

Trump's Asia-Pacific Policy: Features and Directions

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Since Donald Trump was inaugurated as US President, his Asia-Pacific policy has witnessed continuous adjustments through provocations and counter-actions with a clear priority assigned to major security threats in the region. He has reiterated the United States' commitment to its regional allies, demonstrated the flexibility in US's interactions with other major powers, and highlighted the fundamental role of military might. Compared to the Obama administration, Trump's policy is unorthodox to some extent, but in essence his Asia-Pacific policy are not deviated from the established modus operandi of previous US administrations, especially the core elements of the Republican's policy traditions in the region.

Features of Trump's Asia-Pacific Policy

Different from his policy on Europe, Russia and the Middle East, Trump's Asia-Pacific policy is generally agreed in the government. That is to say that current emphasis on strengthening the United States' military capabilities, insistence on the foundational role of its alliance system, and reshaping regional economic and trade rules are consensus between Republicans and Democrats. As stated by the acting assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Susan Thornton, despite abandoning Obama's approach and his "pivot to Asia," Washington's strategic emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region

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will continue.¹ There are three major features that can be observed in Trump's Asia-Pacific policy since he took office.

An issue-oriented approach

Trump's Asia-Pacific policy has adopted an issue-oriented approach by which he achieves his strategic goals by addressing main challenges first, structuring a grand strategy with smaller-scaled strategic designs. At the early stage of his administration, Trump did not announce any grand-scale comprehensive Asia-Pacific strategy, but a list of issues of which he will determine the priorities and make pragmatic responses. The approach echoes to Republicans' conservatism and lacks the idealism of Democrats, in the following ways.

First, Trump is making great noise with regard to the North Korean nuclear issue. In facing the DPRK's major breakthroughs in nuclear and missile technologies, Trump assessed the issue shortly after he took office and made it a security priority. In the United States' comprehensive review of its policy toward the DPRK released in mid-April, a series of options used to be on table for Trump's consideration, including a military strike, encouraging regime change and acknowledging the nuclear status of the DPRK.² Yet at the end Trump chose "maximum pressure" as his policy against the DPRK in attempt to halt its illicit missile and nuclear activity with sanctions and other diplomatic means. Regime change is not forcefully reiterated; the Trump administration pragmatically said the US would consider contacts with the regime of Kim Jong-un as long as he decides to alter its behavior.

Second, Trump decided to renegotiate multilateral agreements to shape new trade rules. In his inaugural speech, Trump emphasized his priority was to reinvigorate the economy, to "buy American" and "hire American,"

1 Benjamin Lee, "Trump's First 100 Days in Asia: Continuities and Discontinuities in Trump's Asia Policy," *The Diplomat*, April 28, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/04/trumps-first-100-days-in-asia>.

2 Josh Rogin, "Trump's North Korea Policy is 'Maximum Pressure' but not 'Regime Change'," *The Washington Post*, April 14, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2017/04/14/trumps-north-korea-policy-is-massive-pressure-but-not-regime-change/>

and to address the issue of “unfair” trade.³ In Trump’s opinion, the long-time trade deficit is to blame for the United States’ economic downturn, and the United States has become the loser in trade while Asian countries are taking advantage of the US market to develop their own economies. Thus he outlines the priorities of US trade policy of exterminating what he claims unfair trade practices and redistributing trade resources with its partners. Trump announced to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) immediately after taking office and claimed to replace it with multiple bilateral trade agreements. Using its own market resources and financial superiority as a bargaining chip, the Trump administration intends to leverage the unilateral bargaining power of the United States to make an overall adjustment to Obama’s policies in foreign trade, commercial and financial relations, and to force other countries to adapt to its new rules.

Peace through strength

Trump has readopted the realpolitik slogan of the Reagan administration and intends to build the security and prosperity of the United States on the basis of increasing and wielding its military and economic strength. In his eyes, the United States’ global dominance and the control over the Asia-Pacific order must be led by the US with supports from its ultimate superiority in strength.⁴

First, Trump announced plans for a large military expansion. Trump put an end to Obama’s approach of reducing deficits by defense expenditure cuts. Instead, he expanded the size of all military services, including the US nuclear arsenal. This in fact completely overturns Obama’s military design of better quality with less quantity and replace it with the overall expansion of the US armed forces.

