

COMPARATIVE

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Regional Overview

US ASIA POLICY, SYMBOLICALLY SPEAKING

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Once every four years, our Regional Overview attempts to reassure our readers that, despite a new US administration and/or new secretary of state, US Asia policy will remain generally consistent. This year we are trying to reassure ourselves. It is, of course, premature to be making firm pronouncements about an incoming administration's policies, but by now signals are usually becoming pretty clear. It seemed safe to assume (as we did at the time), that the incoming Obama administration would pursue the same general policies and national security objectives in the Asia-Pacific as its predecessor: support for existing alliances as the foundation of regional security policy, constructive engagement with China, support for free trade and promotion of human rights, and a strong deterrence posture regarding North Korea, combined with firm support for nonproliferation regimes. This could yet be the case for the incoming Trump administration, but the signals are, at best, mixed, in part because we find ourselves responding to tweets – which transition team spokesmen caution should be taken “symbolically” not literally – rather than clear policy pronouncements. As a result, regional leaders, while hoping for the best (or at least more of the same) seem to be preparing themselves for a variety of outcomes, even as some try to shape the future environment.

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What (we think) we know thus far

Experience tells us to discount at least half of what is said during presidential campaigns: Jimmy Carter was going to withdraw US troops from the Korean Peninsula; Ronald Reagan was going to recognize Taiwan; Bill Clinton was going to get tough on the “butchers of Beijing”; etc. The challenge is predicting correctly which half to discount.

According to [NBC News](#), the president-elect ran and won a campaign in which he took 141 distinct policy positions on 23 issues over the course of 511 days. In the two months since being elected, Trump has taken 15 new policy stances on nine different issues. Therefore, it’s anyone’s guess which pronouncements will become policy.

Our default position – and much more importantly, the default positions of the tens of thousands of diplomatic, defense, and security officials and civil servants who will show up for work on Jan. 20 – is to believe that the US foreign policy establishment will continue pursuing the policies and initiatives they were pursuing on Jan. 19, until directed otherwise. Policy changes, to the extent they are made, will come from Cabinet officials (not yet fully vetted, much less confirmed) and from presidential directives, not tweets.

So what do we (think we) know thus far? It seems safe to assume that Obama’s “pivot” toward Asia will likely exit when he does. But this does not mean the focus on Asia, present (by other names) in all administrations since the end of the Cold War, will end. If the number of tweets we have seen about China and North Korea are any indication, Asia – for better or for worse – will remain high on the Trump administration’s agenda.

Anticipated policies and relations with individual regional states are covered elsewhere in *Comparative Connections*. It is important here to note that the centrality of US alliances has been a bipartisan constant in US security policy since the end of WWII and the US focus on Asia as a national security priority has enjoyed bipartisan support since the end of the Cold War. It’s unfortunate – and potentially misleading – that virtually every news story about Prime Minister Abe’s late December visit to Pearl Harbor included some reference to Trump’s alleged disdain for alliances, usually citing flippant comments made by candidate Trump (and not yet repeated by the president-elect). But few mentioned the positive impression gained by Abe after his face-to-face meeting with the president-elect: “Mr. Trump is a leader in whom I can have great confidence.” None

mentioned Trump’s assurances to Korean President Park that he was committed to a “strong, firm” alliance and that America would be with Korea “until the end.” Most importantly, President Obama, after his first face-to-face session with the president-elect noted Trump “expressed a great interest in maintaining our core strategic relationships” – another strong indication that US alliances and commitments in Asia (as well as with NATO) will continue under President Trump.

In this regard, the selection of an experienced, strong-willed, and battle-hardened general to head the Pentagon also bodes well for a continued US commitment to its alliance relationships. Assuming he is confirmed, Gen. James Mattis – who clearly understands the importance of alliances and deterrence – will be a voice of reason.

Many pundits have been commenting, mostly negatively, on Trump’s choice of retired military officers to fill several national security positions: secretary of Defense (Gen. Mattis), homeland security (Gen. John Kelly) and national security advisor (Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn). Such concerns appear misplaced. Experience tells us that generals are least inclined to recommend the use of the military instrument since they are most aware of the human consequences of imploring such an option. Gen. George C. Marshall served both as secretary of Defense and secretary of State with distinction. More recently, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Colin Powell was a voice of reason and caution during service as secretary of State and earlier as national security advisor to the president; former NSC Advisor Lt.Gen. Brent Scowcroft (former Pacific Forum CSIS Board of Governors Chairman) is another sterling example.

