Security policy in Asia from Obama to Trump: Autopilot, neglect or worse?

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Introduction

Donald Trump's 2016 election threatened a revolution in US Asia policy. Since the early years of the Cold War, the United States has been a constant presence in the region's security setting.¹ American military power has been the pre-eminent force in the region, organised through a series of bilateral alliances and quasi-alliance guarantees. This presence was part of the larger US Cold War grand strategy in which Washington sought to ensure a favourable strategic balance in Western Europe, the Middle East and East Asia.² Although the Obama administration put considerable public emphasis on its "Pivot", or "Rebalance", to Asia, and there were key differences between Obama and Bush's approaches to the region, in its major elements, the approach of the forty-fourth president towards Asia was very much in keeping with longer-run US strategic policy. Given what Trump said during the election campaign, and his activity during the transition and in the early days of the presidency, a fundamental break with the past looked entirely possible. As candidate he had demeaned alliances; during the campaign he showed a worrying lack of concern about nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia and promised a trade war with the world's second largest economy. As President, Trump looked like he might govern US foreign policy in the same norm-busting manner in which he had campaigned, with dramatic consequences for regional security.

But after two years in office, those hoping for radical change in US security policy towards the region have been disappointed. Much in the way that Obama's Pivot was more about the presentation of US strategic policy and involved much less substantive change, Trump has not yet instigated any significant shifts. Indeed, the level of continuity with his predecessor's policy is striking, particularly given his instinct to reject almost anything to do with the Obama presidency. Alliances have been reaffirmed, as has the One China policy. Indeed, much to the surprise of critics and friends alike, Trump developed a good working relationship with

China's President Xi Jinping, engaged with regional multilateralism and even participated in the Asia summit season in November 2017, albeit in a slightly chaotic fashion by opting out of the East Asia Summit at the last minute. His administration has so far been more explicit in seeing China as a long-term geopolitical rival but has not yet made substantive changes to US security policy to match this shift in declaratory tone.

In this chapter I argue that US security policy in Asia is stuck somewhere between inertia and neglect. The continuity is not the result of a carefully considered policy choice; rather it is in the main due to the heavy inertial qualities of a strategic policy that has been in place for many decades. And when the Trump administration has focused on regional security rather than taking its cues from a larger strategic plan, it views things through the narrow prism of bilateral ties, with a heavy emphasis on a mercantilist view of economic relations, and crisis management. It is also constrained by a lack of adequate resources with many key bureaucratic posts still vacant. The consequence of this negligent and a-strategic approach has been to strengthen China's relative position in the region. This approach is also prompting friends and allies to accelerate their planning for a region in which the United States plays a more diminished role.

The chapter is in four parts. The first will discuss the Asia policy that Trump inherited from Obama. It will draw attention to the longer-term trends in US policy and the subtle differences introduced into that policy by Obama's team. The second will sketch out the range of possibilities that Trump's Asia policy promised. Here a composite picture will be drawn up based both on campaign promises and action during the transition. This is necessary because as candidate there was no clear and systematic articulation of how he would approach Asia's many significant security challenges with most of his regionally oriented pronouncements focused on China and trade. The third will explain why US security policy can be described as continuity by neglect. The chapter will conclude with an assessment of the consequences of this policy and how it is accelerating a significant transformation of Asia's regional order. Ultimately, Obama sought to sustain long-term US security policy in the face of a changing region, but failed to recognise the scale of the changes it faced; the Trump administration's careless approach to the region throughout its first two years has hastened a significant shift in Asia's security setting.

Obama's Asia legacy

Unsurprisingly for a president who came to national prominence because of his objection to the Iraq War, foreign policy was a significant focus of the Obama administration. And of the many achievements which the administration claimed, such as the Iran nuclear deal, the rapprochement with Cuba and the Paris climate

change accord, their most significant long-term strategic effort was the emphasis put on Asia.³ Indeed the attempt to put the region at the centre of US international policy is described by many in the administration as their most significant long-term contribution.⁴

Obama's electoral victory in 2008 was interpreted by the incoming administration as a mandate to end the war in Iraq and to focus in the first instance on the conflict in Afghanistan. The new government's aim was not only to make good on its commitment to extricate the United States from Iraq and to resolve the security problems of radical Islam in Afghanistan, but also to reorient US policy so as to better focus on the big trends in world politics. Obama's senior officials perceived that the major conflicts in the Middle East had not only sapped blood and treasure to no obvious strategic advantage, they had also warped the government's priorities and taken its focus off the major forces that were shaping America's global interests. In particular, so claimed the administration, Bush's focus on Iraq and Afghanistan had come at the cost of America's position in Asia, the region that was fast becoming the world's most important.

