Northeast Asia is rife with potential conflict, given US-China great power rivalry, ongoing differences over interpretations of history between Korea and Japan and between China and Japan, simmering maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas, and worries that tensions could escalate between Taiwan and the Mainland under the US presidency of Donald J. Trump.

The articles in this cover package of Global Asia argue that now is the time for players in the region to embrace “strategic diplomacy.”

ESSAYS BY
Jochen Prantl & Evelyn Goh 8
Huang Jing 14
Bong-Geun Jun 20
Brendan Taylor 28
Jochen Prantl & Hyun-Wook Kim 34
Amy King 42
Bruce W. Jentleson 50
Evelyn Goh 58

By Bruce W. Jentleson

After Donald Trump’s stunning upset in the US presidential election, his foreign policy approach in office is far from clear. Leaving aside the harsh campaign rhetoric and the crystal ball, Bruce W. Jentleson considers current thinking on US strategic interests in Northeast Asia and urges a measured approach to this vital region during a time of regional and international transition.

WRITING ABOUT any aspect of United States foreign policy in the immediate aftermath of the most startling upset in American political history, the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th president, registers very high on the uncertainty chart. In this essay, I address the political context of the 2016 election and broad debates about US “grand strategy” as they pertain to the US role in Northeast Asia. My intent is to present the debate and argue for what in my assessment is the optimal strategy for the US to pursue, not to predict what a Trump administration will do.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

Five points stand out as particularly significant.

First, foreign policy had only been a major factor in four of 17 prior post-Second World War US presidential elections — 1952 in the middle of the Korean War, 1968 and 1972 during the Vietnam War and 1980 following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and amid the Iran hostage crisis; 2016 was the fifth.1 In December 2011, less than a year before the Obama-Romney 2012 election, only 6 percent said international issues were the most important ones facing the country; and only 9 percent expressed this view in December 2014, shortly after the midterm congressional elections; in December 2015, it was 32 percent. This was even higher than for the economy (23 percent). The context of being less than a month after the San Bernardino ISIS terrorist incident likely inflated the figure. Still, an April 2016 USA Today poll had 25 percent stressing jobs and the economy and 23 percent terrorism and national security, with all other issues in single digits. And a CNN/ORC poll in late October had 85 percent of likely voters saying terrorism was important to them, and 82 percent foreign policy.

Second, pre-election polls showed voters favored Hillary Clinton over Trump on foreign policy. When asked who could better handle foreign policy (CNN, October 20-23), 59 percent said Clinton to 38 percent for Trump. Commander-in-chief: 55 percent Clinton, 40 percent Trump. Temperament to serve effectively as president: 61 percent Clinton, 32 percent Trump. On being a strong and decisive leader, the margin was less, but still in favor of Clinton, 46 percent to 46 percent. In retrospect, these polls may have shared similar inaccuracies with the overall polling that predicted a Clinton victory, and/or voters may have opted for other preferences over these issues when they actually cast their ballots. Still, they are informative and may well gain significance as President Trump’s foreign policies take shape and the American public responds.

Third, going back to the general state of public opinion on foreign policy, polls differ on the basic question of isolationism versus internationalism. On the one hand, Pew Research Center polls showed 57 percent leaning isolationist and 35 percent leaning internationalist. On the other hand, polls by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs had 64 percent agreeing with taking an “active” part in international affairs and only 35 percent wanting to step back. Some of the difference is in wording.2 Neither, though, gets at the Trump campaign position, which was less “stay in” versus “get out” than “matonismo,” from the Spanish word for bully. When trying to characterize the Trump foreign policy approach in lectures and meetings with journalists in Spain in February 2016, I called it “bully-ism” — not just withdrawing from the world but doing so in a manner that imposes costs and burdens on others: the 45 percent surcharge on Chinese imports, the wall paid for by Mexico, the you-owe-us to traditional allies, the you-deal-with-them ban on refugees and indeed any Muslims entering the US. The Spanish word for bully, maton, has more resonance, so I’ve taken to calling this “matonismo.”