Another bipartisan constant in US foreign policy has been the firm commitment to nuclear nonproliferation. While candidate Trump had a rather cavalier attitude toward nuclear weapons – “If Japan had that nuclear threat, I’m not sure that would be a bad thing for us.” – he has since tweeted that “The @nytimes states today that DJT believes ‘more countries should acquire nuclear weapons.’ How dishonest are they. I never said this!” True, he never said those exact words, but the implication was there.

However, a Trump advisor (unnamed) recently commented that President-elect Trump has reportedly “moved on to talk about non-proliferation in a way that you would hear from any Republican president,” and further noted that “We are very much committed to both non-proliferation and assuring the allies that not

only will they continue to be under the nuclear umbrella, but that we are going to be strengthening our missile defense in ways that alleviate some of their concerns about North Korea.”

If this is Trump’s real view – and it certainly should be – one hopes that he will firmly and consistently say these words himself, and sooner rather than later. Nuclear policy is about more than just national interests, it’s about national survival. His New Year’s comment regarding North Korea – “North Korea just stated that it is in the final stages of developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the U.S. It won’t happen!” – is clearly consistent with the views and aspiration not just of President Obama but several of his predecessors as well. Even candidate Trump’s expressed willingness to sit down and talk with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un is reminiscent of President Obama’s inaugural promise to extend a hand to those who would unclench their fist.

One area where Trump has been clear – and in our opinion clearly wrong – has been in rejecting President Obama’s signature multilateral trade deal. In one of his first policy pronouncements (or, more accurately, day one promises) after being declared the victor on Nov 9, Trump stated: “On trade, I’m going to issue a notification of intent to withdraw from the TPP... Instead we will negotiate fair bilateral trade deals that bring jobs and industry back onto America shores.”

Trump has argued that he is not against free trade, only “bad” deals. If, as the above may imply, he is prepared to pursue a bilateral agreement with the largest TPP partner – Japan – that can help repair some of the damage caused by his intended abrogation of US international trade leadership, but at some point he needs to readdress the multilateral agreement (just as Presidents Clinton and Obama learned to live with NAFTA, after both campaigning against it).

Other than walking away from TPP, which includes four members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the good news is Southeast Asia was not an issue in the presidential campaign. As a result, reaffirming the US commitment to ASEAN’s centrality in promoting constructive multilateral security cooperation should be easy (but not overlooked).

In late September, when everyone (your authors included) were blissfully assuming that the very predictable former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would soon be setting US Asia policy, Salena Zito of *The Atlantic* presciently warned that “the press takes

[Trump] literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally.” Foreign policy experts and pundits still need to heed this warning, at least until Jan. 20.

In short, and in our never-ending effort to reassure, we note that the US commitment to Asia is not new. With every passing year, the region continues to grow in importance to the US, politically, economically, and strategically. While it is difficult not to take the president-elect’s tweets and earlier campaign promises seriously, policy pronouncements – which must be taken more literally – have yet to be issued. We will therefore watch the confirmation hearings for secretary of Defense and secretary of State with great interest while awaiting President Trump’s first State of the Union Address.

Asia Reacts (Cautiously)

As allies and adversaries grappled with the prospect of a Trump presidency that might, our reassurances notwithstanding, actually make good on campaign rhetoric to reassess US engagement with the world, some governments moved to fill the looming vacuum. Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo was especially energetic, in keeping with his determination to ensure that Japan remains at the forefront of regional diplomacy. Abe reached out to the Philippines’ mercurial president, Rodrigo Duterte, after Duterte indicated he would distance his country from the US and join China and Russia in a new geopolitics. Abe offered the Philippines new ships and surveillance aircraft in September and followed up with a summit with Duterte in October.

In December, Abe pushed the Japanese Diet to ratify the TPP despite US threats of withdrawal – which would neuter the deal – to demonstrate his government’s commitment to the embattled trade agreement and put Tokyo at the forefront of regional rule making. Abe then held a “hot spring summit” with Russian President Vladimir Putin in December in an attempt to settle the island dispute that has blocked closer relations between their two countries since the end of World War II when the Soviet Union seized four Japanese islands north of Hokkaido. By all reports, Abe made no progress with Putin on the territorial issue – few observers expected any – but the two leaders concluded economic agreements that could begin the reconciliation process and put Japan at odds with Western countries that seek to punish Russia for its annexation of Crimea and fomenting instability in Europe. December concluded with agreement between Tokyo and Jakarta to establish

the Japan-Indonesia Maritime Forum. The forum aims to engage Jakarta, which will hopefully use its influence on ASEAN, and shape regional maritime security discussions in ways that are congenial to Japan's outlook and interests.

