

Research Paper

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Pivotal Days

US–Asia-Pacific Alliances in the Early Stages of the Trump Administration



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Summary

- While the Trump administration is still in its early stages, it is not too soon to ask some tough questions about the direction the US is taking (or not taking) towards key regions such as the Asia-Pacific. Will the new president and his team continue to build on the Obama administration's effort to focus economic, diplomatic and military resources towards the region, or will they opt for a different path? In spite of some signals of reassurance from the Trump team, the answer to this question is unknown, which in turn raises many more questions. What will define the US's future engagement in the Asia-Pacific? What roles will there be for allies such as Japan, South Korea and Australia? And how will persistent security challenges affect the US alliance system?
- Both before and since his inauguration, Donald Trump has questioned the value of alliance relationships with Japan, South Korea and Australia. Prior to becoming president, he threatened economic warfare with China and challenged long-standing diplomatic understandings between Washington and Beijing. On his first full day in office, President Trump withdrew the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal – in a 180-degree reversal from his predecessor's policies and a major blow to strategic US economic leadership in the Asia-Pacific. From a broader perspective, calls for 'America first' and economic nationalism are at odds with former president Barack Obama's previous efforts to engage the region. Through these and other actions, President Trump has sown doubt about the direction of future US engagement in the region.
- So far, the president has not acted on his statements about Japan, South Korea, Australia and China. His administration has sought to reassure allies and appears to have put relations with China on a more stable footing. But developments in the region are not standing still. Short- and long-term trends mean that the Asia-Pacific is going to get more, not less, challenging for the US and its allies and partners in the future.
- Looking ahead, the US confronts three big concerns with regard to its Asia-Pacific strategy. First, the administration needs to deliver a detailed, nuanced, multifaceted and high-level statement, reflective of regional complexities, about the US's overall vision towards this part of the world. A second challenge concerns personnel, including the lack of sufficient numbers of senior, experienced policy managers across the top of the administration; the pervasive mistrust between the president and the public services, particularly the intelligence community; and the disarray and divisiveness that have characterized relationships between Trump's senior advisers. A third major challenge concerns developments out in the region itself, and particularly the complex and difficult issues raised by North Korea and China.
- Other US allies around the world similarly feel many of the challenges affecting US policy towards the Asia-Pacific. Comments made by Trump as candidate, president-elect and president have called into question the value he places on relations with European allies. Trump has also appeared sympathetic to Russian President Vladimir Putin's ambitions, raising doubts as to whether he would stand up to Russian territorial and political encroachments against a democratic and free Europe. America's European allies, like its Asia-Pacific partners, are still left wondering about US leadership, engagement and commitment at a time of increasing uncertainty in global affairs.

- European powers should invest further resources in developing their own economic and security relationships in the Asia-Pacific. This can be done via ongoing relationships with the US and/or US partners in the region, such as through the Five Power Defence Arrangements, the ASEAN Regional Forum, ‘Five Eyes’ intelligence cooperation, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Like the US’s allies and friends in the Asia-Pacific, the UK and other European powers can spread their risk by developing security and economic ties with both the US and China. In doing so, US allies in Europe as well as in the Asia-Pacific will have the best chance of hedging against the worst while aiming for the best when it comes to the new US administration and its still-uncertain approach towards the Asia-Pacific and the world.

Introduction: Acute uncertainties

Whenever the US presidency changes hands – especially from one party to another – some uncertainties inevitably arise as to the new directions the incoming administration may take on the big foreign and security policies of the day.

But with the advent of the Donald Trump presidency, such uncertainties seem especially acute. The foreign policy views of the president, and those of his top advisers and cabinet members, were not widely known until relatively recently. The term ‘peace through strength’ – harking back to Ronald Reagan – has gained currency among Trump supporters to explain his foreign policy approach. However, the precise details of the administration’s intended policies for implementing that approach remain sketchy, and they have often run counter to long-standing American foreign policy commitments. Moreover, the president’s statements and actions cast doubt on the confidence he has in US foreign policy, defence and intelligence community professionals. Adding fuel to the fire, dozens of senior appointments in these portfolios remain unnamed and unfilled.

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For close observers of the Asia-Pacific region, perhaps no question is more important than this: will the new president and his team continue to build on the Obama administration’s effort to focus economic, diplomatic and military resources towards the region, or will they opt for a different path? In spite of some signals of reassurance from the Trump team, the answer to this question is unknown, which in turn raises many more questions. What will define America’s future engagement in the Asia-Pacific? What role will there be for US alliance partners in the region, especially Japan, South Korea and Australia? And how will persistent security challenges – such as those involving China and North Korea – affect the US alliance system in the region?

This paper takes up these questions by first reviewing the Obama administration’s ‘pivot’ or ‘rebalancing’ towards Asia and considering its status today under President Trump. Next, it turns to America’s closest friends in the Asia-Pacific – Japan, South Korea and Australia – to discern their current and likely future roles in partnership with the US. China’s regional influence and agenda are critical to these relationships. This reflects the country’s growing economic clout; its expanding military capabilities; its more proactive foreign and security policy under President Xi Jinping; and its centrality to the principal regional hotspots such as the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the Korean peninsula and Taiwan. This study therefore focuses in particular on how China’s relations with the US, and with each of its allies, affect both America’s own Asia-Pacific relationships and wider regional security dynamics (including in relation to North Korea). US engagement with a number of Southeast Asian governments is also considered in this context. The paper concludes with an assessment of the challenges for policymakers and politicians in Washington,

as well as in allied capitals around the world; and with recommendations for helping to clarify and navigate the uncertainties surrounding America’s future as an Asia-Pacific power.

A pivot after the ‘pivot’ – but in which direction?

America’s ‘pivot’ or ‘rebalancing’ towards Asia was one of Barack Obama’s signature foreign policy initiatives. But well before the term became popular, President Obama had signalled his intentions towards the region. Early in his first term, during his first visit to Asia as president, he stated in Japan: ‘There must be no doubt. As America’s first Pacific president, I promise you that this Pacific nation will strengthen and sustain our leadership in this vitally important part of the world.’¹ Two years later, speaking before the Australian parliament, Obama declared, ‘In the Asia Pacific in the 21st century, the United States of America is all in.’²

The strategic reasoning behind these statements was clear. The Asia-Pacific³ is a region of tremendous importance to the US. Depending on the geographical definition used, it can be considered home to the world’s three largest economies (the US, China and Japan), and to six of the world’s nine confirmed or presumed nuclear weapons states (China, India, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia and the US). The 21 members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping account for nearly 60 per cent of global GDP and 50 per cent of global trade. The US has bilateral treaty alliances with five countries – Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand – in the region, and numerous other long-standing security partnerships, including with New Zealand, Singapore and Taiwan.⁴

Reflecting these factors – and both the region’s economic dynamism and potential to transform geopolitics – US prosperity and security depend in part on Washington being more deeply engaged in the Asia-Pacific. Implicit in this is the need to ensure that the US plays a central role in shaping the region’s future, so that Asia-Pacific power structures and relationships are to the greatest degree possible in line with US interests.⁵

Proponents of the Obama ‘pivot’ thus argued for a comprehensive effort to leverage all aspects of American power and engagement, including economic, diplomatic and military tools. At the time, the rationale for this strategic shift was that America should withdraw and pivot away from the quagmires of Iraq and Afghanistan, and instead embrace the promise of a peaceful and prosperous Asia-Pacific. As Michael J. Green makes clear in his most recent book, this approach to the region is consistent with an abiding American strategic interest, dating back more than two centuries, to ensure that ‘the Pacific Ocean remains a conduit for American ideas and goods to flow westward, and not for threats to flow eastward toward the homeland’.⁶

¹ The White House Office of the Press Secretary (2009), ‘Remarks by President Barack Obama at Suntory Hall’, 14 November 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-suntory-hall> (accessed 24 May 2017).

² The White House Office of the Press Secretary (2011), ‘Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament’, 17 November 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament> (accessed 24 May 2017).

³ This paper uses a relatively broad geographical definition of ‘Asia-Pacific’, consisting principally of Japan, the Korean peninsula, China, Taiwan, the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Australia, New Zealand, India and the US.

⁴ APEC (undated), ‘Achievements and Benefits’, www.apec.org/About-Us/About-APEC/Achievements%20and%20Benefits (accessed 24 May 2017).

⁵ This accelerating shift of US interests towards the Asia-Pacific has been in motion for decades. The US’s trade with its Pacific partners surpassed its trade across the Atlantic in 1983. By 2014, the economies of the Asia-Pacific (excluding the US) accounted for 40 per cent of global economic output and two-thirds of global economic growth. See International Monetary Fund (2015), *Regional Economic Outlook – Asia and Pacific: Stabilizing and Outperforming Other Regions*, Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/reo/2015/apd/eng/areo0415.htm (accessed 24 May 2017). The centrality of this region to American strategy was also foretold in the decision announced by Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta in June 2012 that the 50:50 balance of US naval forces between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans would shift by 2020 to a 60:40 split in favour of the Asia-Pacific region.

⁶ Green, M. J. (2017), *By More than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 5.

