic and security partner, valued for its own sake and for the important role it plays in the ongoing US-backed struggle against terrorist forces, notably in neighboring Afghanistan. India's importance grew with Trump's decision in August to add 4,000 troops to the 8,000 American troops stationed in Afghanistan, endeavoring to counter Taliban combatants seeking to overthrow the US-backed Afghan government. Defense Secretary Mattis made his first visit to India in September, with the Pentagon stressing "US appreciation of India's important contributions toward Afghanistan's democracy, stability, prosperity and security." The US continued to press Pakistan to suppress pro-Taliban forces operating along its border with Afghanistan and take other measures to support the Afghan government. The results were disappointing, reinforcing a higher US priority in working with India on Afghan issues despite the India-Pakistan rivalry.

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak was a close partner of the Obama government until he became mired in a major corruption scandal involving billions of dollars in investment funds that came under investigation by the US Justice Department. Najib found the Trump government more welcoming, during a visit to the White House and a cordial meeting with the president in September. The Trump government refused to comment on the US government investigation. The Malaysian government emphasized the positive, pledging to buy US\$ 10 billion in US commercial aircraft over five years and to invest close to US\$ 4 billion in the US economy. Common security interests against terrorism and closer cooperation between the two militaries were underlined.

US–Thailand relations remained stalled on account of the 2014 Thai military coup, which ended democratic rule, and slow progress toward a return to democratic governance. Nonetheless, coup leader and current Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and his wife were warmly welcomed by President and Melania Trump at the White House in early October. This marked the first such visit by a Thai leader since 2005. The talks with Trump, Pence, and congressional leaders covered bilateral trade, sanctions against North Korea, the South China Sea, and the Rohingya refugee crisis in Thailand’s neighbor Myanmar. Prayuth used the occasion to affirm that free elections will be held in 2018 to restore democratic governance.

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made a six-day trip to Washington in late October, just prior to Trump’s inaugural visit to the region. Stressing the positive, Lee followed the Malaysian example in agreeing to purchase \$13.8 billion in US commercial aircraft for Singapore Airlines. Close bilateral military and security cooperation continues to advance, despite sometimes strong negative signals from China pressing Singapore to back away from America. The prime minister came to Washington fresh from a summit with Xi in Beijing. Underlining Singapore’s balancing between the two great powers, he urged Trump to seek a good relationship with China.

Apart from North Korea, the most strident rhetoric criticizing the US government by an Asian leader over the past year came from Philippines President Duterte. His draconian crackdown on drug traffickers resulted in thousands of extralegal killings, including of students, and was strongly criticized by human rights advocates at home and abroad, including the Catholic Church, the United Nations, the US government, and many others. The White House put aside such concerns when Trump in April invited Duterte to meet in Washington. Duterte demurred, saying he was too busy, as the crisis caused by radical Islamic terrorists taking control of the city of Marawi in the southern province of Mindanao escalated into a months-long siege. Answering a media question in July on his facing likely demonstrations if he visited the US, Duterte replied with his trademark candor that he would never again visit the US: “I’ve seen America and it’s lousy.” In contrast, the Philippines leader had a cordial meeting with Secretary of State Tillerson in Manila for ASEAN meetings in August, and by late September Duterte was publicly conciliatory toward the US. One objective of the change in tone was reportedly to encourage Trump to visit the Philippines for talks on bilateral

relations and ASEAN-related meetings hosted by Duterte in his role as chairman of ASEAN in 2017.

RESULTS OF TRUMP'S ASIA VISIT

As promised, Xi Jinping followed through with an extraordinary welcome for visiting President Trump, as did the other Asian leaders hosting the US president on his inaugural trip to the region. When Trump went to the G20 summit in Germany in July, he was seen as shunned and isolated. Familiar with Trump because of earlier cordial meetings in the US, important Asian leaders were attentive and solicitous, seeking improved relations. The trip sometimes featured large trade deals and economic commitments that turned out to be less than met the eye. On the whole, the achievements were heavily symbolic, focused on establishing personal rapport at the top levels of government. The US president's concerns about the threat from North Korea and about US trade imbalances and other economic complaints were evident throughout. His speech at the APEC meeting laid out a strong warning to all concerned that the US would no longer play what the president saw as a passive role in the face of unfair practices by economic partners that disadvantage the US. While Trump continued to reject multilateral economic agreements, he participated fully in the APEC summit, the East Asian Leadership summit, and the US–ASEAN summit. The latter steps and the president's attentiveness throughout his long and demanding schedule signaled strong top-level US commitment to continued active engagement in regional affairs. There was little in the trip for administration critics in the US or elsewhere to complain about.

