

The New Asian Strategy of the U.S.: Continuity with Trumpian Characteristics

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Abstract

The election of Donald J. Trump in 2016 has sparked fears of a possible American retrenchment among several allies worldwide and uncertainty over the implications for regional stability as revisionist powers like China and Russia may regard this as an opportunity to consolidate their power in their immediate spheres of influence. Facing two major threats to stability and security within their region, US allies in the Asia-Pacific have been seeking reassurances over the future role of the United States, whose presence over the past seven decades has been a key contributor to stability and prosperity across a region. Despite domestic dynamics that call for an American withdrawal from the world and rhetoric by President Trump that seems to indicate that he envisions such a future for his country, systemic and institutional dynamics are likely to make such a pullout possible, particularly in the Asia-Indo-Pacific, which has displaced Europe and the Middle East as the most important geopolitical and economic center of gravity. Just weeks after his inauguration, the Trump administration has sent signals that suggest continuity rather than a clean break with past US foreign policy, which is likely to

bring relief to longstanding American allies across the region.

Keywords: Donald J. Trump, Asia-Pacific, China, Japan, Alliance System

I. Retrenchment 2.0?

The election on November 8, 2016, of Donald J. Trump as the 45th president of the United States ushered in an era of uncertainty in the international system, and particularly so in the Asia Pacific, where a rising revisionist power has clearly indicated its intention to displace the United States—for seven decades the sole guarantor of stability and security in the region—as the local hegemon.

Following Trump’s victory and as Inauguration Day approached, analysts worldwide attempted to predict whether, once he entered the Oval Office, President Trump’s policy would completely break with part US policy, as his campaign rhetoric suggested, or would instead gradually shift toward the center in favor of continuity.

As his appointments trickled in, Trump’s “America First” rhetoric seemed to have primacy over the longstanding instinct for continuity that had buttressed seven decades of US foreign policy. Of particular significance for Asia, the new administration seemed to question the very value of US alliance relationships, regarded as one of the pillars of American foreign policy since the conclusion of World War II. Even weeks after his inauguration, analysts were observing that what President Trump was overthrowing were “the fundamentals of American foreign policy, taken as givens by both parties (Republicans and Democrats) since the close of World War II.” What the new administration had done was to “take the few things on which the neocons, realists, and liberal internationalists agree and throw them

out the window.”¹ For the first time in decades, an American president did not seem to adhere either to the need for the United States to be the world’s policeman—the neocons’ position that Washington must seek to influence, unilaterally if necessary, other states’ external behavior and promote American values worldwide—or the liberal internationalist belief in the need for a globally engaged US relying on an increasingly coherent system of international alliances and cooperation. Still, if we were to pigeonhole President Trump on his foreign policy, we would probably have to put him in the category of conservative realist, who regards the international system as a competitive arena.

The main target of President Trump’s shift in foreign policy outlook seemed to be the paradigm, effective since the end of World War II, that regional allies and military alliances worldwide were of immense value to the United States’ security and, it follows, its prosperity. In the Asia-Pacific, such a worldview caused apprehensions in Japan, the key pillar of the United States’ regional military posture. Among other things, the symbiotic relationship between Japan and the United States had functioned as a stopgap against North Korea’s nuclear ambitions and China’s growing assertiveness in recent years. While beneficial to Japan’s own security, particularly given the constitutional constraints on its military following its defeat in World War II as one of the main Axis powers, the US-Japan security alliance also assuaged the fears of other states in the region, including South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines—all potential targets of China’s regional ambitions.

1. Jessica T. Mathews, “What Trump is Throwing Out the Window,” *New York Review of Books*, February 9, 2017, <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/02/09/what-trump-is-throwing-out-the-window/>>.

