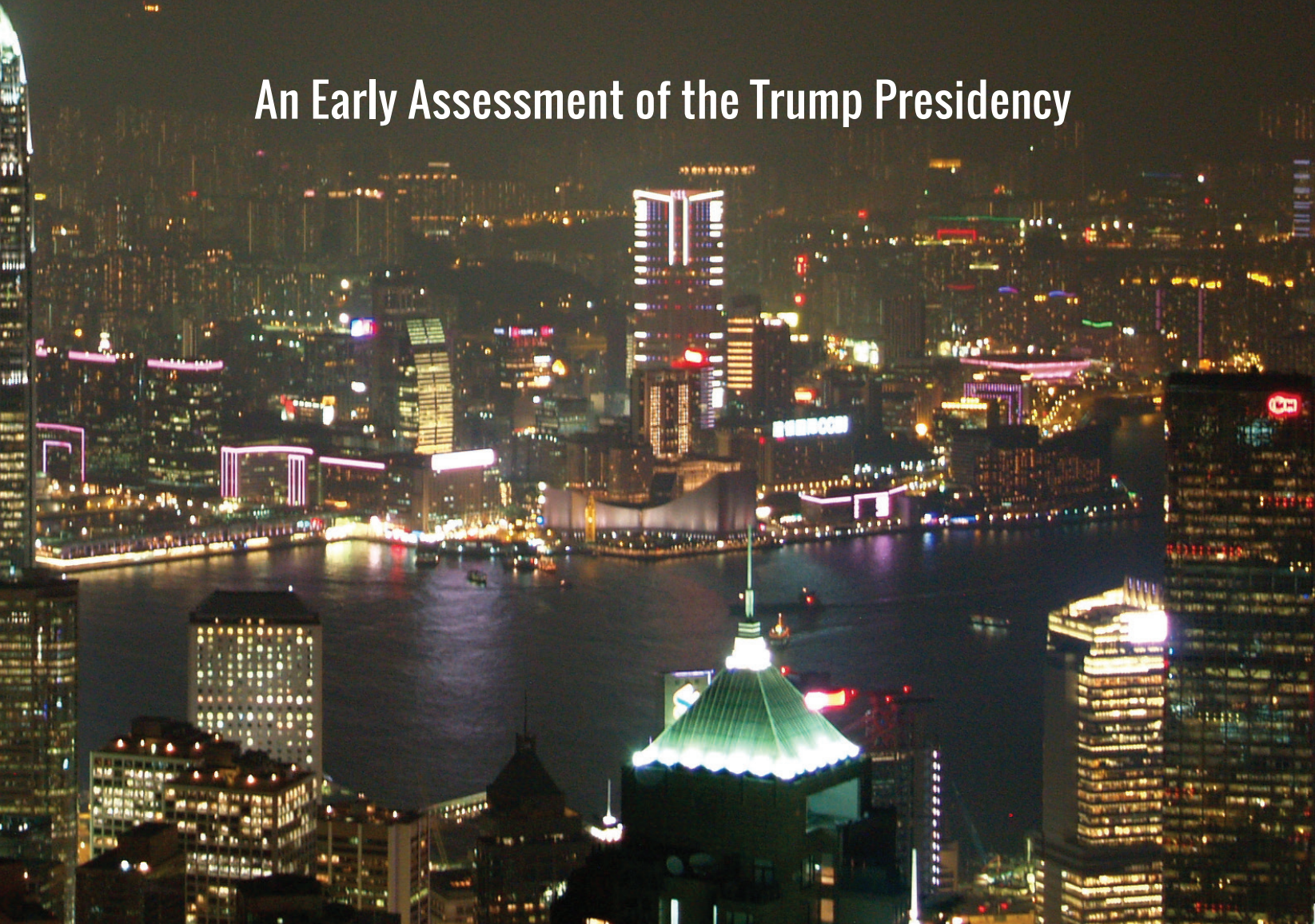


ASIAN VIEWS ON AMERICA'S ROLE IN ASIA

An Early Assessment of the Trump Presidency



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The Asia Foundation

ASIAN VIEWS ON AMERICA'S ROLE IN ASIA: AN EARLY ASSESSMENT OF THE TRUMP PRESIDENCY
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THE ASIA FOUNDATION GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES CARNEGIE CORPORATION OF
NEW YORK FOR THEIR GENEROUS SUPPORT OF THE ASIAN VIEWS ON AMERICA'S ROLE
IN ASIA PROJECT, WITH ADDITIONAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY THE KOREAN-AMERICAN
ASSOCIATION AND THE ROCKEFELLER BROTHERS FUND.



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THIS REPORT WAS WRITTEN BY ASIAN VIEWS ON AMERICA'S ROLE IN ASIA
PARTICIPANTS, BASED ON MATERIALS PREPARED FOR THE SERIES OF MEETINGS AND
DISCUSSIONS THAT TOOK PLACE THROUGHOUT THE PROJECT. IT REFLECTS THE VIEWS OF
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REPORT EDITED BY JOHN RIEGER, DESIGN AND COVER IMAGE BY KRISTIN KELLY COLOMBANO
PHOTOGRAPHY: TED ALCORN, CONOR ASHLEIGH, CHOI JAE-YOUNG, KRISTIN KELLY
COLOMBANO, BART VERWEIJ