The response to this perceived neglect of the Bush administration, as well as the realisation of Asia's growing significance to US interests and the world, was to craft what was first described as the Pivot to Asia but which was soon rebranded as the "Rebalance" to the region.⁵ Outlined in a number of speeches, most notably Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's speech to the East-West Center, Honolulu,⁶ and the President's address to the Australian parliament in 2011,⁷ "rebalancing" US policy towards Asia had a number of key aims. First, it was intended to realign US strategic policy to America's primary long-term interests, moving away from the disproportionate emphasis that had been placed on Iraq and Afghanistan. Too much time, money and bureaucratic resources had been tied up in parts of the world that were out of proportion to their long-term strategic significance. Second, the administration wanted to signal internationally as well as domestically the priority of the Asian region to its strategic policy. Allies and partners in Asia who were concerned that the US focus on the Middle East had opened the door to Chinese influence were to be reassured, and Beijing was to be reminded of America's emphasis on the region. As Obama said to the Australian parliament: 'in the Asia Pacific in the twenty-first century, the United States of America is all in'.⁸ The desire to retain its strategic preponderance was made very clear. It was also intended to send signals within the bureaucracy about how resources should be allocated. More was to be invested so public servants would be incentivised to focus on the region.

America's long-term strategic policy is to remain the dominant power in Western Europe, the Middle East and East Asia. The Pivot to Asia, sold publicly as an emphasis on the most important region in the world, was ultimately about ensuring that long-term goal in the face of transformations caused by the rapid rise in wealth and influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Whether or

not one agreed with the Obama critique that Bush had neglected the region – and many did not⁹ – the underlying imperative for US security policy was that China's dramatic growth was fundamentally changing the region. Even though the United States wanted to retain the basic pattern of Asia's strategic balance, it realised that it would have to adjust its policy to reflect the realities of a shifting distribution of power. To do so it would take a number of steps. The most obvious was to devote more military assets to the region. Prominently announced at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2012, the United States committed to devoting 60 per cent of its naval assets to the Pacific theatre.¹⁰ More broadly, it signalled that Washington intended to remain the pre-eminent regional military power in both conventional and nuclear terms.

Washington also indicated that it wanted to distribute that military force more broadly, signing agreements with Australia and Singapore, as China's rise and its expanding capacities meant that the Cold War emphasis on Northeast Asia would no longer suffice. Equally, Obama wanted US allies to do more, both individually and collectively. If the US approach to the region in the past had been a "hub and spoke" model, in which the United States was the hub and its bilateral links to allies and partners the spokes, under the Rebalance, Washington wanted allies to do more to sustain the existing security order. This was in part about sharing the burden of security order provision, but was also about making it more flexible and nimble, allowing it a wider geographic expanse in which to be effective. It was also about broadening the political base for the US regional role. A more integrated security order in which allies like Japan and Australia work together as well as with the United States looks a lot less like hegemonism than the asymmetries of the past.

Critics of Obama might suggest that there was nothing especially new here. Bush had been keen on allies doing more, individually and collectively. But in other respects the Rebalance was rather more novel. The United States had long been ambivalent about regional multilateralism. While not outright opposed to the various multilateral institutions and structures that had been created in the 1990s and early 2000s, it had shown neither significant leadership in any initiative nor any particular enthusiasm beyond a Clinton-era focus on APEC.¹¹ The criticism that the Bush administration had neglected the region was most on the mark in relation to regional institutions with summits regularly skipped, most notably the ASEAN Regional Forum.¹² Commitment to and participation in multilateralism was a key third dimension of Obama's Asia policy.¹³ The United States joined the East Asia Summit, notably acceding to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (albeit with some opt-out clauses), and joined the efforts to make it a "peak" regional institution. Equally, the United States ensured high level and consistent participation across the board such as Hillary Clinton's 100 per cent record attending ARF meetings. Also, Obama hosted the first US–ASEAN Leaders' Meeting at Sunnylands in California in 2016.

