

Donald Trump: The View from the Asia-Pacific. Loose Nukes and Loose Cannons

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Published on **29 June 2017** | issforum.org

Editors: Robert Jervis, Francis Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Shortlink: <http://tiny.cc/PR-1-5AQ>

Permalink: <http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5AQ-Asia-Pacific>

PDF URL: <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5AQ.pdf>

Slightly more than six months have elapsed since Donald Trump won the 2017 presidential election, and almost five since he took office. For all the Asia-Pacific nations—and virtually every other state—the ensuing days, weeks, and months have brought continuing revelations as to just how surreal United States politics might become. “Mr. Trump Goes to Washington” has become a never-ending reality saga, far surpassing any scenario the most enterprising Hollywood or television scriptwriter would dare to dream up. For sheer entertainment value, as a spectacle the Trump White House is hard to beat.

Across the Asia-Pacific, as elsewhere, the overwhelming expectation was that former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, a respected and experienced political figure with an established track record, would be the next president. While other states might not have been entirely happy with every position she took, she was a known and relatively predictable quantity. With Trump’s victory, not only were all bets off, but apprehension ran high. For a while, stunned disbelief characterized not just many Americans, but also much of the world beyond.

The frozen horror the prospect of President Trump generated around the Asia Pacific was readily comprehensible. Running for office, Trump comprehensively assailed the liberal free-trade principles that had since the 1950s fueled economic growth in East and Southeast Asia by opening U.S. markets to Asian goods, and, especially since the 1990s, encouraging Western manufacturers to relocate industrial production to lower-cost Asian plants. His rhetoric made passionate appeals to those Americans who felt themselves the victims rather than the beneficiaries of the ever growing “globalization,” free-market norms, and deregulation that had become increasingly prevalent around the world since the late 1970s or early 1980s. China was depicted as the arch-villain in this story, the nation that was not only running the highest trade surpluses with the United States, but had deftly manipulated its currency to ensure that its exports entered American markets at artificially low prices. Other Asian commercial partners—notably Japan, South Korea, and assorted Southeast Asian states—also featured somewhere on his radar screen as ‘unfair’ trade competitors. Trump’s election dealt the final blow to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the American-led regional trade agreement with Asia, as the new President announced that the United States would instead “negotiate fair and

bilaterally beneficial trade deals that will bring jobs back to American shores.” The Chinese-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership pact was now the only alternative, one likely to increase Chinese influence around the Asia-Pacific.¹

Equally or perhaps even more disturbing to Asian states were Trump’s attacks on U.S. allies for freeloading on American defense arrangements. Trump expected U.S. defense partners to boost their military spending and cease relying on free protection from the United States. If his campaign rhetoric was credible, the United States seemed likely to abandon Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, and Australia to their own devices, expecting them in the name of burden-sharing to meet their own defense costs. Trump went so far as to suggest that the United States would welcome the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Japan and South Korea. The Seventh Fleet conceivably might redeploy back to Hawaii. Most other nations in the region might find themselves facing a dramatic upsurge in Chinese military power that most considered undesirable. South Korea would also be left exposed to escalating nuclear threats from North Korea. Such expectations might well embolden those Japanese nationalists—possibly including Prime Minister Shinzō Abe—who long to rebuild Japanese military forces and perhaps acquire nuclear weapons. More than seventy years after World War II ended, the prospect of any Japanese military revival still terrifies many in the region. Yet for much of Southeast Asia and probably Australia, the possibility of Chinese hegemony is little more appetizing.

