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.

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The surprise election of Donald Trump in 2016 jolted America’s allies in Asia, especially Japan and South Korea. Trump had roasted both countries during his campaign for not paying their fair share of US security commitments and not playing by the rules on trade. But is his ‘America First’ policy a real shift in the country’s longstanding approach to foreign affairs, or just a one-off effect of Trump the Dealmaker?

At a time when the region faces the North Korea threat and tensions with China over the South and East China Seas, the question is far from idle. Sugio Takahashi outlines how Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has skilfully adapted to the new reality in Washington and what might be expected.

IN JUNE 2016, Britain’s vote to exit the European Union was a major shock to the world. But Brexit was not the only shock in 2016. On Nov. 8, voters chose Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton to be the next US president. At his inauguration on Jan. 13 this year, Trump made it clear that his “America First” campaign pledge would define his administration. Within his first week in office he pulled the US out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement and issued the executive order intended to impose a temporary travel ban on citizens from a number of mostly Muslim countries. The Trump administration’s resolve to implement the new president’s campaign promises was broadly recognized around the world.

To be sure, shifting US policies under a new US president are nothing new. When George W. Bush took office, a kind of guiding principle was ABC: “Anything But Clinton.” Barack Obama’s administration in turn overhauled many of Bush’s policies, such as those involving Iraq and Afghanistan. Even within the same administration, there can sometimes be important policy changes, such as when Bush’s Korean Peninsula policy changed from a hardline approach to one that embraced the Six-Party Talks.

So policy changes under Trump should not come as a surprise. Adapting to new policies and co-ordinating with a new administration are challenges in every US transition. Given the surprise result in 2016, however, one important question needs to be addressed: does this “Trump phenomenon” reflect structural changes in US society that will continue, or is this a one-off event based on Trump’s personality?

For America’s regional allies, this question has critical importance for mid-term and long-term alliance management, as their alliances and economic relationships with the US are cornerstones of foreign policy. Regarding the answer, meanwhile, regional allies need to adapt to the new reality. This essay briefly analyzes the Trump administration’s Asia-Pacific policy and the efforts by Japan to deal with the new administration.

A STRUCTURAL CHANGE IN US POLITICS?

As a presidential candidate, Trump took a range of unusual stances during the campaign, and most pundits predicted Clinton would win. Not only did Trump’s victory come as a surprise, but the fact that his campaign rhetoric challenged US foreign-policy orthodoxy on alliances and even the prevailing international economic system was a shock. During the campaign, he offended US military allies in Asia — arguing, for example, that Japan and South Korea weren’t paying their fair share of US defense commitments. He also argued that the international trading system did not serve the interests of the US, saying he would pursue a policy of “America First.” To be sure, no previous US presidents argued in favor of an “America Second” or “America Third” policy, but the difference is that Trump’s campaign platform had strong unilateral tendencies and transactional characteristics rather than the traditional approach that seeks “win-win” international outcomes. Therefore, Trump’s remarks generated fear among US allies in Asia, because security and good economic relations with the US are the foundations of a full range of policies in these countries. From the viewpoint of Asia (and perhaps other parts of the world), one big question is whether the outcome of the 2016 election reflects structural social changes in the US or was an irregular event, caused by a weak Democratic candidate or a failed election strategy.

Answering these questions won’t be easy. For example, if the election was the product of a failed election strategy by Democrats or Donald Trump’s unique ability to tap into widespread social discontent with the “establishment,” it might be a one-off surprise. On the other hand, if the result is a symptom of an emerging “America First” mentality that questions free trade and foreign military commitments, this could be evidence of a significant social transformation in America that could have long-lasting implications for US foreign policy. It may be years before we have a definite answer.

But countries in Asia need to adapt to the new reality now and be prepared for the possibility that a structural change in US policy may be under way. They need to interact with today’s US while facing the future US. In this vein, Japan moved quickly after the election, with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe placing a call to Trump on Nov. 10 and meeting with him in New York on Nov. 18. Since then, Abe and Trump have had four face-to-face meetings and at least 17 phone calls.¹ Such repeated contact between the two leaders indicates that they have good personal chemistry and also suggests that Japan has successfully adapted and is developing good cooperation with the Trump administration.

