Sea Change or More of the Same? Trump's Security Policies in Asia

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After decades of relative stability and predictability for U.S. strategy in Asia, President Donald Trump has quickly and substantially transformed his country's policy behavior in the region. More than any of his recent predecessors—and notwithstanding efforts by some of his own advisers to constrain his actions—this U.S. president has proved to be a highly transactional figure who is undaunted by those from the U.S. policy establishment who question the validity and effectiveness of his instincts and negotiating style. His foreign affairs agenda is driven by the pursuit of those domestic economic and political objectives he views as critical for “making America great again.” This largely insular approach has been labeled as a form of Jacksonian foreign policy.¹ It has resulted in more open negotiations with autocrats, confrontations with traditional allies and partners on a wide array of previously stable issues, and a radical adjustment to the United States' geopolitics to better fit with his own views of the world.

Policy Continuities and Contradictions

Writing at the end of 2017, renowned Asian affairs expert Sheldon Simon observed that President Trump has been dismantling the U.S.-led, postwar rules-based international order without any tangible strategy for what would replace it or how long it would take for any such alternative to materialize. Trump, Simon insisted, “has rejected past synergies between U.S. vital interests and the responsibilities of global leadership.” Instead, he views international relations as an unmitigated zero-sum process and rejects the security alliances and institutions created by his predecessors “because they required U.S. financial expenditures and supposedly yielded few benefits.”² Past assumptions that U.S. international engagement and leadership yield constructive reciprocity for all involved have taken a back

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¹ Walter Russell Mead, “The Jacksonian Revolt: American Populism and the Liberal Order,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 1, 2017, 2-7.

² Sheldon Simon, “Abandoning Leadership,” *Comparative Connections* 19, no. 3 (2018) ~ <http://cc.csis.org/2018/01/abandoning-leadership>.

seat to what Trump views as the need to rectify a long-standing exploitation of U.S. interests and resources by the country's allies and competitors. Venerable analysts of U.S. policy in Asia such as Simon, however, have always understood that the realities of geopolitics are far more complex than the assumptions underwriting this U.S. president's "America first" posture. Most fundamentally, if managed judiciously, multilateral and bilateral policy approaches can complement each other rather than undercut the pursuit of sound statecraft and strategy.

In some ways, the pace of change in U.S. foreign policy in Asia during the Trump administration has been startling. So, too, have that policy's manifest contradictions. Three days after his inauguration, Trump signed an executive order withdrawing the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)—the main economic pillar of Barack Obama's "rebalancing" strategy that was designed to enmesh U.S. trading interests with key Asia-Pacific economies. During a regional tour in November 2017, Trump subsequently proclaimed that the United States was pursuing a "free and open Indo-Pacific" doctrine.³ Although the current U.S. administration would deny such is the case, this posture actually incorporates several key aspects of the rebalancing strategy. These include containing a nuclear North Korea, strengthening U.S. alliances with traditional Indo-Pacific security partners (while emphasizing allied defense spending and burden-sharing more than Obama did), and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight in Pacific waters (and thus balancing growing Chinese offshore military power).⁴

However, clear differences have emerged between Trump's and Obama's regional policy approaches to Asia. Trump has modulated the promotion of common values and norms as underlying U.S. trade and security relations. He has clearly disdained the efficacy of multilateralism as a means of negotiating future regional order-building, preferring to focus on bilateral negotiations and agreements. He has cultivated closer personal ties with regional autocrats such as North Korea's Kim Jong-un, China's Xi Jinping, and the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte. He has done so with the expectation that stronger bilateral relations with their regimes would immediately

³ Donald J. Trump, "Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit/Da Nang, Vietnam," White House, November 10, 2017 $\approx$ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-apec-ceo-summit-da-nang-vietnam/>.

⁴ Patrick M. Cronin, "Trump's Post-Pivot Strategy," *Diplomat*, November 11, 2017 $\approx$ <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/trumps-post-pivot-strategy>.

generate more favorable outcomes for U.S. trade, investment, and regional security policy.