3 Aaron Blake, “Trump’s Full Inauguration Speech Transcript Annotated,” *The Washington Post*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/01/20/donald-trumps-full-inauguration-speech-transcript-annotated>.

4 Alexander Gray and Peter Navarro, “Donald Trump’s Peace through Strength Vision for the Asia-Pacific,” *Foreign Policy*, January 7, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/07/donald-trumps-peace-through-strength-vision-for-the-asia-pacific>.

Trump's executive order of "rebuilding the Armed Forces" urges the Department of Defense to formulate a new national security strategy that explicitly includes a larger military by January 2018.⁵ On March 16, 2017, President Trump submitted his request to Congress for \$639 billion in military spending, a \$54 billion increase for fiscal year 2018, as well as \$30 billion of additional 2017 appropriations. Trump has also stopped cutting the US Army, with a pledge to increase the number of active-duty troops from 490,000 to 540,000. According to Trump's design, there will be a great-scaled Air Force and Navy armament which includes to increase battleships from 274 to at least 350, and fighters from 1,100 to 1,200. Same with military personnel, Trump promotes the notion of winning two wars at the same time, which requires a major expansion of the Marine Corps, with infantry units increased from 24 to 36 and soldiers 8,000 to 12,000.⁶

Trump has also been actively seeking to expand the United States' maritime forces to maintain its naval hegemony in the Asia-Pacific. US Secretary of Defense James Mattis affirmed to transfer 60 percent of US forces to the region by 2020, and to implement the Asia-Pacific Stability Initiative, which would provide a \$7.5 billion dollar boost to military spending in the region. These were major components of Obama's rebalancing strategy, and having these elements indicates that the Trump administration has inherited the policy of his predecessor at least in terms of the military.

Second, Trump consolidates the US's military alliances. Trump, shortly after taking office, backtracked on his campaign call for Japan and South Korea to share more of the financial burden for the US troops stationed in those countries, reiterating the United States' commitment to their security in his phone calls to the leaders of Japan and South Korea, in an effort to

5 Dan Lamothe, "Trump Promises 'Great Rebuilding of the Armed Forces' while Signing Executive Order at the Pentagon," *The Washington Post*, January 27, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/01/27/draft-executive-order-shows-how-trump-wants-to-grow-the-u-s-military-significantly>.

6 Jeff Schogol, "Trump Pledges to Build A Marine Corps that can Win Two Wars at the Same Time," November 16, 2016, <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/articles/marine-corps-build-up-battalions-trump>.



The United Nations Security Council adopted a presidential statement on August 29 strongly condemning North Korea for its “outrageous actions” in the aftermath of the country’s latest missile launch. The DPRK nuclear issue would be a critical test for Trump’s Asia-Pacific policy.

repair the damage he caused to relations during his election campaign.

At the same time, Trump has changed his position with regard to the relationship with Australia, intending to narrow their differences over the refugee settlement issue. To the Philippines, Trump has expressed his respect for President Rodrigo Duterte’s fight against drug trafficking and other domestic policies, and he invited Duterte to visit the United States, trying to win back the Philippines. In addition, Trump has called Singaporean and Thai leaders and expressed his willingness to strengthen bilateral ties.

America First

In stark contrast to Obama’s broad “internationalism,” Trump advocates “America First” and has retreated to isolationism. The US Asia-Pacific policy under the Trump administration prioritizes the interests of the United States

over those of its allies and other regional countries. With no explicit ideological preferences, Trump has shown little interest in promoting American democracy and liberal values and systems. Compared to strategic thinking on a grand scale, Trump prefers making deals to spreading democratic norms, considering national interests to be achieved by interests trading.

