



ANALYSIS

Autopilot: East Asia policy under Trump

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October 2017

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In his 2016 campaign for the presidency, Donald Trump promised to step away from alliances, free trade agreements, and efforts to promote human rights, steps that would have substantially undermined the liberal international order. Early in his presidency, as he withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, he appeared set to make good on these promises. But since then, the policies of his administration in East Asia — on issues from trade, to diplomatic engagement, to North Korea — have come to more closely resemble those of his predecessors than his campaign vision. Robust institutions and advisers with more conventional views on foreign policy have played key roles in moderating the president's more extreme instincts.

US policy in East Asia is thus on autopilot, which presents two distinct risks. First are those situations that put Trump in a position to fly the plane. In a crisis, the autopilot will disengage, and the equanimity of key advisers will fall away. Likewise, Trump's upcoming travel to the region will place him in a position of much greater influence over policy than usual. Second, without focused leadership from the president, the United States will struggle to respond to challenges in the region posed by rising Chinese power and rising populism and illiberalism. Without a compelling vision for the prosperity and security of the region, the United States could find itself low on fuel and far off course by the time a qualified pilot can retake control of the aircraft.

Donald Trump's 2016 candidacy for president gave us reason to believe that his election would herald the destruction of the liberal international order in Asia. He threatened to turn long-standing alliances with Japan and Korea into protection rackets, scrap free trade agreements that were years in the making, and abandon US advocacy of the values of liberal democracy. In his inaugural address, President Trump promised: "From this day forward, it's going to be *only* America first."¹

Indeed, in his first month in office, Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and relentlessly attacked US and international institutions that have long defended the liberal order. It appeared likely that the story of the next four years would be one of a struggle between the US institutions acting in defence of fundamental liberal values, and a president hostile to them.

But then an odd thing happened: Trump put US policy in Asia on autopilot. He is still at the controls, and as he tweets he appears to tug at them now and then, in fits of pique, to little effect. But the system has taken over, and is charting a preprogrammed course, much of it last mapped during the Obama administration.

As Trump prepares for his first trip to Asia as president, on most major issues and in most of the key bilateral relationships, the Trump administration's policy in the region so far closely resembles the Obama administration's policy, or at least where the trajectory of that policy would have taken it in the intervening nine months.

Trump focused on trade in his campaign, but after withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership just three days into his presidency, he has failed to levy tariffs on Asian trading partners or terminate other trade deals already in operation. Trump has not disengaged from US alliances in the region for failure to pay up, nor withdrawn from its multilateral institutions.

On North Korea, which Obama identified in his handover briefing with Trump as the greatest challenge to US interests, Trump's advisers say that he has ditched the Obama policy of "strategic patience". But the mix of UN and unilateral sanctions, pressure on Beijing to take a harder line, and refusal to negotiate with Pyongyang until it agrees to give up its nuclear program are all hallmarks of strategic patience.

Trump has not changed. The president continues to tweet and speak in terms redolent of his campaign. But he appears incapable of effecting the change that he promised. He has been hamstrung by his lack of knowledge of the issues, lack of experience in government, and resulting inability to organise a sustained effort to change policies.

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Nor does he have around him a team who share his America First vision and possess these qualities themselves. Trump ran against the foreign policy establishment and promised to “drain the swamp” that he claimed had sold America out. But he has turned over policy to that same establishment, a group of foreign policy experts who could have been found in any centrist administration.

For a president who promised such a radical transformation, Trump and the true believers around him have so far proven singularly ill-equipped to effect it. We should not overestimate the influence of Donald Trump on his own administration.

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PERSONNEL IS POLICY

American constitutional theory holds that the president *is* the executive branch. But in practice, the heads of executive agencies and the people who staff them have always held great influence over major policy decisions, and often act autonomously in thousands of minor policy decisions each year. In the Trump administration, these individuals do not share the president’s America First agenda.

Under President Trump, a combination of pushback from executive agencies — and an inexperienced president’s inability to bend the policymaking process to his will — have conspired to dramatically curtail the president’s personal influence over foreign policy. More than ever, “personnel is policy”, as the old Washington axiom goes, and the personnel under Trump are surprisingly conventional.