Initial Asian responses to the election of Donald Trump bore some resemblance to the mixture of panic and wary respect that the discovery of an unexploded bomb in the immediate neighborhood might elicit. For China, fears were compounded not simply by continuing hostile comments on its trade policies and its assertiveness in the South China Sea that the President-elect posted on his ever-active Twitter account, but also by his accepting a phone call in early December 2016 from President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan. The close ties to Taiwan that some of his senior foreign policy advisers enjoyed gave rise to further apprehensions that this move portended a major change in the de facto understanding and status quo on Taiwan that had governed U.S. and Chinese policy for almost forty years. Commentators noted that the Republican platform on which Trump had run for the presidency had reaffirmed U.S. support for Taiwan, in language last used by President Ronald Reagan in 1982.² In response, mainland Chinese media, which had previously been relatively restrained in commenting on Trump, responded with fierce condemnation. The nationalist *Global Times*, a state-run tabloid, concluded that Trump was “not behaving as a president who will become master of the White House in a month,” complaining that: “He bears no sense of how to lead a superpower.” If Trump’s attacks continued after his inauguration, the newspaper warned, China would not “exercise restraint.”³ China, preoccupied in recent years with enhancing its global position and influence within the existing international system and possibly modifying that system to its own advantage, suddenly faced the

¹ Fanny Potkin, “What Trump’s Presidency Will Mean for Southeast Asia in 2017,” *Forbes*, 8 December 2016.

² Mark Landler and Jane Perlez, “Trump’s Call with Taiwan: A Diplomatic Gaffe or a New Start?” *New York Times*, 5 December 2016; also Mark Landler and David E. Sanger, “Trump Speaks with Taiwan’s Leader, An Affront to China,” *New York Times*, 2 December 2016; Jane Perlez, “China Sees New Ambiguity with Donald Trump’s Taiwan Call,” *New York Times*, 3 December 2016; Mark Landler, “Donald Trump Thrusts Taiwan Back on the Table, Rattling a Region,” *New York Times*, 3 December 2016; and Ann Gearan, Philip Rucker, and Simon Denyer, “Trump’s Taiwan phone call was long planned, say people who were involved,” *Washington Post*, 4 December 2016.

³ Tom Phillips, “Trump has no idea how to run a superpower, say Chinese media,” *The Guardian*, 19 December 2016.

prospect that the ground rules by which it was playing might themselves change dramatically. Whether such developments would be beneficial or detrimental to China's regional ambitions was decidedly unclear.

While many commentators have assumed that Trump's election represents an unprecedented challenge to the existing international system, for Asia this is not entirely true. At least once before, Asian leaders faced the alarming prospect of dramatic change in American policies that might even have involved U.S. withdrawal from the Asia-Pacific, leaving its erstwhile allies uncomfortably exposed to great powers. In the 1970s, U.S. allies and non-communist states in Asia—Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and even Indonesia—confronted the possibility of a dramatic drawdown of U.S. forces in the region, one that became even more likely after the fall of South Vietnam in 1975. Jimmy Carter was elected president in 1976 on a platform that envisaged the removal of American military personnel and bases from South Korea. Within the United States, there were calls in and beyond the U.S. Congress for Japan to remilitarize and perhaps even acquire nuclear weapons, and also for Japan to enhance its economic aid programs and investments around Southeast Asia and in China.

In such crises, a host of Track II organizations and dialogue arrangements are now often available, ready to swing into action on the multilateral and bilateral fronts. While these were less ubiquitous in the 1970s, some already existed. Japan and South Korea both had a variety of well-established think tanks and policy institutes, with links to some of their American counterparts. The Trilateral Commission, linking Japanese, European, and North American elites, was founded in 1973. In addition, the annual Williamsburg Conferences—sometimes termed “the Asian Bilderberg”—were established in 1971 by John D. Rockefeller III and the Asia Society in part to reassure non-Communist states in East and Southeast Asia that the United States was not so preoccupied with its new opening to China that it had forgotten older associates in the region. These extremely private annual meetings of top-level political, business, and academic elites from North America, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong, provided opportunities for high-level policymakers from non-communist Asian states to express quite forcefully to their North American peers worries that the United States might be contemplating withdrawal from Asia, as well as their concerns over the prospect of Japan acquiring nuclear weapons or raising its military profile.⁴

Forty years later, many more multilateral and bilateral forums for dialogue and negotiation exist, linking elites within the Asia-Pacific and beyond in efforts to interpret the international scene. With the election of Trump, all such mechanisms went into overdrive in attempts to analyze the new President and the implications for the Asia Pacific of his victory. Recent commentators have suggested that—although the jury is still out—at least in the short-run, some of Trump's international positions are becoming less extreme. Most nonetheless hasten to add that, with many key foreign policy posts in the State and Defense Departments still unfilled, any assessment of the Trump administration's international outlook must be provisional at best.⁵ Unpredictability has become the new normal.