On the one hand, American values are now subordinated to the US interests. Trump's diplomatic vocabulary features phrases such as "America First" and "[to be] responsible for the United States, not the world," and is characterized by the frequent use of words such as "tariffs," "exchange rates" and other tangible interests. This diplomatic approach reflects the traditions of American populism and modern-day Jacksonianism, which argues that the United States' foreign policy must serve to maintain the United States' economic well-being and actual security, encourages more mercantile trade relations with trade partners, and advocates isolation from international organizations and strengthening national security more through grand political strategies than by promoting democracy or nation-building overseas.⁷

In terms of security, Trump's policy is based on the judgment that the United States cannot provide its allies with sufficient support when the United States itself lacks enough strength. Therefore to ensure the United States' effective protection of its allies, the allies must first share more burden for the US, easing the US's pressures for it to revitalize its competitive edges. Those countries that accept the US security protection should shoulder more security obligations and buy more US military equipment, increasing the US's income and thereby contributing to the increase of its defense spending.

On the other hand, Trump safeguards the US interests by occupying a better position in interest trading with other countries. In terms of geopolitics, the Trump administration focuses on shaping more chips it has at hand to strengthen the bargaining power of the United States.

7 Walter Russell Mead, "The Jacksonian Revolt: American Populism and the Liberal Order," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2017; Chen Ding, "Why 'America First' Jacksonianism Could End One-China Policy," *China-US Focus*, February 6, 2017, <http://cn.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/20170206/12305.html>.

On the DPRK nuclear issue, Trump is playing carrots and sticks. During the election campaign, Trump implied his willingness to directly communicate and form a friendly relationship with Kim Jong-un, a break from the conventional strategy of the US that favors multilateral negotiations. After taking office, however, Trump turned tough toward Pyongyang and warned of an “effective and overwhelming” response from the United States if North Korea used nuclear weapons.⁸ The United States has also been imposing military pressure on North Korea with its unprecedentedly large joint military drills with South Korea, practicing for the scenario of removing Kim. Nevertheless at the same time, Trump allows room for negotiation, indicating the possibility of a dialogue with Kim Jong-un under “appropriate conditions.”

On the South China Sea issue, Trump flexibly changes between assertive and conciliatory approaches. Despite the aggressive posture in his early term, Trump lowered his tone on the South China Sea after adopting “maximum pressure” on Kim Jong-un, hoping that China will use whatever leverage it may have to rein in Pyongyang. As the nuclear issue subsided and as China reached a framework agreement with neighboring countries on a code of conduct in the South China Sea, the United States has again started hyping the issue again.

Trump had also intended to bargain with China on the Taiwan issue. During the transition period, Trump challenged the One China policy long held by the US government and made a phone call with Taiwan’s leader Tsai Ing-wen. He further asserted in an interview with Wall Street Journal that the One China policy was negotiable. Bashed by strong warnings from Beijing and criticism from the American media, however, Trump has come to understand the issue’s sensitivity to China-US relations and he stopped questioning the One China policy. In his telephone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Trump expressed his respect for the One China

8 Justin McCurry, “North Korea Faces ‘Overwhelming’ US Response if It Uses Nuclear Arms – Mattis,” *The Guardian*, February 3, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/03/n-korea-faces-overwhelming-us-response-if-it-uses-nuclear-arms-mattis>.

policy and willingness to develop constructive relations with China.⁹

Foundations of Trump's Asia-Pacific Policy

The Trump administration has inherited part of the Obama-era rebalancing strategy while denouncing others. Regarding the strategy of pivot to Asia, Trump has been highly consistent with Obama except that he is more assertive. But he set different policy priorities compared to Obama, expected objectives and practical approaches. Generally speaking, the Trump administration has changed the aggressive posture toward Asian countries since Trump's term began and is moving toward the middle ground, embracing reality and adopting a more conventional approach. Trump's Asia-Pacific policy with a prudent conservative flavor is derived from a renewed understanding of three aspects.

Complexity of Asia-Pacific issues

After entering the White House, Trump has to deal with actual issues, which urges him to understand their complexity and prevents him from speaking at will as he did during his election campaign. For the Asia-Pacific where several major countries with interconnected interests are located, it takes time for Trump to understand the context and crux of the issues.

