Key Challenges for China and the US: Climate and Security

Melanie Hart
With Trump deciding to pull out of the Paris climate accord, China is poised to lead the world on climate issues. It does not have to be this way.

Peter A. Dutton & Isaac B. Kardon
Despite some rhetorical bombast, US security policy in Asia so far under President Trump has been fairly consistent with past administrations.
Continuing to Confront China: Trump’s Approach to Maritime Security in East Asia

By Peter A. Dutton & Isaac B. Kardon

While any new American administration brings with it new thinking and new directions in security policy, the advent of a Trump presidency augured an even more substantial strategic realignment. Nonetheless, US maritime security policy in East Asia in the first year of the new administration has been surprisingly consistent with that of past administrations. In its emphasis on international law and alliances, as well as on substantive policy grounds, US policy in maritime East Asia has been largely stable, write Peter A. Dutton and Isaac B. Kardon.

AT THE 2017 Shangri-La Dialogue, held in Singapore, US Secretary of Defense James Mattis made clear that, despite some new elements and shifts in emphasis, there would be significant continuity in the US security strategy in East Asia. As he put it: “By further strengthening our alliances, by empowering the region and by enhancing the US military in support of our larger foreign policy goals, we intend to continue to promote the rules-based order that is in the best interest of the United States and all of the countries in the region.”1 These words could just as easily have been uttered by his predecessors in the Barack Obama administration, and indeed, those of the last several administrations. On a bipartisan basis, all shared a vocal commitment to the so-called liberal international order, underwritten by a formidable US forward military presence in East Asia.

In the contested East and South China Seas, the current administration continues to anchor its policy in defense of “the rules” and the security of allies. On the key questions of sovereignty, maritime jurisdiction and US access to the East Asian littoral, we see a surprising lack of major adjustments. It is, of course, possible that this is just temporary, but in the first year of the new administration, policy on maritime disputes in Asia remains roughly unchanged. Below, we analyze two major continuous aspects of the administration’s policy on maritime security in the region: the central role of allies and “rules-based” interactions. We then turn to some specifics on maritime disputes, most of which are still intact from the previous administration. Overall, the biggest changes are in emphasis rather than substance, though the tough talk about using US “hard power” is now matched by an augmented defense posture that may have consequences for regional security over time.

THE ‘RULES-BASED INTERNATIONAL ORDER’

Early statements by the administration’s national security team make clear that maintaining regional stability continues to be the primary focus of the American strategic presence in East Asia. A key tenet of this stability remains the “rules-based international order” — the constellation of norms, treaties and institutions that are supposed to govern interactions among states. Although the White House has not emphasized international law, the rest of the executive branch has done so in relatively conventional ways.

The current administration is continuing former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s “hard line” on Chinese coercion in its maritime disputes, introduced in 2010 at an ASEAN-US ministerial meeting in Hanoi, Vietnam. While they certainly do not cite her speech, the basic thrust of the present policy and its rationale remain the same: the US wants to preserve international law as a means for smaller states to pursue their interests free from coercion by larger states (i.e. China). In Clinton’s words, “The US supports a collaborative diplomatic process by all claimants for resolving various territorial disputes without coercion … we believe claimants should pursue their territorial claims and accompanying rights to maritime space in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.”2

Secretary of Defense Mattis delivered roughly the same message at the 2017 Shangri-La Dialogue, where he pledged that the US would “work with others to secure a peaceful, prosperous and free Asia, one with respect for all nations upholding international law … As countries make sovereign decisions that are free from coercion, the region will gain increased stability and security for the mutual benefit of all nations.” He went on to emphasize the “theory” underlying US support for international law, expressing “a deep and abiding commitment to reinforcing the rules-based international order … These principles underwrite stability and build trust, security and prosperity … All countries should have a voice in shaping the international system, but doing so by ignoring or violating international law threatens all that this inclusive global community has built together.”3

This was a barely concealed dig at China that would have been obvious to all East Asians. Regional states closely followed China’s choice to ignore and violate international law, first with its refusal in January 2013 to accept or participate in the Philippines-initiated international arbitration case over disputes in the South China Sea, and then, in July 2016, its refusal to recognize and implement an award in that case that went solidly against it. The US appeal to international law as the appropriate means for resolving disputes remains a pillar of its Asia policy, and has become especially salient as China persists in actions that are now formally unlawful under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.4

While the validity and importance of the Philippines’ international arbitration has not featured prominently in US policy declarations, it is clear that the administration still supports it. Mattis called on “all claimants to use [the arbitration] as a starting point to peacefully manage their disputes in the South China Sea. Artificial island construction and indisputable militarization of facilities on features in international waters [note: here Mattis must be referring to Mischief Reef] undermine regional stability. The

4 www.lawfareblog.com/tracking-compliance-south-china-sea-arbitral-award-chinas-2017-summer-fishing-moratorium-may...
In Focus: Key Challenges for China and the US: Climate and Security

These statements do not mark the hasty departure from regional security that many had anticipated. Similarly, on maritime disputes, the administration has continued to defend “the rules” (particularly those concerning freedom of navigation) and attempted to reassure allies about US commitments to maritime openness and access. Officials have stressed that the United States remains a key stakeholder in the disputed waters, and in the region generally, and so too are many other states. Accordingly, the new administration is continuing a pattern of seeking to dilute Chinese influence by staying involved in the South China Sea, and encouraging others to follow suit.

**FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA**

As a necessary enabler to the American commitment to regional stability, support for like-minded states in Southeast Asia, and access to the waters of the South China Sea, the Trump administration eventually reaffirmed America’s intention to uphold freedom of navigation in the region. Mattis’s words on the matter echoed those of Obama’s defense secretary, Ashton Carter, nearly verbatim. At Shangri-La, Mattis said: “We will continue to fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows, and demonstrate resolve through operational presence in the South China Sea and beyond. Our operations through the region are an expression of our willingness to defend both our interests and the freedoms enshrined in international law.”

This statement is also a clear reference to China, which in the wake of the July 2016 arbitration decision made clear that it intends to make broad maritime claims in and around the Spratly Islands that run contrary to international law. The Trump administration has clearly rejected such claims and is demonstrating the determination not to cede maritime space to Chinese control. Again, Mattis has emphasized that “the United States remains a key stakeholder in the disputed waters, and in the region generally, and so too are many other states. Accordingly, the new administration is continuing a pattern of seeking to dilute Chinese influence by staying involved in the South China Sea, and encouraging others to follow suit.

Scope and effect of China’s construction activities in the South China Sea differ from those of other countries in several key ways. This includes the nature of its militarization, China’s disregard for international law, its contempt for other nations’ interests and its efforts to dismiss non-adversarial resolution of issues … We cannot and will not accept unilateral, coercive changes to the status quo.”

Underlying this continuity in message is an unchanged policy position on the core elements of the disputes: sovereignty. The US remains agnostic on which claimants enjoy sovereignty over disputed features, insisting only on peaceful means of dispute resolution — specifically using the tools provided by international law.

**COMMITMENT TO ALLIES**

US officials also continue to stress the importance of alliances and the robustness of the US extended deterrence posture on their behalf. These relationships are pillars of the regional stability that this administration does not want to disrupt — even if Trump’s campaign rhetoric scared allies into thinking that American alliance commitments were in jeopardy. The voices of other leaders have assuaged these concerns to some degree, in part through physical presence, and in part through reaffirmations of the treaties and norms underpinning the alliance architecture in Asia.

For example, Admiral Harry Harris, the Commander of the US Pacific Command, explained that the US will pursue the “common objective of regional stability” in three ways: “Strengthening alliances, empowering countries in the region and strengthening the United States’ military capabilities in the region.” This will be the US approach to the region, Mattis added, “because security is the foundation of prosperity, enabling the flow of commerce.” This positioned the administration’s fundamental approach to regional security squarely in line with every administration dating back to Franklin Roosevelt.”

The American security posture in Asia has relied on military power based in the region, supported by regional allies, to establish and maintain a balance of power that enables American access in service of economic and strategic interests.

The Trump administration explicitly reaffirmed the necessity of support for and from American regional allies to achieve these objectives. As Mattis put it in Singapore: “By further strengthening our alliances, by empowering the region and by enhancing the US military in support of our larger foreign policy goals, we intend to continue to promote the rules-based order that is in the best interest of the United States and all of the countries in the region.” Furthermore, the administration expressed its solidarity with regional countries on the basis of a common set of liberal values. America’s “enduring commitment to the security and prosperity of this region … is based on strategic interests and on shared values of free people, free markets, and a strong and vibrant economic partnership … open to all nations.”

These statements do not mark the hasty departure from regional security that many had anticipated. Similarly, on maritime disputes, the administration has continued to defend “the rules” (particularly those concerning freedom of navigation) and attempted to reassure allies about US commitments to maritime openness and access. Officials have stressed that the United States remains a key stakeholder in the disputed waters, and in the region generally, and so too are many other states. Accordingly, the administration is continuing a pattern of seeking to dilute Chinese influence by staying involved in the South China Sea, and encouraging others to follow suit. Mattis noted that “we have top national interests in the South China Sea, just as China does, and just as many countries in the region do.” These interests are defended first by the military power of the United States and its allies, manifested in continuing commitment to freedom of navigation and alliances.

**Commitment to the US Enduring Commitment to Asia**


Remarks by the Vice President aboard USS Ronald Reagan, Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, April 19, 2017.


General (ret.) James Mattis, op. cit.