For a while it seemed that the United States under President Trump was in retreat, less committed to intervention in world affairs, particularly when it came to US military forces. President Trump seemed dedicated to enabling a policy of retrenchment and offshore balancing by encouraging other countries—free-riders, as Trump referred to them during his electoral campaign—to take the lead in checking rising powers. This outlook, however, anteceded President Trump and had ebbed and flowed since the end of the Cold War. Dueck defines retrenchment as looking “for ways to reduce a country’s international and military costs and commitments.” This, he continues, “might be done by cutting defense spending, withdrawing from certain alliance obligations, scaling back on strategic deployments abroad, reducing international expenditures, or all of the above.” However, retrenchment “does not necessarily avoid strategic entanglements altogether, but the desired direction is certainly one of lowered cost and reduced commitment.”²

After the neocon adventurism in Iraq and Afghanistan, President Barack Obama himself had vowed to disengage the United States as the world’s policeman and break with the “orthodoxy of a foreign policy establishment that is hobbled by groupthink” so that he could focus on a program of liberal reform domestically.³ Critics of President Obama, however, observed that his policy of international retrenchment arrived at no different a destination than that of his predecessors: the United States was exhausting its resources in corners of the world—Libya, the Middle East, and perhaps even the Asia-Pacific—in

2. Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 15-16.

3. Kori Schake, “Will Washington Abandon the Order? The False Logic of Retreat,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2017, <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/will-washington-abandon-order>>.

ways that were not contributing to American security and that did not have public support back home. Worse, those missions, critics argued, seemed to be failing, what with the ascendancy of revisionist powers such as Russia, China, and Iran, which despite American involvement were getting their way within their own spheres of influence.⁴ President Trump, the anti-establishment dark horse, seemed committed to succeeding where his predecessors had failed: the troops were coming home, and longstanding allies that relied upon and prospered under the US security umbrella suddenly faced the prospect of abandonment and the attendant influence of rising regional hegemons. President Trump seemed on the brink of suddenly abandoning a policy of US patronage of regional allies that was “deeply encoded in contemporary American strategic thinking.”⁵ For key regional states South Korea and Japan, this had all sorts of implications for North Korea’s nuclear weapons program; for the region as a whole, it raised the real prospect of life under authoritarian China’s shadow and fueled fears, particularly among more fragile “frontier allies” such as Taiwan and the Philippines, that absent a security guarantee from the United States those states may have no choice but to make concessions to China that went against their national interests.

Further comments by Trump and his entourage exacerbated apprehensions among US allies in the Asia-Pacific, particularly among those who are directly challenged by an increasingly assertive and expansionist China. While President Trump was giving every indication that he intended to revise the alliance system—such as pulling out

4. Michael Mandelbaum, *Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 371-381.

5. Jakub J. Grygiel & A. Weiss Mitchell, *The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies and the Crisis of American Power* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 5.

of the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a regional framework that since its inception had been as much about security as it was about trade—his core group of advisers was also stridently critical of China, particularly on what were deemed to be unfair trade practices. Uncertainty, both over future American policy and Beijing’s reaction thereto, was further fuelled when President-elect Trump held a 10-minute telephone conversation with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen⁶ on December 2 and later on, in an interview with American media, when he suggested that Washington may no longer abide by a “one China” policy, one of the pillars of American policy regarding Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China (PRC).⁷ To make matters worse, Trump’s remarks could be interpreted as an indication that Taiwan could serve as a bargaining chip in future trade negotiations between Washington and Beijing.

Given the break with longstanding American policy, those two incidents regarding Taiwan and China led to fears that President Trump was being ill-advised; worse, that he was improvising on foreign policy, or that he was simply ignoring sound advice and did not fully comprehend the potential consequences of his actions. Among US allies in Asia and elsewhere, President Trump’s improvisation and willingness to chastise China absent assurances of continued American commitment to a regional security alliance was deeply troubling. The consequences of a trade war⁸ between China and the

6. Anne Gearan, Philip Rucker, & Simon Denyer, “Trump’s Taiwan phone call was long planned, say people who were involved,” *Washington Post*, December 4, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-taiwan-phone-call-was-weeks-in-the-planning-say-people-who-were-involved/2016/12/04/f8be4b0c-ba4e-11e6-94ac-3d324840106c_story.html?utm_term=.d9473f64463c>.