GENERALS AMONG THE PRINCIPALS

The foreign policy principals who surround the president in large part determine the direction and success of an administration through deliberation over policy, the execution of that policy within executive departments, and influence over the selection of their own staff. These include the members of the National Security Council’s Principals Committee — the vice president, secretaries of state, defense, homeland security, energy, and the treasury, the attorney general, the national security advisor, the homeland security advisor, the white house chief of staff, the director of national intelligence, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the permanent representative of the United States to the United Nations, and others depending on the circumstances.²

Following President Trump’s election, there was some suggestion that he would name a motley crew of insurgents and contrarians to this group. Former US Permanent Representative to the UN John Bolton and former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, for example, were both under consideration to be secretary of state.³ Giuliani’s views on counterterrorism run to the wrong side of the Geneva Conventions.

Bolton's views on the North Korean nuclear issue run counter to more cautious advice from specialists on the issue.⁴

Yet among this group, only Lieutenant General Michael Flynn was appointed to a position of influence. Had Flynn remained national security advisor, he might have been able to push policy towards the America First agenda that Trump ran on in 2016. He was the only true believer around Trump who had the necessary experience and networks in the national security bureaucracy to be able to coax the system into producing the policy options that candidate Trump envisioned. He appointed trusted aides from his years in Army intelligence and from the Trump campaign to the staff of the National Security Council to carry out that vision. But his 25-day tenure as national security advisor was the shortest in the history of the office, and nearly all of those aides have now been dismissed.⁵

Instead, Trump has appointed respected figures to key posts. General James Mattis became secretary of defense, former ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson secretary of state. And the administration has become more conventional over time. Soldier-scholar Lieutenant General HR McMaster was appointed to replace Flynn as national security advisor, and General John Kelly was named chief of staff in place of Reince Priebus. None of these figures has significant Asia experience, but all of them have strong links back to the national security establishment.

Trump, who attended a military secondary school run by a "growling, abusive martinet", has always been drawn to generals, and often cites historical figures such as George S Patton and Douglas MacArthur as worthy of emulation.⁶ Fox News, from which candidate Trump acquired much of his information on foreign affairs, often portrays the military leadership as more hawkish than the civilian establishment, arguing that they were restrained from carrying out a robust, unilateral foreign policy by the excessive caution of intellectuals in the Obama administration.

If this is what Trump thought he was getting when he hired Mattis, McMaster, and Kelly, he was mistaken. Since the chastening experience of the Iraq War in particular, US commanders have stressed the need for subject matter expertise on areas in which they operate, and are strong supporters of alliances in which they have been embedded for much of their professional lives. For example, Mattis, McMaster, and Kelly have repeatedly argued against Trump proposals that would damage relations with Seoul, citing the US–Republic of Korea alliance and the delicate security situation on the peninsula. The generals on his staff are among the most conventional appointments he could have made.

Other military officials have also played a stabilising role. Pacific Command often rivals the Pentagon for influence over defence policy in its vast area of responsibility from California to India, as a combatant command that reports to the president directly through the secretary of defense. Its commander, Admiral Harry Harris, has successfully pushed

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the Trump administration to continue its predecessor's policy of conducting freedom of navigation operations to challenge Chinese claims to maritime rights in the South China Sea that are inconsistent with international law. He has also worked with Mattis and McMaster to stabilise relationships with allies such as Japan that were unnerved by Trump's rise.⁷ While advocates of an America First policy argue that allies should do more and the United States should do less, Harris has successfully convinced the White House to do more in the region, regardless of its allies' actions.

Among other principals, Vice President Michael Pence and Permanent Representative to the UN Nikki Haley — while no foreign policy experts — have become reliable advocates for a traditional Republican approach to foreign policy. Even Tillerson, who had never spent a day in public service, sat on the board of Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies while at ExxonMobil, and interacted extensively with US and foreign diplomats in his previous roles at the oil major.⁸ Although he has struggled to transition from the role of an executive focused on straightforward fiduciary responsibilities to one focused on more complex public interests, he appears to share little of the America First agenda of President Trump, and has repeatedly stressed the importance of alliances.⁹ Pence, Mattis, and Tillerson all made trips to reassure Asian allies within the first 100 days of the administration.