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and other lawful uses of the sea in the South China Sea and elsewhere, and we will ensure the unimpeded flow of lawful commerce. 12

The Trump administration delayed any Freedom of Navigation operations until nearly five months into its term, but since then has adopted a more active approach on this issue in at least two respects. The first is frequency. The administration has committed to more frequent such operations in East Asia — and in particular in the South China Sea, which has been the target of four such operations since May. The second factor is that it has tried to depoliticize the operations themselves. Where the Obama National Security Council demanded reviews of each South China Sea Freedom of Navigation operation, decisions about the operational schedule have now been delegated to the Commander, Pacific Command in order to allow for more consistent pressure calibrated to support other regional security objectives.13

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STRESSING THE US-JAPAN ALLIANCE IN THE EAST CHINA SEA

The administration has also underscored the longstanding American commitment to the US-Japan alliance as the cornerstone of regional stability. One of Japan’s chief concerns is Chinese pressure on the Senkaku Islands (known in China as the Diaoyu Islands), over which both sides claim sovereignty. To assuage Japanese concerns and to signal the strength of the alliance, the Trump administration committed itself to work with Japan to “deepen cooperation to safeguard the peace and stability of the East China Sea.”14 Of special sensitivity to Japan, of course, is whether American treaty commitments still extend to the Senkaku Islands. Accordingly, in Trump’s April meeting with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the president “affirmed that Article V of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Co-operation and Security covers the Senkaku Islands.” In a direct warning to China that was intended to reassure the Japanese, Trump said that the US opposes “any unilateral action that seeks to undermine Japan’s administration of these islands.”15 The vice president followed up these words from the decks of the USS Ronald Reagan: “Our treaty covers all of the territories administered by Japan, including the Senkaku Islands.”16

Both the US and Japan have taken great pains to demonstrate to the region (and especially to China) that they remain in lockstep on security issues. Just weeks after Trump’s inauguration, Trump and Abe issued a joint statement about the discussions during their meetings at the White House that “underscored the importance of maintaining a maritime order based on international law, including freedom of navigation and overflight and other lawful uses of the sea.”17 During Trump’s November trip to Japan, the two reaffirmed those points and elaborated their shared strategic vision of a “free and open Indo-Pacific,” the new branding for the administration’s approach to Asia — and one that shares quite a bit with the “pivot” initiated by the previous administration.

CONCLUSIONS: A FEW POINTS OF DIVERGENCE

Under the Trump administration, America’s maritime security posture in East Asia remains largely consistent with that of past administrations. This includes a reaffirmed commitment to common interests and values between the United States and its many allies, partners, and friends in East Asia. Perhaps surprisingly, the administration has continued to emphasize the maintenance of a rules-based international order, peaceful resolution of disputes under international law and the central importance of allies to US regional strategy.

However, the policy emphasis has shifted somewhat from broad regional concerns to specific US interests, and secondarily, those of its allies. An emerging divergence from past practice is that American policy-makers now more clearly accept a multipolar order in Asia. This is a subtle but noteworthy shift away from some former American policies that emphasized American security dominance in the region. In part by avoiding confrontation on maritime disputes, the administration has signaled that China’s interests in these areas, security and otherwise, are accepted as legitimate.

Matthis has been the clearest in articulating this changing power dynamic. In his view, Chinese interests must be addressed for any agreement to be durable. During the question and answer portion of his address at Shangri-La, he stated, “We are going to have to work together [with China] on this. I do not think there is room right now to push adversarial approaches. We
have to take into account each nation’s interests in the South China Sea… and work them out to mutual satisfaction, because that is the only way we will have an enduring solution.” Still, the expectation is that China will follow the rules like every other state. As Mattis put it, “[a]ll countries should have a voice in shaping the international system, but doing so by ignoring or violating international law threatens all that this inclusive global community has built together.” This is why there is no need to turn interest-based assertiveness into “adversarial approaches.” Cooperation remains possible because we “can quantitatively show the value in commerce and security where we work together.”

Burden-sharing appears to be another distinctive hallmark of the Trump administration’s approach. All administrations have signaled a desire for allies to shoulder some of the security burden, and accordingly, Japan has already begun to assume larger roles and responsibilities in the alliance. Revived discussions of “The Quad” — the US, Japan, India, and Australia — are another manifestation of this outlook. For all of Trump’s “go-it-alone” bombast, his administration is investing in the network of allies and partners whose cooperation is essential to maintenance of an international order based on the rule of law. However, it is clear that this security web will continue to be based firmly in “credible [US] combat power, in concert with like-minded allies and partners, to preserve unimpeded access to all the shared domains.”

There is no doubt that China (and North Korea) are the reason for this augmented combat power, perhaps most visible in the deployment of two aircraft carrier strike groups to the region, as opposed to the usual one. The goal is not confrontation with China, but rather, the affirmation that both the US and China have major strategic interests that need to co-exist. These interests are nowhere more starkly in tension than in maritime disputes. Any administration would have inherited a changing power dynamic between the US and China, and some experienced leaders in the present administration are approaching this in much the same way that others have and would in similar circumstances.

Finally, America’s security has always come first; now this priority is explicit and unapologetic. The Trump administration’s security policy and posture in East Asia appears geared toward enhancing the credibility of American combat power. This hard-power orientation may be the most basic, and perhaps consequential, difference between this administration and its predecessors. But even in the midst of major rhetorical contradictions, the general thrust of US policy in maritime East Asia remains similar, only it is now implemented more assertively.

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