There were a number of reasons for putting such an emphasis on multilateral engagement. Most immediately, commitment to these bodies signalled very directly Asia's importance to the United States. The conventional wisdom in Washington is that one can measure the significance of an issue by the amount of time the senior leaders, and in particular the President, spends on it. By committing not only to make up for the Bush administration's perceived neglect of regional institutions, but to make ASEAN engagement a high-profile commitment, Obama could in very visible ways communicate his priority on the region. And while Asian multilateral institutions have been criticised for being little more than exercises in political theatre,¹⁴ there was an intent to the US emphasis as well. In the first instance, the United States saw these bodies as having good potential to broaden the support for maintaining the US role in a changing region. Through regular engagement with institutions in which it is one amongst equals, Washington felt it could strengthen the political consensus around its regional role. Relatedly, the political intent was also about buttressing the underlying status quo. Whether they were right to make this judgement is a separate issue but the White House saw in regional bodies like the EAS and APEC, and ASEAN in particular, an existing set of institutional means to strengthen the existing regional order in the face of disruptions caused by China's rise and its growing power and ambition.

In the past, US policy had benefited from the alignment between the economic and security interests of most regional states; the United States was the most important market and source of foreign direct investment (FDI) as well as the predominant military power. This made the pursuit of its strategic interests much more straightforward. The Obama administration realised that China's centrality in regional production chains and the growing asymmetric economic relationship with virtually every regional economy, meant that this could no longer be relied upon. The United States would need to actively pursue an economic strategy in the region to support its security policy, and saw in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) a means through which it could yoke economic and strategic interests. The United States had not initially launched the TPP, but once it became the centre-piece of the economic side of US Asia policy it became the most important player, not surprising given that the United States remains the world's biggest developed market. And in trying to sell the agreement to a sceptical and increasingly mercantilist minded Congress, Obama made clear the true geoeconomic intent of the TPP. That is, to ensure the trading interests of Asian countries are in line with America's vision for the region, for it was those interests that appeared to be the most immediate risk to the status quo.¹⁵

Even though Obama had emphasised Asia and the distinctiveness of his Rebalance to the region, his approach represented more in the way of continuation than change in US regional policy. The emphases on multilateralism and geoeconomics were novel. Yet they were in the service of a status quo security

policy. With the surprising election of Donald J. Trump on 8 November 2016, that all looked set to change.

Expectations of President Trump's Asia policy

The results of the US election began to come through to East Asia in the late morning of 9 November 2016. As his victory went from unlikely to certain, policy makers, analysts and scholars tried to figure out what Trump might mean for the region. Virtually all had assumed Hillary Clinton would win and that her policy would be a continuation of Obama's Pivot, perhaps with a few sharper edges.¹⁶ But Trump's campaign had not really focused on foreign policy, beyond trade, and had made almost no mention of the region as a whole. The only regional issue that had had any prominence was his threat to ditch the TPP and start what would effectively be a trade war with China. In an interview with the *New York Times* during the campaign, he claimed that allies in the region were getting a free ride and would have to pay for their security guarantees or have them withdrawn. When his interlocutors pointed out that that might cause Japan and South Korea to acquire their own nuclear weapons, he evinced virtually no concern.¹⁷

Trump's unorthodoxy as a candidate and his lack of political experience meant that, prior to taking office, no one could say with any confidence whether or not these threats would be carried out. Would alliances be trashed in favour of a nativist approach to America's global role? Would the world's two biggest economies really engage in trade warfare? Or was it all campaign bluster? No one could say with any degree of certainty. As a result, analysts began to examine public comments and publications produced by figures who were going into the administration. Significant emphasis was put on a piece by Peter Navarro and Alexander Gray. Navarro was to be part of a newly created National Trade Council and who was purported to have particular sway over China policy. The piece intimated that Trump's approach to Asia would follow what was purported to be the Reagan approach to the Soviet Union of pursuing peace from a position of military strength.¹⁸ This promised a massive ramping up of military expenditure with the intent of staring down all challengers. A trade war and an arms race looked like they might be in the offing, fundamentally changing US security policy in the region.