THE DECLINE OF AMERICA FIRST AND THE TRUMP FAMILY

Others in the White House who share the president's America First agenda have gradually been marginalised on matters of foreign policy. Former chief strategist Steve Bannon was made a member of the National Security Council's Principals Committee in January — an unprecedented intrusion of politics into the councils of war and peace — but he was removed in April, and resigned from the White House in August.¹⁰ Although Bannon claimed in one of his final interviews from the White House to be making progress in removing Susan Thornton, the Foreign Service officer serving as acting assistant secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, Thornton remains in place while Bannon has returned to the newsroom at Breitbart.¹¹

Trump adviser Peter Navarro met a similar fate. The economics professor and author of *Death by China* holds unorthodox, zero-sum views on trade. Travelling with Trump on the campaign trail, his views on China reinforced Trump's invective against Beijing at rallies and in press interviews. It seems likely that his case for a 43 per cent tariff on Chinese goods informed Trump's suggestion of a 45 per cent tariff in an interview in January 2016.¹² During the transition, Trump announced that Navarro would head a new National Trade Council, giving the impression that he would wield power on par with that of the heads of other White House policy councils, such as the National Economic Council and Domestic Policy Council with their large staffs and reach across the bureaucracy.

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But the National Trade Council now appears to exist only on paper.¹³ Navarro works out of an office across the street from the White House with a staff of just two, and “has earned a reputation for stalking the halls of the West Wing at night and on the weekends to find a moment to slip into the Oval Office to privately discuss trade with the president”.¹⁴

President Trump’s White House has been compared to a royal court, with family members playing key roles.¹⁵ But Trump’s family has also been sidelined from the foreign policymaking process. The president’s son-in-law and senior adviser, Jared Kushner, played a key role in diplomacy between Washington and Beijing early in the administration, with Beijing developing a backchannel to Trump through Kushner and its ambassador in Washington, Cui Tiankai. Kushner helped to set up the first meeting between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the president’s Mar-a-Lago property, and reports suggest he played a role in drafting Secretary Tillerson’s controversially solicitous statement in Beijing on the secretary of state’s first trip to China.¹⁶

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Although Kushner was never a part of the America First faction in the White House, the backchannel nonetheless alarmed observers in other Asian countries. It appeared to give Beijing privileged access to the president through an individual without the knowledge and experience to put Chinese messages in their proper context. Kushner also advertised that he would be willing to trade away long-time US positions on the shape of the regional order in exchange for concessions from Beijing that would meet Trump’s transient priorities. Tillerson’s statement in Beijing, for example, repeated slogans that Chinese officials use to argue that the United States should cede primacy in the Western Pacific to China.¹⁷

But by August, a planned trip to Beijing by Kushner and his spouse and colleague Ivanka Trump to advance the president’s first visit to China had been cancelled, and Chinese officials indicated that most diplomacy was now being conducted through regular channels.¹⁸ Though Kushner may remain influential in other matters, his dalliance in Asia policy appears to be over, for now.

SHALLOW STATE

Principals are not the only figures who shape policy in the United States. Dozens of sub-cabinet posts wield significant influence over major policy decisions, particularly the majority of policies that do not rise to the level of the principals’ attention. Here, a combination of civil servants and Republican foreign policy experts are holding the line against advocates of an America First foreign policy.

Their efforts have faced difficulties. Trump’s challenge to the foreign policy establishment led dozens of senior Republican foreign policy experts to sign letters opposing his candidacy, including one, signed by eight top Republican experts on Asia, endorsing Hillary Clinton. After he

was elected, Trump's transition team and Office of Presidential Personnel refused to hire any Republicans who had signed one of three such letters.¹⁹

At first it seemed that the administration's purge might push Trump to nominate unqualified true believers and partisan opportunists for key roles. Leading the transition's landing team at the State Department's Bureau of East Asia and Pacific Affairs was Alexander Gray, a twenty-something with a few years' experience on Capitol Hill.²⁰ Later, reports indicated that the White House was considering nominating Christian Whiton, who had briefly served in the Bush administration as a speechwriter and in a human rights advocacy role, to lead the Bureau.²¹ Senator John McCain was so alarmed by the reports that he placed a call to Secretary Tillerson to indicate that the nomination would be unacceptable to the Senate.²²