First, understanding the complexity of the DPRK nuclear issue not only concerns the sustainability of the United States' alliance system, but also the security of the United States itself, as well as the peace and stability of Asia and the world. The DPRK has conducted three nuclear tests in recent years. Its research and development of missiles has integrated short and mid-range missiles to intercontinental ones, with increasingly frequent missile tests. As the nature of the DPRK nuclear issue has changed from "involving nuclear weapons" to "possessing nuclear weapons," there have also been fundamental

9 Tom Phillips, "Trump Agrees to Support 'One China' Policy in Xi Jinping Call," *The Guardian*, February 10, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/10/donald-trump-agrees-support-one-china-policy-phone-call-xi-jinping>.

changes in the negotiating position and strategies of Pyongyang.

After several rounds of contacts, the Trump administration has obtained a deeper understanding of both the complexity and the urgency of the issue. While Trump threatened to end Obama's "strategic patience" toward the DPRK in speeches, he has de facto continued that policy, which is reflected in adopting the "maximum pressure" approach instead of other more assertive ones. The only difference lies in Trump putting more emphasis on sanctions and strengthening dialogue with the United States' allies to extend strategic deterrence,¹⁰ while also agreeing to keep in touch with Kim, leaving room for bargaining with the DPRK.

Another situation that Trump has to face is the failure of the hard line policy towards North Korea by the conservative government of Park Geun-hye in South Korea. The demand for dialogue with Pyongyang has increased since Moon Jae-in replaced Park as president. Moon indicated that he would not rule out the possibility of meeting with Kim Jong-un,¹¹ and emphasized that he would negotiate with the United States on downsizing the scale of the two countries' joint exercises and the deployment of US strategic weapons.¹² Moon's more peaceful posture towards Pyongyang suggests the gap between Washington and Seoul on the DPRK nuclear issue. Trump has to take into account the changes in South Korea's domestic politics and its attitude to the North so to seek a new equilibrium with the new government in Seoul on how to deal with Pyongyang.

Trump once strongly believed that Beijing would have enough leverage over Pyongyang, and he counted on Beijing to easily end the threat from the DPRK. But he has now come to realize that China is an external factor in solving the nuclear issue. After his conversations with President Xi Jinping, Trump has come to a better understanding of the complexity and difficulty

10 Benjamin Lee, "Trump's First 100 Days in Asia: Continuities and Discontinuities in Trump's Asia Policy," *The Diplomat*, April 28, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/04/trumps-first-100-days-in-asia>.

11 "South Korea's Moon Jae-in Willing to Visit North Korea," *Al Jazeera*, May 10, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/south-korea-moon-jae-visit-north-korea-170510051022569.html>.

12 Dagyum Ji, "Seoul Distances Itself from Adviser Comments on Joint Military Exercises," June 19, 2017, <https://www.nknews.org/2017/06/seoul-distances-itself-from-adviser-comments-on-joint-military-exercises>.

of the issue and his over-simplified wishful thinking that China's strengthened sanctions on North Korea would lead to a final resolution to the issue.

Second, Trump needs to grip onto the complexity of China-US relations. The management of the bilateral relations between the United States and China concerns both the United States' own strategic environment and the interactions between Asia-Pacific countries. Since the Nixon administration, successive US presidents have maintained the One China policy. Trump's challenge to the One China policy shortly after his election victory drew widespread criticism at home and abroad, because such imprudent remarks are generally considered what would seriously damage China-US relations. At a time when the United States badly needs China's help on the DPRK nuclear issue, the practice was highly unworthy. After taking over the office and experiencing the complexities of governance in person, Trump quickly corrected his reckless behavior and expressed his administration would uphold the One China policy.