This strategic reasoning still stands. Long-term, proactive and effective engagement in the Asia-Pacific is a fundamental imperative for the prosperity, security and regional leadership of the US. Importantly, US engagement is also strongly encouraged and welcomed by the country's allies and partners across the region. But where did President Obama leave this strategy, and will President Trump take it forward?

Obama's legacy

President Obama was not the first to recognize the emerging strategic importance of the Asia-Pacific.⁷ However, his administration can justifiably lay claim to having devoted unprecedented time and attention to the region. Much of this focus derived from the president himself, who spent large parts of his childhood in Hawaii and Indonesia. His secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, was likewise a powerful advocate of the 'rebalancing' strategy.

Looking back on this strategic initiative, the rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific had many successes, along with some high-profile setbacks. The Obama administration's approach to the Asia-Pacific scored a number of 'firsts'. One was the significant amount of time the president spent in the region. With 11 trips and stops in 14 countries (in many of them, more than once) during his presidency, Obama made the most visits to the Asia-Pacific of any sitting US president.

Political and security relations with the US's key regional allies – Japan, South Korea and Australia – improved significantly under Obama. In 2015 the US and Japan finalized new and forward-looking defence guidelines – the first time these had been updated since 1997 – that broadened the circumstances under which the US would respond to defend Japan. The guidelines also deepened bilateral defence cooperation in intelligence-sharing, weapons development, maritime security, peacekeeping and missile defence.⁸ Washington's defence relations with Seoul likewise deepened, as seen notably in a 2016 joint decision to deploy US Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile systems in South Korea.⁹ In Australia, US marines began to deploy on a rotational basis outside Darwin as the US and Australian governments deepened their partnership in counterterrorism, intelligence-gathering and defence technology cooperation.¹⁰

In addition, Obama's Asia-Pacific policy broke new ground by devoting unprecedented time and attention to Southeast Asia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), long given short shrift by previous US administrations. For example, the US government set up a formal diplomatic mission to ASEAN, became a member of the East Asia Summit, and finally acceded to the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. The Obama administration also saw to the creation of the annual US–ASEAN Leaders' Meeting, announced a US–ASEAN 'strategic partnership',

⁷ See Silove, N. (2016), 'The Pivot before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia', *International Security*, 40(4): pp. 45–88, www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/ISEC_a_00238 (accessed 24 May 2017).

⁸ Japanese Ministry of Defense (2015), 'The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation', 27 April 2015, www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/ampo/shishin_20150427e.html. For more detail on the US–Japan alliance during the Obama era, see Szechenyi, N. (2015), 'The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Prospects to Strengthen the Asia-Pacific Order', in Tellis, A. J., Denmark, A. M. and Chaffin, G. (eds) (2015), *Strategic Asia 2014–15: U.S. Alliances and Partnerships at the Center of Global Power*, Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, <http://nbr.org/publications/issue.aspx?id=307> (accessed 24 May 2017).

⁹ For more details on the US–South Korea alliance during the Obama era, see Snyder, S. (2015), 'The U.S.-ROK Alliance and the U.S. Rebalance to Asia', in Tellis, Denmark and Chaffin (2015), *Strategic Asia 2014–15*.

¹⁰ For more details on the US–Australia alliance during the Obama era, see Gill, B. (2015), 'The U.S.-Australia Alliance: A Deepening Partnership in Emerging Asia', in Tellis, Denmark and Chaffin (2015), *Strategic Asia 2014–15*. See also Gill, B. and Switzer, T. (2015), 'The New Special Relationship', *Foreign Affairs*, 19 February 2015, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/australia/2015-02-19/new-special-relationship (accessed 24 May 2017).

and held a ‘Special ASEAN–US Summit’ in California in 2016 (the first time that the leaders of the 10 ASEAN countries had met together with the president on US soil).

Also in Southeast Asia, US relations with the Philippines made a number of gains, including the agreement to allow US-built and -operated military facilities on Philippine military bases and the rotation of US forces through them. US relations with Myanmar and Vietnam also underwent historic and positive transformations during the Obama years.¹¹ Beginning in 2016, some US\$140 million in US government support began flowing to assist the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia in expanding and improving their capacities in maritime domain awareness. The assistance included transfers of patrol vessels and surveillance systems, and the provision of training. Also in 2016 came the announcement that Vietnam would buy 18 US coastal patrol boats, and that the US arms embargo on the country was fully lifted to allow for further US defence equipment and weapons exports in the future.

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In other areas, the Obama legacy in the Asia-Pacific must acknowledge several setbacks. After the Thai military took power in a 2014 coup, Washington’s relations with Bangkok suffered; they have still not really recovered. More alarmingly, the recently elected president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, has taken an anti-American stance – openly and crudely insulting Obama, denigrating the alliance relationship with Washington, and appearing to embrace closer political and economic ties with China. US relations with Thailand and the Philippines, two key Southeast Asian allies, thus hit new lows under Obama.

Obama, along with the US Congress, must also share the blame for failing to ratify the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal. Owing to the TPP’s strategic and economic centrality to the US ‘rebalancing’ strategy, this failure was a major setback to American leadership in the region. In addition, the Obama presidency proved unable to reduce the nuclear threat from North Korea, as the latter’s nuclear and missile programmes developed steadily more threatening features. China also made significant economic, diplomatic and political advances in the Asia-Pacific during Obama’s time in office, raising doubts about the long-term prospects for US influence in the region.

Trump in Asia

The election of Donald Trump as the 45th US president has put the rebalancing strategy into question. Much of what Trump and his advisers have said appears to signal a different approach towards the Asia-Pacific region.

During his presidential campaign, Trump questioned the value of alliance relationships with Japan, South Korea and Australia. In the case of Japan and South Korea, he said that these countries needed to pay more for US protection, or else should consider seeking nuclear weapons of their own as

¹¹ See the analysis of US relations in Southeast Asia in Gill, B., Goh, E. and Huang, C. H. (2016), ‘The Dynamics of US-China-Southeast Asian Relations’, The United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, 22 June 2016, www.ussc.edu.au/analysis/the-dynamics-of-us-china-southeast-asia-relations (accessed 24 May 2017).

American security guarantees might no longer apply.¹² In April 2017, Trump said he might ‘terminate’ or renegotiate the US–South Korea free-trade agreement (FTA), which had been initiated by the George W. Bush administration.¹³

According to an account leaked to the Australian press, an early telephone call between President Trump and Malcolm Turnbull, the prime minister of Australia, ended tersely and abruptly when Turnbull sought confirmation for an agreement previously reached with President Obama in which the US would accept and resettle 1,250 asylum-seekers housed in an Australian-operated offshore holding centre. President Trump later suggested that he would pull back from the agreement, tweeting that he would need to study ‘this dumb deal’.¹⁴ In Australia this incident led to calls for the government to rethink relations with Washington generally, and with the Trump administration in particular.

Prior to becoming president, Trump had caused a stir with his challenging of accepted US foreign policy towards China. He had expressed scepticism about the US’s long-standing ‘one China’ policy. And he had repeatedly threatened to wage economic warfare against China by declaring it a currency manipulator ‘on day one’ of his presidency, and by imposing a tariff of up to 45 per cent on Chinese imports.

Prior to becoming president, Trump had also caused a stir with his challenging of accepted US foreign policy towards China. He had expressed scepticism about the US’s long-standing ‘one China’ policy. And he had repeatedly threatened to wage economic warfare against China by declaring it a currency manipulator ‘on day one’ of his presidency, and by imposing a tariff of up to 45 per cent on Chinese imports.¹⁵ President Trump also appointed an outspoken China hawk, Peter Navarro, to head the newly created National Trade Council.¹⁶

So far, President Trump has not acted on his statements about Japan, South Korea, Australia and China. Similarly, Navarro has not yet shown much influence in the form of concrete policy outcomes, and has been relegated to a lower-profile position as head of the Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the president has sowed doubt about the direction of future American engagement in the region.

¹² *New York Times* (2016), ‘Transcript: Donald Trump Expounds On His Foreign Policy Views’, 26 March 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/us/politics/donald-trump-transcript.html?_r=0 (accessed 25 May 2017).

¹³ Rucker, P. (2017), ‘Trump: “We may terminate” U.S.-South Korea trade agreement’, *Washington Post*, 28 April 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-we-may-terminate-us-south-korea-trade-agreement/2017/04/27/75ad1218-2bad-11e7-a616-d7c8a68c1a66_story.html?utm_term=.e04bd115416b (accessed 24 May 2017).

¹⁴ Thrush, G. and Innis, M. (2017), ‘U.S.-Australia Rift is Possible After Trump Ends Call With Prime Minister’, *New York Times*, 2 February 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/02/02/us/politics/us-australia-trump-turnbull.html; Solomon, F. (2017), ‘Trump Vows to Scrutinize “Dumb” Refugee Deal After a Reportedly Hostile Call with Australia’s Leader’, *Time*, 2 February 2017, <http://time.com/4657577/trump-australia-refugee-deal-turnbull/> (accessed 24 May 2017).