Instead, after long delays, the Trump administration now appears to be looking to a relatively shallow pool of a few dozen Republican national security experts, who — though many privately opposed Trump's nomination, and say they did not vote for him — chose not to sign any of the letters. Among this group, several have been named or are said to be under consideration for key Asia policy roles. For example, the White House has announced its intent to nominate Randall Schriver to be the assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, the lead Asia hand in the Pentagon; and Victor Cha is said to be President Trump's likely pick for ambassador to Seoul.²³ Schriver and Cha held senior Asia policy roles in the Bush administration, and their views on key issues reflect mainstream GOP thinking on Asia.²⁴

Infighting within the Trump transition team and administration have led to several stalemates over choices for key jobs. Ironically for a White House which has claimed to be thwarted by the "deep state",²⁵ the long delay in nominating anyone to fill deputy, undersecretary, and assistant secretary level positions at the State Department and the Pentagon has left many career civil servants in acting roles until the Trump administration can nominate and the Senate can confirm replacements.

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The deep state moniker is inaccurate, of course. As the legal scholar Jon Michaels has argued, in developing countries where a deep state exists, shadowy networks of military and government officials conspire to defy democratic directives consistent with the rule of law. Yet the activities of these civil servants are transparent and the product of a system of laws and rules created by previous administrations that are not easily changed or repealed.²⁶

While these non-partisan civil servants are obliged to serve the government of the day, they do so within that framework of laws and rules. In many instances, they are constrained by law from carrying out an America First agenda. For example, Tillerson cannot stop the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor from

researching and releasing human rights reports on nearly 200 countries every year, because the reports are mandated by law. Although Tillerson broke with convention by not attending their launch in March, the reports were released on schedule.²⁷

TRUMP GOES TO ASIA

President Trump and his America First advisers racked up some wins early in the administration with withdrawals from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. From time to time, they may claim some more. But they lack the experience or networks in government that they would need in order to wholly undermine the collection of policies, norms, and laws that support the liberal international order. This becomes clear when their progress in three areas of policy in East Asia are examined, as outlined in the next section.

There is, however, an inverse relationship between the stability that has been achieved in East Asia policy and Trump's attention to it. When Trump is reminded by a television news report or a conversation with an outside adviser on a matter of East Asia policy, there is a risk that he will tweet about it or demand changes. While the principals around him have not been able to restrict his television diet or access to Twitter, they have made it more difficult for outside advisers to reach the president. When he demands changes, they have been able to bring in other voices that complicate his decision-making, or to defer a decision by proposing that it be studied further.²⁸

Trump's forthcoming visit to Japan, Korea, China, Vietnam, and the Philippines will do much to disrupt the dynamic that limited his influence on policy towards the region. While in Asia, Trump will be forced to constantly address East Asia policy in unscripted interactions with the press, and will come into frequent contact with foreign interlocutors, putting him in a greater number of situations in which he will be able to make policy on the fly, with a minimum of institutional advice. Moreover, he will be doing it under the extraordinary pressures of a ten-day long series of official engagements.

White House advisers appear to be aware of these risks, and are seeking to mitigate them. For example, they have decided that he will not attend the East Asia Summit, which will occur on what would have been the 11th day of the trip.²⁹ Southeast Asian and Australian leaders were keen that Trump should come to the summit as a way of demonstrating US commitment to the region; presidential attendance at key regional forums has in recent years been regarded by regional leaders as a litmus test for US engagement. But Trump's aides worry that an exhausted Trump will be "cranky, leading to unpredictable or undiplomatic behavior".³⁰

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That nevertheless leaves ten days in which Trump's influence on East Asia policy will be greater than at any other time in his presidency, and in which the principals' and American institutions' ability to mitigate the effects of that influence will recede.

PACIFIC DRIFT: TRADE, DIPLOMACY, AND NORTH KOREA

...one of the few significant changes to US policy in East Asia has been a change in brand.

As a businessman, Trump was primarily a brand manager rather than an operator. He made millions by licensing his name to products and projects around the world, from hotels to apparel to appliances, in which he had no other stake or substantive role. It should come as no surprise, then, that one of the few significant changes to US policy in East Asia has been a change in brand. The Obama administration's description of its strategy as the rebalance, formerly the pivot to Asia, was discarded within weeks.³¹

However, the component pieces of the Trump administration's Asia policy look much like that of his predecessor's policy. It may be necessary for those who work for President Trump to present policies as a repudiation of Obama, as they have done on North Korea, but whether the substance supports those claims matters less. With the important exception of Trump's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, much of the rest of Trump's Asia policy looks like the approach to Asia long pursued by past administrations, most recently Obama's.