As the days and weeks of the transition unfolded, more disconcerting signals were sent about what Trump might mean for the region. Perhaps none more so was the telephone conversation with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen. Since the cessation of diplomatic relations with Taiwan, no president or president-elect has communicated directly with the leader of the Republic of China. The call was carefully planned and communicated effusively.¹⁹ But quite what it meant was again not at all clear. Would the United States ditch the One China policy,

the anchor of its regional engagement since the 1970s? Or was this a first step in some grand bargain with the PRC in which Taiwan would be offered up as part of a neo-Kissingerian deal to carve Asia up into security spheres of influence? With the wilfully unpredictable former TV star turned president no one could say. And when Rex Tillerson said that China should be barred from access to the disputed islands in the South China Sea during his Senate confirmation hearings, the administration looked as though it were on a collision course with the region's most important resident power.²⁰

President-elect Trump appeared to promise an almost complete repudiation of the Obama legacy. Certainly, in many areas of government policy he appeared to take instinctively anti-Obama positions. Signature Obama policies, like health care and immigration reform, were a particular focus of ire. As Thomas Wright of Brookings pointed out, Trump was a politician of few hard convictions, but trade policy was one exception. He has been consistently mercantilist since the 1980s and seemed particularly put out by large-scale multilateral agreements.²¹ Trump's "America First" rhetoric of the campaign promised that a wounded nationalism would lead to a narrow transactionalism, and zero-sum thinking would replace the liberal internationalism that had driven Washington's global role. Asia policy seemed set for a radical transformation.

Trump's Asia policy: Continuity and neglect

After two years in office, the most striking feature of the US approach to regional security under President Trump is the extent to which it retains most of the key features of Obama's approach. There are some notable exceptions, most obviously the ramping up of rhetorical pressure on North Korea and a shift in tone towards China, but there is far more continuity than change between Obama and Trump. In many respects, Trumpian policy is effectively Obama policy with the added dimension of bellicose rhetoric and without the overarching strategic vision of his predecessor.

US security policy in Asia had been predicated on the perpetuation of military primacy and a "conengagement" approach to China which attempted to bind the PRC's interests to the prevailing security order. Trump entered office evidently looking to use the former to overturn the latter. Yet in spite of flirting with Taiwan and hard-line rhetoric on the PRC, security relations with China are striking for their broad continuity.²² Trump formally honoured the One China policy early on in his presidency,²³ and focused on building a good personal rapport with Xi Jinping in the early months of his presidency. At the Mar-a-Lago meeting in April 2017 they agreed to establish a formal process for managing inter-governmental relations that was little more than a retooling of the Obama era Strategic and Economic Dialogue.²⁴

Strategic policy has taken a more stern declaratory policy – with the PRC figuring more explicitly as a geopolitical rivalry – and there has been an increase in the tempo of freedom of navigation exercises in the South China Sea,²⁵ a militarised contestation has not materialised and indeed Washington looks as though it has found a way to live with what Beijing has done in Southeast Asia's contested waters. And the one security domain in which Trump has made change – in relation to North Korea – requires the cultivation of Beijing. Put simply, the state of Sino-American security relations stands some way from the revolution threatened in late 2016.

Equally, allies who were concerned that Trump may be prepared to make them pay for protection were particularly worried by a difficult first phone call between Trump and the Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.²⁶ If an ally as close as Australia could be treated as badly as Turnbull had been, and so publicly, then what lay in store for the others? Yet within weeks of the inauguration, key senior figures in the administration were sent on a series of "reassurance tours".²⁷ Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis and then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, were dispatched to the region to reassure allies and partners that the underlying purpose, structure and funding of US regional strategy were going to remain as they had been in the past.