As the second-largest economy in the world, China has established increasingly interdependent economic ties with the United States, and its economic developments have become an important pillar for US prosperity. Although China currently has a large surplus in its trade with the United States, a trade war between the two is not a cure-it-all for the United States. Only by cooperation with China can Trump forward his commitment to revitalize the US economy. After the Mar-a-Lago summit in April, the two countries launched 100 days of intensive negotiations to discuss bilateral economic and trade issues. Further consultations on these issues would help to mitigate the US trade deficit with China, and further opening of investment areas on both sides would in turn enhance bilateral capital interchanges, which is a solution fundamentally targeted to the trade imbalance between the two sides. When the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was held in Beijing in May, the United States sent a delegation headed by Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Asia Matthew Pottinger to test the water for cooperation with China under the Belt and Road Initiative and make a positive gesture for enhancing economic and trade

relations. Moreover, there have been efforts by the Trump administration to avoid regional issues from hijacking the bilateral relationship; it is considered by them that regional hotspot issues, as multiple parties are usually involved, should not dictate the directions of China-US relations.

Limitations of unilateralism

Trump once attempted to take a unilateral and isolationist approach until he quickly found himself restrained in various ways.

First, the tradable chips available for the United States are decreasing. The United States' international strategy is more and more constrained by the reality of great-power competition and economic interdependence. The gap between the economic sizes of China and the United States is narrowing at an accelerating pace, and the two countries will be neck to neck at some point between 2025 and 2030.¹³ Changes in the balance of their respective economic power will inevitably lead to smaller gap in military strength. The United States' competitive edge is on the decline, with its capability of maintaining its hegemony increasingly failing to match its ambition. Moreover, various deficiencies in the United States' domestic economic, social and political systems have become more and more explicit, giving rise to much debate about whether the so-called American Century is over.¹⁴ For America to be "great again," Trump needs to maintain growth momentum instead of depleting it, and therefore he seeks to recover the United States' strength and pursue its security and economic interests with the aid of other countries.

The state of economic interdependence cannot be dispensed by wishful thinking either. Trump has quickly realized that to retreat is not a feasible approach; US enterprises would still be the biggest loser even if the global trade regime was again characterized by protectionism. The US market is too limited to embrace absolute free trade, and the US share in the global market

13 "PWC: China to Surpass US and Become No.1 Economic Power in 2030," *China News*, February 10, 2017, <http://www.chinanews.com/m/cj/2017/02-10/8146578.shtml>.

14 Joseph Nye, *Is the American Century Over?* Cambridge, England: Polity Press, January 2015, p.152; Richard Haas, *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order*, Penguin Press, January 10, 2017, p.2.

is shrinking. Trump's task, therefore, is to stop this declining trend. His withdrawal from the TPP is to better protect the United States' own market share, exchanging its comparative advantages for more market resources.

Second, the alliance system is still the pillar for the US hegemony. Trump's "America First" slogan also worries the United States' allies and partners. After coming to power, Trump has been mired in disputes with the United States' traditional allies on basic concepts such as free trade and democratic values, forcing these countries to adjust their relations with the United States or even to seek alternatives.

In terms of trade, Trump's withdrawal from the TPP signaled a change of path to fulfill its economic objectives in Asia. This abrupt change of direction was undoubtedly a heavy blow for allies and partners in the region. For Japan, fostering negotiations with the United States on a free trade agreement was hardly a voluntary choice, since its highly protected agricultural sector is likely to be asked for liberalization in further TPP talks. Neither would Japan want to see the issue of the exchange rate to be brought to the negotiation table, which is for now outside the TPP negotiation framework. For Australia, the exit of the United States from the trade deal was betrayal of its free trade spirit.

In terms of security, Trump once proposed withdrawing troops from Japan and South Korea, and implied that the two countries should consider developing nuclear weapons to counter the perceived threat from North Korea to reduce the United States' defense burden. This has driven the two countries to find their own way out of the crisis. Japan is accelerating cooperation regionally and building itself into a third force independent of China and the United States for regional countries to choose from. Australia, questioning the credibility of the United States' security commitment, is also enhancing security ties with Japan, India and ASEAN, and responding cautiously to the United States' imprudent actions on regional issues.¹⁵

15 Jane Perlez and Chris Buckley, "Trump Injects High Risk into Relations with China," *The New York Times*, January 24, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/24/world/asia/trump-us-china-trade-trans-pacific-partnership.html>.