The following review is not intended to be comprehensive, but examines the state of US policy on: trade, which was the target of Trump's most revisionist rhetoric on the campaign trail; engagement with Southeast Asia, which was the greatest contribution of Barack Obama's presidency to the long-standing bipartisan consensus on East Asia policy; and North Korea, which has dominated the attention of the Trump administration and governments in the region in 2017.

TRADE POLICY

Donald Trump ran for the presidency on the most protectionist platform of any major party candidate since 1932. He promised to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, calling it a "rape of our country".³² He promised to label China a currency manipulator on day one of his presidency, telling crowds that China was "killing us" by devaluing the yuan.³³ He told reporters he would levy a 45 per cent tariff on Chinese goods entering the United States.³⁴

Nor have his protectionist instincts left him since taking the oath of office. In March, he signed an executive order commissioning a review of trade deficits with 13 trading partners.³⁵ The next month, he threatened to renegotiate or abandon the US–Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS). Trump and other White House officials have repeatedly indicated that

they would like to limit steel imports into the United States from South Korea and China by using a national security waiver.

Any decision to withdraw from KORUS, particularly during a time of heightened tensions on the Korean peninsula and at the outset of the presidency of a leader from the South Korean left, would do great damage to the alliance between Washington and Seoul. The use of a national security waiver to impose quotas or tariffs on steel imports would also be extremely disruptive. It would be the first use of a national security waiver, intended only for wartime use, since the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995. Although the waiver is authorised under WTO rules, it is such a large exemption that governments have avoided invoking it for fear that doing so would deal a fatal blow to the liberal trading system.³⁶

However, since 23 January, when Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership just three days into his presidency, Trump has not actually *done* anything outside the mainstream of US trade policy. He clumsily explained to *The Wall Street Journal* that there was no longer any need for him to name China a currency manipulator because they had stopped, implying his influence. (In fact, monetary intervention to devalue the yuan had ended years earlier.)³⁷ The report he commissioned reviewing trade deficits was due on 29 June, but there has been scarcely a word about it in recent months. Despite much noise about steel tariffs prior to the G20 meetings in Germany in July, no decision was forthcoming. Likewise, Trump was reported to be close to withdrawing from KORUS at the end of August, but his advisers talked him out of it.³⁸

The Trump administration has been more revisionist in other regions, ordering a renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and engaging in smaller disputes with trading partners, for example by imposing countervailing duties in a long-standing dispute with Canada over softwood lumber, and proposing duties on Bombardier jets manufactured in the United Kingdom.³⁹

Any decision to withdraw from NAFTA or the cumulative effect of many smaller actions could be corrosive to the global trading system over time, reducing confidence in the credibility of the United States as a negotiating partner in free trade agreements, and provoking retaliatory measures that reduce the total volume of trade worldwide. But the measures announced thus far do not pose such a threat in themselves. At the time of publication, the United States remained in NAFTA, and business and other interest groups were pushing the administration to back down from its more extreme demands. The size of the other two disputes are relatively small, concern wonkish debates about what types of state assistance count as subsidies, and have been handled by the Trump administration within the context of existing regulatory frameworks.

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To acknowledge that the administration's trade policy has not been as counterproductive as Trump's campaign promised, however, is not to suggest that it is not doing long-term damage to the US position in East Asia. The United States' withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership will reduce growth in trade between the United States and Asian members of the agreement, and reduce more broadly the incentive for those members and other Asian countries to undertake labour, environmental, and state-owned enterprise reforms that would have made US–Asia trade more politically sustainable in the United States.

Moreover, it abandons the field to China, which is making a big play to better integrate its Asian neighbours into the Chinese economy through its Belt and Road Initiative. Without the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the United States has been left with no competing narrative of economic opportunity with which to frame its vision for the future of the region, even as the region's leaders come under increased pressure to deliver those opportunities.

DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT

Under the Obama administration, the United States dramatically expanded the scope of its diplomatic engagement with East Asia, and particularly with Southeast Asia. Although the trade and military planks of the Obama administration's rebalance strategy are often remarked upon, the diplomatic plank has been underappreciated outside Southeast Asia. If President Trump planned to roll back Obama's legacy in East Asia, this would be a natural place to start.