Any credibility gained by Trump reaching out to Asian autocrats has been compromised by his tendency to impose greater sanctions and other forms of punishment on such regimes when they are viewed as compromising U.S. regional interests. Hence, Trump orchestrated a brinkmanship strategy, threatening “fire and fury” in the event of a North Korean military strike against U.S. territory or forces deployed in the region.⁵ This was done to force Kim to negotiate with him at a June 2018 summit in Singapore, which to date has produced no visible progress on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. After hosting Xi at his Florida Mar-a-Lago estate in early April 2017, and characterizing the leader as a newfound friend he could trust, Trump proceeded to launch what appeared to be a major trade war with China a little more than a year later in July 2018. He initially levied \$34 billion in tariffs against Chinese products to neutralize what the White House described as “a [Chinese] pattern of unfair trade practices and theft of American intellectual property.”⁶ China quickly retaliated by imposing tariffs on U.S. products, and by late September 2018 the Trump administration had imposed an additional \$200 billion, while the Chinese had levied another \$60 billion.⁷ This intensifying Sino-U.S. trade dispute has heightened the risk of another global economic recession and prompted the European Union to sign a comprehensive bilateral trade agreement with Japan as a hedge against growing U.S. trade protectionism.

From Trust to Suspicion

The credibility of the postwar U.S.-led security network in the Asia-Pacific has been underwritten by the United States sustaining trust in its commitment to defend its allies against future attacks and deter external threats to their national security. By doing so, the United States has facilitated Asia’s own remarkable economic growth. However, key allies and partners in Asia are now gradually concluding that President Trump’s approach to geopolitics is disturbingly erratic and renders Washington as an unreliable collective defense partner.

⁵ Peter Baker and Choe Sang-Hun, “Trump Threatens ‘Fire and Fury’ against North Korea if It Endangers U.S.,” *New York Times*, August 8, 2017.

⁶ Ana Swanson, “Trump’s Trade War with China Is Officially Underway,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2018.

⁷ “China Accuses U.S. of Trade Bullying as New Tariffs Imposed,” BBC, September 24, 2018.

Trump's announcement, after meeting Kim, that he would suspend joint military maneuvers with South Korea for as long as denuclearization talks with North Korea were ongoing surprised both the U.S. Department of Defense and South Korea's government—neither of which received advance notice of the president's decision.⁸ Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe had been a strong supporter of Trump's previous "maximum pressure" campaign (including the imposition of tough UN sanctions) against North Korea and was arguably the international leader most repeatedly consulting the White House on international relations developments. This, however, did little to exempt Japan from being targeted (along with South Korea) by the Trump administration in March 2018 with a 25% tariff on imported steel and 10% on aluminum.⁹ Neither could Japanese policymakers, having watched recent North Korean ballistic missile tests fly over Japanese territory, gain much solace from the lack of explicit information emanating from the Trump-Kim summit regarding which North Korean missile systems would be part of any denuclearization process or how the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of the North's nuclear weapons and delivery systems would be realized. The Trump administration previously had claimed that the latter issue was nonnegotiable.¹⁰

In a speech delivered at London's Chatham House in mid-July 2018, then Australian foreign minister Julie Bishop ruminated on the unpredictability of the long-standing U.S.-Australia alliance and observed that Washington now seemed less committed to preserving the international rules-based order that it had been so integral in establishing and leading.¹¹ This has the practical consequence of making it difficult for Australia to extend unqualified support for Trump's quest to strengthen ties with Russia, which Canberra views as a continual violator of international norms. However, it remains an open question to what extent Australia can actually reconcile its declared support of a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific as underscored by its November 2017 foreign policy

⁸ Robert Burns and Foster Klug, "Trump Contradicts U.S. Military Stance on Korea War Games," Associated Press, June 12, 2018.

⁹ Michael Heath and Enda Curran, "With Friends Like These: Trump's Tariff's Hurt Asian Allies," Bloomberg, March 5, 2018 ~ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-03-05/with-friends-like-these-trump-s-tariffs-hurt-asian-allies>.

¹⁰ Daniel Hurst, "The Trump-Kim Summit: The View from Japan," *Diplomat*, June 12, 2018 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/the-trump-kim-summit-the-view-from-japan>.

¹¹ Nick Miller, "Less Predictable and Less Committed': Bishop's Pointed Speech on 'Disruptive' U.S.," *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 19, 2018.

white paper while remaining a steadfast U.S. ally in all instances. Any Australian initiative to conduct joint freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea with the U.S. Navy, for example, would run afoul of China, which is by far Australia's largest trading partner.¹² Australian policymakers must now ask themselves if U.S. support would be forthcoming if China were in some manner to punish their country for siding with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) territorial claimants in a future South China Sea crisis.

