How the region is making sense of a very different US president

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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Giving Away Advantage: Donald Trump and Beijing

There is no bilateral relationship in Asia — or perhaps the world — more important than the one between China and the US. Given the range of issues where agreements or disagreements between the two global powers hold either promise or peril, it is understandable that President Donald Trump’s approach to China would attract so much attention. Susan Shirk examines how Trump’s first year in office and his relations with Beijing have raised eyebrows, and concerns, across the region.

ANYONE ELECTED as US president in 2016 would have faced a difficult challenge managing relations with today’s China. Under President Xi Jinping, China has become more ambitious, aiming to establish the country as a global as well as a regional power. With China’s economic and military capabilities improving dramatically, Xi believes he has the resources to realize these ambitions. Domestically, the Chinese Communist Party is building up the country’s strength through state capitalism and techno-nationalism rather than by extending market reforms. Economic conflicts are therefore likely as well, as foreign firms chafe against restrictions that limit their market access and pressure them to transfer their technology. Xi also is mandating that other countries also respect and that can serve as a focal point for common action. As Republican Senator John McCain wrote in The New York Times, “To view foreign policy as simply transactional is more dangerous than its proponents realize.”

Framing policies in terms of narrow self-interest also throws away America’s soft-power advantage over China, an advantage that also translates into greater security. As McCain wrote, America is “a country with a conscience. We have long believed moral concerns must be an essential part of our foreign policy, not a departure from it.” Trump, by contrast, has what Evan Osnos has called an extractive conception of American power: “I want to take back everything from the world that we’ve given them.”

Countries that help provide public goods such as peace and stability are able to win these wars. Countries that behave selfishly and pursue mainly narrow private goods (such as China’s fixation on its claimed sovereignty over rocks and waters in the South China Sea) cannot build coalitions and are always at a disadvantage. Trump’s narrowly framed “America First” foreign policy is causing our allies and partners to hedge away from us and find other ways to protect themselves by finding other protectors or by building up their own defenses.

Trump’s transactional approach has been most clearly in evidence with respect to Taiwan. Even before entering the White House, Trump created a crisis in relations with both China and Taiwan by suggesting that the long-standing American position on Taiwan, the “One China” policy, could be traded away as a bargaining chip to get a better deal from Beijing on trade, foreign exchange rates, North Korea and the South China Sea. The Chinese leaders showed impressive discipline in reacting to this shock: They banned all domestic media criticism of Trump; created a channel to the White House between their ambassador in Washington and the American “princeling” Jared Kushner; and simply refused to talk to the new president on the telephone until he backed down and publicly reaffirmed the long-held One China policy. Score one for Beijing, zero for the Trump administration.

‘WITHDRAWAL DOCTRINE’
While respecting China’s historical and economic centrality in the region, the 21 Asian countries neighboring China do not want to be dominated by a Chinese hegemon. If backed up by a US presence in the region, they can effectively restrain Chinese behavior. Trump unnecessarily reduced the positive force of this regional influence on China when he abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) regional trade agreement and made disparaging remarks toward the Japanese
and South Koreans for not paying what he termed their “fair share” of the costs of their military alliances with the US. He also inexplicably demanded that South Korea renegotiate the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) and pay for the THAAD missile-defense system just at a time when Americans and South Koreans should have been standing closer together to deter the growing North Korean nuclear and missile threat.

Trump’s selfish approach sent a message that America’s commitment to peace and stability in Asia is not reliable. Doubts about whether the US would actually be willing to defend them if they were attacked have always existed among South Koreans and Japanese, but since Trump entered the White House, they have grown much more acute. Seoul and Tokyo are adjusting to this new reality by strengthening their own capabilities and will likely also seek to improve relations with Beijing. Meanwhile, the US increasingly finds itself facing China alone in Asia.