7. Elliot Smilowitz, “Trump on ‘One China’ policy: ‘Everything is under negotiation,’” *The Hill*, January 14, 2017, <<http://thehill.com/policy/international/314324-trump-on-one-china-policy-everything-is-under-negotiation>>.

US amidst an American military retrenchment from the region, for example, or the belief that alliances could be held hostage to economic and trade issues,⁹ could leave allies exposed; the resulting vacuum could give China an opportunity to sever the alliance once and for all through retaliation against vulnerable allies before they had a chance to reorganize themselves by creating a regional security alliance minus the United States. Perhaps worse, China could thenceforth impose its own terms in what it regards as its immediate sphere of influence.

II. The Pull of Continuity

In the chorus of Trump critics who accused the incoming president of policy immaturity and irresponsible adventurism, a few voices nevertheless argued that notwithstanding the idiosyncratic nature of the new administration's worldview upon entering the White House, powerful systemic forces would soon compel the new administration to gradually shift back toward a policy of continuity—the same forces, institutional, economic and ideological, that had derailed the plans of many an incoming president before Trump to rewrite the rules of American foreign policy.¹⁰

8. Seen as a distinct possibility due to the prominent advisory roles played by the likes of China critics Peter Navarro and Michael Pillsbury during Mr. Trump's electoral campaign. Navarro now heads the White House's National Trade Council.

9. Laura Rosenberger, "Can the U.S.-Japan Alliance Survive Trump?" *Foreign Policy*, February 9, 2017, <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/09/can-the-u-s-japan-alliance-survive-trump/>>.

10. See for example, J. Michael Cole, "One China, Many Trumps?" December 12, 2016, *The National Interest*, <<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/one-china-many-trumps-18723>>.

Unpopular and easily dismissed at the time, such views may have turned out to be right, although admittedly much of President Trump's future foreign policy, and policy toward the Asia-Pacific more specifically, remains at this time of writing contingent on several factors, principally the nature and influence of the individuals who will have the president's ear at the White House and other parts of the American government.

Still, there were indications, soon after President Trump's inauguration on January 20, that his policy team was already moving away from creative destruction—and therefore uncertainty—toward more continuity. Chief among those was the American president's declaration during a telephone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping on February 9 that his administration would honor "our" (that is, the United States') "one China" policy,¹¹ a decision that conceivably assuaged fears in Beijing and thereby potentially silenced elements within the Chinese state apparatus that were already calling for a more muscular strategy to resolve the Taiwan "issue."

The same week, during a joint press conference at the White House with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, President Trump said the friendship between the US and Japan was "very, very deep" and that the United States' security alliance with Japan remained a cornerstone of peace in the Asia-Pacific. "We are committed to the security of Japan and all areas under its administrative control and to further strengthening our very crucial alliance," Trump said. "We will work together to promote our shared interests including freedom of navigation and defending against the North Korean

11. William Ide, "Trump to Honor 'One China' Policy," *Voice of America*, February 10, 2017, <<http://www.voanews.com/a/trump-reaffirms-one-china-policy/3717374.html>>.

missile and nuclear threat, both of which I consider a very, very high priority.”¹²

By reaffirming the crucial alliance with Japan and referring to freedom of navigation, areas under its administrative control and Pyongyang’s nuclear program, President Trump made it clear that the alliance would resemble that which has characterized the relationship since the end of World War II. Moreover, defending freedom of navigation and countering the North Korean threat clearly indicated that the US military in Japan and the region would likely remain in place, as those threats necessitate patrols, surveillance, intelligence gathering, and a force composition substantial enough to maintain both a deterrent and retaliatory capability. Additionally, President Trump’s comments included the necessary vagueness (“shared interests”) to ensure that revisionist powers such as China were put on notice: other contingencies, such as the South China Sea and Taiwan—the defense of which remains very much in the interest of both Japan and the United States—would therefore conceivably remain part, if only implicitly, of the security commitment between Japan and the United States.