¹⁵ See, for example, Trump, D. J. (2015), ‘Ending China’s Currency Manipulation’, *Wall Street Journal*, 9 November 2015, www.wsj.com/articles/ending-chinas-currency-manipulation-1447115601; Haberman, M. (2016), ‘Donald Trump Says He Favors Big Tariffs on Chinese Exports’, *New York Times*, 7 January 2016, www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/01/07/donald-trump-says-he-favors-big-tariffs-on-chinese-exports/ (accessed 24 May 2017).

¹⁶ Navarro is an economist who worked most recently at the University of California, Irvine. His work includes a book and related documentary, both entitled *Death by China*. See, Navarro, P. (2011), *Death by China: Confronting the Dragon – A Global Call to Action*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

¹⁷ Davis, B. and Mauldin, W. (2017), ‘Despite Setbacks, Trump’s Trade Warrior Peter Navarro is Fighting On’, *Fox Business*, 8 May 2017, www.foxbusiness.com/features/2017/05/08/despite-setbacks-trumps-trade-warrior-peter-navarro-is-fighting-on-update.html (accessed 24 May 2017).

On his first full day in office, fulfilling his pledge as a candidate, President Trump instructed his team to withdraw the US from the TPP, ending nearly all possibility for US accession to the agreement during his time in office. This was a 180-degree reversal from his predecessor's policies, and a major blow to strategic US economic leadership in the Asia-Pacific. This specific step, more than any other in his first months in office, has set President Trump's approach starkly apart from the fundamentals of the rebalancing strategy. From a broader perspective, calls for 'America first' and economic nationalism are at odds with President Obama's previous efforts to engage the region.¹⁸

Another challenge for long-standing US–Asia-Pacific policy has nothing to do with policy *per se*, but with personnel. By all public indications, in ways even more than his immediate predecessors, President Trump has surrounded himself with a very tight group of trusted, senior White House advisers who have very little professional or policy experience in Asia-Pacific affairs.

In addition, the time-honoured tussle between the director of the National Security Council (NSC) and her/his staff (which by geography alone has the best access to the president) and the Department of State (where some of the US government's very best Asia-Pacific expertise resides) looks sure to continue. While it is unclear what influence the NSC may ultimately have on the president, the State Department's secondary role stands out given the large proposed cuts to its budget and continuing gaps in senior appointments to its leadership positions. As of mid-April 2017, the administration had not submitted the name of even one nominee to the Senate for any senior post in the State Department, other than that of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. At the Defense Department, a similar story prevails.¹⁹ At this point in the early months of the Trump presidency, there is a decided lack of professional experience and institutional memory on Asia-Pacific affairs at the senior political levels of government.

The early months of the Trump administration have also been notable for significant infighting and disarray at the upper levels of the president's White House advisory team. Trump's original national security adviser, Michael Flynn, lasted only 23 turbulent days in office. In another controversial move, President Trump allowed his chief political strategist, Stephen Bannon, to serve on the NSC's Principals Committee, only to remove him two months later. Flynn's successor, H. R. McMaster, has apparently managed to carve out some policymaking authority while trying to marginalize the 'Breitbart' faction led by Bannon. The president's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, has also gained prominence on the foreign policy front, with his role in helping broker the early Trump–Xi summit being particularly notable. In all of this, mixed foreign policy messages have abounded.²⁰ None of these developments has provided US allies and friends in the Asia-Pacific with grounds for confidence in the credibility and consistency of White House policies towards the region.

¹⁸ For some high-profile examples, see The White House (2017), 'The Inaugural Address: Remarks of President Donald J. Trump as prepared for delivery', 20 January 2017, www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural-address; and remarks by Stephen Bannon at the Conservative Political Action Conference, available at Beckwith, R. T. (2017), 'Read Steve Bannon and Reince Priebus' Joint Interview at CPAC', 23 February 2017, <http://time.com/4681094/reince-priebus-steve-bannon-cpac-interview-transcript/> (accessed 24 May 2017).

¹⁹ See the online tracker compiled by the *Washington Post* and the Partnership for Public Service that shows the status of more than 550 key government positions requiring confirmation by the US Senate. *Washington Post* (2017), 'Tracking how many key positions Trump has filled so far', www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-administration-appointee-tracker/database/ (accessed 24 May 2017).

²⁰ On factional infighting within the White House, see Parker, A. Costa, R. and Phillip, A. (2017), 'Bannon wants a war on Washington. Now he's part of one in the White House', *Washington Post*, 6 April 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/bannon-wants-a-war-on-washington-now-hes-part-of-one-inside-the-white-house/2017/04/06/ec4a135a-1ada-11e7-9887-1a5314b56a08_story.html?utm_term=.e2386d54d8ea (accessed 24 May 2017).

In spite of these problems, the Trump administration has managed to maintain good ties with some of its regional allies and has softened some earlier controversial positions. The most prominent success has been the administration's early interactions with Japan's prime minister, Shinzo Abe. Abe has made a concerted effort to court American leaders in 2016–17, including meeting President-elect Trump in November 2016, standing alongside President Obama at Pearl Harbor the following month, and conducting an official visit to the White House (and travelling with the new president to Florida) less than two months later.

In early February, President Trump and China's President Xi had a telephone call which the White House described as 'lengthy' and 'extremely cordial'. Importantly, during the call President Trump agreed 'at the request of President Xi' to remain committed to the US 'one China' policy.²¹ The Trump–Xi Mar-a-Lago summit in April – while initially short on substantive policy outcomes – helped put the highly consequential US–China relationship on a firmer footing and has thus far resulted in some minor agreements on China opening its market to US exports. Trump's telephone calls to the leaders of Japan and South Korea immediately after his meetings with Xi sent the right message to Tokyo and Seoul. In another positive step, in mid-April, following his meeting with Xi, Trump reversed his long-standing position on China's exchange rate policy, stating that he no longer believed the country to be a currency manipulator.²²

In terms of defence cooperation, a number of steps have been taken to reassure allies of US commitment. In his first trip abroad as secretary of defence, Jim Mattis travelled to Japan and South Korea in February 2017 to reassure these allies about the US commitment to their security. His trip followed separate telephone calls during which President Trump assured both countries of America's 'ironclad' commitment to the alliances. During his trip, Secretary Mattis confirmed the need for THAAD deployment in South Korea to defend against the North Korean missile threat.

Other senior US officials have made diplomatic trips to the Asia-Pacific region. Secretary of State Tillerson travelled there in March to meet with his counterparts in Japan, South Korea and China. And the vice-president, Mike Pence, made a similar 'reassurance tour' to Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and Australia in April.

Sealing a trade pact with Japan, or successfully securing the US\$150 billion in investment in the US promised in principle by Prime Minister Abe, would be a significant breakthrough, but it remains to be seen if such deals can be achieved.

On trade policy, the president and his advisers have argued for the promotion of bilateral trade agreements, as opposed to multilateral arrangements. However, they have not been clear as to how such initiatives might proceed. In the region, the US already has bilateral trade agreements with Australia, Singapore and South Korea. Sealing a trade pact with Japan, or successfully securing the US\$150 billion in investment in the US promised in principle by Prime Minister Abe, would be a significant breakthrough, but it remains to be seen if such deals can be achieved.

²¹ The White House Office of the Press Secretary (2017), 'Readout of the President's Call with President Xi Jinping of China', 9 February 2017, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/02/09/readout-presidents-call-president-xi-jinping-china (accessed 24 May 2017).

²² Baker, G., Lee, C. E. and Bender, M. C. (2017), 'Trump Says Dollar "Getting Too Strong," Won't Label China a Currency Manipulator', *Wall Street Journal*, 12 April 2017, www.wsj.com/articles/trump-says-dollar-getting-too-strong-wont-label-china-currency-manipulator-1492024312 (accessed 24 May 2017).

Many of these latter developments are positive. The administration has taken steps to reassure Asia-Pacific allies about US commitment in the region and has retreated from some of Trump's early campaign positions, which had sent mixed signals about his intentions. But the need for a more fully articulated foreign policy remains, as developments in the region are not standing still. On the contrary, short- and long-term trends mean that the region is going to get more, not less, challenging for the US and its partners in the future. Whether the next foreign policy approach towards the region is called a pivot, a rebalancing or something else, the interests of the US and its allies will demand a continuing strong American diplomatic, economic and security presence in the Asia-Pacific. The sooner the Trump administration can put forward a coherent strategy to address these challenges, the better.

US allies and the China factor

Formulation of such a strategy could usefully start with efforts to bolster the US's political, economic and security ties with its most important allies and friends in the region. However, while this is certainly important, the challenges that those partners face – especially regarding China and North Korea – will greatly complicate US engagement. All the more reason, then, for the Trump team to take these relationships and interests seriously and engage with them accordingly.

