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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President Donald Trump’s global foreign policy is further complicating US policy in Asia. His ‘America First’ nationalism has caused the US to back away from trade deals such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the hard-fought consensus of the Paris climate accords and even NATO’s collective security pledge, much to the consternation of US allies. He is re-prioritizing the Middle East. And his impetuous decision-making style is deeply disconcerting.

As a result, writes Bruce W. Jentleson, America’s Asian allies are uncertain about the US while China and even Russia are emboldened on the world stage.

American First
The term “America First” was coined in the 1930s by isolationist groups seeking to keep the US out of the war in Europe. Trump’s version is an assertive nationalism that imposes costs and burdens on others: the 45 percent surcharge on Chinese imports proposed during the campaign; the border wall that Mexico is supposedly going to pay for; the “you owe us” attitude toward traditional allies; the pledge to ban most refugees and, indeed, any Muslims from entering the US. While some campaign positions have been kicked down the road now that he is in office, the thrust remains that the world owes America more than America owes the world, and that the US will use its power at times, places and in a manner of its own choosing.

More broadly, Trump has made clear his lack of interest in international institutions and agreements. At the May 2017 NATO summit, he omitted a passage in the speech prepared by his national security advisors affirming the US commitment to Article V on collective security. While in a later speech he mouthed the words, it convinced few that he had a genuine commitment to the most successful peacetime alliance in history. In June, he reneged on the US commitment to the Paris climate accords. At the July G-20 summit, President Trump was more interested in chatting with Russian President Vladimir Putin than engaging with other leaders. At the UN in September, he bashed enemies and harped on contribution levels and management reform, paying little attention to the UN policy agenda or traditional appeals to peace. On trade, Trump wants to dismantle one regional trade agreement to which the US is already a party (NAFTA), renounced the US commitment to another one — the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement — and stated his intent to ignore WTO rulings that don’t go America’s way.

The principal effects of this approach are threefold. One is to further weaken the already fraying “Liberal Order.” I say further weaken because Trump (like Brexit and various other manifestations of anti-liberal populism) is an effect and not just a cause of problems that have been building for some time. Notwithstanding some US-European differences in personalities and other particulars, there is a common pattern of three swirling social forces — economic dislocation, cultural anxiety and fear of terrorism — stewing in a potent witch’s brew that runs deeper than the outcomes of particular elections.

Second is the unsettling effect on friends and allies who increasingly view the US as unreliable. If there are doubts about the American commitment to NATO’s collective security, what American security commitment can be counted on? “The era in which we could fully rely on others is over to some extent,” German Chancellor Angela Merkel said after the G7 meeting at which Trump pulled the US out of the Paris accords. Moreover, given the ongoing investigations into the Trump campaign’s alleged Russia ties and America’s internal political upheaval, policy inconsistency is not going to end soon.

Third is the opening provided to China and to an extent Russia to increase their global influence. I do not subscribe to the idea of a deadly “Thucydides trap” resulting from China’s challenge to the US or the emergence of a new Cold War, but there is real competition under way to shape the 21st century international order. Trump’s economic nationalism has made it way too easy for Chinese President Xi Jinping to position his country as the champion of free trade, despite the elements of mercantilism in China’s economic policies. The meager US foreign-aid budget, responsibility for which stretches back to Congress, isn’t even remotely in the same league as China’s US$1 trillion, 68-country “Belt and
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Road” initiative, even if these official estimates prove inflated. Moreover, Trump’s repudiation of the Paris deal provides China with an opportunity to seize the global mantle of the public good. While I see all this as a competition for influence, not incipient Chinese hegemony, it is nonetheless a real competition for global influence.

RE-PRIORITYIZATION OF THE MIDDLE EAST
The Middle East is also back. While the Obama “pivot” to Asia was overhyped, it did convey at least a sense of paying more attention to Asia and less on the Middle East. The Trump foreign policy has the Middle East back at the center. More troops to Afghanistan and Iraq. Stepped-up military action against ISIS. The president’s first foreign trip starting in Saudi Arabia. A renewed Israeli-Palestinian peace effort. Trying to pick a fight with Iran despite evidence of overall compliance with the nuclear nonproliferation agreement. Loosening constraints on drone strikes and ratcheting up other counterterrorism strikes in one country after another.

At the same time, both Russia and China have been increasing their presence in the Middle East. Russia’s military intervention in Syria has had a number of objectives, both tangible ones such as supporting the Assad regime and solidifying an ongoing military presence in the region, and indirect message-sending ones such as taking a stand against yet another US-supported regime change. In addition, Russian-Egyptian relations have grown closer since General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi came to power in the 2013 military coup. Even given differences over Syria, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel el-Jubeir spoke of his country’s desire to “build the best relations with Russia in a number of joint co-operation fields.” The kingdom, he said, is “ready to give Russia a stake in the Middle East that will make Russia a force stronger than the Soviet Union.”