Comments by US Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis during an “alliance-mending” visit to Asia in early February also suggested more coherent and on-the-same-page planning leading up to President Trump’s remarks during his summit with his Japanese counterpart. Addressing Prime Minister Abe in Tokyo, Mattis provided assurances that the United States would stand by the Mutual Defense Treaty with Japan and lauded Japan’s decision to increase its military

12. “Trump: US-Japan Alliance Foundation for Peace in East Asian Region,” *Voice of America*, February 11, 2017, <<http://www.voanews.com/a/trump-holds-two-day-summit-with-japanese-prime-minister-abe-/3717646.html>>.

spending. Tellingly, Mattis also confirmed that the United States would continue to help Japan defend its sovereignty over the disputed Senkaku (Diaoyu/Diaoyutai) islets in the East China Sea, also claimed by Taiwan and China. Earlier in Seoul, Mattis also pushed for the deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea, which has sparked ire in Beijing, while also seeking to reassure his counterparts that the United States remains fully committed to the region.¹³

1. North Korea

The Trump White House has ordered a full review of US policy toward North Korea, though so far his administration has not provided any details as to the nature of the review or its effects on the United States' strategy to deal with Pyongyang.¹⁴ During his election campaign, Trump often stated that the North Korean nuclear program was one of the greatest threats facing the United States and that as president he would deal with the issue accordingly. Like other presidents before him, various options, from direct engagement to regime change, are said to be on the table. There is clearly a school of thought in American politics that the kind of accommodation that guided President Obama's policy on North Korea and Iran has allowed reclusive regimes, has failed to curb their nuclear ambitions and therefore contributed to greater, rather than less, instability in their respective regions. However, given the conservative realists' aversion to the type of nation building

13. Michael R. Gordon & Choe Sang-hun, "Jim Mattis Seeks to Soothe Tensions in Japan and South Korea," *New York Times*, February 5, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/05/us/politics/jim-mattis-south-korea-japan.html?_r=0>.

14. Nike Ching, "Full US Review of Policy Toward North Korea Expected," *Voice of America*, February 23, 2017, <<http://www.voanews.com/a/full-united-states-review-policy-toward-north-korea-expected/3737223.html>>.

that would be necessary after removing the Kim apparatus and, in the wake of the messy occupation of Iraq, the low support among the American public for new military adventures abroad, it is unlikely that the Trump administration will opt for this option.

Consequently, even though President Trump may want to break with past policy on North Korea, a narrow list of alternative options could force him to retain much of his predecessors' sticks-and-carrots strategy involving targeted sanctions, multilateral or "Track 1.5 talks," and a tripwire military posture in South Korea. Some analysts have already suggested that the scope and frequency of military exercises near the Korean Peninsula should be expanded, and that other allies within the region, including Australia, should be invited to participate.

Like other administrations before, the Trump White House will also conceivably convince itself of the necessity of involving China, Pyongyang's main political ally, in negotiations on North Korean nuclear disarmament. The belief, right or wrong, that Beijing plays an indispensable role in talks with the reclusive regime will also, as in the past, impose limits on what the United States will be prepared to do in the Korean Peninsula and elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific. Unless the Trump administration convinces itself that Beijing is no longer an essential partner in efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, the need to keep China on board will add another incentive for continuity and militate against a more bellicose posture of containment against the PRC. Following the test launching of a Pukguksong-2 ballistic missile as President Trump was meeting Japanese Prime Minister Abe on February 12, and with the State Department cancelling visas for a North Korean delegation ahead of expected informal talks, Beijing has sought to convince Washington—including a visit by State Councilor Yang Jiechi in late February

—of the need to continue talks with Pyongyang, and for such talks to involve China.¹⁵