Yet even though the initial fears that the United States was going to undercut its alliances or radically transform the financial arrangements of security guarantees have been assuaged, South Korea, Australia, Japan and others remain unsettled by Trump. During the campaign Trump indicated he wanted allies to do more for themselves, although perhaps the message was communicated in a somewhat rough fashion. The fact of his election and the uncertainties that it has prompted has led many in the region to begin to do just that. Although there has been no major change to US strategy, in form or function, as yet, Trump has still had a noticeable impact upon the region's security arrangements as Asian states begin to take steps to better look after themselves. After all, an America that elected Trump is not the country that allies had come to expect. And the issue of increasing the financial contributions of host nations remains a fixation of the administration, leaving partners jittery about the longer-term future.

It was on one of those tours that Vice President Pence announced probably the greatest surprise of Trump's Asia policy in its first twelve months: that the President would attend APEC and the gaggle of meetings that comprise the region's multilateral summit season in November 2017.²⁸ Not only was Trump cosying up to China that year, he was going to partake in that most quintessentially Obama move: engagement with regional institutions. Typically, it was not all smooth sailing. Prior to the trip the White House announced that Trump would not ultimately go to the EAS, but at the last minute changed tack again to say he was going, only finally skipping out at the last minute. Notwithstanding some clumsy handling, Trump did go and comported himself more effectively than when he took part in NATO meetings in May 2017.²⁹

North Korea policy has been the most visible facet of US security policy in Asia under Trump and arguably where he has most visibly broken with the past. Within five months of coming to office the administration announced the era of “strategic patience” was over.³⁰ The US policy would now be one of “maximum pressure” in which Washington upped the ante of sanctions – pursuing not only a tighter and more closely enforced regime but also imposing secondary sanctions as well – and adopted a dangerously bellicose public diplomacy. Clearly this was a ratcheting up of pressure and a break with Obama’s approach. But it also reflected the reality that the DPRK was within touching distance of achieving its long-held nuclear ambitions. Trump met with Kim in a visually powerful summit in Singapore in June 2018. The meeting delivered little but a break in the tensions that Trump had ratcheted up. The North remains a long way from denuclearisation and Trump looks increasingly to have been played by Pyongyang. But beyond North Korea policy, which in spite of its weighty nuclear dimensions remains a crisis management exercise, in its big strategic dimensions, Trump’s policy maintains the direction of Obama which in turn was largely in keeping with US policy in the region over the past decades.

Trump’s approach to Asia is most visibly different from his predecessors in the trade sphere. The Obama administration tried to use economic policy to sustain the old alignment of economic and security interests that was being disrupted by China’s rise. In walking away from trade agreements and adopting a narrowly instrumental approach to trade and economic relations, Trump is unwittingly strengthening China’s position and undermining US security policy as it is widening the gap between regional countries’ economic and security interests. It also risks adding an overtly politicised dimension to regional economics. But Trump has brought about some important changes to the US approach to the region.

A further change in the US approach to Asia from Obama to Trump is the lowering in the importance of values in American priorities. For Obama, US policy was about advancing American interests in regional security, prosperity and human dignity.³¹ Each component was given equal weighting and seen as mutually reinforcing. For the Trump administration the third pillar, relating to human rights, democracy and freedom, is of much lesser importance. These ideas barely figure in public remarks by the President or senior officials in relation to Asia, nor indeed do they seem to be particularly emphasised in any aspect of US foreign policy. Where in the past the US vision of the region saw peace, prosperity and the advancement of liberal values as mutually reinforcing, the Trump administration sees economic and security questions as separate from, and of greater importance than, questions of values and rights. The United States has not completely walked away from any commitment to these issues – the theme of Trump’s APEC speech was a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’,³² the rhetoric of which was embellished by these ideas – but the substantive emphasis on freedom, rights and democracy is noticeably lower.