When President Obama came into office, the United States was not engaged in the region's most important institutions. Under President George W Bush, it had expressed little interest in joining the East Asia Summit, and had twice skipped the ASEAN Regional Forum. These no-shows did not pass without notice.⁴⁰ As Hillary Clinton would note on her first trip to Asia as Secretary of State: "Showing up is not all of life — but it counts for a lot."⁴¹

The Obama administration took engagement with ASEAN to a new level by signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, sending a resident permanent representative to ASEAN to Jakarta, holding the first US–ASEAN leaders' meeting, and then joining the East Asia Summit. Although the Bush administration saw little potential for the East Asia Summit,⁴² with the United States at the table it quickly became the premier forum for the discussion of difficult regional issues. All of these moves put ASEAN, not China, at the centre of regional diplomacy. Assurances of American diplomatic support gave Southeast Asian governments greater confidence to stand up to Beijing in defence of their own sovereign rights, and thus the broader liberal international system.

There was little in Trump's campaign that suggested this engagement would continue after his inauguration. Yet the principals have met most

expectations. Administration officials have announced that Trump will attend two key regional summits in Southeast Asia in November 2017: the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Vietnam, and the ASEAN–US Summit in the Philippines — a strategy which, as noted earlier, is not without risk. Vice President Pence made a point of visiting the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta during an April swing through the region, meeting with its Committee of Permanent Representatives, a body the United States has encouraged to play a larger role in regional diplomacy.⁴³ Secretary Tillerson invited his counterparts to the State Department in May, and met them again when he attended the ASEAN Regional Forum in Manila in August — an event that his predecessor in the Bush administration, Condoleezza Rice, skipped twice.⁴⁴ Secretary Mattis delivered a major policy address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June that trod a path well traversed by his immediate predecessors in the Obama administration.⁴⁵ Mattis also attended the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM+), a meeting of defence ministers from the East Asia Summit countries, in late October.

Where the general dysfunction of the Trump administration has affected engagement with ASEAN, the State Department has sought to compensate for it. As noted earlier, the White House process for naming political appointees to key diplomatic posts has been among the slowest in history, leading State Department officials to worry that the United States would suffer from the indefinite absence of a high-level representative to ASEAN at its Secretariat in Jakarta. Improvising, the State Department sent the former US ambassador to Brunei, Daniel Shields, to serve as a long-term chargé d'affaires at the US Mission to ASEAN until the White House could nominate a new ambassador to ASEAN. Although the mission still lacks a proper ambassador, the unusual arrangement and Shields' high rank have signalled to other diplomats at the Secretariat that the United States still regards diplomacy with ASEAN as a priority.⁴⁶

There has been one major departure from Obama administration diplomacy in the region: Trump's outreach to illiberal leaders in Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia. The US relationship with Thailand had been cool since the junta led by General Prayuth Chan-ocha took power in 2014. In response, the United States reduced military cooperation and found itself at the receiving end of Prayuth's press conference polemics.⁴⁷ Likewise, ties with the Philippines had been damaged by the election of President Rodrigo Duterte in 2016. Although Duterte's anti-American views had little to do with support for him among the electorate, his brutal drug war and anti-American rhetoric made it difficult to continue the close cooperation between Washington and Manila under his predecessor, Benigno Aquino. While cooperation never ceased, it was limited. US–Malaysia relations suffered after press reports in 2015 alleged that Prime Minister Najib Razak had embezzled state funds on an extraordinary scale, and he undertook newly repressive measures in order to remain in power.

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Trump's outreach to each of these leaders appears to have been born of his comfort in the company of strongmen. His invitations to Prayuth, Duterte, and Najib to visit him at the White House suggested to the region that further moves against democracy and human rights will not incur a price in relationships with the United States. That sent a damaging message in a region already sliding into a politics that is increasingly illiberal.

Although Trump administration officials say they have replaced the Obama administration's policy of "strategic patience" with "strategic accountability", the latter closely resembles the former.