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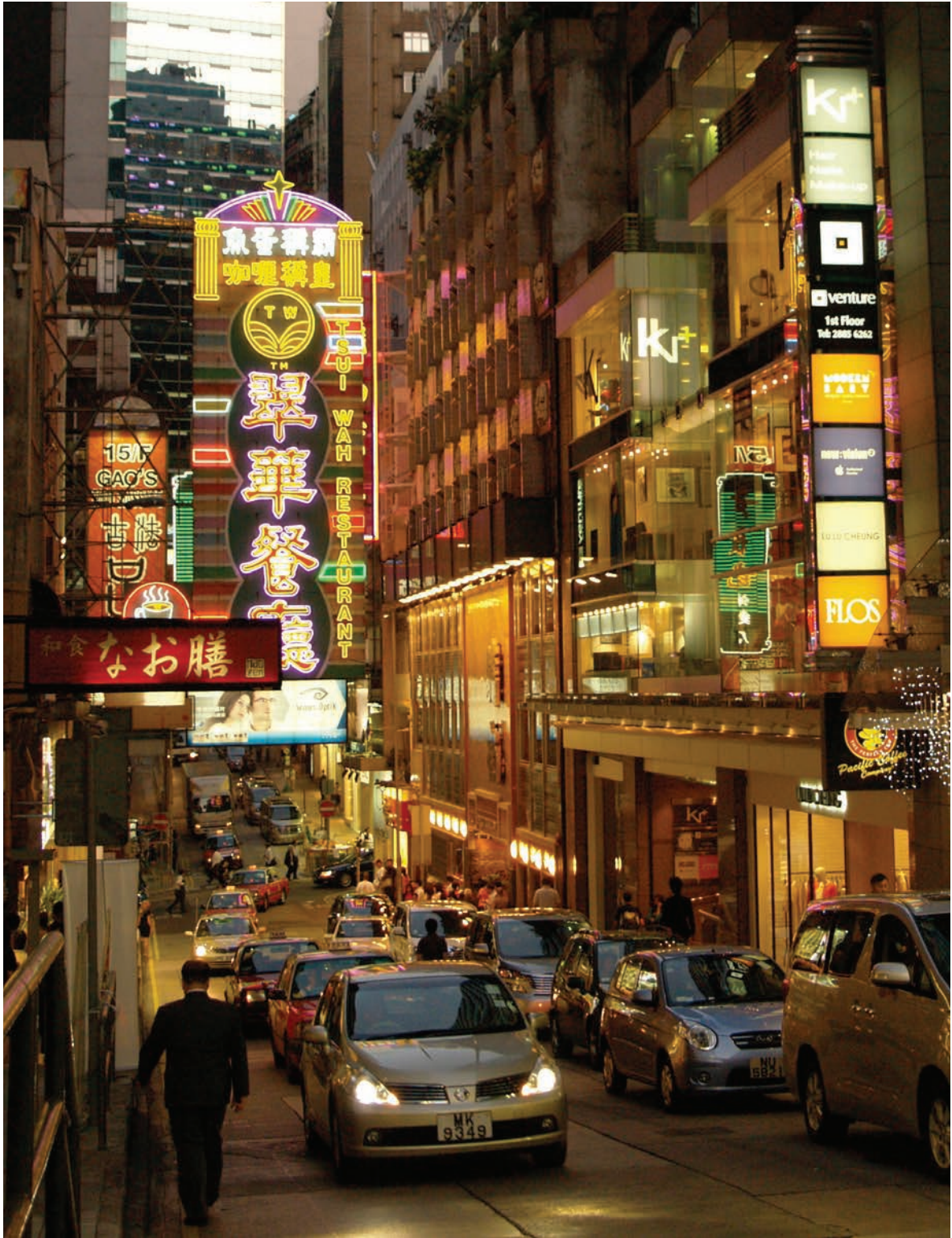
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HARRY HARDING



Asian Views on America's Role in Asia: Reflections in a Time of Uncertainty

The essays in this collection reflect Asian views on U.S. policy towards Asia drawn from a symposium that took place on March 15, 2018, in Hong Kong. It was a particularly timely moment. In the week prior, President Trump had removed Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, announced that he would be willing to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un by summer, and imposed protective tariffs on aluminum and steel imports, potentially risking a trade war with allies and competitors alike.

Convened in partnership with the Hong Kong–America Center, the Department of Asian and International Studies, the Southeast Asia Research Centre at City University of Hong Kong, and the Asia CEO Forum, this symposium, more than a year after the election of U.S. President Donald J. Trump, was part of The Asia Foundation's signature foreign policy publication, *Asian Views on America's Role in Asia* (AVARA), which brings together influential Asian thought leaders for ongoing discussions of U.S. foreign policy priorities in Asia. Fifty people, comprising university faculty, graduate students, and business executives, participated in the symposium, including the three Asian chairs of the project, Dr. Yoon Young-kwan, former Korean foreign minister and professor emeritus of international relations at Seoul National University; Dr. C. Raja Mohan, founding director of the Carnegie India center of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, in New Delhi; and Dr. Thitinan Pongsudhirak, professor of international relations and executive director of the Institute of Security and International Studies (ISIS) at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. Joining the three Asian

chairs was Dr. Harry Harding, university professor at the University of Virginia and visiting professor of social science at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, who served as the AVARA project's American co-chair.

In his year and a half in office, President Trump has repeatedly questioned long-standing assumptions about the global political order and launched unexpected departures from established U.S. foreign policy. As Harry Harding writes here, Asians have responded to President Trump with a mix of "relief, approval, confusion, and concern." President Trump's manner of governing has been unorthodox and even befuddling, causing some Asian nations to wonder if this is "the new normal" in international affairs, at least with respect to the United States.

When President Trump first came to office, in January 2017, some observers, in Asia and elsewhere, feared that America might withdraw from the region. This has not, so far, been the case; but while many Asian leaders want the United States to maintain a robust presence in Asia, they want policies that are clear, not contradictory. The United States remains an important guarantor of security in the Asia-Pacific, but a strong economic component must also be part of the relationship, and while there was an acknowledgement at the symposium that free trade may not be working, tariffs were viewed as the wrong remedy. Interestingly, participants were more concerned by the deep divisions among the American people than they were by President Trump himself, although they viewed his election as a reflection of those divisions. There was a

strong sentiment that Asians did not wish to take sides in America's culture war or become entangled in its new, nationalistic discourse.

One durable truth, however, is that Asia remains a vast, diverse, and complex region full of conflicting trends and differing interpretations. Asian nations, by and large, want a United States that is engaged in their region; but what should America's role be? The answer remains to be seen. They want the United States to be not too close, but not too far; and we can expect continued pressure for America to enunciate a vision of its role in Asia with greater clarity and precision.