ELEMENTS OF US STRATEGY

Rejecting the Trans-Pacific Partnership and ending the Obama rebalance policy both combined with Trump's often strident and harsh pressure on North Korea and periodic outbursts on unfair trade practices by Asian governments to pose major uncertainties for American allies, partners, and others seeking stability advantageous to their countries' development—their top policy priority. Regional officials looked in vain for a coherent American strategy telling them what to expect from the US during the Trump presidency. The obstacles to such a strategy seemed formidable. The administration remained

seriously understaffed at the policymaking level. It had enormous preoccupations at home, headed by the faltering legislative agenda of the Republican leadership. Moreover, investigations of the Trump campaign's alleged collusion with Russian meddling in the 2016 election campaign caused periodic controversy and widespread legal complications for administration officials caught up in the investigations. The US government's focus on North Korea remained intense, and the importance of the China relationship received high-level attention, but other regional priorities received episodic treatment. The US attention to the region competed with the need to manage the wide range of instability in the Middle East and Russian challenges in Europe and elsewhere.

Nevertheless, Trump's Asian summitry and supporting developments showed clear and consistent elements of American strategy, notably on defense and on a lower American profile on human rights, democracy, and promotion of good governance. The main uncertainty involved economic relations with Asia, where conflicting camps within the administration continued to advocate opposing approaches, with little clarity on whether the president would favor one or the other.

There appears to be broad agreement within the Trump government—shared by congressional leaders—on the need to strengthen the American security position in the Asia-Pacific region. President Trump seems persuaded that his campaign rhetoric against US alliances was largely incorrect, though he continues to seek better terms on trade imbalances and burden sharing of defense costs. His proposed increase in US defense spending comes in tandem with recent congressional legislation seen in the Asia-Pacific Stability Initiative, the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, and other such proposals. How far the initiatives will go in actually expanding US force presence and capabilities spending in order to carry out substantial strengthening of US Asia-Pacific forces will depend on administration and congressional willingness to modify or end the ongoing sequestration limiting US defense and other discretionary government spending. While many Republicans are willing to consider deficit financing in order to increase defense spending, Republican “budget hawks,” who reportedly include the current director of the Office of Management and Budget along with many in Congress, oppose deficit financing, making increases in defense spending contingent on cuts in other budget accounts and major tax cuts under Republican-led tax reform.

While Republicans in the Congress include strong advocates of human rights, democracy, and American values in the conduct of American foreign policy, the Trump government's record shows little disagreement in following a pattern of pragmatic treatment of these issues, giving them lower priority than US security and economic concerns. Consistency in this stance seems to be welcomed by authoritarian Asian leaders and leaders in more pluralistic states like the Philippines, Myanmar, and Malaysia, who were targeted for criticism by the Obama government and continue to be attacked by congressional and NGO advocates in the US.

Getting to a unified and sustained Trump government position on US economic and trade issues with Asia and other parts of the world promises to be more difficult than consistency in security and values concerns. Key officials managing economic policy have records very much at odds, with some strongly identifying with the president's campaign rhetoric pledging to deal harshly with states that treat the US unfairly and take jobs from American workers, and others sticking to conservative Republican orthodoxy in supporting free trade. The media has been full of stories of "alliances" of political forces in the White House, including presidential senior advisor and son-in-law Jared Kushner and Economic Council Director Gary Cohn on one side and Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross and US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer on the other. The president chose these officials and has a long record of welcoming sharply alternative views among his staff. Where he will come down in this debate and whether he will stick with a position are very unclear.

The Trump administration's national security strategy, released in December, provided a well-integrated security, economic, and diplomatic strategy for Asia and the rest of the world. While focused on threats from North Korea, terrorism, and Iran, the approach zeroed in on China and Russia. It employed strong language not seen in authoritative US government commentary on China for decades to warn in no uncertain terms of China's ambitions to undermine US economic, security, and political interests and displace the US and its leadership in the Asia-Pacific. It clearly sided with those in the administration seeking a much tougher policy toward China on economic issues. What impact the document will have on actual US behavior regarding Chinese actions and Asian affairs remains to be seen. The US has begun closer collaboration with Japan, India, and Australia in military cooperation to secure maritime interests challenged by China in the broad Indo-Pacific region. As

noted above, how far the US will go in countering perceived adverse Chinese actions is determined in part by the region's uncertain priority in the very full international agenda of the Trump government. Meanwhile, Trump's rhetoric announcing the strategy during his recent trip to the region failed to clarify his personal commitment to the injunction to counter China's challenge laid out in his administration's national security strategy.