However, it also reflects the views of those parts of the US government less concerned with democracy and human rights, such as Pacific Command and the State Department's regional bureaus. Many in these institutions argue that the United States can only do so much to encourage Southeast Asian politics in a more liberal direction, and must accept the region on its own terms. Trump's invitations to the three are consistent with a realist approach to the long-running debate within the US system about how best to balance US interests and values. Moreover, they have not prevented US diplomats from continuing to push for greater freedoms in these countries at the working level, or prevented Justice Department prosecutors from proceeding with a criminal investigation of corruption linked to Najib.⁴⁸

NORTH KOREA

Even in the case of the North Korean nuclear crisis — the regional issue on which President Trump has focused more than any other — the policy appears to have deviated little from its previous trajectory. Although Trump administration officials say they have replaced the Obama administration's policy of "strategic patience" with "strategic accountability", the latter closely resembles the former.⁴⁹

Under strategic patience, the Obama administration refused to return to negotiations with Pyongyang unless it agreed to rewind its nuclear program to the status quo that prevailed before it took office.⁵⁰ It was a policy born of the administration's assessment that provocative actions taken by Kim Jong-il in late 2008 were designed to pressure the incoming team into new concessions. Obama administration negotiators reasoned that it would be counterproductive to reward bad behaviour, and that North Korea would cooperate when it realised that the new administration would not do so. It was also based on an assessment that North Korea would struggle to develop an intercontinental ballistic missile that could reach the United States, and a miniaturised nuclear warhead to place atop it.⁵¹

By the end of the Obama administration's second term, it had become clear that under Kim Jong-un, strategic patience was not working. Despite Pyongyang's accelerated progress towards a nuclear weapon that could reach the United States, the Obama administration continued to pursue a policy that sought to put pressure on North Korea through multilateral sanctions, diplomacy with China, and a refusal to engage in

negotiations without preconditions. To this it added efforts to cut off funding to the nuclear program by reducing North Korea's diplomatic and commercial footprint. Although the United States carried on direct talks on other subjects, such as US citizens held prisoner by the DPRK, and these talks may have touched upon the nuclear issue, they did not constitute negotiations.⁵²

The Trump administration's policy of strategic accountability is little different. It has continued to apply pressure from the Obama playbook, adding only secondary sanctions on several Chinese banks and individuals.⁵³ Like its forerunner, it places preconditions on nuclear negotiations with Pyongyang that the regime has less and less interest in meeting. In fact, at times Trump administration officials have suggested preconditions even more unrealistic, with Vice President Pence saying in April that the United States would not negotiate until North Korea had totally denuclearised.⁵⁴ Trump is doubling down on his predecessor's mistakes.

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Those who would argue that this Analysis minimises the influence of the president on his own foreign policy might point to his public pronouncements, particularly his periodic tweets on the subject and his September 2017 speech to the UN General Assembly, in which he referred to Kim Jong-un as "rocket man", and threatened to "totally destroy" North Korea if it attacked the United States or its allies.⁵⁵

Some of these statements are standard, if colourful, reiterations of long-time US policy — for example, that if attacked the United States will defend itself and its allies. But in matters of nuclear deterrence, signalling is important, and the president and his advisers' statements have occasionally given the impression that the United States believes that Pyongyang cannot be deterred from launching a nuclear attack, or that the United States is considering preventive military action. Neither of these statements are conducive to strategic stability.

Perhaps more dangerous have been comments to the press suggesting that Trump is reluctant to risk an attack on the United States in order to defend US allies in East Asia, particularly South Korea and Japan. Any unwillingness to "trade Seoul for San Francisco" would undermine the logic of the United States' long-standing policy of extended deterrence. It suggests to North Korea that it will have greater freedom to attack South Korea and Japan once it acquires the ability to strike the United States, because the United States would be unwilling to risk its cities to come to the aid of an ally. Such an assumption would give Pyongyang an incentive to accelerate its nuclear and missile programs, and to engage in more aggressive behaviour within the region; and spur Seoul and Tokyo to rely less on US pledges to defend them, potentially by developing their own nuclear deterrents.⁵⁶

However, these statements are only damaging insofar as US allies and adversaries consider them a fixed position of the president, arrived at

after careful analysis of the situation. Trump's lack of knowledge of foreign affairs, and his tendency — although he might never acknowledge it — to change his position as he learns that many of his previous positions were impractical or ill-informed, means there should be little expectation on the part of any Asian leader that he is deeply committed to any particular policy position or course of action. While North Korean diplomats track his tweets closely, it seems that they have not taken them at face value, and are continuing to try to understand the president.⁵⁷ Trump's lack of preparation for the presidency, disastrous in many other ways, partly softens his reckless statements on North Korea.