The Obama administration's approach to Asia was in keeping with the longer run trends in US regional policy. It also reflected the continuing belief that China's economic rise could be compatible with the prevailing regional order and America's place at the centre of that order. Whether informed by the idea that an increasingly wealthy China would become more liberal, or just by the notion that a China that is prosperous and economically integrated with its neighbours has no incentive to disrupt the region, up until Trump's election, the view from Washington was that China could find wealth and satisfaction in a region in which the United States maintained its current position. In 2017 it became clear, due both to the actions and activities of the PRC as well as the response of the United States, that that view no longer has the grip it once did in Washington. Indeed, Trump's administration seems to have believed that long-term geopolitical competition amongst great powers is the central feature of world politics.³³ If Obama's policy represented a broadly liberal internationalist outlook on the region and its dynamics, Trump's approach has so far been informed by a strong dose of real-politik. This was perhaps most clearly articulated in the National Security Strategy released late in 2017 which states:

These [great power] competitions require the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades – policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners. For the most part, this premise turned out to be false.³⁴

If these ideas are acted upon then Trump's approach to trade and his approach to the broader dynamics of security would mark the end of a broadly liberal American foreign policy and the start of a more realist and nationalist outlook in US policy.

It is tempting to see in the mercantilism of Trump's trade policy and the realism of his security strategy a coherent worldview and a decisive break with the past based on that philosophy. Notwithstanding the changes outlined above, the puzzle of Trump's Asia policy to date is that even though he seems to evince an outlook at odds with what has come before him, US Asia policy has not substantially changed.

The continuity with Obama policy alongside the absence of what can be described as joined-up thinking has led some to describe US policy as being on autopilot. As Aaron Connelly observes, in spite of the odd tweet and snarling press conference, US regional policy 'is charting a pre-programmed course, much of it last mapped during the Obama administration.'³⁵ To date there has been little evidence of an "America First" agenda in US security policy. The most notable feature of Trump's approach to the region is a strong emphasis on bilateral relationships. That is, rather than think about US security interests in the region as a whole, whether conceived as East Asia, Asia Pacific or Indo-Pacific, US interests are assessed and prosecuted on a country-by-country basis. Any issue linkage is

narrow, instrumental and largely driven by crisis. There is no evidence of a big picture vision of America's regional ambitions and consequently little attempt to match statecraft and resources to drive those ambitions. Instead policy is highly reactive, driven by instincts and concerns about optics. Crucially, it is poorly resourced.

At the time of writing in early 2019, crucial posts in the machinery of US Asia policy remain unfilled. The Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs, Susan Thornton, remains in an acting capacity as the White House refuses to endorse her in a permanent capacity. The equivalent post in the Defense Department, Randall Schriver, was appointed on 8 January 2018. The Asia section of the National Security Council, a vital coordinating body for regional policy, remains badly understaffed. Meanwhile, ambassadorial posts to South Korea, Australia and Singapore were vacant for most of the first two years. Given the importance of the region to US security interests and to the broader international system, why has US policy been one of autopilot, at best, if not downright neglect at worst?

Even those who expected Trump to bring about significant changes to US international policy, whether in Asia or elsewhere, did not expect revolution to be achieved immediately. The US government is vast and its inertial qualities are tremendous. US policy in Asia has pursued the aims of regional primacy and the means of bilateral alliance relationships and open markets for decades. To change either the ends or the means of the country's Asia policy would take significant effort, and time. The question thus is whether Trump has a different set of policy ends in mind. Is he prepared to expend the energy to change that policy, and over what time might one reasonably expect to see change?

Since Trump's inauguration, there has been a major cleavage within the West Wing between what is effectively an orthodox Republican foreign policy posture and the nativist "America First" outlook of Peter Navarro, Steven Miller and (the now ousted) Steve Bannon, amongst others. This division and the efforts of the two sides to capture what both seem to think is the open market of the President's attention is one factor in the slow-moving nature of US Asia policy. To date, the lack of significant shifts away from the underlying pattern set by Obama and his predecessors seems to indicate that Trump's Asia policy represents the victory of the orthodox wing of the administration. What is less clear is whether the pattern so far, of US security policy as largely a continuation of the Obama period, will persist or whether this is a temporary state of affairs with more significant changes yet to come.

The other important reason for the continuity of US security policy in Asia – albeit in a somewhat bureaucratically anaemic state – is the absence of serious alternatives. While Trump's campaign was filled with overheated rhetoric and ideas at some remove from US government business as usual, as the presidency has progressed it has become increasingly clear that much of the bombast was little more than rhetoric. Trump and his team do not appear to

have a well-developed view of America's global role, whether "America First", Kissingerian realpolitik, or any other. To shift US policy in the region requires a well thought through alternative and not only does none currently exist, there is little evidence that any effort is being put into new policy development. All signs thus far indicate that US policy in Asia is likely to continue to be broadly in keeping with the past, but that it will be shaped by a reactive administration fond of theatrics and bluster. Relations with China may become more fraught, particularly if trade tensions spike or if the United States decides to push back on Chinese maritime activity.