Policy adjustments seen among the United States' regional allies are clear signals to Trump which urge him to recognize that it is unrealistic to alienate the United States' national interests from its international commitment and its alliance system. Most of the United States' strategic objectives cannot be realized by the US alone, and therefore it is necessary for the Trump administration to review its alliance policy and strike a balance between "taking" and "giving." Now the administration has taken a more cautious approach and returned to conventional US policy, reaffirming the United States' support for its Asian allies.

Domestic political division

Following the fierce competition in the presidential election, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party are sharply opposed. Even the Republican Party itself is undergoing serious internal disputes. Trump has to find a middle way and make compromises if he wants to carry out his agenda.

A series of radical policies implemented by Trump shortly after he entered the White House has triggered widespread domestic censure. The sharp dissidence and debate within the diplomatic and strategic community in the wake of the United States' withdrawal from the TPP still echo. The "Muslim Ban," a complete smash to the liberal democratic values long cherished by the United States, has seriously hindered high-level brain flows, thus strongly resisted by the legislature and the judiciary. Trump's reckless remarks on the United States' alliance system have aroused concerns from the military, the Congress and companies of civil use of military technologies that question the sustainability of the United States' hegemony. His remarks of launching a trade war with China have also driven states with large agricultural lobbying groups and Boeing factories to pressure the Capitol Hill.

The unremitting domestic resistance has consumed excessive political energy of the Trump administration, which has pushed Trump to act more discreetly in Asia. Therefore the US Asia policy under Trump has

again aligned to its policy traditions of being consistent and predictable.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the initial reason for Trump's strategic return to Asia is the intensive opposition from domestic anti-Russia political forces at home to improving relations with Moscow; the opposition has encouraged Trump to seek for breakthroughs in Asia. Trump's alleged collaboration with Russia in its meddling with the election, and the leak of classified information by his aides are all under constant exposition by mainstream media, to the opposition party, the Congress and the judiciary. Thus US-Russia relations become an issue that Trump had better keep away from for his own good and the "Asian Theater" is made an alternative.

The isolationism highlighted during Trump's campaign has frustrated the Establishment and concerned them that the United States will completely abandon its global influence. Trump is learning to return to the traditional Republican approach so to pacify the Establishment, the business elites and some Democrats, adopting a series of economic and foreign policies to win back the Establishment's heart, including a hardened stance against the DPRK, reaffirming the United States' commitment to its allies, a stop to challenging the One China policy, and a halt to listing China and Japan as currency manipulators.

This shift of Trump's approach is highly relevant to the reshuffle of his surrounding personnel. On taking office, Trump's close aides were divided into two factions, one that advocated global thinking led by the President's son-in-law Jared Kushner and the other that featured the populism promoted by Trump's Chief Strategist Steve Bannon. The former is modest, hoping to pull Trump back to the mainstream, while the latter is radical, attempting to establish his own banner. The conflict between the two factions is gradually being made public, and eventually Kushner's more moderate thinking gained the upper hand and Bannon's radical views lost ground.¹⁷

16 Prashanth Parameswaran, "What Will Donald Trump's Asia Policy Look Like?" *The Diplomat*, November 10, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/11/what-will-donald-trumps-asia-policy-look-like>.

17 Dan Merica, "Who's Who in the Trump White House," CNN, April 7, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/07/politics/donald-trump-white-house-staff>.

Directions of the US Asia-Pacific Policy

Trump's Asia-Pacific policy is still being shaped, with some specific policies yet to be formulated. The future US Asia-Pacific policy will still highlight the concept of "America First" and follow the basic and effective principles, especially the Republicans' defining norms. Some possible trends are worth attention.