It is possible that Trump's tweets will create a crisis. Certainly a case can be made that his statements on North Korea could have that effect. But thus far, governments in East Asia — including in Pyongyang — appear to be focusing instead on statements by Secretaries Tillerson and Mattis and Lieutenant General McMaster, while discounting Trump's statements except where useful for the purposes of their own messaging.⁵⁸ When Trump announced that the USS *Carl Vinson* was steaming towards North Korea, for example, tensions did not rise in the way that would have been expected had the *Vinson* actually been en route. Actions speak louder than words.

Of course, in a crisis, whether the creation of the president or other actors, the president's views and instincts will suddenly become much more decisive than in ordinary circumstances. As tensions climb between the United States and North Korea, therefore, the likelihood that Trump will begin to have a much greater influence on events in this critical area will likewise continue to rise, and his impetuosity will become a great liability.

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But it would be inaccurate to suggest that he has recalibrated US policy, which remains on the same trajectory that it was on at the end of the Obama administration. As Jake Sullivan, a former Obama administration official and senior policy adviser to Hillary Clinton, said in a June 2017 lecture to the Lowy Institute: "I think they are casting about, just like we would have done if we had won, for a potential solution to a wicked problem."⁵⁹

FLYING OFF COURSE

Much of the early commentary on Trump's presidency has reflected the late commentary on his campaign. The sum of President Trump's promises in that campaign suggested that, if elected, he would destroy the liberal international order by undoing decades of hard work to secure systems of alliances, free trade, and institutions that served the interests of the United States and the world.

It was a campaign that suggested not an autopilot but another aviation metaphor. Indeed, a conservative intellectual supporting Trump, writing

under the pseudonym Publius Decius Mus during the 2016 campaign, argued:

“2016 is the Flight 93 election: charge the cockpit or you die. You may die anyway. You — or the leader of your party — may make it into the cockpit and not know how to fly or land the plane. There are no guarantees. Except one: if you don’t try, death is certain.”⁶⁰

The analogy, which placed the Washington establishment in the role of the September 11 hijackers, was offensive but telling: even Trump’s supporters recognised the president’s distinct lack of qualifications, but hoped for a presidency that would be such a radical departure from convention that it risked destroying the ship of state by flying it into the ground. Publius, it was later revealed, was Michael Anton, now one of the last remaining Flynn appointees on the staff of the National Security Council, where he serves as spokesman.

Yet both Anton and Trump’s critics err in arguing that this is the presidency that Trump has delivered. On the contrary, the problems with Trump’s leadership are more pernicious. By continuing to describe Trump’s presidency in such dramatic terms, we risk mischaracterising the two gravest risks of the next three years: first, the emergence of an exogenous crisis; and second, a failure to change course to respond to the rise of China.

First, the crisis: when it comes, the autopilot will disengage, and Trump will be required to fly the plane. In a crisis, all of Trump’s instincts, insecurities, and prejudices will come to the fore, and the judgement, wisdom, and equanimity of the principals and professionals will fall away. In a crisis, the president’s ability to do great damage to the liberal international order, and America’s role in it, will reach its peak.

The other risk is in the limits of the autopilot to fly a complex craft in a dynamic world. Last reprogrammed in late 2016, the autopilot will struggle to manage unanticipated challenges. By the time a qualified pilot takes command of the aircraft in 2021 or 2025 with the authority to make a course correction, the United States could be low on fuel and irretrievably off course.

This risk is particularly acute in East Asia, where there appears to be weather ahead. The United States faces challenges to its economic leadership from Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative, a program of massive infrastructure investment that will enmesh the economies of China and its Asian neighbours; challenges from Chinese attempts to shape regional institutions to its advantage, and to shape a narrative of the region’s future that puts Beijing at its centre; and challenges to its primacy in the region from an increasingly capable Chinese military. It faces these challenges in a region that is becoming increasingly illiberal — and doubtful of US staying power.

In other words, now is not the time for autopilot, but for adroit flying by an experienced, focused pilot in full command of the capabilities of the US government. Donald Trump is not that pilot, and by the time he turns over control to one, it may be too late.

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Aaron's position is supported by the Lowy Institute's Engaging Asia Project, which was established with the financial support of the Australian Government.

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