The Asia Foundation extends its thanks to Drs. Yoon, Mohan, Pongsudhirak, and Harding for the essays they have contributed to this volume; to Mr. Glenn Shive at the American Center of Hong Kong, Dr. Mark Thompson at City University of Hong Kong, and Mr. Mark Michelson of the Asia CEO Forum for their support of the symposium in Hong Kong; and to Carnegie Corporation of New York for its support of this publication and for its generous support of the AVARA project over the past two years.

JOHN J. BRANDON

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Trump and South Asia Breaking New Ground

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U.S. president Donald Trump's foreign policy has received unprecedented negative reactions from the traditional security establishment in Washington as well as the strategic communities of America's main allies and partners. It has been criticized for its incoherence, for wantonly undermining old institutions like the State Department, for breaking away from long-standing international obligations, and for its departure from the many principles of American internationalism held sacrosanct for decades. That, of course, has not really deterred Mr. Trump from pressing on in the manner that he has seen fit.

President Trump's emphasis on "America First," his attacks on the world trading system and his launch of a trade war against key economic partners, his demand that allies take on a "fair share" of the American burden, and his opposition to the global trading rules carefully constructed under U.S. leadership over many decades have thrown the international system into great turmoil.

Many believe, and many others pray, that President Trump and his policies are an unfortunate deviation from Washington norms that will be corrected, sooner rather than later, under pressure from the so-called permanent establishment and push-back from other institutions like the U.S. Congress. It is also possible, however, to view Mr. Trump as the accidental instrument of a long-overdue correction in U.S. foreign policy that will establish a better fit between American ends and means in a rapidly changing world. Whichever assessment prevails over the near term, there is no denying the unprecedented turbulence in America's engagement with the world under Trump.

Meanwhile, in a striking contrast, the Trump administration's policy towards the South Asian subcontinent has shown a measure of continuity, purposefulness, and innovation. South Asia is one of the few regions to have seen considered review and reformulation of previous U.S. policies. The president outlined his new approach to South Asia in August 2017, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson spoke about the administration's policy towards India on the eve of his visit to South Asia in October 2017. During his travels to Asia at the end of 2017, Trump also outlined a strategy towards the Indo-Pacific with a special emphasis on the role of India. This, over the long term, could integrate the South Asian subcontinent into U.S. strategies towards what has traditionally been viewed as the Asia-Pacific region.

By any measure, Trump's approach to India and its neighbors could be the harbinger of a major structural shift in the way Washington relates to India, Pakistan, and China.

Four broad themes stand out in Trump's approach to India and the subcontinent. The first is a new commitment to the stability of Afghanistan. Reportedly against his own instinct, which was to end the wars begun by his predecessors in the Middle East, Trump decided to order a small increase in the American military presence in Afghanistan. Unlike President Barack Obama, he refused to set a timeline for the

withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. He also eased the rules of engagement to facilitate a more robust confrontation with the Taliban and the Haqqani Network, which continue to destabilize Afghanistan through sustained terror attacks. The United States hopes to demonstrate that these groups cannot win the war for Afghanistan, and to compel them to come to the negotiating table.

It is possible to view Mr. Trump as the accidental instrument of a long-overdue correction in U.S. foreign policy that will establish a better fit between American ends and means in a rapidly changing world.

It is certainly too early to judge the new policy a success. The Taliban and the Haqqani Network have stepped up their attacks in Afghanistan and have rebuffed all U.S. efforts to initiate a dialogue between Kabul and its adversaries. The fighting season in the summer of 2018 could be quite intense and set the tone for future actions by the Trump administration in Afghanistan.

Second, the success of Trump's policy on Afghanistan is likely to depend on what happens in Pakistan, for it is the Pakistani army's support for the Taliban and the Haqqani Network that has limited the prospects for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. Trump's predecessors certainly had no difficulty in recognizing Pakistan as very much part of the problem in Afghanistan, but given its dependence on Pakistani territory to resupply its troops in Afghanistan, Washington found it hard to confront Pakistan's policy of playing both sides in the war on terror.

Trump, however, has signaled his intent to grasp the nettle. He has threatened Pakistan with severe consequences if it does not change its ways. He followed through with significant cuts in U.S. military assistance to Pakistan and mobilized international support to put Pakistan on the watch list of countries financing

terrorist groups. Pakistan has so far refused to change course, and Trump will soon have to decide either to escalate the confrontation with the Pakistani army or return to the policy of acquiescing in its destabilization of Afghanistan. Many within and without the administration are cautioning Trump not to push too hard against a nuclear Pakistan and warning of the dangers of driving Islamabad deeper into Beijing's strategic embrace.

Third, Trump has called on India to play a larger role in Afghanistan. Washington in the past discouraged India from assuming a significant security role in Afghanistan, for fear of offending Pakistan's political sensibilities. Trump has shed some of those inhibitions. Trump's conviction that America's friends and allies must do more to promote regional and global security certainly drives him to the position that Delhi must do more for the stabilization of Afghanistan. Whatever the motivation, Trump is moving away from the policies of Obama and Bush, which put engagement with India and Pakistan in separate boxes, but he is not returning to the older policy of placing India and Pakistan on the same pedestal. He is recognizing the greater weight of India in the region and demanding that it be deployed in support of U.S. objectives towards Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Trump's conviction that America's friends and allies must do more to promote regional and global security certainly drives him to the position that Delhi must do more for the stabilization of Afghanistan.

Fourth, and even more important over the long term, Trump has begun to put India at the very heart of a new strategic balance with China. Trump has explicitly challenged the assumption of the previous administrations that sustained engagement with Beijing would turn China into a benign actor and a trustworthy partner. Trump has come to the conclusion

that competition with China is inevitable, and that any strategy for balancing China must involve India. If previous administrations merely hinted at this long-term prospect, Trump seems to be nudging the relationship with India towards an explicit framework of strategic burden-sharing with the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, through both bilateral understandings and multilateral arrangements with Japan, Australia, and others.

Trump has explicitly challenged the assumption of the previous administrations that sustained engagement with Beijing would turn China into a benign actor and a trustworthy partner.

