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.
US Alliances and Trump’s ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ Policy

Before turning to the alliances in Asia, it is worthwhile considering the major challenges that US foreign policy faces globally: a fragmenting rules-based order; the rise of Asia (including, but not limited to, China’s re-emergence as a great power); new questions relating to the reliability of the US, mounting global challenges; and problems of governance that spill over into neighboring states and regions.

If one is concerned about peace and stability in Asia, a rules-based multilateral order is important for all nations and vital for smaller countries. Among the cleavages that have developed among major powers in recent years are issues related to trade, finance, infrastructure development and rules governing the maritime and cyberspace domains. Americans generally are most worried about the extent to which China and Russia separately and in tandem seek to erode the existing rules-based order. This is not just a US concern, but also a driver of intensified activity and deeper co-operation among Asian-Pacific actors.

Leading indicators of the fragmentation of international order are heightened tension and competition among the major powers, especially between China and Russia on the one hand, and the US, Japan and India on the other. While war is not breaking out, competition will persist, if not grow, making allies and partners more rather than less important for US policy.

Asia’s — and not just China’s — re-emergence remains a second major concern, producing a redistribution of global power. The fact that aggregate material power is growing across Asia has been well documented, with the share of Asia’s emerging and developing countries on track to rise from 12 percent of global GDP in 1990 to nearly 40 percent by 2022. Although most countries still see the US as the world’s leading economy, China is vital to future prosperity. As an illustration of the regional shift in opinion, Australians by a 2-to-1 margin see China rather than the US as the primary economic leader. The US remains ahead by far when it comes to soft power, but that, too, increasingly may be contested. As Chinese President Xi Jinping made clear at the most recent Communist Party conference in October, China wants to be at the center of the world stage by mid-century. Beijing’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, backed by a blue-water navy and modern military force, are meant to provide the means to restore China’s historic position.

A third geopolitical factor is the perception that the US is in retreat. While the country under Trump’s leadership has not veered into isolationism, it is fair to say that many do not have a clear understanding of US foreign policy even nine months into this political transition. Washington remains engaged across the Indo-Pacific region, but only began to make a consistent case for an affirmative, reliable commitment to the region during the much-overlooked address delivered by Trump in Da Nang. Doubts about America’s leadership arose, not least because of unilateral actions taken on trade and climate change that reversed years of multilateral engagement. Without the US as part of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement, for instance, China’s newfound interest in infrastructure building and finance has loomed larger on the regional agenda.

All of this occurred within a larger context of American unpredictability, heightened concern about US reliability and staying power, and a relative vacuum of power opportunity for others. But this started to change with Trump’s first visit to the region as president in November, a trip that marks the inception of America’s post-pivot strategy.¹ Not only did the president have impressive bilateral talks in Japan, South Korea and China, but his ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ speech in Vietnam set out a roadmap for sustained, strategic engagement. The trip, high-

Trump wants allies and partners to provide greater public goods, but he also said in Vietnam that partners will be penalized if they fail to abide by reciprocity and fair rules. That means the free and open Indo-Pacific is neither free nor likely to remain open unless allies and partners shoulder greater responsibilities, starting with their own defense.

Trump has made it clear that he expects all countries to do more to preserve the right balance for sustained harmony and growing prosperity.

**TRUMP ADMINISTRATION POLICY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION**

The Trump administration enters its second year in office on the cusp of completing its first national security strategy. Predicated on “principled realism,” the overarching strategy will focus on protecting US interests and strengthening America’s economy and military, while informing a subsequent articulation of US policy toward the wider Indo-Pacific region.2

Guided by a process led by National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, the administration’s regional strategy is anchored in history. After all, the US has long and abiding interests in a free and open Indo-Pacific region. Michael Green, former Senior Director for Asia on President George W. Bush’s National Security Council staff, has noted that, “For over two centuries, Americans have been tied to the Pacific by commerce, faith, geography and self-defense.”2 During the past decade, the US has doubled down on engagement in Asia. President Barack Obama made a conscious decision early in his first term to shift America’s emphasis to the Asia-Pacific. Speaking before the Australian Parliament in Canberra in November 2011, Obama pledged that the US “will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future.”3 By January 2012, the Department of Defense announced that, “while the US military will continue to contribute to security globally, we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.”4 Although Trump avoided a buzz word such as “pivot” or “rebalance,” his November call for a free and open Indo-Pacific was deliberately meant to convey a more predictable, long-term vision for an inclusive, connected, and co-operative region stabilized by a durable balance of power.

During his inaugural Asian tour, through summits and a landmark speech, Trump set forth his broad vision for preserving peace and prosperity across a vast and dynamic region critical to the US national interest. His speech at the National Assembly in Seoul was widely acclaimed in South Korea because the president for the first time made clear his desire to find a political outcome to the standoff with North Korea.