Selective multilateralism

Trump will not be as avid in promoting Asian multilateralism as his predecessor, but he will not completely withdraw either, instead taking a utilitarian approach and selectively participating in those mechanisms that can advance American interests.¹⁸

Trump attaches great importance to ASEAN's role in countering terrorist threats and maintaining maritime security, and thinks he can establish cooperative relations by selectively negotiating with some countries. Trump has hosted Singaporean and Vietnamese leaders in Washington, and extended an invitation to the Philippine President and the Thai Prime Minister. US Vice President Mike Pence also announced Trump's attendance to the East Asian Summit (EAS) to be held in the Philippines in November 2017.

The Trump administration is expected to realize the necessity and merits of regional multilateral mechanisms through a series of interactions with the leaders of ASEAN countries, and therefore is more likely to put more proposals on the discussion agenda.¹⁹ For example, these proposals might include incorporating regional countries into the US-led global alliance against the Islamic State group; touting US opinions through the platform of the East Asia Summit, including urging other countries to cooperate with the

18 Prashanth Parameswaran, "What Will Donald Trump's Asia Policy Look Like?"

19 Nina Hachigian, "Here's How Trump Can Succeed in Southeast Asia," *Foreign Policy*, April 21, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/21/heres-how-trump-can-succeed-in-southeast-asia>.

United States in response to the threat from the DPRK; motivating regional influential forces to legitimize the United States' hardened pressure on Pyongyang by the intense diplomacy carried out by its mission to ASEAN in Jakarta.²⁰ Nevertheless, it is still uncertain whether Trump would extend this kind of selective multilateralism into the economic field. For example, Trump might opt to participate in the US-ASEAN Connectivity Cooperation Initiative, only in the condition that the mechanism is already well-founded.

Preventing regional hotspot issues from endangering US interests

The United States is trying to steer the direction of the DPRK nuclear issue, but it will not shoulder the burden to resolve the issue alone or have one-on-one talk with Pyongyang without assurance of denuclearization from North Korea. Under the guidance of Trump's "America First" principle, the United States is passing the buck to regional countries. As long as the DPRK does not pose a threat to the US continent or cause panic among the US people, Washington is not likely to resort to extreme measures against Pyongyang. Trump's increasingly strong rhetoric aims to place the DPRK under control. In fact, Trump does not have much confidence in a complete resolution. Even if the United States negotiated with the DPRK, the talks would probably be limited to arms control and nuclear non-proliferation. Just as in dealing with Iranian nuclear issue, the United States will find it hard to overcome its antagonism towards the DPRK, let alone establishing bilateral diplomatic relations.

Meanwhile, the United States is actively taking advantage of the South China Sea issue instead of passively responding to it, and operations averring the freedom of navigation will continue. The United States will intervene in the South China Sea but will avoid entangling itself so deep in the region that itself becomes the focus of controversy. So far, there has been no major shifts in the United States' interests in the South China Sea and in the broader Asia-Pacific. Trump's relatively restrained approach to

20 Michael H. Fuchs and Nina Hachigian, "How Not to Lose Asia to China," *Foreign Policy*, May 3, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/03/how-not-to-lose-asia-to-china>.

the issue should not be interpreted as abandoning the bargaining chip. As stated by the US Commander of the Pacific Fleet Admiral Scott Swift, the United States' policy on freedom of navigation in the disputed South China Sea areas has not changed. It takes time for Trump to observe and assess the situation in the region and map out a strategy to intervene. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that the United States will continue its freedom of navigation operations in the area even if countries stop their constructions and their militarization of islands and reefs.

Rearranging regional economic relations

Trump's announcement that he is withdrawing the United States from the TPP does not mean the United States will absent itself from the construction of the Asia-Pacific economic order. It will not abandon the initiative to reshape that order.²¹ What Trump opposes is multilateral free trade agreements that he claims harmful to US interests, not trade per se. By scrapping the TPP, he intends to replace it with something new, which means a proposal for the new regional economic order will be put on the agenda.

Trump will likely prioritize reopening free trade negotiations with Japan. When Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited the US, both sides were open to free trade talks, agreeing to elevate the level of dialogue and to rearrange bilateral economic relations. Besides, the United States would also look to rewrite the bilateral trade arrangements with Australia and South Korea.