Russian-Israeli relations also have warmed, including easing potential military conflict in Syria in ways that have allowed Israel to selectively target Hezbollah and launch other operations.

Xi’s January 2016 trip to the Middle East was the first by a Chinese leader in seven years. A report from the RAND Corporation put it well, stating that even with limited diplomatic activity “China has managed the impressive feat of maintaining good relations with virtually all countries in the region.” China imports almost 60 percent of its oil, and over half of that comes from the Persian Gulf. In November 2016, China and Saudi Arabia signed a five-year security co-operation agreement including counterterrorism, military exercises and Saudi purchases of Chinese military technology on top of already close trade relations. In December 2014, Xi and Egyptian President el-Sisi upgraded their relationship to a “comprehensive strategic partnership” and signed US$10 billion worth of deals. China is now Israel’s largest Asian trading partner, an increasing investor in Israel’s economy and a beneficiary of some of Israel’s leading agricultural technologies.

While political differences remain on issues like the Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories, these are limited in their impact on the overall relationship. Israel along with a number of Arab countries have joined the Belt and Road Initiative as well as the China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). China also conducted joint naval exercises in the Gulf with Iran in 2014 that, while focused more on their bilateral concerns, did show the Chinese Navy’s increasing blue-water capacity.

Given how accustomed the US had become since the end of the Cold War to being largely the only major power wielding significant influence in the Middle East, the renewed Russian role and newly expanded Chinese one further adds to the attention the region will get in Washington.
LIMITS OF TRUMP’S APPROACH AND TEAM

Trump’s impetuous decision style, a concern for many in the world, is especially so for China. The US cruise-missile attack in Syria launched during a dinner with Xi at Mar-a-Lago, while spun by the Trump administration as a bold display of American power, was seen by the Chinese as worrisome bravado. As an experienced China watcher reported amid the 2017 North Korea crisis, the Chinese greatly value kaopu, meaning reliability, yet Trump keeps showing himself to be bu kaopu, unreliable. Xi and Trump have very different temperaments. Xi is deliberate, Trump is brash. Xi values respect shown for China’s history and traditions, Trump exudes American boosterism and has little regard for history or other cultures. While they have gotten along thus far, these deeper differences may well surface over time.

Major US foreign policy failures (e.g. the Bay of Pigs in 1961 and the 2003 Iraq War) have resulted from insufficiently deliberative executive-branch decision-making, driven more by groupthink than analytic assessments of policy options, and infused with a president’s political calculations and ideological inclinations. Trump’s personal style and the policy process he runs manifest these (and other) fundamental flaws. As someone who prides himself on dictating a deal’s terms to others, and having been the CEO of a family business without the accountability of an independent board of directors, no wonder Trump sees little need to persuade rather than just impose his will as holder of the most powerful office in the world.

Internationally, the list of allies Trump has personally insulted is long: Merkel in Germany, Theresa May in Britain, Malcolm Turnbull in Australia, Enrique Peña Nieto in Mexico and others. The issue here is not just etiquette, but judgment and the lack of sufficient trust for when a coalition for a major undertaking may need to be built. And more world leaders are catching on that what works with Trump is an appeal to his narcissism. That’s what the Saudis did during Trump’s May trip, with their lavish gifts, big-figure trade deal (whether it was real or not) and dramatic hands-on-the-magic-orb scene. Some see Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe using a similar strategy, stroking Trump’s ego, pushing him to do things that show he’s tough and that are in Japan’s interest. Xi seemed to be thinking along similar lines during Trump’s recent visit, with parades, grandeur and “the biggest banquet ever.”

Much has been made of Trump’s “team of generals” and their potential moderating effect. We’ve seen some of this with the backfilling done particularly by Defense Secretary Jim Mattis on Trump’s NATO statements, North Korea and other issues. But while Mattis, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and White House Chief of Staff John Kelly are policy professionals, their principal formative experiences have been much more in the Middle East than in Asia, and largely in counterterrorism, asymmetric conflict and stabilization operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. There really is no one on the senior team with significant experience and expertise in what Jochen Prantl and Evelyn Goh call strategic diplomacy — “diplomacy undertaken with long-term system implications … [and] an accentuated strategic rationale … [and] contesting and negotiating conflicting strategic ideas.” The consequence is an administration not well equipped for overall global and multi-dimensional strategy.

In sum: There have been times when America’s Asia policy has benefitted from the broader role the country has played globally. This is not one.