⁴ For further details, see Priscilla Roberts, “The Seventh Williamsburg Conference and China: Canberra, 1977,” unpublished manuscript; and Dino Knudsen, *The Trilateral Commission and Global Governance: Informal Elite Diplomacy, 1972-82* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁵ Richard Sokolsky and Aaron Miller, “Trump's Foreign Policy: 100 Days of Global Bafflement,” *Politico*, 24 April 2017, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Website, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/04/24/trump-s>

How have Asian states sought to respond to the roller coaster of Trump statements and actions? In most cases, with pronounced caution. Like their counterparts around the world, following his victory the leaders of most Asian countries generally tried to place a courtesy telephone call to the President-elect, expressing good wishes and hopes for future cooperation. Some such conversations were cordial: Japan's Prime Minister Abe and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte each apparently had a warm and friendly first telephone exchange with Trump.⁶ Abe followed this up with a personal visit in February 2017. He came bearing a gift of gold-plated golf clubs, visited both the White House and Trump's retreat in Mar-a-Lago, and promised to increase Japanese defense spending.⁷ Other encounters were more fraught. Malcolm Turnbull of Australia, one of the closest U.S. allies in the Asia-Pacific, had a notoriously acrimonious initial phone call with Trump, as the two men differed over refugee policy, and eventually broke off the call.⁸ Yet here, too, fences were soon mended. In terms of its own interests, Australia had too much at stake to allow hurt feelings to destabilize permanently its relationship with the United States.⁹

Southeast Asian countries felt particularly vulnerable. On commercial and security matters, several major ASEAN states, including Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore, were apprehensive. Most disliked the U.S. decision to jettison the TPP, which was likely to inflict significant harm on their economies. Several also feared that China's growing strength and assertiveness in both the military and economic spheres, especially its insistence that most of the entire South China Sea should be considered Chinese territorial waters, threatened not just their own maritime claims to portions of these waters and the islands in them, but more broadly speaking, their independence as states. As China expanded its footprint and activities in the South China Sea, reclaiming reefs and placing military installations on them, most had tried to use the United States as a strategic counterweight to China. Trump's election seemed to threaten this delicate balance. Although Rex Tillerson, Trump's Secretary of State, visited Asia in early May 2017 and met with all ten ASEAN foreign ministers, urging them to impose stronger sanctions on North Korea and promising that Trump would attend the next ASEAN summit in November 2017, many of his interlocutors

[foreign-policy-100-days-of-global-bafflement-pub-68763](#), accessed 31 May 2017; Klaus Larres, "Donald Trump and America's Grand Strategy: U.S. foreign policy toward Europe, Russia and China," *Global Policy* (May 2017); Larres, "Reality check: Donald Trump shies away from isolationism during his first meeting with the Chinese president," *International Politics and Society*, 11 April 2017; and Ross Douthat, "Donald Trump, Establishment Sellout," *New York Times*, 20 May 2017.

⁶ Potkin, "What Trump's Presidency Will Mean for Southeast Asia in 2017," 8 December 2016.

⁷ Jennifer Lind, "The Art of the Bluff: The U.S.-Japan Alliance under the Trump Administration," H-Diplo/ISSF Policy Series: America and the World—2017 and Beyond, 25 April 2017.

⁸ Greg Miller and Philip Rucker, "This was the Worst Call by Far': Trump Badgered, Bragged and Ultimately ended Phone Call with Australian Leader," *Washington Post*, 2 February 2017; and Glenn Thrush and Michelle Innis, "U.S.-Australia Rift is Possible after Trump Ends Call with Prime Minister," *New York Times*, 2 February 2017.