By any measure, Trump's approach to India and its neighbors could be the harbinger of a major structural shift in the way Washington relates to India, Pakistan, and China. The prospect of a fundamental transformation of U.S. thinking towards southern Asia and the Indo-Pacific littoral, however, continues to be tested by issues of organizational and doctrinal coherence that have dogged the Trump administration. Even a modestly focused deployment of energies towards the goals outlined by Trump could leave the international relations of the subcontinent irrevocably altered.



U.S.—Southeast Asia Relations Under Trump

THITINAN PONGSUDHIRAK

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President Donald J. Trump is now well into the second year of his controversial and contentious term. Daily headlines from the leading media of the world have suggested from the outset that he is likely to be impeached, that his presidency is destined to be derailed by this or that scandal. In the predominant view of the global intelligentsia more broadly, Trump has been so toxic and damaging to the fabric of American democratic values and the rules-based liberal international order of the past seven decades that he should not be allowed to serve out his term. It is hard to be an impartial, detached analyst of U.S. foreign policy under Trump, because he makes himself so unlikeable by being rambunctious, arrogant, and mercurial—a walking agent of divisiveness. Yet Trump has been defiant and resilient. His staying power has befuddled and frustrated critics and detractors the world over. It appears he will soldier on past the midway mark of his first term, with a full term in view, and a second four-year term not entirely implausible. For those outside the United States and its virtual political civil war, it is imperative to be prepared for a prolonged Trump presidency.

Indeed, Trump's time in office has become the new normal for international affairs. He is arguably the first "post-post-Cold War president," who causes so much disruption and discontinuity that many who are accustomed to the rules-based, liberal international order are unable or unwilling to grapple with it. All U.S. presidents from Harry Truman through the Cold War years nurtured, promoted, and upheld the international system as we have known it since the end of World War II. So did Presidents George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama after the Cold War's

end. But not Trump. He accepts no common grounds, preconditions, or assumptions from the past. He neither rejects nor accepts the postwar, liberal international order, dealing with it on a case-by-case basis, making his own rules along the way, thereby reflecting his basic instincts and outsider attributes.

The noise and controversy Trump has generated—from his nocturnal tweets on government policy to his trade protectionism, xenophobic leanings against immigrants, and apparent bigotry—obfuscate his administration's foreign-policy directions and outcomes. Nowhere is this more evident than in the contours and dynamics of U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia.

All U.S. presidents nurtured, promoted, and upheld the international system as we have known it since the end of World War II. But not Trump. He accepts no common grounds, preconditions, or assumptions from the past.

Take, for example, the 37th annual Cobra Gold military exercise conducted by 29 nations in Thailand in February 2018. Contrary to expectations about Trump's lack of foreign-policy experience, this military exercise displayed a nuanced U.S. geostrategic playbook. It was earlier thought in many quarters that the Trump administration, with its mantra of "America First," would be isolationist and aloof from Asian affairs, but this has not been the case in its first year. Counterintuitively, this administration is broadly reasserting America's role in Southeast Asia, and Southeast Asia should encourage

this development as a way to achieve a balanced geopolitical neighborhood less dominated by, and less beholden to, an unchecked China.

In Cobra Gold's latest iteration, the U.S. military increased its participation to 6,800 personnel, nearly double the figure for 2015–16. The smaller U.S. presence in recent years in Asia's largest military exercise stemmed primarily from Thailand's military coup in May 2014. President Obama imposed a range of sanctions on Thailand's military regime, including a ban on high-level official visits and slashes to Cobra Gold operations. It has taken Trump a year to reboot U.S. participation in Cobra Gold, which is designed to boost interoperability among U.S. armed forces and their allies and partners in Asia.

The Trump geostrategic reorientation has, ironically, superseded Obama's "pivot" and "rebalance." Widely respected for his intellect, integrity, and internationalism, Obama staunchly supported the rules-based, liberal global order. Yet during the Obama years, Southeast Asia can be said to have been "lost" to China.

The Trump administration has made clear that its geostrategy privileges interests over values. Thailand's military government thus has more latitude in dealing with Washington. Trump, in fact, hosted Vietnamese, Malaysian, and Thai leaders at the White House last year in the lead-up to the ASEAN-related summits in November. The visit of the Thai leader, General Prayut Chan-ocha, was particularly notable, because he was the serving head of a military junta that had seized power from an elected Thai government in May 2014. Other Southeast Asian leaders seen as more authoritarian, such as Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte, have also received more attention from President Trump. The conspicuous exception to Trump's attentions is

Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi, who enjoyed a warm rapport with President Obama, but who now faces a crisis of international confidence in her handling of the humanitarian calamity in the country's westernmost Rakhine State, where as many as 680,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled to next-door Bangladesh, in desperation to survive.

Beyond supping with Southeast Asian leaders of different stripes, the Trump administration appears equipped with a broader geopolitical game plan for a "free and open Indo-Pacific," which Trump has trumpeted as the main global arena of contest and cooperation. At this year's Cobra Gold, in view of persistent tensions on the Korean Peninsula, South Korean troops were given a front-and-center role in mock beach-landing exercises. President Trump has repeatedly pointed to North Korea as America's most existential threat. And while Trump may have talked up Chinese President Xi Jinping as a "very special man" during the season of ASEAN-led summits last November, the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) announced a month later that both China and Russia are "rival powers" that aim to "challenge American power, influence, and interests." The NSS was reinforced in January 2018 by the National Defense Strategy, which posits "interstate strategic competition, not terrorism" as the "primary concern in U.S. national security."

Thus far in office, the Trump administration, which includes more former military brass than other U.S. cabinets in recent decades, has come up with an Indo-Pacific framework that prioritizes U.S. interests on a transactional basis when it can, and seeks regional platforms when it must. This outlook is evident in Trump's approach to U.S. trade deficits with key Asian countries such as China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Yet President Trump himself has not abandoned broader cooperative vehicles and forums, such as the recent ASEAN-U.S. summit and leaders' meetings at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) and the East Asia Summit (EAS).