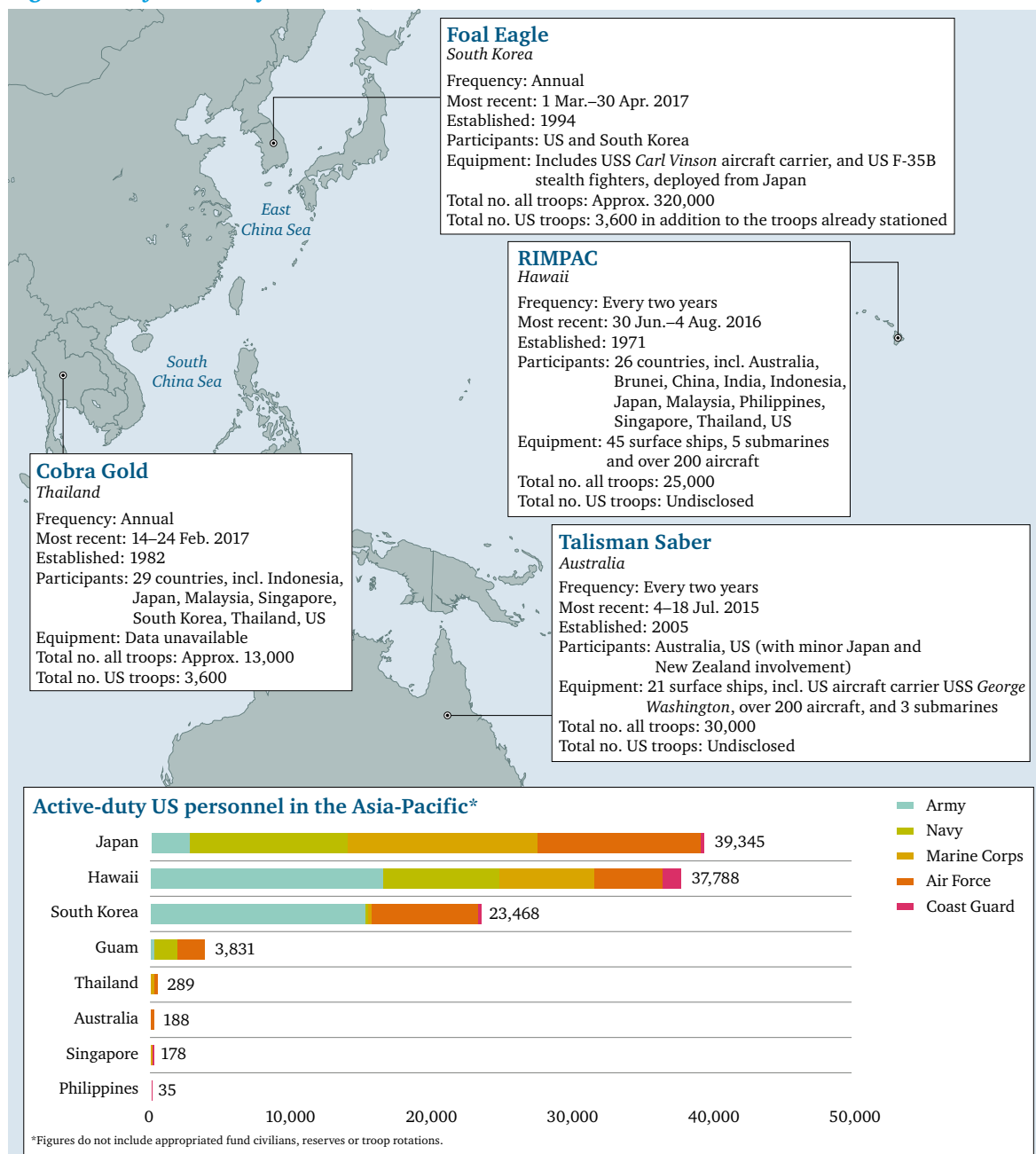
US–Japan relations

US–Japan relations have deepened considerably over the past decade, and they look set to continue in this direction during the Trump presidency. As mentioned, in 2015 the two countries concluded new strategic guidelines to expand US defence commitments to Japan while opening up new channels for bilateral security and military cooperation. Today, Japan hosts more US military personnel and their dependents – approximately 100,000 people in total – than any other country outside the US.²³ Of this number, more than 39,000 are US troops (see Figure 1).

In 2016, in a symbolically important exchange, President Obama visited the memorial in Hiroshima commemorating the first use of a nuclear bomb in wartime; he was the first sitting US president to do so. Later in the same year, Prime Minister Abe joined Obama at Pearl Harbor to pay respects to the service personnel who died there under Japanese attack in December 1941. These visits – while controversial to some domestic constituents – also symbolized the depth of respect and maturity that has been achieved in US–Japan relations.

²³ Green, M. J., Cooper, Z., Hicks, K. H., Schaus, J., Cancian, M. F., Bower, E., Cha, V., Conley, H., Crotty, R., Dalton, M., Glaser, B., Hersman, R., Hiebert, M., Johnson, C., Karako, T., Sanok Kostro, S., Poling, G., Rossow, R., Squassoni, S., Szechenyi, N. and Zheng, D. (2016), *Asia-Pacific Rebalance 2025: Capabilities, Presence and Partnerships*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, p. 37.

Figure 1: Major military exercises in the Asia-Pacific



Sources: US Embassy & Consulate in Thailand (2017), 'Exercise Cobra Gold 2017 to Begin February 14, 2017', press release, <https://th.usembassy.gov/exercise-cobra-gold-2017/> (accessed 12 Jun. 2017); Exercise Cobra Gold (2017), Facebook page, www.facebook.com/ExerciseCobraGold (accessed 12 Jun. 2017); Australian Government Department of Defence (2015), 'Exercises – Talisman Sabre', www.defence.gov.au/exercises/ts15/ (accessed 12 Jun. 2017); Seibel, J. C. (2015), 'The U.S. and Australia Team UP as a Combined Task Force During Talisman Sabre', America's Navy, www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=90019 (accessed 12 Jun. 2017); Agence France-Presse (2015), 'Japan Joins US-Australia War Games Amid China Tensions', *Defense News*, www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/asia-pacific/2015/07/05/japan-joins-us-australia-war-games-amid-china-tensions/29734855/ (accessed 12 Jun. 2017); US Navy (2016), 'RIMPAC 2016', www.public.navy.mil/surfor/Pages/RIMPAC-2016.aspx#.WT5vHNy1vct (accessed 12 Jun. 2017); Moon Cronk, T. (2017), 'U.S., South Korea Launch Annual Foal Eagle Exercise', *DoD News*, www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1102331/us-south-korea-launch-annual-foal-eagle-exercise/ (accessed 12 Jun. 2017); LaGrone, S. (2017), 'Carrier USS Carl Vinson to arrive in South Korea today', *U.S. Naval Institute News*, <https://news.usni.org/2017/03/14/carrier-uss-carl-vinson-arrive-south-korea-today/> (accessed 12 Jun. 2017); Kim, J. and Park, J. M. (2017), 'South Korea, U.S. begin large-scale annual drills amid North Korea tension', Reuters, 1 March 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-usa-drills-idUSKBN1683HQ> (accessed 20 Jun. 2017); Defense Manpower Data Center (2016), 'DoD Personnel, Workforce Reports & Publications', counts of active-duty and reserve service members and APF civilians by location country, personnel category, service and component as of 31 December 2016, www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp (accessed 9 Jun. 2017).

The Trump administration also made an early effort to engage and reassure Japan about the strength of US–Japan relations. During his trip to Japan in early 2017 – his first foreign visit as secretary of defence – Jim Mattis reconfirmed the US position, first stated by President Obama, that America’s defence commitment under the US–Japan alliance treaty extends to the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea (which Japan claims and occupies but which Beijing considers as belonging to China).²⁴ President Trump later made the same declaration. In March 2017, Secretary of State Tillerson also visited Japan, where he strongly reiterated US support for the alliance. In public remarks Tillerson was especially pointed in his concern about North Korea’s threat to Japan and the region.²⁵

US–Japan alliance and the China factor

Behind much of the deepening relationship between Washington and Tokyo lies concern with the security challenges posed by China and North Korea. For more than a century, warfare and strategic rivalry have characterized China–Japan relations, especially since the early to mid-20th century. The Communist Party of China seeks to draw some of its legitimacy from its role in defeating Japan and ousting it from China at the end of the Second World War, following Japan’s annexation of Taiwan in 1895 and its brutal invasion and occupation of China in the 1930s and 1940s. As Japan became a close treaty ally of the US and grew into the world’s second-largest economy, it enjoyed a position of strategic superiority over China for most of the post-Second World War era. But with China’s burgeoning economic strength and military capabilities, especially since the start of the 21st century, those strategic tables have begun to turn.

The most acute security problem between China and Japan concerns disputed maritime territories, especially the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Since 2012, there has been a serious increase in military and quasi-military activities as both sides have sought to demonstrate their claims to these islands, and a decided downturn in China–Japan political relations as a result.

In an effort to pre-empt an inflammatory plan by Shintaro Ishihara, a right-wing politician, to buy and develop the islands, the Japanese government announced it would purchase them from their private owner in late 2012. China, seeing this as a hardening of the Japanese claim to the islands, responded in November 2013 by declaring an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) that included the islands, and by stepping up the dispatch of coastguard vessels, commercial ships and military aircraft to the area.