⁹ "Trump, Australia's Turnbull move to clear air after tense phone call," *Reuters*, 5 May 2017.

remained dissatisfied with U.S. economic and strategic policies and the security dilemmas with which the Trump administration presented them.¹⁰

The remarkable improvement in relations between China and the United States that followed the first meeting between Trump and China's paramount leader, President Xi Jinping, at Mar-a-Lago in early April 2017, provided significant justification for such apprehensions. During his presidential campaign, Trump had effectively demonized China, and his apparent questioning of the established U.S. guidelines on Taiwan further strained relations. Although Trump did ultimately reverse course and announce his adherence to the one-China policy, when the forthcoming summit meeting of Trump and China's President Xi Jinping was announced in March 2017, expectations were extremely low. Trump even tweeted, forecasting that their first encounter would be "very difficult."¹¹

As so often with Trump, events confounded all prior predictions. After their meeting, Trump tweeted his admiration for both President Xi Jinping and the latter's stylish wife, Peng Liyuan, announcing that he and Xi had a "very, very good relationship" and had made "tremendous progress" in their talks, while proclaiming how helpful he had found the Chinese leader's elucidation of the difficulties China faced in seeking to influence President Kim Jong-un of North Korea.¹² Xi Jinping is, it seems, Trump's new best friend. In the interests of avoiding future crises, the two Presidents established a special communications hotline. China subsequently signed various trade deals on beef, poultry, and natural gas with American businesses, while promising to open its markets further to a variety of U.S. products, and to allow American credit card firms to offer their services to Chinese consumers.¹³ In an effort to persuade its recalcitrant neighbor to enter into talks with the United States and other powers that might rein in its nuclear weapons program, China also applied various forms of economic pressure to North Korea and acquiesced in the expansion of United Nations sanctions on Kim Jong-un's regime.¹⁴ The Trump administration, for its part, announced that it intended to cut back to zero funding for State Department aid programs for Tibetans in exile.¹⁵

¹⁰ David Brunnstrom, "Tillerson urges ASEAN to cut North Korea funding, minimize ties," *Reuters*, 4 May 2017.

¹¹ Cristiano Lima, "Trump Tweets: Meeting with Chinese leader will be 'very difficult,'" *Politico*, 30 March 2017.

¹² Tom Phillips, "Donald Trump hails friendship with China's Xi as missiles head to Syria," *The Guardian*, 7 April 2017; and "Trump hails 'tremendous' progress in talks with China's Xi," *BBC News*, 7 April 2017.

¹³ See, e.g., Keith Bradsher, "U.S. Strikes China Trade Deals but Leaves Major Issues Untouched," *New York Times*, 11 May 2017.

¹⁴ Robert Delaney, "UN punishes North Korea in first China-US sanctions deal under Trump," *South China Morning Post*, 3 June 2017.

¹⁵ "Donald Trump administration proposes zero aid to Tibetan community," *Indian Express*, 26 May 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/world/donald-trump-administration-proposes-zero-aid-to-tibetan-community-4674173/>, accessed 1 June 2017.

China had, it seemed, pulled off what has almost certainly been the greatest diplomatic coup of the early Trump administration: an apparent rapprochement with the new President. How and why did this happen? To a considerable degree, it reflects the extent to which, in less than four decades since the normalization of relations with the United States, the People's Republic (PRC) has become what one leading scholar of Sino-American relations recently termed an "insider" of the existing international system.¹⁶ Trump's victory came a mere six months after the people of Great Britain voted, by a narrow majority, to leave the European Union. Both these political events have been widely interpreted as a rejection by ordinary people of the espousal by international elites of globalization, deregulation, and free-market economics, an outlook that has become increasingly entrenched since the late 1970s, facilitated both by China's enthusiastic embrace of the market revolution under Deng Xiaoping and his successors, and by the ending of the Cold War. China's ever-growing prosperity and economic might owed much to the ever growing dismantling of barriers to the free movement of goods and capital, a trend that made it far easier than ever before for international businesses to outsource the production of manufactured goods and eventually of services to locations outside their own borders where costs are lower than in those businesses' original home countries.