Abe wasn't alone in seeking to shape the regional order; China was equally active. Beijing also reached out to Duterte – he visited China before going to Japan – and the two countries reached a *modus vivendi* on their territorial dispute, as Robert Sutter and Chin-Hao Huang detail in their chapter on China-Southeast Asia relations. That visit followed the seventh Xiangshan Forum, the ever-more popular meeting that China created to rival (and eventually overtake) the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue as the pre-eminent Asia-Pacific defense conclave. This year, representatives from more than 60 countries discussed “Strengthen Security Dialogue and Cooperation and Build a New Type of International Relations,” a topic of mounting relevance and urgency as the Trump presidency approached.

Nor can we overlook multilateral efforts to strengthen a regional order that appeared to be weakening. The 28th and 29th ASEAN Summits, and the associated ASEAN Plus Three and East Asia Summits, were held in Vientiane, Laos in early September. The meetings were the usual pro forma get-togethers, complete with renewed commitments to ASEAN centrality, community building, and calls to honor previous pledges. Expectations were low, given that Laos, the host, was widely seen as “challenged” by the task of chairing ASEAN, as well as firmly within “the China camp,” and thus unlikely to press Beijing on contentious issues. It was therefore a bit of a surprise when the EAS Chairman's Statement expressed concern about “developments in the South China Sea” and affirmed the commitment to resolving disputes in accordance with principles of international law.

The November APEC Economic Leaders Meeting produced the usual promise to fight protectionism, boilerplate that assumed larger significance after Trump's victory and his pronounced readiness to slap big tariffs on US trading partners that he accused of unfair trade practices. President Obama used the meeting to make another push for the TPP, telling a press conference that “not moving forward would undermine our position across the region and our ability to shape the rules of global trade in a way that reflects our values and our interests.” The [APEC Leaders Statement](#) endorsed both the TPP and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) as paths to a broader Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific.

The prospect of US withdrawal from TPP makes RCEP even more important. Yet as interest in RCEP grows, negotiations continue to be fitful. Originally slated for conclusion this year, the talks are going slower than anticipated; a full schedule of RCEP meetings at the ministerial and official levels is planned for 2017 to complete the negotiation process.

Largely overlooked (at least in the US) in the heat of the presidential campaign, President Obama participated in the 11th (his 10th and final) G20 Summit in Hangzhou, China in early-September. According to the White House [Fact Sheet](#), Obama reiterated US support for an open, integrated global economy, underpinned by a level playing field that gives workers and businesses a fair opportunity to compete. Leadership of the G20 now falls to Germany's Angela Merkel, with the next summit (Trump's first) set for Hamburg in early July 2017.

Finally, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in late November finally got around to responding to the latest round of DPRK nuclear and missile tests, passing “the strongest set of [sanctions](#) ever,” include cutting North Korea's coal exports, one of the Kim regime's few remaining sources of hard currency. Pyongyang was not amused, releasing a statement that, “DPRK strongly censures and categorically rejects [UNSCR2321] as another excess of authority and violation of the DPRK's sovereignty by the UNSC acting under instructions of the U.S.” Nor is it likely to be deterred. According to *Yonhap*, the North has conducted 25 ballistic missile tests and two nuclear tests in the past year alone.

In summing up his nation's nuclear accomplishments of the past year, Kim Jong Un, in his New Year's Address, bragged that “We conducted the first H-bomb test, test-firing of various means of strike and nuclear warhead test successfully to cope with the imperialists' nuclear war threats, which were growing more wicked day by day, briskly developed state-of-the-art military hardware, and *entered the final stage of preparation for the test launch of intercontinental ballistic missile [emphasis added].*” Many news reports assessed the highlighted portion (erroneously?) as a signal that an ICBM test was imminent, perhaps to coincide with Trump's inauguration, but clearly no time frame was given. It was this quote that also drew Trump's “It won't happen!” tweet. We're betting it will, as Pyongyang will inevitably find a way to test its ICBM capabilities and the incoming US administration.

REGIONAL CHRONOLOGY

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2016

Sept. 4-5, 2016: Eleventh [G20 Summit](#) is held in Hangzhou, China.

Sept. 5, 2016: North Korea launches three [Rodong](#) ballistic missiles from its east coast into the Sea of Japan (East Sea) landing about 400km inside Japan's Air Identification Zone.