As Simon has sagely observed, most of the Trump administration's interactions with Southeast Asia during his first year in office were dominated by efforts to persuade members to support UN sanctions against nuclear-bound North Korea.¹³ It would be understandable for ASEAN states to conclude that, unlike his predecessor, Trump has little affinity for understanding or responding directly to Southeast Asia's subregional aspirations and problems nor any intent to support ASEAN centrality as a legitimate pillar for order-building in the region. ASEAN states have been skeptical of Trump's promise made at the U.S.-ASEAN Commemorative Summit in November 2017, following the United States' withdrawal from the TPP, that Washington would "remain committed to ASEAN's central role as a regional forum."¹⁴ They are well aware that Trump relies on protectionist-oriented advisors such as Peter Navarro. Only in the domain of security relations (including military exercises, assistance, and arms sales) does Southeast Asia continue to interact with the United States on a level that matches or, in some cases, even exceeds that of previous U.S. administrations. Overall, as Simon has concluded, "Southeast Asian governments view Trump's Washington with anxiety and suspicion."¹⁵

Conclusion

Writing soon after President Trump assumed office, this author speculated that his foreign policy style would reflect his background in

¹² Australian Government, "Chapter 3: A Stable and More Prosperous Indo-Pacific," in *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* (Canberra, 2017), 47 ~ <https://www.fpwhitepaper.gov.au/foreign-policy-white-paper/chapter-three-stable-and-prosperous-indo-pacific/safeguarding-maritime>.

¹³ Simon, "Abandoning Leadership."

¹⁴ Donald J. Trump, "Remarks by President Trump at the 5th US-ASEAN Summit," U.S. Mission to ASEAN, November 14, 2017 ~ <https://asean.usmission.gov/remarks-president-trump-5th-u-s-asean-summit/>.

¹⁵ Simon, "Abandoning Leadership."

the business world—“hard but fluid bargaining to derive optimal results for interest-based objectives.” Whether such an approach has been successfully implemented, however, remains questionable at a time when the imperative of responding quickly and coherently to an Asia that is reshaping along both multipolar and multilateral lines at “breakneck speed” is greater than ever.¹⁶

With the benefit of hindsight, the president has assumed high-risk strategies during his first eighteen months in office but has to date been largely unsuccessful in realizing concrete gains as a result. His initial choice to withdraw the United States from the TPP has not resulted in the series of bilateral trade agreements that he deems to be more favorable. His subsequent decision to launch a trade war against many of the United States’ European allies and Northeast Asia’s industrial powers (including China as well as U.S. security allies Japan and South Korea) threatens to tear apart the global economy in ways that would dwarf the previous decade’s global financial crisis. Trump’s snap decision to meet with Kim Jong-un has thus far yielded little in the way of denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, despite his hyperbolic pronouncement following that summit that Americans could “sleep well tonight!”¹⁷ Both the Philippines and Thailand—U.S. security treaty allies—continue to explore forging closer political-economic and defense relations with U.S. great-power rivals: Thailand with China, and the Philippines with both China and Russia. The so-called Quadrilateral Security Dialogue binding Australia, India, Japan, and the United States closer together as strategic collaborators has yet to materialize as a substantive defense arrangement, and the initiative would be strongly opposed by China and at least some key ASEAN states if it did so. In many ways, the aggressive businessman from Queens who unexpectedly ascended to the United States’ highest office has been put largely on the defensive relative to more adept great-power geopoliticians.

At this juncture, projecting what the future holds is difficult. It is not encouraging that experienced “Asia hands” in the U.S. State Department and U.S. policy community at large have either resigned or been marginalized by the Trump administration’s central policymakers and a manifestly conservative U.S. Congress. In any assessment of who should provide policy

¹⁶ William Tow, “Trump and Strategic Change in Asia,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Strategist, January 20, 2017 ~ <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/trump-strategic-change-asia>.

¹⁷ “Trump Claims N. Korea No Longer Nuclear Threat, Tells Americans to ‘Sleep Well,’” CBS News, June 13, 2018 ~ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-claims-end-to-nuclear-threat-from-n-korea-tells-u-s-to-sleep-well>.

advice to an administration that must clearly upgrade its performance in Asia, Simon would be especially prominent. His record of seeking truth from the facts on the ground as they have emerged in Asia, and offering sound judgments about what the facts mean and how to respond to them, is unsurpassed. His work and insights serve as a model for all of us who remain concerned about U.S. relations with Asia and beyond. ♦