

CHAPTER 10

The United States in 2017: Security Developments & Implications for Defense Policy, the Security Sector and Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation/Coordination

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Introduction

In January 2017, a year ago, my assessment of security developments, implications for defense policy, the security sector and Asia-Pacific cooperation was presented to this forum on the 5th day of President Trump's administration. Today, I return to reconsider my assessment of the same issues on the 370th day of the Trump Administration—but I do not want anyone to conclude that I am counting the days! Necessarily, my earlier assessment was focused on the 2016 election debate and in particular the winning candidate's statements. Given President Trump's surprising victory and the uncertainties raised by his campaign statements regarding a range of key issues related to Asia-Pacific security, how can we assess a year of *actual* policy, including key national security guidance documents and actual relations with Asia-Pacific countries including an unprecedented trip to the region in November?

Major Security Policy Developments for the United States in 2017

First, the configuration of domestic politics, power and influence important to U.S. security policy in 2017 saw important continuity and changes. First, the President was not impeached, did not resign, and has to date not been charged with a crime even though an investigation into possible collusion of members of his election campaign with Russian officials and representatives continues under the supervision of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Second, Republicans continued to hold a majority in both the House and Senate and successfully defended some contested seats during the year—though there were some important defeats such as the Senate race in Alabama. More than electoral victories or losses, the Republicans now face the resignation or possible loss in both the House (e.g., Chairman Royce) and Senate (e.g., Senator Robert Corker, Senator Jeff Flake, and tragically possibly Senator McCain due to illness) of some major figures from the party—many of whom in

some way clashed with the Trump Administration on important foreign policy and defense issues (and in some cases also on domestic ones). Moreover, while still almost a year away, the mid-term elections in November 2018 are expected to result in at least the loss for the Republicans of the House majority and even possibly the Senate majority. The President's own national approval rate is in the mid-30 percentile. Third, the foreign policy bureaucracy (Department of State) has been especially buffeted by rumors all year long about the imminent resignation of Secretary Tillerson and the Department continues to see an outflow of senior officers as well as a decline in inflow of new officers; and this without clarity on what are looming budget cutbacks for the department. Though not all tied to foreign, security and defense, the Administration still trails its predecessors in filling political appointments.

The net effect of this configuration of domestic politics and bureaucracy (an important element of the security sector) for security and defense policy is likely to be quite minimal. There will be continuing tussles on Iran as well as the “right” response to North Korea, general support for a tough line on Russia and China, and robust support for the military/security sector: the Democrats’ task on the military is not less spending, but matched funding for domestic programs. The one “security” divergence between the two parties is likely to be funding for President Trump’s wall to halt the flow of illegal immigrants from the south. (So far there have been no calls for a “wall” in the north in the event of the failure of NAFTA talks).

The key developments most important to shaping U.S. defense and security policy broadly remained largely the same in 2017 as in 2016:

The Russian threat. The National Security Strategy (NSS) states clearly: “China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity”¹ While the President continues to reject allegations that Russian interference was responsible for his election victory or that there was any collusion between his campaign and Russia, it does appear the President now more explicitly accepts, maybe even shares the foreign policy, security and defense consensus regarding Russia.

¹ The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>, p. 2.

North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. North Korea has dominated the frontlines of U.S. policy and attention in 2017 just as in 2016 not least because of its successful July tests of two missiles which could hit CONUS and in September of what some regard as a thermonuclear device. Just this week there was a false alert about an incoming North Korean attack on Hawaii. The Trump Administration has worked hard at both the UN and with a variety of partners across the globe to strengthen sanctions. And as of this writing North Korea and South Korea are engaged in talks regarding participation in the Winter Olympics and other forms of inter-change, though apparently there have been no talks about nuclear programs or missiles specifically. Just this month President Trump reiterated his willingness to meet with Kim Jong-Un, but under what conditions or format is not clear. At the same time, leaked reports and presidential tweets still provide evidence that the military option is “to hand” if needed and President Trump has responded to President Kim’s threats by saying that his nuclear button is bigger and actually works. American experts continue to debate whether China is or is not truly enforcing the sanctions—though administration officials generally compliment China for its support and adherence to sanctions.