The China-US economic relations would be one area Trump most wishes to reshape. He has urged China to make more compromises to address the US's trade deficit, including specific requests like reducing its exports to the United States, expanding its imports from the United States, and scaling up the cutting of excessive capacity in the steel industry. As trade negotiations go deeper, the United States is likely to push the talks on

21 Mira Rapp-Hooper, "Deciphering Trump's Asia Policy, What 'America First' will Mean for Regional Order," *Foreign Affairs*, November 22, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2016-11-22/deciphering-trumps-asia-policy>.

bilateral investment, requiring full market access to China for US internet enterprises and the introduction of Chinese capital in US infrastructure construction.

Despite the explicit interests and clear-cut objectives in Trump's Asia-Pacific policy, its effects remain to be seen under the influence of domestic political polarization, the complicated situation in Asia and the design of the broader US global strategy.

The first challenge is disruptions from internal conflicts. His government is yet to be completed—so far, Trump has yet to fill some key posts in the State and Defense Departments before he and his team could make up an unambiguous strategic direction to formulate consistent policies. Beyond the White House, Trump faces constant, serious domestic oppositions and the Russia-gate is still continuously brewing. Besides, Trump is questioned to have manipulated the grey areas in the US Constitution and laws, especially in terms of ethics and customary practice of the President. Risk is lingering around Trump's governance, and thus his Asia-Pacific policy still faces uncertainty.

Second, the US commitment to alliances remains concerning. Trump's application of "America First" in his foreign policy has tingled the nerves of the United States' Asia-Pacific allies, and they are busy making their respective Plan Bs. In his keynote address at the 2017 Shangri-La Dialogue, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said that, "[in] this brave new world we cannot rely on great powers to safeguard our interest. We have to take responsibility for our own security and prosperity while recognizing we are stronger when sharing the burden of collective leadership with trusted partners and friends."²²

In South Korea, there have also been twists and turns after Moon Jae-in took office regarding the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system. Seoul is considering taking operational control

22 "Keynote Speech: Malcolm Turnbull," The IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, June 2, 2017, <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri-la-dialogue/archive/shangri-la-dialogue-2017-4f77/opening-remarks-and-keynote-address-fc1a/keynote-address---malcolm-turnbull-4bbe>.

of its own forces in wartime as soon as possible, so as to retain the military initiative and to obtain diplomatic autonomy. On peninsula issues, Seoul is also seeking for more leeway to avoid losing its independence of action. Both Japan and Australia have been increasingly aware that they can no longer yield full control of the situation to the United States, which is embodied in their insistence on promoting the TPP after Washington's exit.

The third challenge is brought by the ASEAN centrality. Centrality is the key to ASEAN's self-positioning. Trump's withdrawal from the TPP has helped the Southeast Asian nations who relied on this trade arrangement review the United States' strategy as soon as possible and thus rethink their trade policies towards the United States. Malaysia and other countries have indicated that they would not easily restart their trade talks with the United States. On the South China Sea issue, Washington's hyping of tensions is not welcomed by ASEAN. The ASEAN members including the Philippines have indicated they are willing to put aside their disputes, to participate in joint development, and to effectively manage their disputes on a bilateral basis. The United States' disruptive actions will only lead the relevant countries to question its real motive.

The last challenge lies in factors exterior to the Asia-Pacific. The Middle East is a crucial part of the United States' global strategy, and the strategic planning and operations regarding this region will definitely affect the implementation of the US Asia-Pacific policy. Right now, the priority for the US national security is to address the threat of radical Islamic forces, and thus it is inevitable that tremendous diplomatic and military resources will be allocated to the region. If the United States could extricate itself from the Middle East situation, its intervention in the Asia-Pacific would be greater. But either way the strategic input in Europe will reduce, which stifles European countries' willingness to coordinate with the United States on its Asia policy. This is however inevitable since upgrading its involvement in Europe and NATO would probably deprive the United States of much energy in its dealing with Russia. 🌐