Military tensions have risen accordingly. According to the Japanese government, Japanese fighters scrambled a record number of times – with over 850 sorties – between April 2016 and March 2017 to warn off Chinese aircraft approaching the islands’ airspace.²⁶ In August 2016, China held live-fire naval exercises in the East China Sea and then despatched a flotilla of 230 commercial fishing vessels, under the protection of the Chinese coastguard, to the waters around the islands. As China steps up such activities, and Japan responds to them, the possibility of a serious military clash between the two sides increases dramatically. Depending on its scale and circumstances, any such incident could trigger a military response from the US, resulting in a further escalation.

²⁴ In 2014, President Obama stated that ‘the Senkaku Islands are administered by Japan and therefore fall within the scope of Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security’, and that the US will ‘oppose any unilateral attempts to undermine Japan’s administration of these islands’. President Obama’s remarks were published in the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, with an English version printed in the *Washington Post*. See *Washington Post* (2014), ‘Q&A: Japan’s Yomiuri Shimbun interviews President Obama’, 23 April 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/world/qanda-japans-yomiuri-shimbun-interviews-president-obama/2014/04/23/d01bb5fc-cae3-11e3-95f7-7ecdde72d2ea_story.html?utm_term=.5e5ab027edb4 (accessed 24 May 2017).

²⁵ US Department of State (2017), ‘Press Availability with Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida’, 16 March 2017, www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/03/268476.htm (accessed 24 May 2017).

²⁶ Kubo, N. and Kelly, T. (2017), ‘Japan scrambles jet fighters at record pace as Chinese military activity rises’, Reuters, 13 April 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-defence-scrambles-idUSKBN17F0J6. See also Kelly T. and Kubo, N. (2016), ‘Japan jet scrambles against Chinese aircraft hit six-month record’, Reuters, 14 October 2016, www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-china-scrambles-idUSKBN12E0V8 (accessed 24 May 2017).

Meanwhile, with US prompting and support, Japan has sought to increase its diplomatic and military activities in and around the South China Sea, a trend Beijing has found alarming. These steps have included offers to provide patrol vessels and other maritime surveillance equipment to countries in the region. The US and Japan also conducted a joint exercise in the South China Sea which involved Japan's largest naval vessel, the helicopter carrier *Izumo*, in May 2017.²⁷ The *Izumo* was also scheduled to make port visits to Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore before taking part in the US-led Malabar exercises in the Indian Ocean.²⁸

From Tokyo's point of view, the threats to Japan emanating from North Korea are not unrelated to those posed by China. The fact that China has proven unable and unwilling to rein in its communist neighbour only makes bad China–Japan relations worse.

In response to this news, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman was quoted as saying that Japan had 'inflamed' South China Sea issues of late and that if Tokyo 'still refuses to realize its error and play[s] up regional tensions, China will definitely respond to any action that harm[s] China's sovereignty and security'. He reminded his audience that Japan in the past had invaded and occupied Chinese island territory in the South China Sea, and urged Tokyo to 'remember history and mind its words and steps'.²⁹

From Tokyo's point of view, the threats to Japan emanating from North Korea are not unrelated to those posed by China. The fact that China has proven unable and unwilling to rein in its communist neighbour only makes bad China–Japan relations worse. Japan has serious concerns about North Korea, which continues to advance its ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programmes. North Korea conducted its fourth and fifth nuclear tests in 2016, and also carried out dozens of ballistic missile tests – including one from a submarine – over the course of 2016 and early 2017. North Korea is believed to possess hundreds of Nodong-1 missiles capable of reaching Tokyo.

While it remains unclear at present whether North Korea can deliver a nuclear weapon against Japan, it is important to remember that Pyongyang already has one of the world's largest chemical weapons arsenals, which could be used in a missile attack against Japan and other neighbours. As if to underscore these possibilities, North Korea test-fired a missile during Prime Minister Abe's visit with President Trump in Florida in February 2017; the missile flew about 500 kilometres towards Japan before splashing into the Sea of Japan.

In March, North Korea fired at least four more ballistic missiles towards the seas west of Japan, with three of them landing well within the waters of Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), about 250 kilometres off Japanese shores. The North Korean news agency claimed that these were training drills for units 'tasked to strike the bases of U.S. imperialist aggressor forces in Japan in contingency'.³⁰ Additional North Korean missile firings into the Sea of Japan have followed.

²⁷ US Navy Destroyer Squadron 7 Public Affairs (2017), 'US, JMSDF Complete PASSEX in South China Sea', 19 May 2017, www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=100554 (accessed 6 Jun. 2017).

²⁸ Kelly, T. and Kubo, N. (2017), 'Exclusive: Japan plans to send largest warship to South China Sea, sources say', Reuters, 14 March 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-navy-southchinasea-exclusive-idUSKBN16K0UP (accessed 24 May 2017).

²⁹ Xinhua (2017), 'China urges Japan not to stir up troubles on South China Sea issue', 16 March 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/16/c_136134407.htm (accessed 24 May 2017).

³⁰ Korean Central News Agency (2017), 'Kim Jong Un Supervises Ballistic Rocket Launching Drill of Hwasong Artillery Units of KPA Strategic Force', 7 March 2017, <https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/270276/kim-jong-un-supervises-ballistic-rocket-launching-drill-of-hwasong-artillery-units-of-kpa-strategic-force/> (accessed 24 May 2017).

Importantly, North Korea's threats against Japan do not only involve Japan. Under the US–Japan defence alliance, an attack on Japan by North Korea would demand an American response, which in turn could ignite a full-scale regional conflict involving the US, the two Koreas, Japan and China.

The Trump–Abe meeting in February 2017 took stock of these security challenges to Japan and to the alliance, and signalled the joint determination of the US and Japan to defend against them. As to maritime disputes, a Trump–Abe joint statement underscored the importance of freedom of navigation and overflight, declaring:

The United States and Japan oppose any attempt to assert maritime claims through the use of intimidation, coercion or force. The United States and Japan also call on countries concerned to avoid actions that would escalate tensions in the South China Sea, including the militarization of outposts, and to act in accordance with international law.³¹

Following the North Korean missile test, the two leaders issued a brief statement in which Abe called the action 'absolutely intolerable', with Trump saying that 'the United States of America stands behind Japan, its great ally, 100 percent'.³² However, the statement seemed hastily crafted, and provided no indication of an overall US and allied approach in the region (to include South Korea) for dealing with the security challenges posed by North Korea.

From these early interactions, it appeared that the US–Japan alliance was on relatively solid footing, in part because of joint concerns about a rising China and a more threatening North Korea. Assuming he is able to weather any minor scandals, Prime Minister Abe also looks set to remain in office for several more years, which will lend greater stability to US–Japan ties. However, the Trump administration will need to be sensitive to persistent concerns in Tokyo that Washington might consider a 'grand bargain' to settle a range of outstanding difficulties with Beijing, and that it might cut such a deal while ignoring Japanese interests.

US–South Korea relations

Like the US–Japan alliance, US–South Korea relations have improved over the past decade. There were some important advances in the latter years of the Obama administration. A 2009 joint vision statement and a 2013 joint declaration to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the alliance provided a strong and forward-looking conceptual structure for collaboration at both the regional and global levels. South Korea hosts around 23,500 American troops (see Figure 1).

The US–South Korea FTA, negotiated during the George W. Bush administration, entered into force in 2013, enhancing and liberalizing trade and investment between the two G20 economies. The two sides also worked closely in organizing three of the four nuclear security summits held between 2010 and 2016. The 2015 meeting in Washington between President Obama and President Park Geun-hye emphasized 'new frontiers' for future alliance ties, including countering cyberthreats, promoting policies for a sustainable environment, improving health security and expanding cooperation in space. These examples of bilateral cooperation are important in showing the value of the relationship beyond the military alliance framework and its defence of South Korea.

³¹ The White House Office of the Press Secretary (2017), 'Joint Statement from President Donald J. Trump and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe', 10 February 2017, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/02/10/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-and-prime-minister-shinzo-abe (accessed 24 May 2017).

³² The White House Office of the Press Secretary (2017), 'Joint Statement by President Trump and Prime Minister Abe of Japan', 11 February 2017, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/02/11/joint-statement-president-trump-and-prime-minister-abe-japan (accessed 24 May 2017).

There was some concern in Washington in 2015–16 when the Park Geun-hye administration appeared to be cosyng up to leaders in Beijing, in the hope that China would put greater pressure on Pyongyang to halt its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile development programmes. However, US–South Korea alliance relations have become closer since 2016 as North Korea has stepped up its nuclear and missile tests, and as Seoul has grown increasingly frustrated with Beijing’s apparent unwillingness or inability to do anything about this. President Park was particularly unhappy with Beijing when, following North Korea’s nuclear test in January 2016, she repeatedly attempted to speak directly with China’s President Xi but was ignored for weeks. In the end, Beijing has done little to address South Korean concerns about Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile programmes and increasingly threatening posture.

Washington and Seoul initiated formal discussions in March 2016 on the possible deployment of a THAAD anti-missile system in South Korea to defend against North Korean missiles. In spite of strenuous Chinese opposition, the Park government decided to go forward with THAAD.