MANAGING THE ALLIANCE IN THE ERA OF TRUMP

In the US, there is a bipartisan consensus about the importance of security in Asia and the necessity for a robust US commitment to the region, as was demonstrated by a policy review last year by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), commissioned by the US Congress.² But when the Trump administration took office,
there was uncertainty over whether it would follow this bipartisan consensus. So far, Trump’s security policy toward Asia has veered too far from that of the Obama administration.

With regard to the current security environment, the most serious challenge in the region is North Korea’s nuclear-weapons and missile programs. Given the basic continuity of policy from the Obama administration, one major difference is a tougher stance on the Korean Peninsula. In the face of threats from North Korea, including tests of nuclear missiles and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), the Trump administration reinforced the US military presence in the region and made significant efforts to strengthen sanctions, including secondary sanctions. Its policy includes some new elements compared to the Obama administration. One is that it is demonstrating military strength without hesitation. In 2013, the Obama administration postponed unarmed flight tests of the Minuteman III ICBM to avoid an inadvertent escalation of tensions with North Korea. In contrast, the Trump administration has conducted test launches of the Minuteman three times this year—in April, May, and August—sending a strong signal to North Korea. In addition, the administration dispatched bombers and aircraft carriers to Northeast Asia, ratcheting up pressure on Pyongyang. Another new element is the combination of economic sanctions with military measures to encourage China to increase pressure on North Korea. Secondary sanctions that include Chinese businesses are a clear case of this. With repeated conversations taking place between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping, China’s pressure on North Korea is now stronger than ever before, even if Beijing may be acting reluctantly.

Even the Obama administration’s policy of “strategic patience” did not mean doing nothing. It included efforts to enhance deterrence such as deployment of the TPY-2 radar in Japan and Obama’s strong commitment to strengthen Japan-US-South Korea trilateral co-operation while leaving open the door for diplomacy if North Korea implemented the September 2005 denuclearization agreement reached during the Six-Party Talks. The Trump administration, despite sometimes harsh rhetoric toward North Korea, has repeatedly emphasized the role of diplomacy. In the sense that the US under Trump is saying it is not pursuing regime change, the administration’s policy toward North Korea does not fundamentally differ from that of Obama. While it places more emphasis on pressuring Pyongyang, the policy could be called “strategic patience 2.0.”

For Japan, the Trump administration’s robust posture toward North Korea in military and economic terms is a strong source of reassurance. In this sense, political resources spent on these measures are rewarded. At the same time, one cannot be optimistic that the current pressure will result in North Korea abandoning its nuclear program. If Kim Jong Un is confident about completing the development within a few years of nuclear-tipped ICBMs that could reliably reach the US, there would be little reason for him to give up now. Given this, the potential timing is intriguing. North Korea might be willing to return to negotiations after it has completed and deployed nuclear ICBMs. That would require much more significant deterrence and defense capabilities in the region. In this context, Japan has decided to reinforce its missile-defense system by acquiring the Aegis Ashore system (a ground-based Aegis ballistic missile-defense system). Conventional counter-strike capability, which currently does not exist in Japan’s Self-Defense Force, is now actively being discussed in Japan. In the country’s next five-year defense procurement plan, which will be released at the end of 2018, improving defense and deterrence capability will be a significant topic.

Second, in addition to the threat from North Korea, the rise of China remains a significant strategic challenge for Japan. Specifically, China’s assertive behavior in the East China Sea regarding the Senkaku Islands (known in China as the Diaoyu Islands) is a source of grave concern in Japan, especially after the government purchased the islands from a Japanese private citizen in September 2012. Afterward, Japan requested the US to reaffirm that the US-Japan Security Treaty covers the islands, and the Obama administration did so. When the Trump administration came into office, the first issue in alliance management was whether the new administration would continue this commitment. It turned out Japan had no reason to worry. In a joint statement after the first summit meeting between Trump and Abe, the US reaffirmed that the Senkaku Islands are covered by the collective defense obligations of the US-Japan Security Treaty.