China, now a stakeholder in the existing system, responded to Trump's electoral victory with immediate and unfeigned horror. Soon, however, a dual strategy came into play. On the international stage, less than a week before Trump's inauguration, President Xi Jinping of China made a major address at the annual Davos forum, a meeting of the international great and good and the world's power brokers, in which he affirmed China's continued adherence to the norms of globalization, and in particular to open markets and unfettered world trade.¹⁷ In a fairly astonishing reversal of roles, with the defection of the United States, China's leader was stepping up, assuming the mantle of foremost champion of these values, and presenting himself as the voice of moderation and reason. In simple terms, China has invested too much in the existing international system to stand by and simply watch it being dismantled.

On the more pragmatic level, Chinese diplomats and specialists on the United States scrutinized the Trump administration in great detail, with the objective of understanding how it worked in practice. After the early weeks of incredulity, China became exceptionally cautious toward the incoming regime. An official directive to the Chinese media clearly stated: "Any news about Trump must be handled carefully; unauthorised criticism of Trump's words or actions is not allowed." The media were instructed only to publish stories on Trump that originated from Xinhua, the government news agency. In an effort to avoid offering any kind of provocation to the new president, Chinese officialdom went further, and embargoed any attacks on Trump's somewhat inflammatory gender attitudes from feminist groups within China, temporarily closing the Weibo social media account of one such organization after it posted an article highly critical of his views.¹⁸ Back in favor, too, are the assorted organizations and personal networks that have invested heavily—in many cases

¹⁶ Chen Jian, Keynote Speech, Conference on "Cultural Integration and Cultural Conflict: Great Power Relations and Hong Kong," 20 May 2017, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou.

¹⁷ "Fulltext of Xi Jinping Keynote at the World Economic Forum," 17 January 2017, CGTN America Website, <https://america.cgtv.com/2017/01/17/full-text-of-xi-jinping-keynote-at-the-world-economic-forum>, accessed 3 June 2017.

¹⁸ "Donald Trump's feminist critics in China accuse Weibo of gagging their views," *South China Morning Post*, 22 February 2017.

since the early 1970s—in keeping U.S. relations with Asia on an even keel. In the case of China, this marks something of a change. In the past three to five years, Chinese voices counselling moderation and continued rapprochement with the United States have been conspicuously excluded from Beijing political circles, while informal elite contacts among influential Chinese and Americans have languished and fallen into abeyance.¹⁹ Now—in something of a reprise of China’s original opening to the United States, when the Foreign Ministry’s cohort of America-watchers were suddenly recalled from re-education in the fields to deploy their expertise to further the new policy initiative—China’s established group of middle-of-the-road American specialists are more visible than has been the case for several years.

The Chinese government’s ultimate policy objective was to enable a meeting of not just persons but ideally minds between Trump and Xi Jinping. Chinese diplomats, especially State Councillor Yang Jiechi and China’s Ambassador in Washington, Cui Tiankai, soon concluded that the advisers who carry most weight with Trump are two family members, his daughter and son-in-law, Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner. They promptly set out to cultivate the couple, whose relatives, notably Kushner’s sister, do indeed enjoy significant business links with China.²⁰ Given how salient family ties still are in Chinese culture—and indeed, in Asian cultures generally—this strategy perhaps came fairly naturally to those involved. Charm is not a quality normally associated with China’s formidable and somewhat forbidding President, who generally leaves that department to his talented and charismatic wife, Peng Liyuan, in whose company—now almost a given on his foreign trips—he nonetheless relaxes visibly. On this occasion, though, China’s first couple were on a mission, one they performed with an aplomb reminiscent of the skill displayed by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and his late wife Raisa in the early years of overtures to the West.

Beyond Mar-a-Lago

What will happen next is less clear. At least in public, well-connected Chinese political commentators are currently often being exceptionally circumspect when discussing any aspect of Sino-American relations. Most are willing, however, to caution that it is far too early to reach any definite conclusions as to the future course of Sino-American relations, and that on both sides much will depend on the internal domestic political factors involved. Privately, in closed-door discussions of the subject, experts have differed remarkably in their analysis of which side came out best from this encounter. Pointing to the trade concessions Trump won from China, one suggested that he has been far more successful than any previous American president in obtaining genuine changes in Chinese international commercial policy. Another, by contrast, thought that the advantage lay with China, and lauded the skill of Chinese diplomats in analyzing Trump’s inner circle, identifying those with the greatest influence on him who might be sympathetic to modifying his early position on China, and working to facilitate a personal meeting.