2. South China Sea

As to a future role for the United States in the South China Sea, indications of continuity emerged in early January when Rex Tillerson told his confirmation hearing before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee that China should be denied access to artificial islands it has built in the contested area. “We’re going to have to send China a clear signal that, first, the island-building stops and, second, your access to those islands is not going to be allowed,” Tillerson told the hearing.¹⁶ Clearly the signaling, though the Trump administration did not immediately comment on it, was indicative of a desire among senior officials of the incoming administration to continue to extend US security guarantees to the increasingly tense South China Sea, a move that, moreover, could only reassure smaller parties in the territorial dispute. Amid new evidence of militarization by China of the artificial islets and the expected deployment of additional surface-to-air missiles (likely HQ-9, already deployed on other islets) by the People’s Liberation Army in that area and with the possibility that such deployments may presage a future declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) by China over the South China Sea, the Trump administration authorized routine US Navy patrols starting in February. Rear Admiral James Kilby, commander of the USS *Carl Vinson*-led carrier strike group (CSG 1) that patrolled the waters in mid-February, said at the time that “We are looking forward to

15. Katie Hunt, “Will China push Trump to talk to North Korea?” *CNN*, February 27, 2017, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/27/politics/china-us-north-korea/>>.

16. David Brunnstrom & Matt Spetalnick, “Tillerson says China should be barred from South China Sea islands,” *Reuters*, January 12, 2017, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-congress-tillerson-china-idUSKBN14V2KZ>>.

demonstrating those capabilities while building upon existing strong relationships with our allies, partners and friends in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region.”¹⁷ Rather than overturning the policies of his predecessor, under whose watch the United States had implemented a “pivot” or “rebalancing” to Asia amid fears of Chinese expansionism, the regular patrols in the South China Sea—initiated by President Obama in 2016 after a four-year freeze—along with the expressed commitment to cooperate with allies and partners, suggest recognition by Washington that a continued US Navy presence in the area was necessary. Limited to sailing within 12 nautical miles of land features in the South China Sea, the mission asserts the United States’, and other nations’, right to sail in international waters.

As in the past, the intent of the freedom of navigation patrol was to challenge claims by any country that would unlawfully restrict the rights and freedoms provided under international law. Although it sparked a strong response by China and could result in heightened tensions with Beijing, the decision to proceed with the patrols indicates that the strain of liberal internationalism in Washington seems to have prevailed upon President Trump’s retrenchment instincts, at least for the time being.

Thus, while Mr. Trump’s rhetoric during his electoral campaign and in the weeks following his election suggested the possibility of real, and perhaps unprecedented, retrenchment on the diplomatic and military fronts, forces both within the United States government and in the international system militated against such a drastic break with past policy. This is especially true for the Asia-Indo-Pacific region, which both economically and politically has turned into the geostrategic

17. “Carrier Strike Group 1 Conducts South China Sea Patrol,” *Navy News Service*, February 18, 2017, <http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=98973>.

center of gravity at the expense of the messier Middle East, into which the United States has poured much of its capital to little avail, and to which it might feel less beholden due to hopes that the US could soon become energy independent.¹⁸

Although it is difficult to conceive that the United States will completely pull out of the Middle East—Islamic State, Al-Qaeda and Iran’s nuclear program, not to mention the politico-religious alliance with Israel, will ensure that it does not—there is a possibility, given the trajectory of revisionist China and unpredictable North Korea and their potential to disrupt a region that is vital to the United States’ economy, that no American retrenchment will be undertaken in Asia. Indeed, the possibility that a pullout could destabilize trade in the Asia-Indo-Pacific may have been a key factor influencing President Trump and his entourage in their decision to continue American engagement with the region. In late 2016, a report by the Asia Foundation based on consultations with academics and former officials from 20 Asian nations warned that a US military withdrawal from Asia, such as removing the 80,000 US military personnel based in Japan and South Korea (48,828 and 27,558 respectively, plus 5,647 in Guam), would “trigger massive destabilization of the regional order” by sparking an arms race and compelling states like Japan and South Korea (to which we could perhaps add Taiwan) to develop their own nuclear deterrent.¹⁹ Furthermore, there was the argument, made by Grygiel and Mitchell, among others, that while reducing immediate

18. Peter Zeihan, *The Accidental Superpower: The Next Generation of American Preeminence and the Coming Global Disorder* (New York: Twelve, 2014), pp. 116-138, for a discussion on the possible impact of shale gas on the United States’ position as an energy importer and its consequences for geopolitics.