Fourth, there are major differences among Republicans and Democrats. For example, on banning Muslims from entering the US, 59 percent of Republicans agree but only 15 percent of Democrats. On concern about Islamist extremism within the US, 65 percent of Republicans agree, 38 percent of Democrats. Eighty percent of core Trump supporters and 77 percent of Democrats. The issue of trade splits both parties, as the leftist support for Bernie Sanders and the rightist support for Trump both illustrate. Fifty-five percent of Republicans and 44 percent of Democrats believe that US involvement in the global economy is a “bad thing” that lowers wages and costs jobs.

Fifth, the Republican Party is more split on foreign policy than Democrats. Over 100 Republican foreign policy professionals signed an open letter highly critical of Trump’s foreign policy views.3 Another open letter responding to his advocacy of torture was titled, “Defending the Honor of the US Military from Donald Trump.” The traditional internationalist wing of the Republican Party — George HW Bush, Colin Powell, Brent Scowcroft, and Senator Richard Lugar — has withered, including in Congress. We also see splits between core Trump supporters and other Republicans. Eighty percent of core Trump supporters see immigration as a critical threat, compared to 67 percent of other Republicans. Globalization is viewed as “mostly good” by 49 percent

2 Pew is two options, “The US should deal with its own problems and let other countries deal with theirs the best they can” and “The US should help other countries deal with their problems”, make it sound like an international role is helping others, not the US’ own interests. CGCA: “Do you think it would be best for the country if we take an active part in world affairs or stay out of world affairs?” connects an international role with national self-interest (italics added for emphasis). I think the CGCA is a better measure. I should add, for transparency, that I am a member of the CGCA Public Opinion Advisory Board and a Non-Resident Senior Fellow.
3 http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/22/reports-of-american-fears-have-been-greatly-exaggerated/
of core Trump supporters and 59 percent of other Republicans. Maintaining existing alliances saw 34 percent of core Trump supporters saying very effective and 40 percent of other Republicans.5

Finally, looking past the US election outcome and across the Atlantic, the combination of economic dislocation, cultural anxiety and personal insecurity from terrorism pose a deep crisis for Western democracies, what in an April 2016 article I called “Western Democracies’ Witch’s Brew.”6 Similarities in the Brexit vote and the Trump victory make this especially evident, but similar dynamics are evident in one European country after another. These go well beyond foreign policy, and must be met with a comprehensive commitment to revitalizing economic opportunity, chartering a consensual path to cultural comity and preventing terrorism in ways consistent with an open society.

US GRAND STRATEGY AND NORTHEAST ASIA* 
I again need to stress that I leave predictions of Trump’s foreign policy to the pundits, and instead want to frame the US debate on overall grand strategy and Northeast Asia. While there are various ways this is conceptualized, I cast it as among three main approaches: retrenchment, re-assertiveness and recalibration.

Retrenchment: The US should do less in the world. This is often thought of as isolationism, yet the one candidate who ran on straight isolationism, Republican Senator Rand Paul, was one of the first to drop out. Trump added the resentment factor in terms of other countries getting a free ride. “We have been disrespected, mocked and ripped off for many, many years by people that were smarter, shrewder, tougher,” was how he put it during the campaign. In more transactional terms, he said, “We are not being reimbursed for our protection of many of the countries.” Japan and South Korea were among those on his list of countries not paying their fair share for the protection the US provides (Saudi Arabia, most of NATO and various others are also on the list). He called the current US relationship with Japan “a pretty one-sided agreement,” because “if we’re attacked, they do not have to come to our defense.” But “if they’re attacked, we have to come totally to their defense. And that is a … that’s a real problem.”7 He made clear that he is open to withdrawing US forces from Japan and South Korea if they did not cover more of the costs of keeping those troops in their countries. Nor was it just a business matter. He did not see regional stability as being undermined if either or both of these countries developed their own nuclear weapons. “Would I rather have North Korea have [nuclear weapons] with Japan sitting there having them also? You may very well be better off if that’s the case. In other words, where Japan is defending itself against North Korea, which is a real problem.8