¹⁹ Orville Schell, “China Strikes Back!,” *New York Review of Books*, 23 October 2014; Edward Wong, “Xi Jinping’s Inner Circle Offers Cold Shoulders to Western Officials,” *New York Times*, 25 September 2015; and Karen Lu Huang, Nectar Gan, and Kristine Kwok, “Now for the Hard Part,” *South China Morning Post*, 30 September 2015.

²⁰ David Shambaugh, “Can steely Xi Jinping and volatile Donald Trump find the right chemistry in Florida?,” *South China Morning Post*, 31 March 2017; and Shi Jiangtao, “The man behind the Xi-Trump summit,” *South China Morning Post*, 1 April 2017.

Few, however, expected that the new warmth between the two leaders heralded any resurgence of the Group of Two (G-2) worldview put forward some years earlier by the late Zbigniew Brzezinski, an outlook that contended that the only international relationship that really mattered was that between the United States and China, who could effectively come close to running the world between them.²¹ Publicly and privately, more cautious voices warned that Trump is an exceptionally volatile individual, who is entirely capable of reversing any past position almost instantaneously, either for self-interested reasons or due to real or fancied affronts to his outsize ego. Americans familiar with Trump's past business career also counsel that he is a man who takes a transactional view of both business and international dealings and has little if any belief in "win-win" solutions, but is driven by an ingrained zero-sum outlook that could lead him to cancel any past bargain if he thought he could thereby gain some advantage. The message was clear: Trump could not necessarily be trusted. Independent Asian political commentators do not hesitate to express doubts as to his judgment, most recently in seeking the views of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte on China's policies toward North Korea.²²

One trigger for the Mar-a-Lago meeting between Trump and Xi Jinping was North Korea's intransigent insistence on not merely continuing its program of developing nuclear missiles, but conducting tests that—even though as often as not unsuccessful—seem deliberately calculated to rattle its neighbors. Hopes of persuading China to pressure North Korea into abandoning its nuclear program were one factor driving Trump to meet with Xi Jinping. In an updated version of what former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger once termed linkage, the American President even suggested that, if China could use sanctions to influence North Korea in this direction, the United States would be less rigorous in demanding commercial concessions. China has imposed some restrictions and endorsed more restrictive UN sanctions but, given Kim Jong-un's past and present stubborn determination to go his own way, just how effective such measures may be is something of an open question. North Korea responded to Mar-a-Lago with additional missile tests in April and May, moves that alarmed not just the United States but also Japan and even Beijing, both of which are uncomfortably within range of these weapons. China, perhaps the only ally and patron North Korea possesses, the source of much of its food and coal, apparently has very little leverage over its obstreperous client. This is far from new: even in the mid-1950s, China found North Korean President Kim Il-sung such a difficult ally that Chinese leaders Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai contemplated removing him from office.²³

The role and powers of commander-in-chief seem to appeal to Trump. Despite his campaign rhetoric condemning U.S. military interventionism almost everywhere and questioning the value of his country's alliances, since taking office he has authorized missile strikes on government forces in Syria, an episode that coincided with President Xi's arrival at Mar-a-Lago, and proposed a ten percent increase in U.S. military spending. If American allies respond positively to his calls to boost their own defense budgets, the strategic position of the United States might even be enhanced. There is some evidence that Trump administration

²¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The Group of Two that could change the world," *Financial Times*, 14 January 2009.

²² Phar Kim Beng, "How Xi and Abe will Interpret Trump's North Korea Call with Duterte," *South China Morning Post*, 28 May 2017.