19. The Asia Foundation, “Asian Views on America’s Role in Asia: The Future of the Rebalance—Strategic Recommendations for the Incoming U.S. President

costs and the risks of entrapment in a regional conflict of only marginal importance to US interests, disengagement could be costlier in the long term if conflict in a frontier region compelled the United States to intervene—this time without a ready system of alliances and a dearth of pre-deployed forces in the region. As Dueck argues, “Conservatives need to learn a number of lessons from the past decade, but the answer is not to relapse into narrow isolationism.”

It is likely, therefore, that a large share of the additional vessels that President Trump has vowed to provide the US Navy—the US fleet is expected to increase from 272 vessels to 350—will be allocated to the Asia-Pacific in commensurate response to the growing People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy fleet deployed in the area.

No major reversal in the United States’ policy toward the Asia-Indo-Pacific is therefore expected under President Trump, and institutional forces will likely compel the administration to retain some of the existing strategies, as the continued patrols in the South China Sea and reaffirmation of US security commitments to longstanding allies Japan and South Korea seem to confirm. Moreover, if, as discussed above, the Trump administration indeed targets other parts of the world (Europe or the Middle East)²⁰ for retrenchment, a segment of the freed-up resources could be reallocated to the Asia-Pacific in times of crisis in the Korean Peninsula, the South China Sea, or

on Foreign Policy Towards Asia,” January 2017, p. X, *The Asia Foundation*, <http://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Asian-Views-on-Americas-Role-in-Asia_Jan17.pdf>.

20. As of late 2015, deployments of US military personnel abroad stood at 44,800 in US Central Command (CENTCOM) areas of responsibility; 37,704 in Germany; 35,000 in 20 nations across the Middle East; 11,697 in Italy; 9,800 in Afghanistan; 1,590 in Turkey; and 1,196 in Belgium.

Taiwan, whose relationship with the US under President Trump also remains unchanged under the *Taiwan Relations Act*, *Three Communiqués* and “Six Assurances.” Thus, it is not inconceivable that at some point in future, and barring major conflict in other parts of the world (e.g., Iran), as much as three quarters of the American military personnel posted overseas could be deployed in the Asia-Pacific region (the region currently accounts for more than half of the 150,560 military personnel serving in foreign countries).

III. Empowering the Frontier Allies

Early (and reassuring) signs of continuity notwithstanding, President Trump’s threats of a potential American retrenchment in the lead-up to the November 2016 elections may have had the benefit of forcing Asian states and recipients of US patronage over the past decades to seriously consider how to more actively counter China’s assertiveness while lowering their dependence on United States security guarantees. Consequently, fears of abandonment or the threat thereof could usher in an era where allies and partners of the United States in the Asia-Indo-Pacific could play a grater role in ensuring stability and security. Moreover, although the Trump administration seems to have distanced itself from its earlier suggestion that it could pull its military out of Asia should allies like Japan and South Korea fail to do more to shoulder the burden of their defenses, the White House will conceivably seek to reinforce the notion that regional allies must do more in order to be worthy of US assistance—a view that also predates the Trump presidency and that has long had traction within the American public. Public opinion polls conducted between 2010 and 2013 by various organizations, such as Gallup and the Pew Research Center, clearly indicated that the American public had had enough of recent war efforts and opposed new military interventions overseas, preferring instead that their government focus on the economy.

Therefore, in order to facilitate and create incentives for burden sharing, we can expect Washington to be more permissive in what its regional allies can do militarily. This, in turn, will have a direct impact on the types of weapons systems that key allies (South Korea, Japan, Australia) and partners (Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand) are “allowed” to acquire, develop and deploy. The Trump administration’s commitment to a THAAD deployment by South Korea is an indication that Washington continues to regard the need for a more proactive role by its allies in the regional defense architecture.