The Trump geostrategic reorientation has, ironically, superseded Obama's "pivot" and "rebalance." Widely

respected for his intellect, integrity, and internationalism, Obama staunchly supported the rules-based, liberal global order. Yet during the Obama years, Southeast Asia can be said to have been “lost” to China. Starting in 2012, China built a string of artificial islands and placed military installations and other assets on them. Despite an Arbitral Tribunal ruling to the contrary in July 2016, backed by provisions in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, Beijing has kept what it took.

In mainland Southeast Asia, China, similarly, has built a chain of dams on the upper reaches of the Mekong River, to the detriment of downstream communities in Cambodia and Vietnam, in disregard of the Mekong River Commission, a subregional body with the mandate to oversee river management. China insists on its own framework, known as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, which held its second summit meeting in January 2018. Regional responses to China’s belligerence and unilateral rule-making were tepid in the absence of a major counterweight. China’s upstream Mekong dams and weaponized islands in the South China Sea were largely uncontested, notwithstanding the Philippines’ and Vietnam’s remonstrances. Ultimately, China has a way of bulldozing smaller states into concessions and submission through bilateral dealings. With the United States more visibly back in the mix, these regional dynamics are likely to undergo a fluid rebalancing. The Trump administration will also have geopolitical room to maneuver, because it is not preoccupied with human rights and democracy as was the Obama administration.

While Trump is seen as polarizing at home, his Asia outlook has been harder to pin down. He brings a different kind of carrot-and-stick approach, and is able to match China’s penchant for bilateral, transactional agreements. On trade, he invokes “America First” for home constituencies, but he is equally inclined to reassert America’s military presence in the wary view of allies and partners. Many thought he had little appetite for foreign policy—that he might not even know the locations of smallish Southeast Asian countries on a map. Yet he completed a 12-day tour of Asia, including key visits to Vietnam and the Philippines for leaders’ meetings of APEC, the ASEAN-U.S. summit, and the East Asia Summit, to the surprise of many.

When Obama’s first secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, declared in Bangkok in July 2009 that “the United States is back,” it was meant to signal a return from the previous administration’s aloofness and alienation from Southeast Asia. But despite good intentions and rhetorical flourish, the Obama pivot did not go very far. The Trump administration has not announced any sort of “return,” but the results on the ground are pointing towards a new geopolitical balance in the region. As far as Southeast Asia’s quest for major-power balance to preserve ASEAN centrality is concerned, Trump is unwittingly doing better than Obama, although the road ahead will be long and daunting for both the United States and Southeast Asia.

These trends and dynamics suggest these recommendations for America’s role in Southeast Asia and for ASEAN’s search for a new regional balance:

- Encourage political stakeholders in the United States to tone down their divisiveness and seek recourse through regular electoral channels and democratic institutions, because protracted U.S. polarization directly undermines America’s role in Asia.
- Reinforce the long-held conviction of U.S. foreign policy circles that ASEAN centrality is indispensable for regional peace and stability in Asia. This should include high-level U.S. political representation, such as the president and the secretaries of state and defense, at APEC, EAS, and the ASEAN Regional Forum.
- Ensure that President Trump’s Indo-Pacific framework neither marginalizes nor minimizes ASEAN’s architecture-setting role and agenda in Southeast Asia.
- Reinvigorate ASEAN cohesion and unity to boost ASEAN centrality, by closing ranks and promoting greater camaraderie among top leaders.
- Promote America’s reengagement in Southeast Asia, including military maneuvers, to shore up ASEAN’s regional autonomy and centrality by creating more balance among the great powers.
- Prevent regional rivalries among major powers from spiraling into open conflict.



U.S. Engagement in Northeast Asia Under President Trump

YOON YOUNG-KWAN

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U.S. engagement in Northeast Asia since the start of the Trump administration has reflected President Donald Trump's unique view of U.S. foreign policy. This view is "illiberal," in the sense that it emphasizes the importance of narrowly defined American economic interests—"America First"—instead of America's long-standing leadership in maintaining the global free-trade regime. It is also unconventional in preferring a bilateral and transactional approach to dealing with foreign countries while disregarding the utility of the multilateral institutional mechanisms established in the post-World War II period.

The Trump administration's first major foreign-policy move, for example, was to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement (TPP), in January 2017. President Trump believes that bilateral deals with foreign countries will bring more benefits to the United States than a multilateral deal. But critics have argued that withdrawing from the TPP will "sacrifice a significant geopolitical advantage and deprive the United States of important leverage in trade negotiations with China. These critics say China will now be able to increase its influence in the Asia-Pacific, at the expense of the United States, by strengthening the competing Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in the region.

With the American withdrawal, the TPP seemed to lose its momentum, but the 11 participating states that remained agreed, in May 2017, to revive the pact, and they signed the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) on March 8, 2018.

Interestingly, President Trump is reported to have asked Larry Kudlow, chairman of his National Economic Council, and U.S. trade representative Robert Lighthizer, in April 2018, to review American reentry into the TPP, although he retracted this order just a day later.

President Trump's illiberal foreign economic policy materialized more concretely when he imposed across-the-board tariffs on imports of steel (25 percent) and aluminum (10 percent) in March 2018. This provoked extensive debate on the negative domestic and international impacts of the tariffs. Some argued that the economic cost of the tariffs to the U.S. economy would exceed the benefits. Others worried about the possibility of an international trade war. Countries like Canada, Mexico, and South Korea were exempted from the tariffs, while Japan and China were not. The Chinese government retaliated in early April 2018, announcing tariffs of up to 25 percent on \$3 billion in food imports from the United States.

President Trump's foreign-policy approach may have extracted some benefits for the United States from its negotiating partners, but his administration has lacked a big-picture, strategic concept for U.S. foreign policy.

In 2017, the U.S.-China relationship was better than many experts had previously predicted. President-elect

Trump had caused much concern among Chinese leaders when he placed a phone call to Taiwan's president Tsai Ing-wen in early December 2016. There was even greater concern when he questioned the "One China" principle immediately after his inauguration in early 2017. U.S.-China relations improved, however, when President Trump declared his government would respect the One China principle, and the two countries were able to cooperate in managing several bilateral issues, most notably the problem of a nuclear North Korea.