Many, including myself, view a major drawdown of the US military presence and pulling back the nuclear security umbrella from South Korea and Japan as making the region less stable and more damaging to US interests as well as those of our South Korean and Japanese allies, and arguably also China. A whole range of bilateral tensions — China-Japan, North-South Korea, Japan-South Korea, North Korea-Japan — are too great to be left without US intermediation. Along those lines, it’s worth noting that “realist school” scholars with a narrower conception of vital national interests — who advocate less defense spending, fewer overseas bases and troop deployments, less use of military force and generally pulling back from overextension — still see Northeast Asia as a vital strategic area for the US.9

Re-assertiveness: This is characterized by a robust assessment of US power and the contention that it is still good for both the US national interest and the world order for the US to be the dominant or at least lead nation. While this is most associated with “neo-conservatism,” it also comes through, albeit less unilaterally, in “liberal interventionism.” Neo-conservatism prevailed in the George W Bush administration (in the first term especially) and it is rooted in a “we won they lost” analysis of the Cold War, with victory attributed to US power and ideology. Its assessment of the 2003 Iraq war sees the right strategy but just some mistakes in implementation. It was scathing in its critique of the foreign policy of President Barack Obama for lack of resolve, too limited use of military power, insufficient support for traditional allies, excessive willingness to compromise with adversaries and various other accusations.10

Liberal interventionists give greater emphasis to international institutions and multilateralism when it comes to the use of force and more generally for the maintenance of the world order. But they tend to be hawkish on the use of force — e.g., Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s, for some at least initially the 2003 Iraq war, support for the 2011 Libyan intervention and involvement in Syria not with ground troops but other military options. The international institutions they support are very much the post-Second World War “liberal order,” with relatively more power sharing but with the US still at the center. They share with neo-cons a penchant for spreading democracy, albeit motivated more by calculations such as the democratic peace than American exceptionalist ideology and with less reliance on military means.

Applied to Northeast Asia, they see North Korea ratcheting up its nuclear weapons program and China’s provocations on such issues as the Diaoyu-Senkaku Islands dispute with Japan and declaration of its expansive air defense identification zone as attributable to the Obama admin-
Both retrenchment and re-assertiveness, though, see the world more as it was than as it is. Militarily, while the US still has ample superiority over any other state or potential coalition, in a world with much less of a shared and overarching threat, the currency of military power is less convertible to other forms of power and influence than in the Cold War. Diplomatically, the doubling down on allies and doubling up against longstanding and emerging adversaries misses how much less states today are defining their foreign policies principally in pro— or anti-American terms. In these and other ways, both fall into the trap that noted diplomatic historian Melvyn Leffler identifies from past global transitional moments, when “too often officials clung to prevailing strategic concepts without fully reassessing their strategic utility, reappraising their costs and benefits, reexamining threats and opportunities, or rethinking goals and tactics.”

Recalibration: The US must remain deeply and broadly engaged in the world, but with a re-appraisal of US interests, reassessment of US power and re-positioning of its leadership role to better fit the geopolitical, economic, technologi- 
cal and other dynamics shaping the 21st-century world strategic environment. Four aspects differentiate recalibration:

First is a systemic view of the transformation from the Cold War “Ptolemaic” world to the 21st century “Copernican” world. Just as for Ptolemy, the earth was at the center with the other planets, and indeed all other celestial bodies, revolving around it, so too was the US at the center of the Cold War world. The wielder of power. The economic engine. The bastion of free world ideology. When the Cold War ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, American centrality seemed even more defining. It was the sole surviving superpower. The American economy was driving globalization. Democracy was spreading all over. The world seemed even more Ptolemaic.

Not any more. The 21st century world is more like Copernicus’ theory of the universe, with the planets in orbit around the sun not the earth. So too here in the 21st century, the US is not at the center. It has its own orbit. Other countries have their own orbits in terms of policy priorities and preferences in the name of national interest and as manifestations of their national identities. As one study put it, “countries small, medium and large are all banking more on their own strategic initiative than on formal alliances or institutional relationships to defend their interests and advance their goals.” This is not to say that the US should not provide any global leadership. When the international community has broadly shared interests but an impetus is needed for collective action, the US remains best able, as former US policy planning director Anne-Marie Slaughter has put it, “to convene, to catalyze, and to connect.” On some issues it remains uniquely positioned to play the lead broker role. On others, we’ve been seeing a “pluralization of diplomacy” involving more states with more relations with one another on a wider range of issues than ever before.