But for clarifying regional strategy, it was in Da Nang, the fourth stop on the trip, where Trump’s address to the APEC chief executive summit outlined US Asia policy.5 Offering a general set of principles and interests that will be fleshed out in the new national security strategy and in actions taken over the next few years, Trump sketched out his “Indo-Pacific dream” as an alternative to the “China dream.”
In so many respects, US policy remains moored deeply in history. Indeed, the president began his speech by observing how the United States has been engaged in commerce, freedom of navigation and security in this region since American independence.

Payng homage to the rise of Asia, Trump enumerated some of the recent achievements of specific countries. He praised an opening Vietnam and an Indonesia that is one of the fastest-growing G-20 economies. He highlighted Thailand’s ascent into the group of upper middle-income countries in less than a generation, and Malaysia as “one of the best places in the world to do business.” He noted Singapore’s transformation by “honest governance” and how the Philippines was a leader in Asia in closing the gender gap. He credited China’s market reforms with lifting 800 million people out of poverty. Finally, he reserved special tribute for three of the wealthiest Asian democracies: South Korea, Japan, and India.

While rooted in history and focused on Asia’s dynamism, the main thrust of Trump’s vision was forward-looking. He said America was not seeking domination but rather partnership with strong, independent nations willing to play by the rules. “It is in America’s interests,” said the president, hinting at regional concern about the assertiveness of an increasingly powerful China, “to have partners throughout this region that are thriving, prosperous and dependent on no one.”

At the same time, he called for international co-operation in supporting both traditional and non-traditional security. Gray-zone challenges to the rule of law and freedom of navigation, as well as the persistent threat posed by Islamic terrorism and other transnational threats, are very much on the Trump agenda. Yet there is no larger or more immediate threat to regional peace and security than that posed by North Korea. At present, we remain on a potential collision course, with Pyongyang determined to deploy nuclear-armed, long-range missiles that can strike US territory, and Washington leading a policy of maximum pressure to convince Kim Jong Un to deviate from his current path. As Trump said during his speech to the National Assembly in Seoul, “The future of this region … must not be held hostage to a dictator’s twisted fantasies of violent conquest and nuclear blackmail.”

How successfully the US manages the North Korea problem — mostly through deterrence and containment, but also through timely diplomacy when the opportunity arises — will go a long way to determining the ultimate legacy of the Trump administration’s policy in Asia.

Trump’s vision of a world of strong, independent sovereign states following common rules and co-operating to manage tough security challenges, stands in contrast to Xi’s nationalistic call to realize a “China dream” in which China is at the center of the global state by the centenary of the Communist Party in 2049. “We will be blessed with a world of strong, sovereign, and independent nations, thriving in peace and commerce with others,” Trump said in Da Nang. Rather than being tied to one road, Trump added, “let us never forget the world has many places, many dreams, and many roads.”

Once upon a time, Republican administrations used to talk about multilateral trade and bilateral security. In some ways, the Trump administration’s embrace of bilateral trade represents a clear departure from past bipartisan policy in support of the international trade order. The key here is whether Trump is bent on undermining a post-war order that America helped to erect, or whether he will be satisfied with reforming it through tough-love diplomacy. Beyond that serious difference, there is mostly continuity in Trump’s security and regional policies.

Trump is doubling down on allies and partners as vital to the successful achievement of stability and economic growth. There were times when some members of the Obama administration tended to treat alliances as ends in themselves; the Trump administration clearly sees alliances as a means for achieving common ends. Among other things, Trump wants allies and partners to provide greater public goods, but he also said in Vietnam that partners will be penalized if they fail to abide by reciprocity and fair rules. That means the free and open Indo-Pacific is neither free nor likely to remain open unless allies and partners shoulder greater responsibilities, starting with their own defense. Some allies, such as Japan and South Korea, are eager to assume greater responsibility for their defense, and the Trump administration is keen to support them, including through the transfer of new technology and defense equipment, but also through better co-ordination, interoperability, and where appropriate, integration.

Although more of a step change than something new, Trump is looking to bolster ties with newer partners. “Indo” in the phrase “free and open Indo-Pacific,” provides a telltale sign that the US will not only look to strengthen bilateral ties with Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and others, but will be more open to specific multilateral co-operation should it seem to address real issues. We should also expect the US to pursue even more meaningful co-operation with Australia, a country whose latest foreign policy white paper posits staunch support for the US, despite its flaws. As the paper states, “The alliance is a choice we make about how best to pursue our security interests.”

The foreign policy and economic teams of the Trump administration are focused on preserving not just US sovereign strength but also on finding new ways to work co-operatively with allies and partners as well as with other major powers to preserve a mutually acceptable regional and global balance of power. In these endeavors, as with the first year in office, the Trump administration will continue to demonstrate a hybrid policy approach based on both continuity and change. However, the key to success will be to ensure that the US does not cast away, but fully harnesses, its unparalleled network of allies and partners. The world’s — and the region’s — challenges are too great to do otherwise.

Patrick M. Cronin is Senior Advisor and Senior Director of the Asia-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), a bipartisan, non-governmental think tank in Washington, DC. He can be contacted at peronin@cnas.org