In the short term, Japan can successfully adapt to the new reality in the US. A future question is whether the Trump administration—and Trump himself— which has so far been driven by the domestic agenda of the election campaign, can adapt to the complex reality of the security situation in the Asia-Pacific region.

MANAGING CHINA AND THE US
On the other hand, while the Trump administration focuses on North Korea, political attention to the South China Sea, including the rule of law in maritime security issues, seems to have been downgraded in this administration compared with that of Obama. This could be interpreted as a form of “America First” foreign policy. As North Korea’s ICBMs pose a potential threat to the US mainland, this issue has a higher priority than the South China Sea, where there are no direct threats to the US, even though China’s challenge here could have systemic effects in the long term. This US approach may give China an advantage since it can tout its leverage over North Korea to seek favorable solutions for itself in the South China Sea, or Taiwan. For example, China could suggest that a confrontational US policy in the South China Sea might spoil China’s efforts to increase pressure against North Korea.

The rise of China increases its influence far beyond just the Korean Peninsula or the South China Sea. How to manage this rise has been a serious strategic challenge for both Japan and the US, and the two countries basically share a “shape and hedge” strategy, seeking to “shape” China toward becoming a “responsible” major power through engagement, while strengthening the US-Japan alliance as a “hedge” against the possibility that China might not make such a choice. Over the past several years, however, China’s behavior in the East and South China Seas has raised questions about the relevance of this strategy, especially on the “shape” side. In this regard, America’s China strategy needs to be fundamentally reviewed. The Trump administration has an opportunity to forge a new US strategy toward China and Trump’s emerging notion of an “Indo-Pacific Strategy” could be a key basis for a more comprehensive strategy that goes beyond the laser focus on the Korean Peninsula.
The US-Japan alliance needs to make collaborative efforts to formulate an alliance strategy toward the “Indo-Pacific.” The bottom line is that North Korea is not the only issue in this region and problem areas like the South China Sea and Taiwan could emerge as flash points at any time. What is needed is more diversified attention to other regional issues and a comprehensive strategy regarding China.

Last, but not least, the Trump administration’s attitude toward regional economic co-operation is another serious challenge, which was crystallized in the politics surrounding the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement. During the US presidential campaign, both Trump and Clinton opposed the TPP. It was therefore no surprise to Japan that Trump withdrew the US from the TPP only days after taking office. As an alternative, Japan has two options. One is to launch an amended TPP without the US, and the other is to abandon the TPP and conclude a bilateral FTA with the US. Japan has hedged its options, establishing the US-Japan Economic Dialogue between Vice President Mike Pence and Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso on the one hand, and negotiating with the other TPP countries to go forward with the so-called TPP-11 without the US.

CONCLUSION
With good personal chemistry between Abe and Trump, Japan can succeed in developing good relations with the new administration, despite the concerns that arose during the heat of the US presidential election campaign. To be sure, the long-term question of whether Trump is a one-off disruption or the harbinger of a structural change in American society remains unanswered. But in the short term, Japan can successfully adapt to the new reality in the US. A future question is whether the Trump administration — and Trump himself — which has so far been driven by the domestic agenda of the election campaign, can adapt to the complex reality of the security situation in the Asia-Pacific region.

On the Korean Peninsula, if North Korea continues to develop nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles, even in the face of robust international pressure, they will certainly at some point in the near future acquire reliable nuclear-tipped ICBMs. The decision on whether to use military options before that moment or at that moment, and to develop a much more robust deterrence posture for Japan and South Korea, will need to be made by this US administration. Even if the choice is to refrain from using military options, a more robust deterrence posture will bring a new Cold War-like confrontation to the region.

On China, the “shape and hedge” strategy, which was embraced by the Bush and Obama administrations, is going to become irrelevant, because “shaping” China to become a “responsible stakeholder” is becoming more difficult with China’s increasing power, assertiveness and self-confidence. In this context, America’s China strategy needs to be fundamentally reviewed. The Trump administration has an opportunity to do precisely that.

In this way, like or not, the measures taken by the Trump administration will shape future trends in this region. The achievements of this administration at this crucial juncture will be graded by future historians. America’s regional allies, meanwhile, will hope that Trump succeeds and that his administration gets an “A+.”

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