It follows as a second point that any state pursuing hegemony — be it the US, China, Russia or whomever — will find it not achievable. Major powers will continue to compete for geopolitical advantage, but there should neither be excessive expectations for major-power rapprochement nor threat inflation. Relative gains still matter, but they will be limited by the centrifugal Copernican dynamics and come with the burdens of trying to maintain control. The US has been taught this lesson all too painfully. As China has been doing more regional muscle-flexing, it has spurred countermeasures from a range of neighbors, ironically setting up an almost classic balancing situation for the US. Russia, for all its recent muscle-flexing, is encountering the same limits.

Third, just as traditional allies and friends are among those re-assessing the extent to which their interests coincide with US interests, so too does the US need to make its own re-assessments of the mix of shared and divergent interests. It is important to stand by commitments. It also is important to ensure that they don’t become blank-cheque assurances of support.

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istration’s lack of resolve. “The Obama administration has not done nearly enough to bolster the rapidly eroding balance of power in East Asia,” writes Aaron Friedberg, Princeton professor and former senior foreign policy aide to then-Vice President Dick Cheney. A report from the Center for a New American Security, with former top Obama officials Kurt Campbell and Michele Flournoy among the authors, cites US-China relations as “the single most consequential challenge for US foreign policy,” stressing concern about “China’s surging military spending on capabilities directed squarely against American power projection platforms” and “that Asian allies and friends worry Washington does not have the will” to deter China. Particular differences notwithstanding, both neo-cons and liberal hawks will” to deter China. Particular differences not-
regional security in ways in which it has unique capacities, but with regional partners taking on more responsibility. This not only is more sustainable fiscally given US budgetary constraints, it also has a substantive strategic rationale of making security a more genuinely collective enterprise between the US and its allies and friends. Fourth is recognizing the shift in the principal locus of threats from inter-state competition to intra-state instability. During the Cold War, much of global instability was “outside in,” i.e., the internationalization of the US-Soviet global rivalry into states with their own tensions and conflicts. The 21st century dynamic is more “inside out.” The international community is increasingly susceptible to threats and other disruptions that emanate outward from inside states. What happens inside states doesn’t stay inside states. Bruce W. Jentleson, “Global Governance in a Copernican World,” Global Governance 18 (2012), pp. 133-148.

It is one of the key recalibrations needed in relations with some longstanding allies. The US should continue to provide its unique military capacity, but with regional partners taking on more direct responsibility. Such shifts need to be done transitionally, not abruptly, with consultations and some shared decision-making with partners and allies, as well counteracting the message of “retreat” by articulating the strategic logic of making security more of a genuinely collective effort.

Diplomatic pluralism here means that relations in the region are shifting from the hub-and-spokes model based on bilateral ties with the US to a more networked model between and among regional nations. The resumption of China-Japan-South Korea trilateral meetings is an important part of this. Some of this is also between Japan and South Korea and the need to address historical legacies of colonialism and the Second World War both on a bilateral basis and through the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral. There also could be a useful role for the ASEAN Regional Forum.

CONCLUSION

In considering these and other options and scenarios, the social construction of narratives stressed by Prantl and Goh is crucial to bear in mind. The approaches of all parties — the US, China, Japan, South Korea and North Korea — to Northeast Asian security issues are very much socially constructed, with regard both to their own narratives and their perceptions of those of the other parties. Perceptions and misperceptions can affect assessments of negotiating positions — expressive or purposive, fixed or flexible, compromises as signs of weakness to be exploited or good will to be reciprocated — as well as actions — aggressive or defensive intentions, deterrent or compellent. All this may get seriously tested under a new American president with virtually no foreign policy experience and a penchant for reactive comments and social media “tweets.”

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