What Richard Haass dubbed Trump’s “withdrawal doctrine” — pulling out of global agreements such as the Paris climate accord, the TPP and UNESCO, and threatening to withdraw from NAFTA and NATO — is also reinforcing the impression of a country unwilling to sustain its commitments and motivated by pure self-interest. At the G-20 meeting earlier this year, the US found itself completely isolated by its refusal to go along with a joint statement that, as in the past, included a critique of protectionism. As a result, the US has lost the moral high ground in the eyes of the rest of the world and in the relationship with China.

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Xi Jinping is cautious about outright criticism of American actions. But he courts international public opinion in eloquent speeches, such as the one he gave at the World Economic Forum in Davos that drew an implicit contrast between American selfishness and China’s benevolent commitment to global institutions and provision of public goods, including an open trading system. In his speech to the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress on October 18, Xi claimed that “China’s international standing has risen as never before … China’s soft power and the international influence of Chinese culture have been greatly enhanced … This is an era that will see China move closer to the center of the world and make more contributions to humankind.”

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MISSED OPPORTUNITY ON NORTH KOREA

The one thing the Trump administration got right in its approach to China was the focus on the North Korean nuclear threat as the most dangerous situation in Asia. The new administration should make the reduction of the North Korean threat the top priority in diplomacy with China, and the two presidents should engage directly to encourage China to use its economic leverage to convince North Korea’s leaders to halt development of their nuclear and missile programs. But Trump has botched the effort in a number of ways that have diminished American influence over China’s behavior and more generally weakened our hand in Asia.

First, Trump’s high-profile attempt to “get a deal” with China to cut its economic ties to North Korea is going about it in the wrong way. China has joined in another round of United Nations sanctions and appears to be enforcing them moderately well, but Xi isn’t willing to go further, because he hasn’t made the strategic shift to viewing a nuclear-capable North Korea as more threatening to China than the American military presence in Northeast Asia. An effective policy for getting China to do more would be to create the context for Xi to want to show the Chinese people that he is acting to protect their own security interests, not just pandering to the US.

Trump and other members of his administration have sent Beijing and Pyongyang mixed messages about their willingness to negotiate with the North Koreans. Trump himself talks inconsistently, most of the time aggressively taunting Kim Jong Un and criticizing Secretary of State Rex Tillerson for proposing negotiations, but once obsequiously stating that he would be “honored” to meet Kim. Meanwhile, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Tillerson and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster try to communicate the
obvious point that the goal of sanctions is to bring Pyongyang back to negotiations. No one actually expects that sanctions will drive the North Koreans to unilaterally disarm. Getting China to ramp up sanctions and North Korea to respond to them depends on combining the pressure of sanctions with some assurance that if North Korea were to stop producing nuclear weapons and missiles, the US would be ready to negotiate a package of security, diplomatic and economic measures that would make North Korea better off. Tillerson gets that, but Trump apparently does not. It’s not surprising that Xi is not ready to completely break China’s relationship with Pyongyang to join Trump in an effort to change Kim Jong Un’s decisions that looks sure to fail.

Second, Trump’s public threats to use military force to stop North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons and missiles before they can reach the US are bluster. If Steve Bannon can see that the US has no good military options, so can Xi and Kim. Any pre-emptive attack on North Korea, even one narrowly targeted on a missile launch pad, could be misperceived by Kim and his generals as an all-out assault on the regime and provoke a massive artillery attack on Seoul, with devastating consequences for the population. The South Korean government would never agree to take such a risk unless North Korea had already attacked the US or South Korea.

Meanwhile, Trump’s Twitter attempts at muscle-flexing actually undercut US credibility. Sending a carrier battle group to the Western Pacific was a prudent response to the heightened threat from North Korea. But Trump’s tweet that “We’re sending an armada,” when, in fact, the carrier, after cancelling a port call in Australia, actually went south before going north toward the Korean Peninsula, looked completely inept and unco-ordinated — like the gang that couldn’t shoot straight.