Following that episode, Washington and Seoul initiated formal discussions in March 2016 on the possible deployment of a THAAD anti-missile system in South Korea to defend against North Korean missiles. In spite of strenuous Chinese opposition (see below), the Park government decided to go forward with THAAD. By March 2017, initial elements of the THAAD system were being deployed in South Korea.³³

China turns up the heat on the US–South Korea alliance

The decision by Washington and Seoul to deploy the THAAD missile defence system sparked especially strong reactions in Pyongyang and Beijing. While this was expected from Pyongyang, the Chinese response took many by surprise and has added new complications to the US–South Korea–China dynamic.

Beijing argues that the THAAD deployment negatively affects a number of China’s strategic interests. First, it claims that the system – and in particular the radar component known as the ‘Army/Navy Transportable Radar Surveillance’, or AN/TPY-2 – would help the US detect and respond to possible Chinese missile launches towards the US, thereby undermining China’s nuclear deterrent and US–China strategic stability with it. In addition, Beijing states that the deployment unnecessarily escalates and intensifies instability on the Korean peninsula. More broadly – but on this point Chinese official statements are more muted – China is prone to see the move as part of a larger ‘containment’ effort by the US, and as a worrisome sign that the US–South Korea alliance is deepening in the face of North Korean provocations.

Beijing’s arguments on the technical capabilities of the AN/TPY-2 radar are questionable and remain open to debate.³⁴ Chinese concerns appear on more solid ground when it comes to the deepening of US–South Korea relations. According to a recent poll of South Korean public opinion by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, a Seoul-based think-tank, favourable views towards China dropped

³³ United States Pacific Command Public Affairs (2017), ‘U.S. Pacific Command Deploys THAAD to Korean Peninsula’, 6 March 2017, www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1104300/us-pacific-command-deploys-thaad-to-korean-peninsula/ (accessed 24 May 2017).

³⁴ See some of the opposing positions here: Sankaran, J. and Fearey, B. L. (2017), ‘Missile defense and strategic stability: Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea’, *Contemporary Security Policy*, doi:10.1080/13523260.2017.1280744; Bin, L. (2017), ‘The Security Dilemma and THAAD Deployment in the ROK’, *China US Focus*, 6 March 2017, www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/2017/0306/14759.html; Denmark, A. M. (2017), ‘China’s Fear of U.S. Missile Defense is Disingenuous’, *Foreign Policy*, 20 March 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/20/chinas-fear-of-u-s-missile-defense-is-disingenuous-north-korea-trump-united-states-tillerson-thaad/> (accessed 24 May 2017).

‘precipitously’ in early 2017, falling behind the comparable rating indicating respondents’ views towards Japan. At the same time, a majority of those polled found that relations with China were more competitive than cooperative, a reversal from views of a year before.³⁵

Beijing’s coercive trade behaviour in response to the THAAD deployment goes a long way to explaining these opinions. Among other steps, Beijing halted tour groups from travelling to South Korea, a potentially sharp blow as nearly half of South Korea’s inbound tourists are from China. The Chinese also targeted one of South Korea’s largest *chaebol*, Lotte Group, which has significant business interests in China, after Lotte agreed in March 2017 to sell golf course land that it owns to make land available for the THAAD system. Lotte stores in China were shut down for a variety of alleged safety violations, and anti-Lotte and anti-South Korea protests and boycotts were organized across China.³⁶ In addition, Chinese authorities suspended some military-to-military contacts and even blocked the streaming of popular Korean television programmes and music videos.³⁷ These are all intended to tilt the South Korean political debate about THAAD and the US–South Korean alliance in China’s favour.

During this same period, in another move meant to shape US–South Korea alliance relations, the Chinese foreign minister proposed the following:

To defuse the looming crisis on the peninsula, China proposes that, as a first step, the DPRK suspend its missile and nuclear activities in exchange for a halt of the large-scale US-ROK [military] exercises. This suspension-for-suspension can help us break out of the security dilemma and bring the parties back to the negotiating table. Then we can follow the dual-track approach of denuclearizing the peninsula on the one hand and establishing a peace mechanism on the other.³⁸

This ‘suspension for suspension’ proposal was quickly dismissed at the official level by the US and South Korean governments. But it marked another example of a more proactive effort by Beijing to influence debates in South Korea about the US alliance and relations with the North, especially in the run-up to the South Korean presidential election on 9 May 2017.

Overall, US–South Korea relations appear steady and strong – helped in no small measure by the North Korean threat and China’s ramped-up pressures. But many challenges lie ahead. The election in May ended almost a decade of conservative rule and brought into power Moon Jae-in, a progressive who has advocated more engagement with North Korea – including a statement that he would be prepared to visit Pyongyang if elected – and a review of the THAAD system deployment. But it is unclear how far and how fast he will want to move – if at all – on these matters of importance to the alliance with the US.

US–Australia relations

The US–Australia relationship has deepened considerably since the early 2000s. These closer ties have included an FTA concluded in 2004; the expansion of US–Australia cooperation in intelligence-sharing and defence technology development; and the significant involvement of Australian forces in US-led military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Australia is one of the world’s largest importers of US weapon systems. The number one destination

³⁵ Kim, J., Lee, J. J. and Kang, C. (2017), *Changing Tides: THAAD and Shifting Korean Public Opinion toward the United States and China*, Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 20 March 2017, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/changing-tides-thaad-and-shifting-korean-public-opinion-toward-the-united-states-and-china/> (accessed 24 May 2017).

³⁶ Hernandez, J. C., Guo, O. and McMorrow, R. (2017), ‘South Korean Stores Feel China’s Wrath as U.S. Missile System is Deployed’, *New York Times*, 9 March 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/world/asia/china-lotte-thaad-south-korea.html?_r=0 (accessed 24 May 2017).

³⁷ Denmark (2017), ‘China’s Fear’.

³⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (2017), ‘Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press’, 8 March 2017, www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1444204.shtml (accessed 24 May 2017).

for Australian investment – with a total accumulated stock of US\$400 billion – is the US; at the same time, the US is by far the largest foreign investor in Australia.

One of the most high-profile examples of closer US–Australia ties has been the annual six-month rotation of US marines through an Australian military base in the Northern Territory outside Darwin. This arrangement was reached between President Obama and Australia’s then prime minister, Julia Gillard, in 2011. Initiated in 2012, the agreement allows up to 2,500 US marines to conduct joint exercises and training activities with Australian counterparts. In 2017, that rotational deployment will involve some 1,250 marines and 15 aircraft.³⁹ In spite of some difficulties early on in the Trump administration (see above), President Trump and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull met bilaterally in New York in May 2017. The White House gave positive signals about that meeting, stating that the two leaders ‘discussed the enduring bonds, deep friendship, and close alliance between the United States and Australia that have been critically important to the maintenance of regional and global peace and security’.⁴⁰

However, while the US–Australia relationship remains strong, it has not been without controversy or difficulties. For example, the two sides have struggled to finalize the financial and logistical arrangements involved in the deployment of US marines to Darwin. In 2016, after extended negotiations, they reached an agreement in principle to share US\$1.5 billion in new infrastructure costs to support the annual rotation of marines in Australia. At the same time, however, deployment of the full planned contingent of 2,500 marines has been pushed further into the future, and is now slated to begin in 2020.

China looming larger for US–Australia alliance

More importantly, the growing influence of China in Australia – particularly as an economic partner – has introduced new tensions into US–Australia relations. China is Australia’s largest trading partner: about one-third of Australian exports by value go to China, and China is the largest source of tourist visits to Australia. China is also the largest source of foreign students in Australian schools and universities. About 35 per cent of the international students attending Australian universities are from China; as a result, education has become one of Australia’s top exports, with revenues of over US\$15 billion annually. Chinese capital is a rapidly growing source of investment in Australia, especially in mining, real estate and agriculture.

Meanwhile, China’s influence has grown in other ways: Mandarin is the second-most widely spoken language in Australia; nearly all the Chinese-language newspapers in Australia are owned by mainland Chinese media groups; and China-related funds are a major source of donations to Australian political campaigns.⁴¹ In private and in public, the Chinese government has sought to influence choices in Canberra by signalling its displeasure with certain Australian decisions and threatening retaliation. For example, when Canberra voiced strong support for the July 2016 decision by the arbitral tribunal in The Hague which ruled against Chinese claims and activities in the South China Sea, the state-run *Global Times* shot back: ‘Australia has inked a free trade agreement with China, its biggest trading partner, which makes its move of disturbing the South China Sea waters surprising to many.’ The editorial went on to warn Australia:

³⁹ Morgan, M. (2017), ‘Next deployment of US Marines to Australia to be biggest yet’, SBS, 24 January 2017, www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2017/01/24/next-deployment-us-marines-australia-be-biggest-yet (accessed 24 May 2017).

⁴⁰ The White House Office of the Press Secretary (2017), ‘Readout of the Meeting between President Donald J. Trump and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull of Australia’, 5 May 2017, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/05/readout-meeting-between-president-donald-j-trump-and-prime-minister (accessed 24 May 2017).

⁴¹ Australia is one of the few countries in the world to allow foreign funding of political campaigns.