Although it is still unknown whether the June 12 summit will ultimately lead to denuclearization, transforming the military confrontation of last year into an opportunity for negotiation is a positive result for Trump's diplomacy.

The U.S.-China relationship has become more confrontational, however, since around the beginning of 2018. U.S. trade policy, as explained above, is one reason, but there has also been friction over Taiwan and the South China Sea. Seeking perhaps to differentiate itself from the Obama administration by assuming a more aggressive posture, the Trump administration has been increasing the pace of naval freedom-of-navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea since 2017, pushing back against Chinese maritime claims and requirements of prior notification for passage, and tensions have been rising.

On March 16, 2018, after unanimous votes in both houses of Congress, President Trump signed the Taiwan Travel Act, authorizing U.S. officials to visit Taiwan, and high-level Taiwanese officials to visit Washington. Protesting vehemently, Beijing increased sorties by Chinese fighter jets and sent its aircraft carrier through the Taiwan Strait. All this occurred against the backdrop of increasing tensions between

China and Taiwan following the inauguration of Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen.

America's relationship with its allies in Northeast Asia turned out to be better than many observers had feared at the time of Trump's electoral victory in November 2016. Candidate Trump had several times made remarks criticizing U.S. allies like South Korea and Japan, characterizing both countries as "free riders" that benefitted from the alliance without paying their fair share of the costs, but Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and President Moon Jae-in, with great effort, were able to establish good personal relations with President Trump and preserve their nations' respective alliances. Nevertheless, President Trump's "America First" policy, emphasizing U.S. economic interests, seems to have taken its toll on America's relationship with these two long-time allies. Some observers in Japan and Korea, for example, have complained that under America First, U.S. troops stationed in those countries could be considered mercenaries. Policymakers in both countries have quietly begun to question the credibility of U.S. security commitments and to wonder whether U.S. troops will remain if peace and denuclearization are achieved on the Korean Peninsula.

The United States needs to maintain its multidimensional engagement in Northeast Asia instead of relying only on its military presence and bilateral, transactional diplomacy.

One major area of progress in American engagement in Northeast Asia has been its nuclear diplomacy with North Korea. President Trump entered office criticizing his predecessors for their failure to denuclearize North Korea, claiming that only he could solve the nuclear problem. He then began to apply what he termed "maximum pressure" on North Korea, both economically and militarily. He persuaded China to impose its greatest-ever economic sanctions on

North Korea, in accordance with several UN Security Council resolutions. According to some research, North Korea's exports decreased by 35 percent in 2017 due to sanctions and may decline by as much as 90 percent in 2018 if current sanctions remain in place. The United States also applied military pressure. Key U.S. policymakers, including President Trump himself, made it clear that the United States was ready to use military options if diplomacy failed, and three U.S. aircraft-carrier battle groups sailed together to Korea on two occasions in 2017.

If the United States abandons its multilateral, multidimensional engagement with Northeast Asia, the region will gradually fall into the orbit of China, potentially leading to the formation of a China-centered bloc.

Probably due in part to this strong pressure, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un abruptly changed tack in early 2018 and extended an olive branch to South Korea and the United States. On March 5, 2018, for the first time during his rule, he voiced the intention, in the presence of the visiting South Korean envoy, to denuclearize North Korea "if the safety of his regime be guaranteed and military threats against North Korea removed." Thereafter, there were two inter-Korean summits, the first on April 27 and the second on May 26. The U.S.-DPRK summit was finally scheduled for June 12, after Kim Yong-chol, vice chairman of North Korea's Workers' Party, met President Trump at the White House on June 3. It is still unclear if Kim Jong-un has made a strategic decision to trade his nuclear program for certain rewards, or if he is repeating the deceptive tactics of the past. Although it is still unknown whether the summit will lead to denuclearization, transforming the military confrontation of last year into an opportunity for negotiation is a positive result for Trump's diplomacy.

President Trump's foreign-policy approach may have extracted some benefits for the United States from its negotiating partners, but his administration has lacked a big-picture, strategic concept for U.S. foreign policy and has tended to miss the linkages between international issues. For example, U.S. policies on trade, Taiwan, and the South China Sea may affect U.S. nuclear diplomacy toward North Korea by affecting whether China chooses to cooperate in maintaining sanctions. A more balanced approach toward China, avoiding either confrontation or appeasement, would help in this regard. Some pundits were also concerned about the possibility that the administration's decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear accord might have a negative effect on U.S.-North Korea diplomacy by casting doubt that President Trump would keep his word in a negotiated solution. These uncertainties would be reduced if President Trump or one of his key advisors—ideally his national security advisor—had a broader strategic view of American foreign policy.

Secondly, "America First" is not a good foreign-policy catchphrase for an international audience. It will make allies suspicious of U.S. commitments and weaken American influence in the world. In contrast, China's leader uses more appealing terms like "common destiny" or "mutually beneficial relationship" to reach out to neighboring countries and the world.

Thirdly, the United States needs to maintain its multidimensional engagement in Northeast Asia instead of relying on its military presence and bilateral, transactional diplomacy only. Continued U.S. economic investments and cultural, social, and educational commitments are also important components of U.S. influence in Northeast Asia. If the United States abandons its multilateral, multidimensional engagement with Northeast Asia, the region will gradually fall into the orbit of China, potentially leading to the formation of a China-centered bloc.



How Asia is Viewing the Trump Presidency

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The symposium on which these essays draw, convened by The Asia Foundation, the American Center of Hong Kong, and City University of Hong Kong in March 2018, provided a valuable opportunity to hear Asian assessments of the Trump administration's Asia policy a little over a year after the new president assumed office. As he did throughout his campaign, President Trump entered office questioning many of the long-standing assumptions underlying American foreign policy, both regionally and globally. He promised to reject both these assumptions and the foreign policy elites who championed them. Now in the second year of his term, the president has repeatedly challenged America's commitment to free trade, its reliance on regional trade and security architecture, and its devotion to human rights. How do thoughtful Asian observers evaluate these developments? And do they regard the president's views simply as a temporary consequence of his unexpected election that will be swept away at the end of his term, or as deeper, more enduring trends that foreshadow the decline and retreat of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region? Interestingly, the opinions expressed by symposium participants on these issues were neither as polarized nor as extreme as one may encounter in other parts of the globe, including the United States. Instead, they reflected a blend of *relief*, *approval*, *confusion*, and *concern* across a large number of important regional issues. Their complex and often subtle analysis warrants careful consideration by their

Asian observers react to the Trump administration with a blend of relief, approval, confusion, and concern.