²³ Nobuo Shimotomai, "Kim Il Sung's Balancing Act Between Moscow and Beijing, 1956-1972," in *The Cold War in East Asia: 1945-1991* (Washington, DC, and Stanford: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2011), 122-151.

officials contemplated the possibility of a unilateral strike that would eliminate North Korea's nuclear program. In late April, at a closed-door meeting on Sino-U.S. relations, a retired Chinese general even asked a retired U.S. admiral whether the United States could be certain of identifying and destroying every single missile installation. (His interlocutor gave no definite reply.) Since then, it has become clear that there is no guarantee this could be done. Instead, multilateral talks aimed at a peaceful resolution of the situation in Korea, negotiations that will involve both Koreas, China, the United States, and Japan, are now very much on the agenda.²⁴ In a recent tweet condemning the latest North Korean missile test, Trump himself praised China for "trying hard" on North Korea.²⁵

Even so, top Chinese policy advisers anticipate choppy waters for Sino-US relations. In late May 2017 the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a leading Beijing think tank, released a report on U.S. foreign policy under Trump, that contended that Trump would be less likely than his predecessor, Barack Obama, to make concessions to China; that he would increase the pressure on Beijing to get tough with North Korea, especially if direct talks between the United States and North Korea proved fruitless; and that, Trump's "America First" pledges notwithstanding, the United States would retain its strategic stake in the Asia-Pacific region. The Academy's report characterized Trump as "more determined than Obama to take diplomatic and military risks in key international issues," and thought the North Korean nuclear situation "will bring huge challenges for Sino-US relations." The report's authors thought it likely that the United States would also turn to Japan and South Korea to deal with North Korea. In addition, they anticipated further confrontations with U.S. military forces over the South China Sea, where U.S. surveillance aircraft and destroyers were already operating in waters claimed by China. They did, however, suggest that China and the United States could seek greater bilateral cooperation in the economic sphere.²⁶

The report was broadly correct in its analysis. A few days later, U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis arrived at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue, an Asian defense summit and regional security forum organized every year in Singapore by the International Institute of International Studies. He promptly proclaimed the determination of the United States to stand by its Asian partners, including Taiwan, even as it welcomed Chinese assistance with North Korea. Even though Mattis responded to subsequent questions by reaffirming U.S. adherence to the existing "one-China" policy, PLA representatives present responded with vehement objections.²⁷ The forum became a venue for Australian, U.S., French, and Japanese criticism of China's

²⁴ Catherine Wong, "North Korean nuclear threat tops agenda as China's senior diplomat visits Tokyo," *South China Morning Post*, 29 May 2017; Kristin Huang, "Japan seeks China's support in confronting North Korea over missile launches," *South China Morning Post*, 30 May 2017; and "Japan vows to work with China to solve North Korea crisis," *South China Morning Post*, 31 May 2017.

²⁵ Catherine Wong, "North Korean nuclear threat tops agenda as China's senior diplomat visits Tokyo," *South China Morning Post*, 29 May 2017.

²⁶ Teddy Ng, "Why the Trump era could mean riskier business for Beijing," *South China Morning Post*, 29 May 2017.

²⁷ "James Mattis outrages China's military delegation with Taiwan remark at Asia Security Forum," *South China Morning Post*, 3 June 2017; and Jeevan Vasagar, "US appeals for Chinese engagement over threat from North Korea," *Financial Times*, 3 June 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/e2555dd8-4801-11e7-8d27-59b4dd6296b8>, accessed 3 June 2017.

actions in the South China Sea, as a breach of the “rules-based order” to which China proclaims allegiance, part of an effort to establish a regional Chinese “Monroe Doctrine.” It was also an arena for Asian states to express to Mattis their concerns over Trump’s economic and security policies.²⁸ In late May, U.S. naval forces had resumed freedom of navigation patrols in disputed areas of the South China Sea. As China protested fiercely against these characterizations of its policies, Chinese and U.S. military aircraft came dangerously close to each other a mere 150 miles away from Hong Kong, while Chinese naval forces ostentatiously sailed out of Hong Kong on patrol.²⁹ Mattis subsequently joined Secretary of State Tillerson on a visit to Australia that emphasized U.S.-Australian defense cooperation, and coincided with a wave of Australian media stories on Chinese interference in Australian politics and intelligence activities.³⁰ Early expectations notwithstanding, the Yanks are not, it seems, about to go home from Asia any time soon.