China. China, as noted above, together with Russia, has now been forthrightly identified as a national security threat to the U.S. and its allies and partners. Together with Russia it also has been labeled a “revisionist” power. China is perhaps even more of a threat to the U.S. than Russia on two counts: first, China is specifically cited as a threat to the U.S. national security innovation base and second it is only China that “seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region...” Last year I posed the question, whether China’s economic policies or security policies or both will get high priority attention compared to issues such as Russia or Islamic terrorism. In this context, it should be noted that the NSS states “Although the United States seeks to cooperate with China,...” suggesting that management rather than confrontation is the basis of the relationship. However, “management” will come with harsher terms and be especially focused on maritime issues. And yet there are already rumors that the yet-to-be-released Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) will call for new types of nuclear weapons to offset threats from Russia and China.² At this time my assessment would be that the focus of U.S.-China divergence in 2018 will

² United States. (2017). The national security strategy of the United States of America. Washington: President of the U.S.

be on trade, investment and commercial issues more than security ones for reasons that I will elaborate further below.

ISIL and Islamic terrorism. To reiterate what I stated last year, the threat posed by ISIL and Islamic extremism was *the* foreign policy theme of Mr. Trump's election campaign. In the preface to the NSS, President Trump says his administration "crushed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorists on the battlefield of Iraq and Syria and will continue pursuing them until they are destroyed." Alas, a major ISIS-claimed terrorist attack in Baghdad's most secure zone this week has raised questions about the completeness of this victory.

Based on these developments, then, what might we conclude about the first year of the Trump Administration?

First, a reasonable conclusion is that for all the drama, tweets and rhetoric, there was notable continuity in what President Trump said he would do and what to date he has pursued. Overall there is more continuity than discontinuity in basic U.S. security and defense policies. At a minimum, we must grant the president did not pursue the most extreme policies that he floated during the campaign (e.g., end alliances, encourage allies to get nuclear weapons, label China a currency manipulator and enact 45% tariffs, etc.). For example, American global leadership has been selectively ceded (e.g., climate change, international trade) and perhaps narrowed but not abandoned. President Trump's "America First" and "Make America Great Again" do not exclude the NSS' focus on "Advancing American Influence" or the objective of maintaining American primacy in the Indo-Pacific. At least in the international security and defense realm, there is less isolationism in administration policy than many expected and feared. Also for example, fears that allies would be abandoned have given way to a dual-track approach of honoring security obligations while not compromising on commercial issues or demands for greater burden-sharing. It is really on existing trade agreements (e.g., NAFTA, KORUS) and trade relationships where the Trump Administration has embarked on uncharted terrain. In the run up to the November 2018 elections my assessment is that pressures on commercial partners will increase, and be supported by the Democratic minority. Finally, during the 2016 campaign, Mr. Trump appeared outside the mainstream of both political parties in his comments on many key foreign policy and security issues. In style, this remains the case. But in many issue areas, the policy approach is well within the guardrails basic U.S.

policies. For all this continuity, I do assess that the Trump Administration has either consolidated, or perhaps captured, trendlines towards American public and societal support for a more restrained foreign policy.

So, what is different?

I think there are five differences in “strategic approach” between Presidents Obama and Trump.

Pres Obama Strategic Approach	Pres Trump Strategic Approach
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. No surprises/predictable2. Transparent3. De-linked issues4. Personnel in place5. Consistent messaging	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Surprises, Unpredictable2. Opaque decision-making3. Everything linked/Transactional4. Personnel dissension, deficit5. Multiple, contradictory messaging

What has been the impact of these five changes/characteristics of the Trump Administration on U.S.-Asia relations? I think the impact can be understood best by looking at the 6 priorities or “lines of action” that the Obama Administration framed for the “pivot to Asia”.