FAILED LINKAGE
By indicating that he is prepared to trade off American concerns about other issues, such as trade, market access and the South China Sea, in order to get a deal with Xi on North Korea, Trump has weakened America’s leverage with China and its overall standing in Asia. This is why wise foreign-policy-makers never explicitly link one issue with any other, even in nonpublic bilateral diplomacy. Each issue is addressed separately as a point of principle, even if there is an implicit recognition that both sides will need to be able to tell their stakeholders that they achieved some wins.

When Trump met Xi for the first time at his Mar-a-Lago resort, he clearly enjoyed playing the gracious host in such an impressive setting. But according to US officials, he failed to press Xi on other issues when the new administration had substantial leverage over Chinese actions. The so-called 100-Day Plan that the Chinese offered to provide Trump an early public victory on trade produced mainly previously agreed Chinese concessions on US imports. And when the Chinese came to the bilateral Economic Dialogue with offers to reduce excess capacity in steel and other heavy industrial sectors, the Americans turned those down, reportedly because the president, who believes that bilateral trade deficits are at the root of all the problems in the economic relationship, preferred to threaten the tariffs that he had promised voters at the time of his election campaign (but not yet actually to impose them).

Trump’s public linking of other issues to Chinese co-operation on North Korea has also led to a widespread misperception that the US is acquiescing to China’s dominance over the South China Sea. In fact, the Pentagon has made very sensible adjustments to the way it conducts its Freedom of Navigation naval exercises to maintain its navigational rights in the South China Sea under international law. During the Barack Obama administration, the Pacific Command publicly publicized these naval exercises so that they became confused with military signaling and made the South China Sea an American problem instead of a regional or global one. The current “routinization” of Freedom of Navigation exercises is a more reasonable and sustainable approach that, due to Trump’s inept linkage of North Korea and the South China Sea, now unfortunately makes America look weak.

WASTED SUMMIT
Trump’s November 2017 state visit to China was no more effective than the Mar-a-Lago encounter at producing meaningful results. By embedding the China summit in a long trip to Asia to visit regional allies and partners and participate in multilateral forums such as the APEC Leaders Meeting and the US-ASEAN Dialogue, senior administration officials sought to remedy the damage done to America’s standing in Asia during Trump’s first year in office. But they failed to prevent Trump from further isolating the US by publicly challenging the norms of collective co-operation with a full-throated defense of unilateralism (“We are not going to let the United States be taken advantage of anymore.”). Meanwhile, the other 11 nations in the TPP — following Trump’s withdrawal of the US from the accord shortly after taking office — were agreeing to salvage the regional agreement minus the US, and Xi was publicly espousing international co-operation in Asia and the world.

The Beijing summit itself was a triumph for Xi, newly crowned as China’s Emperor-like leader at the October CCP National Congress, and an embarrassment for the American leader, who acted flattered by the impressive protocol and was overly deferential to Xi’s wisdom and power. Summit meetings normally are important occasions for government officials to make progress on their priority concerns, which in this case should have been, in addition to North Korea, Beijing’s state-led industrial policies that restrict the access of foreign firms and subsidize China’s outbound investments; reducing the risk of maritime clashes in the South and East China Seas; and the worsening of China’s human rights situation, particularly with regard to the Internet and the legal profession in China. But the Trump Administration failed to prepare for the summit by building an internal consensus on its priority economic, security and human rights objectives and negotiating them in advance with the Chinese side.

In the absence of a comprehensive set of “asks” from the US, the Chinese government was able to repackage a large set of business MOUs and previous contracts for an appreciative president who could claim that he got US$250 billion of “tremendous, incredible, job-producing agreements.” Following the summit, the administration has launched several trade enforcement measures against China, but indicated that it has little interest in a broader discussion of systemic problems in the economic relationship. Unfortunately, there is no sign that Trump’s advisors have succeeded in teaching him that he will get a new and better deal from the overall relationship with China if he abandons his transactional approach.

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