American counterparts.

RELIEF

The relief expressed by many of the Asian participants reflected their realization that many of the preconceptions about the incoming Trump administration, based on Trump's campaign statements, the views of his political base, the positions of some of his advisers, and the characterizations by his opponents, have thus far proved unfounded. Many Asians had feared that Trump would turn his back on the region, as part of an isolationist policy suggested by one of his main campaign slogans, "America First." To the surprise of many, however, Trump made a long, six-country trip to Asia early in his administration, not only meeting leaders in each of the countries he visited, but also participating in the APEC meetings in Danang and the East Asian Summit in the Philippines. Asian observers have therefore concluded that while Trump is indeed a unilateralist, he is not as much of an isolationist as some had expected. Asian participants were also relieved that Trump has backed away from his early reservations about the value of key American alliances in the region, especially those with Japan and South Korea, and has now recognized their essential role in dealing with North Korea's missile and nuclear programs.

APPROVAL

The Asian participants also expressed approval of some of the Trump administration's specific initiatives toward the region. They endorsed his modification or abandonment of some earlier policies that they consider to have been seriously flawed, including the policy of "strategic patience" toward North Korea and

the protracted but inconclusive dialogues with China on security and trade issues. Several participants noted that Trump's tougher diplomacy toward both countries had achieved some early successes, gaining pledges from Xi Jinping to open the Chinese economy more fully to imports and foreign investment, and expressions by Kim Jong-un of his willingness to resume negotiations over his nuclear and missile programs. Nonetheless, they retain significant concerns about the prospects for U.S. relations with Pyongyang and Beijing, as will be described more fully below.

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In addition, some analysts in the region appear gratified that, as one put it, the "neglect of [South Asia] is coming to an end," with a greater focus on the Indian Ocean as well as the Pacific, increased attention to India and Pakistan, and a renewed commitment to Afghanistan, including a modification of what they saw as an excessively accommodative policy toward Pakistan and overly restrictive rules of engagement in Afghanistan. This is not to say that they think this new American approach is guaranteed success, but rather that they believe these changes are moving U.S. policy in the right direction.

CONFUSION

These positive assessments were heavily qualified by the fact that, even a year after the inauguration, there remains much confusion about the Trump administration's policy toward the region. This is the result of clear differences of opinion among some members of the administration on major issues including China and North Korea; the lack of coordination among the White House, the Congress, and parts of the bureaucracy on trade policy; and, above all, the unusually rapid turnover in key positions

in the administration, including the national security advisor, the director of the National Economic Council, and the secretary of state. Trump's personal style adds to the bewilderment, particularly how the president has combined harsh criticism of both China and North Korea with statements of respect and even friendship for both Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un, and the way in which his impulsive use of social media raises doubts about the sustainability of his administration's policies over time.

In addition, the implications of some of the Trump administration's new initiatives remain unclear. At the top of this list is the concept of an "Indo-Pacific" region, focused on the East Asian, South Asian, and South Pacific democracies, especially the United States, Australia, Japan, and India. Does this new formulation replace the more traditional idea of the Asia-Pacific, or merely complement it? Will Washington try to institutionalize the concept through the creation of Indo-Pacific organizations and dialogues, or will it remain a more informal grouping? Does it supplant the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," or is it simply a way of rephrasing it? Those who perceive the Indo-Pacific concept mainly as a reformulation of his predecessor's pivot are relatively relaxed, although they wonder how enthusiastic the response of the other members of this proposed alignment will be. But those who are deeply invested in the original "Asia-Pacific" concept, and especially the principle that ASEAN should be the center of regional activities, expressed greater concern about what they fear is an implicit downgrading of ASEAN's place in the Trump administration's view of Asia, as well as the possible risks in excluding China from this new grouping.

CONCERN

Along with some approval and much confusion, there remains considerable concern about aspects of the Trump administration's approach to the region. One worry is the glacially slow pace in filling several key ambassadorships and high-level positions in the State Department. That, together with an apparent disregard

for the familiar Asia specialists in the Washington policy community, suggests the danger that the administration will lack the depth of professional expertise needed to manage key issues, especially in a crisis. This was believed to be especially true of the Korean peninsula. One participant even warned that the Trump administration did not have enough experienced diplomats in place to prepare his summit meeting with Kim Jong-un and to negotiate successfully with North Korea.

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A still greater reason for concern is that, just as he promised, Trump has been an extremely unconventional president. In part, this is a matter of style. He has replaced the cautious and restrained styles of earlier administrations with a more impulsive, assertive, even aggressive approach to important issues in the region. As one participant put it, “Asians expected Americans to be nice,” but they are now facing a White House that is blunter and tougher than the previous administrations they were used to.

In addition to adopting a rougher style, Trump has dramatically changed American policy on a number of key issues by adopting less accommodative and more assertive positions.

On North Korea, he has replaced the policy of “strategic patience” with a policy of “maximum pressure,” including threats and displays of military force as well as increasingly stringent economic sanctions.

On trade, he is seen as both a protectionist and a unilateralist, abandoning the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement that his predecessor negotiated, demanding a renegotiation of the terms of the bilateral

free-trade agreement between the U.S. and South Korea, and questioning the effectiveness of the World Trade Organization in mediating trade disputes among its members.

On China, while not completely abandoning the traditional American policy of “engagement” with Beijing, he has demanded a more “results-oriented” approach. He has harshly criticized China’s trade surpluses with the United States, denounced China’s trade and investment policies, and threatened or imposed higher tariffs on Beijing in response to its alleged dumping of steel and aluminum and its methods of acquiring intellectual property. While there is concern about a possible “trade war” between the two countries, Asians are giving investment issues equal if not greater attention. They note that an increasing number of Chinese proposals for investments in the United States have been rejected by the U.S. government, especially in an expanding list of sectors that Washington considers strategically important, even as the United States demands greater access to investment opportunities in China.