Impact of the Trump Administration on “Key Lines of Action” of the Pivot

Obama Rebalance/ Pivot Elements	Trump Impacts
Alliances	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. More alliance assurance than in campaign, but still transactional—expressed in burden-sharing, reciprocity and dual-tracking alliance from commercial relationship. 2. Worries about U.S. commitments mixed across countries. 3. Adaptations under way—including “enticing America”.
Partnerships (inc. China)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Most partnerships in SEA + India. More outreach than expected (e.g., VN, Malaysia, Thailand). “Terms of Engagement does not mean Terms of Endearment”. 2. The China “partnership” may be in trouble but not abandoned.
Forward Posture	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No major changes. Better partnerships might provide opportunities for more security activities. 2. Rebuild the U.S. military first.
Multilateralism	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus on sovereignty at UN speech and poor attitude towards multilateralism vs. bilateralism. 2. Yet, surprising engagement with APEC, EAS and ASEAN.
Trade and Investment & TPP	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Heavy focus on bilateral relations, but except on NAFTA and KORUS not clear what individual arrangements will be.
Human Rights & Democracy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. NSS offers mixed messages. 2. Surprising element in bilaterals (e.g., VN, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar). 3. SecState 19th Community of Democracy link to allies, business and security (not universal values/norms). 4. NET: lack of emphasis can help build partnerships and manage relationships but long-term impacts?

In light of current U.S.-Asia relations broadly, what are the pluses and minuses?

Positives & Negatives in U.S.-Asia Relations Today

Positives in U.S.-Asia	Negatives in U.S.-Asia
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Bipartisanship and Alignment b/w mainstream Democrats/Republicans re Asia and DoD/DoS bureaucracies.2. U.S.-Asia major relations (allies of course, but also China) thickly institutionalized.3. Disorder/Disarray is not yet duress and I include DPRK in this assessment.4. Attraction of America (family, feet, finances) despite “brand erosion” that has gone on since 9/11 + Iraq + 2008 GFC + public attitudes to results of U.S. elections (earlier in context of VN, Watergate, stagflation).5. U.S. remains “default” for other countries for many reasons—including domestic: to avoid, address, and play out domestic debates ad choices.6. China’s mistakes: SCS, ECS/anti-Japan, workers, loan terms, threats on sovereignty/territory, domestic interference (e.g., AUS).7. U.S.-Asia & U.S.-China relations still better than China-Asia (e.g., Sino-India, Sino-Vietnam, Sino-Japan, Sino-Korean—both, Sino-Singapore) & intra-Asia relations (e.g., Japan-Korea, intra-SEA). American offer or order still preferable to China’s offer or order.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Asia ambivalence about America rising, but Asia is not yet decoupling.2. American domestic ambivalence about how long how much, what \$ cost to uphold global order—esp. when Asia portrayed as so “rising rich”.3. Too much, too little paradox between U.S. and China (China asks for too much—sovereignty/territory—and worry that U.S. ensures too little—extended deterrence).4. America is emerging as a “variable”, an “X” factor of uncertainty rather than stability.5. China vs. America inversion in the <i>Bad News Bears</i> movie (e.g., we don’t do infrastructure that way).6. Policy Worries: North Korea endgame & ending the dividing line between security & trade/investment (different from burden-sharing demands <i>within</i> security relationships).

Conclusion

As this review of the first full year of the Trump Administration’s actual as opposed to electoral and campaign rhetoric suggests, there was considerably more continuity than discontinuity regarding security developments, defense policy, the security and Asia Pacific security cooperation. The “noise” surrounding the policies and the manner of implementation certainly gives the impression and some reality of the chaos and unpredictability of policy-making. However, *fundamental* policies in these areas did not change. The key security challenges facing the U.S. were engaged, defense and military policies did not change in major ways, and the

U.S. policies in the Asia Pacific, including with allies and partners did not deviate massively from the previous administration. Perhaps the most tumultuous changes came in the trade sphere, but even here, in the Asia Pacific beyond exiting from the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) and adjustments to the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS), there were few major changes. 2018 is a new year, and given this administration's penchant for unpredictability, close monitoring of the situation will be required.