Requirements for burden sharing will also likely include further revisions to what, and in what contexts, the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) is allowed to operate. In addition to the likelihood of even larger defense spending by Tokyo, the bolstering of Japan as a pillar of the US security arrangement in the Asia-Pacific could also lead to a greater role by the Japanese military in contingencies throughout the region, including patrols in the South China Sea and perhaps even closer cooperation in the defense of its neighbor Taiwan, whose stability and existence as a friendly buffer between itself and China remains a key component of Japan’s security. Concurrently, this could also translate into a more permissive defense posture for smaller partners like Taiwan and Vietnam and more leniency by Washington on matters of military technology transfers, security/intelligence cooperation, joint training, and deployment of offensive (or counterforce) weapon platforms.

With regards to the East China Sea and the longstanding dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu/Diaoyutai islets, Washington should play a more active role in helping Taiwan and Japan resolve their differences. Although not as severe as that between China and Japan, the dispute has nevertheless soured relations between the Japanese and Taiwanese Coast Guards and thereby served as an impediment to future

cooperation in joint naval surveillance and other activities.

By creating incentives for regional cooperation, the United States would put commensurate pressure on would-be allies to demonstrate their willingness and ability to contribute to their own security by bringing defense spending to levels that are deemed acceptable by Washington and, presumably, the American public. The logic behind this is that American public support for US military assistance abroad could increase if allies and partners abroad are seen to be doing the necessary to ensure their self-defense and that American lives would not be sacrificed defending nations that are reluctant to hold the line in the first place.

All of the above—Japan as a pillar of the regional security architecture, greater participation by other allies and partners, and strengthened defense capabilities within the region—could also appease fears of abandonment among the frontier states and better prepare them to cooperate should the United States opt for retrenchment at some point in the future due to political developments in the US or a major conflagration elsewhere requiring substantial redeployment of American military personnel. Moreover, a more inclusive regional security apparatus that empowers US allies would reduce the fears of entrapment that have fueled support for American retrenchment in the first place. Theory has it that revisionist powers are more likely to take military action against their weaker frontier opponents if they believe that the strong security partner (the US) will not intervene or no longer has the means to do so (much of China's anti-access/area-denial, or A2/AD, strategy seeks to reinforce that logic).

Thus, in times of uncertainty over American willingness to intervene in foreign contingencies, a regional security apparatus, perhaps bolstered by bilateral or multilateral security guarantees, can present

a stronger deterrent to the revisionist power and thereby reduce the risks that the latter will use force to accomplish political goals. No matter what the Trump administration's ultimate vision for American military deployments in the Asia-Indo-Pacific turns out to be, it has every interest in encouraging the development of a more cohesive and inclusive security architecture within the region. Not only would this ensure greater conventional deterrence against aggression, but by reducing the sense of isolation and vulnerability among states targeted by the regional hegemon, it would also reduce the likelihood that countries with the technological wherewithal to do so would opt for a nuclear deterrent.

In sum, while much of Donald J. Trump's electoral campaign and rhetoric following his election indicated that the United States was on the brink of enacting an unprecedented break with longstanding American foreign policy, a variety of systemic and institutional factors, both domestic and geopolitical, will militate against such a move, thus ensuring a modicum of continuity for the foreseeable future. At most, and particularly in parts of the world such as the Asia-Pacific that remain essential to the economic wellbeing of the United States, American political and military retrenchment—if it occurs at all—will not occur suddenly but will rather be a gradual process contingent on a variety of regional factors, chief among them the behavior of revisionist states like China and North Korea. The need to reassure allies and partners within the region, and indications that a withdrawal of American security guarantees would in the long term foster greater insecurity for the United States and higher costs for intervention, will also compel President Trump and his entourage to tone down their rhetoric of retrenchment while encouraging friends in the region to share more in the burden of standing up to regional challengers to the existing order. Weeks after his inauguration, President Trump was already allaying fears in Tokyo and Seoul, and

adopting policies that have much in common with those of his predecessors, whose approach to the region he had so severely criticized. Although he presents himself as a disruptor and outlier in American politics, President Trump will likely, as has every president before him, be forced to move from the extreme end of the political spectrum he began at toward a middle. And for American engagement with the Asia-Pacific, this means that the United States is here to stay.

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