Sept. 6, 2016: UN Security Council issues a strong condemnation of North Korea's latest missile tests and threatens to take "further significant measures" against Pyongyang.

Sept. 6, 2016: Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzo meets Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte in Vientiane and agrees to provide two large-sized patrol ships and lend up to five used surveillance aircraft to the Philippines.

Sept. 6-8, 2016: The 28th and 29th ASEAN Summits, the 19th ASEAN Plus Three Summit, and the 11th East Asia Summit are held in Vientiane.

Sept. 9, 2016: DPRK conducts its fifth [nuclear test](#) since 2006 and its second this year. The rest of the world sharply condemns the action.

Sept. 13-15, 2016: Myanmar State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi visits Washington and meets President Obama and other senior officials.

Sept. 13-19, 2016: China and Russia conduct *Joint Sea 2016* naval exercise off Guangdong Province in the South China Sea. The joint drill is described as "a strategic measure" and a concrete action to promote the China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership.

Sept. 18, 2016: US Secretary of State John Kerry, Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio, and South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se meet in New York to discuss responses to North Korea's latest nuclear test.

Sept. 26, 2016: United States places sanctions on Chinese firm Dandong Hongxiang Industrial Development Company Ltd and four company officials and files criminal charges against them for assisting North Korea with its nuclear and missile programs, a move representing the first-ever sanctions on a Chinese entity over Pyongyang's weapons programs.

Sept. 26, 2016: US and South Korean navies conducted a joint exercise near the North Korean maritime border. The exercise marks the first time joint forces conducted naval training in an area closest to North Korea's maritime border in the East Sea or Sea of Japan.

Sept. 30-Oct. 1, 2016: Informal US-ASEAN Defense Minister Meeting is held in Honolulu to discuss a range of issues, including terrorism, maritime security, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Sept. 30-Oct. 4, 2016: Two Chinese frigates in transit from the Gulf of Aden visit Yangon's Thilwa deep-sea port for what "a show of diplomatic cooperation between the two nations."

Oct. 1, 2016: Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, Malaysian Defense Minister Hishammuddin, and Indonesian Defense Minister Ryacudu reach agreement on the sidelines of the ASEAN-US Defense Dialogue in Hawaii to explore joint air patrols in transit corridors considered by the three nations as maritime areas of common concern.

Oct. 2, 2016: Two US Navy ships, the submarine tender *USS Frank Cable* and guided-missile destroyer *USS John S. McCain* make a port call in Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay as part of naval engagement activities between the US and Vietnam.

Oct. 3-5, 2016: Lt. Gen. Anthony Crutchfield, deputy commander of US Pacific Command, visits Myanmar to meet senior government officials, ethnic leaders, and Myanmar youth.

Oct. 4-11, 2016: US and the Philippines conduct *Philippine Amphibious Landing Exercise (PHIBLEX)*, which President Rodrigo Duterte says will be the last joint US-Philippine exercise during his term in office. The exercise ends one day earlier than originally planned.

Oct. 10-12, 2016: Seventh [Xiangshan Forum](#), co-hosted by Chinese Association for Military Science and the China Institute for International Strategic Studies, is held in Beijing under the theme of “Strengthen Security Dialogue and Cooperation, and Build a New Type of International Relations.” Representatives from more than 60 countries attend.

Oct. 10-15, 2016: US and ROK conduct [Invincible Spirit](#) naval exercises to “strengthen maritime interoperability and tactics, techniques and procedures,” in South Korean waters.

Oct. 11, 2016: South Korea says it would use greater force, including firearms, against Chinese boats fishing illegally in its waters and summons China’s ambassador to protest a clash between a Chinese vessel and a ROK Coast Guard boat.

Oct. 11, 2016: South Korean President Park Geun-hye tells ROK government to prepare for large-scale defections from DPRK, days after a direct appeal to its citizens to flee their country.

Oct. 13, 2016: Thailand’s [King Bhumibol Adulyadej](#) dies at the age of 88 after extended illness.

Oct. 13-14, 2016: Chinese President Xi Jinping [visits](#) Cambodia and meets Premier Hun Sen and other senior leaders.

Oct. 15-16, 2016: India hosts eighth [BRICS Summit](#) in Goa. The theme of India’s BRICS Chairmanship is **Building Responsive, Inclusive and Collective Solutions**.

Oct. 18-21, 2016: Philippine President Duterte leads a delegation that includes more than 200 business leaders to China. He meets President Xi Jinping and other senior leaders and a [joint statement](#) is issued.