[Canberra] lauds Sino-Australian relations when China's economic support is needed, but when it needs to please Washington, it demonstrates willingness of doing anything in a show of allegiance... [I]t also intends to suppress China so as to gain a bargaining chip for economic interests. China must take revenge and let it know it's wrong.⁴²

Given the growing importance of China to Australia, one of the most pressing contemporary foreign policy debates in the country is how and whether Australia can successfully balance its respective relationships with China and the US.⁴³ So far, Australia has done well in navigating between the two great powers, deepening ties with both and reaping considerable benefits in the process. However, a difficult question looms: if US–China relations become more contentious or devolve into conflict – possibly causing the Australia–US security treaty to be invoked, with expectations in Washington that Australia would join the fight against China – what would Canberra do?

There is no easy answer to this question, and views are divided in the country about the proper course of action under such a scenario. In part as a result of this debate, a significant body of Australian opinion outside of government has grown increasingly vocal in questioning what it sees as an overly close and undiscerning relationship with the US – one that, if Canberra is not careful, would draw Australia into war with China.⁴⁴ These voices have grown in strength with Trump's ascent and his comments calling for economic warfare with China, suggesting that the 'one China' policy could be abandoned, and signalling US intent to forcibly stop China's expanding military footprint in the South China Sea. The contentious telephone call between President Trump and Prime Minister Turnbull only further fuelled Australian concerns about dealing with the new leadership in Washington.

At the official level, Australian leaders continue to support strong ties with the US, and call for greater American leadership and presence in the Asia-Pacific region, in part to counterbalance China's growing influence. In a speech in March this year, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said:

If stability and prosperity are to continue, the United States must play an even greater role as the indispensable strategic power in the Indo-Pacific. The United States is uniquely placed to do so. It is the pre-eminent global strategic power in Asia and the world by some margin. It is a country which does not have territorial disputes with other countries in the region... Critically, the domestic political system and values of the United States reflect the liberal rules-based order that we seek to preserve and defend.⁴⁵

In that speech she also stated, 'Many nations are in a strategic holding pattern and waiting to see whether the United States and its security allies and partners can continue to play the robust and constructive role that they have for many decades in preserving the peace.'⁴⁶ However, not all in Australia are convinced that the country should put such faith in US power, presence and values, especially given China's growing power, expanding influence and eschewal of Western-style democracy, and the perception that, under President Trump, America is moving away from internationalist values in favour of an 'America first' posture.⁴⁷

⁴² *Global Times* (2016), "'Paper Cat' Australia will learn its lesson', 30 July 2016, www.globaltimes.cn/content/997320.shtml (accessed 24 May 2017).

⁴³ This is one of the core questions driving the analysis and recommendations in White, H. (2013), *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power*, Collingwood, Australia: Black Inc.

⁴⁴ One of the most prominent advocates of this view was the late former prime minister, Malcolm Fraser, in his book *Dangerous Allies*, Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2014.

⁴⁵ These remarks are from Bishop, J. (2017), 'Change and uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific: Strategic challenges and opportunities', 28th IISS Fullerton Lecture, Singapore, 13 March 2017, http://foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/Pages/2017/jb_sp_170313a.aspx (accessed 24 May 2017).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ White, H. (2017), 'Julie Bishop's doctrine of denial is no foreign policy future', *Australian Financial Review*, 15 March 2017, www.afr.com/opinion/columnists/julie-bishops-doctrine-of-denial-is-no-foreign-policy-future-20170314-guyas0 (accessed 24 May 2017).

Other allies and partners

US relations with its treaty ally the **Philippines** had made good progress for much of the Obama presidency. The two sides inked an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in 2014, allowing the US to build and operate facilities on Philippine military bases and rotate US troops and equipment through them for extended periods. The EDCA received another boost in January 2016 when the Philippine Supreme Court affirmed the constitutionality of the agreement, allowing it to proceed. In April 2016, in a clear signal to Beijing, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter announced that the two allies would commence joint sea and air patrols in and over the waters of the disputed South China Sea. In July, the long-awaited decision by the arbitral tribunal in The Hague ruled unanimously and strongly in favour of the Philippines' claims against China, and against Chinese activities in the South China Sea, allowing Washington to voice its solidarity with its ally.

However, with the May 2016 election of Rodrigo Duterte as Philippine president, bilateral relations began to go off the rails. President Duterte's apparent support for vigilantism as a means to combat crime put the relationship on shaky political footing. Moreover, his public vulgarity in insulting the US president resulted in the cancellation of a planned meeting between the two in September of that year. Following this, President Duterte travelled to Beijing for a summit with Chinese leaders, at which he sided with China in dismissing the arbitral tribunal decision, spoke of the Philippines' 'separation' from the US, and called for a closer strategic relationship between Manila and Beijing. For their part, the Chinese pledged some US\$13 billion in investment and other assistance for the Philippines.

In spite of these difficulties for the alliance, it appears as if most aspects of the bilateral relationship will continue as normal. Philippine citizens hold America in high regard, with over 90 per cent of those surveyed saying they have a favourable view of the US, according to the most recent poll by the Pew Research Center.⁴⁸ This suggests that Duterte can only go so far in distancing the country from its principal ally. Nevertheless, China should be expected to continue to exercise leverage over the Philippines, both through developing trade and investment ties and through assertions of Chinese sovereignty in areas of the South China Sea which the Philippines claims.

A potential future flashpoint is Scarborough Shoal, an outcrop of rocks within the Philippines' EEZ, only about 225 kilometres from the country's main island of Luzon. China has exercised effective control over the shoal since mid-2012, in spite of Philippine objections and the ruling of the arbitral tribunal in The Hague in July 2016. Should Beijing decide to undertake land reclamation work there and install facilities for military use – as it has done at other features it controls in the South China Sea – it is not at all clear what the reaction of the Philippines and the Trump administration might be. Much will depend on the state of all three sides of the US–Philippine–China 'triangle' at the time. Signalling his support for the US–Philippines relationship, in April 2017 President Trump invited Duterte to visit the White House.

Singapore has also begun to feel greater pressure from China, pressure coincident with deepening US–Singapore political, economic and security relations. Singapore's FTA with the US has been in effect since 2004, and the city-state was an early promoter of the TPP, urging the US to recognize the pact's strategic and economic importance. Singapore allows a significant American military presence in its territory, including the planned rotation of up to four Littoral Combat Ships by 2018 and the

⁴⁸ Pew Research Center (2016), 'Global Indicators Database: Philippines', www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/1/country/173/ (accessed 24 May 2017). See also Tharoor, I. (2016), 'Forget Duterte. The Philippines loves the United States', *Washington Post*, 22 October 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/10/22/forget-duterte-the-philippines-loves-the-u-s/?utm_term=.489e2cb2c952 (accessed 24 May 2017).

rotation of P-8 maritime surveillance aircraft. This is in addition to the more than 100 US Navy vessels and up to 1,000 US Air Force aircraft which transit through Singapore annually.⁴⁹ The Singapore naval base at Changi is the only facility in Southeast Asia that can accommodate US aircraft carriers.

While Singapore has been generally successful in balancing its relationships with China and the US, its deepening political, economic and security ties with Washington are viewed with suspicion in Beijing. Relations with Beijing have soured, in particular, in recent years as Singapore has taken a stronger position than most of its neighbours in questioning China's actions in the South China Sea. Beijing's political and economic pressure on Singapore to take positions in line with Chinese interests will likely mount in the near to medium term. Singapore's leaders will look to Washington for support, and for signals of US leadership and presence, to counterbalance those pressures.

US ties with treaty ally **Thailand** have cooled considerably over the past several years. This is primarily a result of the coup in May 2014, since when the Thai military has been in charge of the country. The annual US-led Cobra Gold exercises, held in Thailand and known as the largest multinational military exercises in the Asia-Pacific, have gone ahead in 2015, 2016 and 2017, though with lower levels of US participation. Nevertheless, some 3,600 US Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps personnel took part in the February 2017 exercise. Admiral Harry B. Harris, the head of US Pacific Command, was among those present; he was the highest-ranking US officer to participate in Cobra Gold since the 2014 coup.⁵⁰

Following the death of the revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej in October 2016, Thailand's military looks likely to rule for the foreseeable future. It will be up to the Trump administration to determine whether, and how, to develop closer ties with this long-time US ally. In April 2017, during a telephone conversation with Thai leader Prayut Chan-o-cha, Trump invited him to the US.

In the meantime, China has been making a number of inroads in terms of forging closer military-to-military and defence trade ties with Thailand. For example, the air forces of the two countries held their first joint exercises in 2015, and the Thai navy has signalled its interest in buying three Chinese Yuan-class submarines. Reports also indicate that Chinese and Thai military and security services have reached agreements to bolster defence technology cooperation, joint military training, intelligence-sharing and counterterrorism cooperation.⁵¹

Challenges for US–Asia-Pacific policy – both at home and abroad

President Trump and his team are still in their early days in office. But based on the evidence so far, the administration is clearly facing a number of key challenges that will define the US's approach to its allies and regional security in the Asia-Pacific. Three major concerns stand out.

First, the administration is yet to sketch out even the broad outlines of a strategy towards this critical region. Instead, the world has come to learn what steps the US will *not* take compared with what President-elect Trump pledged to do before entering the White House. For example, it appears that he will not launch economic and diplomatic warfare against China after all, and that he will not question the value of US alliance relationships in the region.