In the South China Sea, the U.S. Navy continues to engage in freedom-of-navigation operations that challenge China’s potential control of the sea lanes passing through this important body of water, and has urged its allies inside and outside the region to participate in these exercises as well.

While acknowledging the issues that led to these changes, and while agreeing in many cases that a stronger American stand is desirable, Asian participants expressed concern that Washington’s pressure tactics may not obtain the desired results. As one put it, in some cases pressure seems to be working, but in others it may not succeed, or may even prove counterproductive. The main focus of such concern was Trump’s policy toward the rise of China, which, as our 2016 report suggested, remains the issue that receives the greatest attention in the region. The dominant view seemed to be that it was indeed necessary to balance China’s growing clout in the region and to criticize some of its objectionable

trade, investment, and security practices, but it was also important to avoid provoking a Chinese overreaction. In particular, Asians do not want to see either an all-out trade war or a strategic confrontation between the two countries, and doubt remains as to whether the Trump administration will strike that balance effectively. Doing so will be difficult, especially given that the U.S. will receive conflicting advice on this issue from its allies and friends in the region, largely because the members of ASEAN are deeply divided on how best to deal with China, as are the publics in several important Asian countries.

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On other key issues, the participants expressed similar concerns. On North Korea, there was both surprise and relief that Washington and Pyongyang had backed away from a military confrontation and moved instead toward a summit meeting in midyear. However, there was considerable unease about the results of the negotiations. What would Trump demand of Pyongyang, and what would Pyongyang demand in return? Would Trump give too much, or would he get too little? Once again there seemed to be no consensus about what the desirable outcomes would be. There was no agreement about whether a freeze on North Korea's nuclear weapons production and ballistic missile deployments would be acceptable, or whether the United States should continue to insist on complete denuclearization of the North. There was similarly no agreement on whether the United States should raise human-rights concerns in the negotiations, particularly with regard to the Japanese and American citizens who have been

abducted or held by Pyongyang, or whether it should focus only on the security questions that some regard as more important. Nor was there unanimity on whether the United States should withdraw some or all of its forces from South Korea as part of a denuclearization agreement with North Korea or a peace agreement to end the Korean War.

Thus, the original concern about an outbreak of armed conflict on the Korean peninsula has been replaced by a concern about the outcome of the negotiations between the North and the United States. The worry here is either that the negotiations will ultimately "succeed," but on terms that some in the region would regard as inadequate or unacceptable, or that the talks will fail ultimately to reach any agreement at all. In that case, the risk of an impending military confrontation on the peninsula would reemerge, and as one participant warned, "the situation may become more dangerous than before."

South Asians are concerned about a different aspect of the Trump administration's policy: its approach to the Muslim world. As one pointed out, "the world's largest concentration of Muslims is between Dacca and Karachi." American treatment of Muslim immigrants and Muslim-Americans, and its position on employment visas for well-educated South Asians, will therefore be watched just as closely as American policy toward the Middle East and South Asia, and will profoundly influence regional views of the United States under Trump.

On trade, the countries that agreed to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership were disappointed that the United States withdrew from the agreement, although they acknowledge that opposition to the TPP extended across a broad spectrum of America's political leadership, including presidential candidates in both parties. They are pleased that the Trump administration has expressed interest in rejoining if the United States can get a better deal, but are uncertain about what his terms will be. The eleven countries that agreed to join a smaller grouping as a replacement for the

larger original, the so-called TPP-11, have suspended their acceptance of the most important “WTO-plus” concessions that the United States had originally demanded, and they may now resist reinstating them, let alone agreeing to even tougher measures as part of a renegotiated TPP. The prospect of reviving the TPP on terms acceptable to Washington is therefore uncertain at best. Some observers also question the desirability of creating a trade agreement that would exclude China, especially since China is promoting its own Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement as an alternative to the TPP. On the other hand, some believe that a resurrected agreement on the TPP might help persuade China to change its trade and investment policies in favorable directions. Again, therefore, the Trump administration faces an Asia that has not reached consensus on a key issue.

Asians do not completely reject the idea that Trump should be, at least to a degree, a “disruptive” president. They believe that some past American policies toward their region needed to be reconsidered and modified.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the discussions in Hong Kong was the way in which the Asian participants viewed not only the Trump administration’s Asia policy but also the debate over that policy in the United States. While expressing, as already noted, many uncertainties and concerns about Trump’s approach to Asia, the Asian participants took a more balanced and nuanced view than is sometimes heard elsewhere, finding some things to praise as well as others to criticize. One said that the Trump administration “has not been a disaster,” even though many Americans characterize it that way. And they also recognized that this more balanced assessment differentiates them from the more extreme views they have heard from colleagues in the United

States. Some said bluntly that they did not want to be drawn into that polarized American debate, especially if they were pressed to take sides.

This is because Asians do not completely reject the idea that Trump should be, at least to a degree, a “disruptive” president. As already indicated, they believe that some past American policies toward their region needed to be reconsidered and modified. But they want those changes to be made in a more thoughtful, coordinated, and sustained way than they have seen so far. They are also concerned about how the other major powers in the region, especially China, will respond to a more assertive approach from Washington. Just as Asians do not want to be drawn into American domestic debates, they do not wish to be entangled in a confrontational relationship between the United States and China. As always, Asians prefer the “Goldilocks” option: a U.S.-China relationship that is “not too hot, not too cold, but just right.”

Finally, while expressing concern about many aspects of the Trump administration’s Asia policy, the participants in this conference could not always reach agreement on what they wanted that policy to be. There were different views about the concept of an Indo-Pacific region, about the desired outcomes of the U.S.-DPRK summit, and about optimal regional trade arrangements. Americans need to listen carefully to their Asian partners and friends, but they cannot expect them to speak with a unified voice.

ABOUT ASIAN VIEWS ON AMERICA'S ROLE IN ASIA

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