Oct. 19, 2016: South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se and Defense Minister Han visit Washington and meet Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter for the fourth US-ROK 2+2 meeting.

Oct. 21, 2016: The *USS Decatur* conducts a “freedom of navigation” operation near the Paracel Islands in what the US described as a “routine, lawful manner.” China responds by lodging a protest with the US referring to the operation as “illegal” and “provocative.”

Oct. 22-23, 2016: Navies of Japan, South Korea, and the US participate in a joint naval exercise off the southern coast of South Korea’s Jeju Island.

Oct. 24-27, 2016: Sixth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China is held in Beijing.

Oct. 25-27, 2016: President Duterte visits Japan and meets Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and other senior leaders.

Oct. 26-27, 2016: US Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken visits Japan for fifth round of deputy-level US-Japan-South Korea trilateral consultations.

Oct. 28-29, 2016: Deputy Secretary Blinken visits South Korea to discuss strategies to deal with North Korea.

Oct. 30, 2016: Deputy Secretary Blinken visits Beijing to meet Executive Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui for the third interim Strategic Security Dialogue, continuing discussions between the two sides on strategic security issues including DPRK and maritime issues.

Oct. 31-Nov. 4, 2016: Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak visits China and meets President Xi Jinping and other senior leaders.

Nov. 3, 2016: Fifteenth Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Prime Minister's Meeting is held in Bishkek.

Nov. 8, 2016: Donald Trump is elected 45th president of the United States.

Nov. 10, 2016: Vietnam announces cancellation of its plan to construct two nuclear power plants, citing the high cost and slower than expected growth in the demand for electricity.

Nov. 11, 2016: The Obama administration announces that it will not seek congressional ratification of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement.

Nov. 14-18, 2016: US and Brunei conduct the 22nd iteration of *Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT)* naval exercises involving shore-based and at-sea training events.

Nov. 19-20, 2016: Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Economic (APEC) Leaders Meeting is held in Lima, Peru.

Nov. 20, 2016: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte declares the lagoon at Scarborough Shoal as a marine sanctuary and off-limits to fishermen. Chinese Foreign Ministry refuses to comment.

Nov. 21, 2016: US-Philippines Mutual Defense Board and Security Engagement Board (MDB-SEB) is held in Manila. A [joint statement](#) says that "We look forward to continued, close cooperation in areas central to both our national and security interests including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counter-terrorism, cyber security, and maritime security."

Nov. 22, 2016: Japan and South Korea sign a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), which will allow them to share sensitive information on the threat posed by North Korea's missile and nuclear activities.

Nov. 30, 2016: UN Security Council passes [UNSC Resolution 2321](#), which imposes new sanctions on North Korea aimed at cutting its annual export revenue by a quarter in response to North Korea's fifth nuclear test in September.

Dec. 1, 2016: North Korea condemns the new UNSC sanctions, saying the "UN Security Council has once again overstepped its authority and infringed on our sovereignty" and that "There is nothing in the UN Charter or any other international law that defines nuclear tests as threats to international peace or security."

Dec. 2, 2016: Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen and President-elect Donald Trump have a telephone conversation, marking the first time a Taiwan president has had official contact with a US president or president-elect since the US broke ties with Taiwan in 1979. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi characterizes the exchange as a "petty action" by Taiwan.

Dec. 9, 2016: South Korea's National Assembly votes 234-56 to impeach President Park Geun-hye over her role in a corruption and influence-peddling scandal, forcing her to immediately hand over the running of the country to a caretaker prime minister.

Dec. 14, 2016: CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) reports that [satellite imagery](#) shows China has apparently installed "significant" defensive weapons on a series of artificial islands it built in the South China Sea.

Dec. 15, 2016: Chinese Navy warship seizes an underwater drone deployed by the *USNS Bowditch*, a US oceanographic survey vessel, in international waters in the South China Sea, triggering a formal diplomatic protest from the US and a demand for its return.

Dec. 20, 2016: Chinese Navy returns the underwater drone to the US Navy "after friendly consultations between the Chinese and US sides."

Dec. 20-21, 2016: Indonesian Coordinating Maritime Minister Luhut Panjaitan visits Japan and meets Foreign Minister Kishida. They sign a Memorandum of Cooperation to establish the Indonesia-Japan Maritime Forum.

Dec. 24, 2016: China's first aircraft carrier *Liaoning* sets off for the Western Pacific for its first open-sea training exercise, according to the Chinese Defense Ministry.