The ability of the radicals to shift policy will depend on their ability not only to generate compelling new policies in the face of well-marshalled orthodox opposition, but also to capture the imagination of the President. Trump appears to like muscularity in foreign policy and regional security policy is premised on US primacy. One of the problems US policy faces is that while Trump is clearly nativist on trade policy, he has been fairly orthodox in terms of strategic policy. This means that the current settings are likely to remain as they are, with a significant line of tension between a strategic status quo and a revisionism on trade policy. Ultimately, it seems that US Asia policy to 2020 will look much as it did between 2016 and 2018.

Conclusion

Over the past half-decade or so, Asia's security landscape has shifted decisively. From the late 1970s until around 2010 the region was notable for its geopolitical stability and its remarkable growth in economic prosperity. That has begun to change. The region's key powers all feel unsettled by the shifting power dynamics with a more prosperous and powerful China prompting increased uncertainty. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 seemed to underline a second long-term source of that shift in the region's security setting. Since 2008 the United States had cut a more cautious figure in the region. Obama's Rebalance sought to recalibrate US policy to sustain its long-term primacy in the face of a rising China while reducing its risk profile. This led to a decline in American strategic credibility as its dependability was being openly questioned.

Trump has exacerbated that trend. The United States is seen not only as in long-term relative decline in influence, but its political leadership has turned inward. Prior to 2016 few would have deemed credible that a candidate as nativist as Donald Trump would win the nomination of a major party, let alone capture the White House. And it is this double movement – China's growing power and assertiveness, and uncertainty about American influence and purpose – which has unsettled the region's security environment most of all. Trump's election has

opened a door for China to increase its influence in the region, which it is plainly trying to do. Equally, US allies and partners are beginning to explore ways by which they can become less dependent on Washington.

Since the Sino-American rapprochement, the United States has sought to retain its position as the pre-eminent power in the region. After a brief period in the mid-1990s in which it looked as though it might retreat, the United States has committed to retaining its posture. In the past this kept the region stable because at the time the United States was, in the words of the late Singaporean statesman Lee Kuan Yew, the region's 'least distrusted power'. Yet as China has become more confident and capable, the likely implications of the United States seeking to retain its military position are growing rivalry and contestation. The problem the region faces is that in pursuing essentially the same strategic policy nearly two decades into the twenty-first century as it did in the late 1990s, Washington is now contributing to regional instability and not assuaging it. One of the possibilities that Trump held out in the transition period, of a grand strategic bargain with China, offered a break from this. However, as the prospects of that occurring seem to have dissipated, US policy has reverted to its long-term pattern; scholars and analysts should recognise that maintaining the same policy now has a different set of strategic implications than it did at the turn of the millennium.

The Obama legacy in Asia is something of a paradox. On the one hand his strong emphasis on the region indicated that this part of the world would be the top priority for the world's most important economic and military power. On the other, the vision for the United States in the region was one of reduced capacity and leadership. Informed by the somewhat naïve view that China and indeed all regional countries could prosper and find satisfaction in a part of the world in which the United States forever remained the dominant power, Washington acted as if nothing really had changed. Some adjustments in the disposition of its forces might be necessary; some broadening of the political base of US policy would help. Yet the underlying view was that the basic settings were fine.

Xi Jinping's China has shown us that this was a misplaced view. China sees the US role in the region – at least as it has been over the past few decades – as ultimately incompatible with it achieving its long-term interests. It has begun to take steps to provide alternative leadership, to secure its interests and to create a different international environment from that which has prevailed. Across its first two years in office, the Trump administration apparently failed to realise the scale of the challenge China presents, and until it can develop a larger-scale strategic outlook and grapple with China's ambition, then the US position in the region will continue the erosion that began under George W. Bush, and that was increased by Obama. Trump's Asia policy, in contrast to the surface appearances, is entirely in keeping with long-term trends.

Notes

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