⁴⁹ Green et al. (2016), *Asia-Pacific Rebalance 2025*, p. 101.

⁵⁰ Parameswaran, P. (2017), 'US, Thailand to Launch 2017 Cobra Gold Exercises', *The Diplomat*, 14 February 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/02/us-thailand-to-launch-2017-cobra-gold-military-exercises/> (accessed 24 May 2017).

⁵¹ See, for example, Corben, R. (2016), 'Thailand, China Step Up Military Cooperation', *Voice of America*, 26 May 2016, www.voanews.com/a/thailand-china-military-cooperation/3346960.html (accessed 24 May 2017); Parameswaran, P. (2016), 'China, Thailand Mull Joint Military Production Facility', *The Diplomat*, 20 December 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/12/china-thailand-mull-joint-military-production-facility/> (accessed 24 May 2017).

To the degree that there may be a ‘plan’ for US–China relations, it seems to be highly transactional, personalized and contingent. On the basis of Trump’s personal ‘chemistry’ with President Xi during the Mar-a-Lago summit, and in return for Beijing getting tougher on North Korea, the US president will be more forgiving of the American trade deficit with China. Southeast Asia and other partners such as Australia and India do not seem to figure prominently in Trump’s calculations of US interests in the region. Thus far, there has been little sense of collective purpose linking American interests to those of US allies, friends and other partners in the Asia-Pacific. Rather, the single most important strategic decision Trump has taken in relation to the region thus far – withdrawing the US from the TPP – has undermined America’s influence in shaping the Asia-Pacific’s future and given China an enormous opportunity to shape that future on its own terms.

Given the many strategic, security and economic challenges the US faces in this region, the administration needs to deliver a coherent and high-level statement – for example in the form of a major policy address by the president, national security adviser or secretary of state – about America’s overall vision towards this part of the world. An over-reliance thus far on the military aspect of US power in the region – for example, deploying US carrier battle groups towards North Korea in response to the latter’s missile tests – needlessly ignores other American strengths. An overall regional strategy must also include efforts to work closely and multilaterally with allies and friends, advance the US’s economic leadership and engagement, and uphold US values in support of democracy and good governance.

A more detailed, nuanced and multifaceted statement, reflective of the complexities of the region, should also set in motion the preparation and delivery of a new Asia-Pacific strategic review, to be completed before the end of 2017. It is possible that the US president’s announced commitment to participate in the meetings of the East Asia Summit (in the Philippines) and APEC (in Vietnam) taking place at the end of 2017 will generate a more comprehensive and strategic explication of US policy in the Asia-Pacific, but the earlier this can happen the better. It will be important for President Trump to include stops in Japan and South Korea during that trip to the region.

A second challenge concerns personnel. This problem has at least three components. The first is the lack of sufficient numbers of senior, experienced policy managers across the top of the administration, and Trump’s concomitant over-reliance on a few very close advisers, often family members. The second aspect in relation to personnel is the pervasive mistrust between the president and the public services, particularly the intelligence community. The third is the disarray and divisiveness which has characterized relationships between Trump’s senior advisers, a situation exacerbated by how the administration has handled concerns about its ties with Russia and the ongoing investigations into those ties.

This situation undermines the administration’s ability to think strategically and judiciously about America’s role in the region. It results in a lack of preparedness and a reliance on short-term solutions and quick fixes. It raises questions about who has the president’s ear and whether he takes US intelligence findings seriously.

It leaves the impression that the president has no underlying policy vision, but can be easily swayed towards new positions by one or another of his closest advisers. It has led to a public airing of profound policy differences within the West Wing, pitting a hard-right, nativist and ‘America first’ coalition against another group harbouring politically centrist and internationally oriented positions. For the US’s Asia-Pacific allies and friends, the result is confusion and lack of certainty about the consistency and resoluteness of American policy in the region. This in turn undermines US credibility and leadership.

Much as he has done with his national security adviser, President Trump should empower his cabinet secretaries to fill the range of key posts sitting empty in their departments. As national security adviser, H. R. McMaster must be allowed to do his job in coordinating administration-wide policy and generating a more consistent set of prescriptions, while to the extent possible diminishing the role of extreme politics and ideology in national security policy. It appears that the Trump administration is slowly evolving in this more pragmatic direction, but it has lost – and will continue to lose – a lot of precious time.

The third major concern about US foreign policy is that the Trump administration faces a number of challenges out in the region itself. There is a fair bit of political uncertainty within some US allies, which complicates Washington's relationships with these partners. For example, following the impeachment of South Korean President Park Geun-hye, the emergence of new leadership in Seoul could introduce new difficulties for US–South Korea relations at a time of increased tension and volatility on the Korean peninsula. The Australian prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, struggles to hold together a fragile coalition government while enduring low approval ratings. The now-infamous telephone call between Trump and Turnbull continues to negatively colour Australian views of the US president. Philippine President Duterte remains an erratic leader who appears to be popular at home in spite of impeachment complaints, but unpredictable in his dealings with the US.

The US administration has not signalled a strategic or top-down effort to facilitate closer relationships among regional allies and partners. This is an especially difficult problem for Japan–South Korea relations, which have sunk to new depths over the past year, even as the need for cooperation has grown, especially given the increasing tensions with North Korea.

In addition, the US administration has not signalled a strategic or top-down effort to facilitate closer relationships among regional allies and partners. This is an especially difficult problem for Japan–South Korea relations, which have sunk to new depths over the past year, even as the need for cooperation has grown, especially given the increasing tensions with North Korea. That said, lower-level, bottom-up consultations that pre-date the Trump administration will continue. These include consultations between the US, Japan and South Korea, and between the US, Australia, and Japan. However, the ultimate strength of such inter-alliance cooperation depends on political encouragement from the very top.

Perhaps most importantly, the challenges to US alliance relations posed by North Korea and China are particularly complex and difficult. Pyongyang has proven adept at exploiting divisions between Japan and South Korea. Its ability to rain destruction upon Seoul and other parts of South Korea constrains US options – especially military options – for stopping North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes. China's burgeoning economic clout and military power, combined with an increased willingness to exercise them, exacerbate the classic security dilemma of both 'abandonment' and 'entrapment' for US allies.

This situation demands an American leadership finely attuned to these dynamics and prepared to devote the necessary time and attention to nurturing relationships both bilaterally and multilaterally. But so far the Trump administration has not shown that it has the strategy, the will or the ability to conduct sophisticated relationship-building with and among US allies and partners in the region. As a result, China can be expected to steadily advance its positions and influence, especially through economic means.

Resisting North Korea’s nuclear ambitions should be an area in which Washington can forge a united front with its key Asia-Pacific allies, and possibly with China as well. But as President Trump acknowledged, this has proven to be ‘not as simple as people think’.⁵² Meanwhile, North Korea moves closer to realizing its goal of become a fully capable nuclear weapons state.

Other US allies around the world similarly feel many of the challenges affecting US policy towards the Asia-Pacific. Comments made by Trump as candidate, president-elect and president have called into question the value he places on relations with key European allies such as Germany, as well as with NATO and the European Union (EU). He predicted and later applauded the British public’s referendum decision to leave the EU, even though this will have a profoundly negative effect on European unity and solidarity.

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Trump has also appeared sympathetic to Russian President Vladimir Putin’s ambitions, raising doubts as to whether he would stand up to Russian territorial and political encroachments against a democratic and free Europe. As with his previously stated positions towards China, the US president has more recently backed away from some of his earlier statements regarding Europe and Russia. Nevertheless, America’s European allies, like its Asia-Pacific partners, are still left wondering about US leadership, engagement and commitment at a time of increasing uncertainty in global affairs.

Developments in East Asia – especially China’s economic trajectory, Beijing’s investments in Eurasian infrastructure and within Europe itself, and the state of US–China relations – will be of increasing importance to Europe. As such, European capitals have a keen interest in the US approach towards the Asia-Pacific.

So far that approach is lacking in strategy and full of ambiguity. However, that does not mean that allies should be passively reactive. Key European allies, such as the UK, should be in a good position to assess and encourage US strategic leadership and engagement in the Asia-Pacific.

These European powers should also invest further resources in developing their own economic and security relationships in the Asia-Pacific. This can be done via ongoing relationships with the US and/or US partners in the region, such as through the Five Power Defence Arrangements, the ASEAN Regional Forum, ‘Five Eyes’ intelligence cooperation, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Like American allies and friends in the Asia-Pacific, the UK and other European powers can spread their risk by aiming to strike a balance which develops security and economic ties with both the US and China.

In doing so, America’s allies in Europe as well as in the Asia-Pacific will have the best chance of hedging against the worst while aiming for the best when it comes to the new US administration and its still-uncertain approach towards the Asia-Pacific and the world.

⁵² For President Trump’s remarks about North Korea, see the transcript in Blake, A. (2017), ‘President Trump’s thoroughly confusing Fox Business interview, annotated’, *Washington Post*, 12 April 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/04/12/president-trumps-thoroughly-confusing-fox-business-interview-annotated/?utm_term=.cdaa832e43c6 (accessed 24 May 2017).

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Cover image: US President Donald Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pose for photographs before bilateral meetings on 10 February 2017 in Washington, DC.

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