Donald Trump’s shock election to the US presidency in November 2016 sent waves of uncertainty throughout capitals around the world about the future direction of US foreign policy. In Asia, leaders are coming to terms with what a Trump presidency could mean for the region, especially for hot spots such as North Korea and lingering tensions among Asia’s major powers.
Introduction: Trump in Asia

DONALD TRUMP campaigned on a platform that included fundamental changes in the US posture toward Asia. He cast doubt on the utility of the alliances with Japan and South Korea and questioned the One China policy, and thus the longstanding policy of “strategic ambiguity” over Taiwan. He threatened more aggression to deal with the North Korean nuclear dilemma. On the economic front, he promised wide-ranging enforcement actions against China, including over alleged exchange-rate manipulation; an exit from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade accord; and renegotiation of the US-Korea Free Trade Agreement.

A year on from his inauguration, President Trump has made good on some of these promises while modifying others or walking them back altogether. But those reversals did not necessarily imply a reversion to the status quo ante. Following the president’s trip to Asia in November 2017, the administration was still struggling to articulate a coherent vision for the US role in the region. This cover package of Global Asia is based on a recent symposium at the School of Global Policy and Strategy, University of California, San Diego (October 19-20) that gathered together papers on the theme of “Trump in Asia.” They not only dissect the evolution of Trump’s approach to the region, but gauge how China, Russia, South Korea and Japan have adapted.

Bruce W. Jentleson sets the stage by underlining three distinctive features of the president’s overall foreign policy approach — including his rebalance toward the Middle East and the dilemmas associated with his “America First” agenda. Jentleson also tackles the fundamental question of Trump’s decision-making style and the risks posed by inadequate deliberation, particularly in crises.

Patrick Cronin and Robert Thomas consider alliance relationships through political and military lenses, respectively, and claim to find greater continuity than is often thought. Cronin argues that the Trump administration will not focus on human rights to the same extent as his predecessors, but he is more sanguine about the likely evolution of the administration’s economic agenda. The broad outlines of the so-called Indo-Pacific strategy comport with a long-standing Republican preference for an offshore balancing strategy, rooted in a strong naval presence, the alliance relationships and the expansion of ties with ASEAN and India. Thomas outlines the continuity in the alliances at the military level, and does not foresee fundamental change in how the US and allied militaries are likely to operate.

Miles Kahler, by contrast, sees a much more fundamental departure in the scrapping of the TPP. He outlines the risks associated with abandoning the economic component of the Asia pivot under the administration of President Barack Obama.

The challenges of China’s rise have been sharpened recently by internal developments, including President Xi Jinping using his concentrated power to advance a more forward foreign policy. Susan Shirk outlines the risks in Trump’s transactional approach, which weakens the ability of the US to align support around common principles and could leave the US position in Asia dramatically weakened. Shirk argues for a focus on hard problems such as North Korea that could nonetheless yield significant returns. (In this issue’s In Focus section from page 100, Peter Dutton, Isaac Kardon and Melanie Hart look at the prospects for Sino-US conflict and cooperation involving the South China Sea and the energy agenda, respectively.)

With all the uncertainties Trump has introduced, we might expect a region on edge. But a surprising finding of the Asian contributors’ papers is how all four major Northeast Asian countries have adjusted to the Trump era. Perhaps the biggest surprise involves the US alliance partners. Amid North Korea’s challenges, it is not surprising that the administration was concerned to reassure Japan and South Korea.

Sugio Takahashi notes that Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was particularly agile in reaching out and forging a personal relationship, and received some assurances in return. Nonetheless, Takahashi worries about US commitment to the South China Sea.

The larger surprise was in Seoul. South Korea was preoccupied with its own political turmoil, culminating in a presidential election in May that brought a left-leaning liberal government back to office after nine years. Seong-ho Sheen looks at how President Moon Jae-in managed to establish a reasonable working relationship with Trump. The two share common threat perceptions over North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs. Moon faces a difficult balancing act, however, both with respect to his domestic constituency and the gravitational pull of China.

I take a look at the North Korean challenge, which hangs heavily over the other relationships in the region. Trump promised that strategic patience was dead, but quickly learned the constraints that operated in compelling North Korea, and had to elicit some cooperation from China. Many have now asked whether the risks on the peninsula emanate also from possible US miscalculations.

Also disturbing from an American perspective is the ease with which China and Russia seem to have absorbed — and discounted — the Trump effect. Wu Xinbo’s contribution exudes a deep confidence in how well — and easily — Xi has been able to structure the bilateral relationship to China’s liking. Liudmila Zakharova notes the disappointment in Moscow that political cross-pressures in the US blocked a reset in bilateral relations.

Finally, virtually all of the articles raise a more fundamental question: To what extent should the Trump phenomenon be viewed as an aberration, likely to be followed by a return to the bipartisan consensus that has long ruled US Asia policy? Some American contributions are more confident than others, but the sense of anxiety is palpable: that either by design or inadvertently, the Trump administration might fundamentally, and irreversibly, cede power to a rising and more forward-looking China. If there is optimism, it arises as much from expectations about how China’s neighbors will respond than from confidence in the ability of the Trump administration to combine the contradictory elements of his Asia strategy. These include the call for wide-ranging Indo-Pacific cooperation — a classic offshore balancing strategy — but coupled now with a wider approach to foreign policy that seems unilateral, disengaged and even solipsistic.

Stephan Haggard is Lawrence and Sallye Krause Professor of Korea-Pacific Studies and Director, Korea-Pacific Program, at the School of Global Policy & Strategy at the University of California, San Diego.

Myung Hwan Yu is Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Sejong University in Seoul, and former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade during President Lee Myung Bak’s administration from 2008-2010.