Looking to the Future

Although China may now be considered an “insider” of the existing international system, some at least of its policy intellectuals wish it to become a “contributor” to that system, helping to set the international climate of opinion and agenda by putting forward novel and seminal ideas that become part of the global discourse. To date, few representatives of China have been able to attain that status. Much Chinese thinking on international affairs appears somewhat outdated, a recycling of concepts already well established in traditional international relations theory, and rather imitative and derivative in nature.

Ever since the Harvard scholar Joseph S. Nye, Jr., writing in the early 1990s, popularized the concept of ‘soft power’ as an intangible but valuable asset that could supplement and magnify a country’s military and economic strength when dealing with other nations, Chinese leaders and scholars alike have been intrigued by the concept. For budgetary reasons, China was also drawn to the concept of ‘soft power’ as a means of maximizing its influence at minimal cost. In a keynote address to the Seventeenth Chinese Communist Party Congress in October 2007, President Hu Jintao highlighted the need to boost China’s soft power, using the media and Chinese culture to enhance the country’s standing and its international cultural and intellectual prestige and influence overseas. President Xi Jinping continued this policy, even as he placed far greater emphasis than his predecessors upon boosting his country’s military effectiveness, presence, and reach, not just its economic influence.³¹ In May 2013 he also aggressively proclaimed his belief in the “China Dream,”

²⁸ Wang Xiangwei, “China Chafes at Lectures on ‘Rules-Based Order,’ as US Breaks All the Rules,” *South China Morning Post*, 10 June 2017.

²⁹ Shi Jiangtao, “China Shows US its Military Muscle with Patrol off Hong Kong Waters Amid Rising Maritime Tensions,” *South China Morning Post*, 8 June 2017.

³⁰ Asher Wolf, “Frenzied Australian Media Fears Foreign Influence—‘China’ Foreign, Not ‘US’ Foreign,” *South China Morning Post*, 10 June 2017.

³¹ Xinhua, “Xi: China to Promote Cultural Soft Power,” 1 January 2014, XinhuaNet Website, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-01/01/c_125941955.htm, accessed 5 October 2015; Zhang Lihua, “Beijing Focuses on Soft Power,” 28 April 2014, Carnegie-Tsinghua Website, <http://carnegietsinghua.org/publications/?fa=55458>, accessed 5 October 2015; and Rory Medcalf, “Xi Jinping’s Speech: More Diplomacy, Less Raw Power,” 1 December 2014, The Interpreter Website,

purportedly a rival to the “American Dream,” a vision of China as a prosperous and modernized society.³² President Xi Jinping’s vision of China’s future combines economic prosperity, national assertiveness overseas, and a hard-line approach to any potential threat to state and party authority.

Some Chinese are eager for China to throw its weight around more assertively in international affairs. In a book with the title *The China Dream*, Colonel Liu Mingfu, a retired Chinese army officer whose views are apparently influential with President Xi Jinping, argues that it is inevitable that China will replace the United States as the global hegemon and the world’s foremost military power.³³ Historians and political commentators have embarked on intense debate as to whether China is a rising power that will eclipse and replace the United States, possibly through war with the current hegemon of the international system, or whether the two are more likely to work together and perhaps even become co-hegemons.³⁴ Martin Jacques and Stephen Halper suggest that the “Beijing consensus” Chinese model of economic growth and political authoritarianism is likely to prevail over Western norms of liberal capitalist democracy enshrined in the “Washington consensus.”³⁵

Until recently, many Chinese seemed to assume that relations between the United States and China would inevitably deteriorate, quite possibly ultimately provoking fullscale war or at least armed conflict between the two. A significant number of Chinese academics and policy intellectuals subscribe to Realist international affairs theories that view geopolitics and global strategy from a win-lose balance of power perspective, and the

<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/12/01/Xi-Jinping-speech-More-diplomacy-less-raw-power.aspx>, accessed 5 October 2015.

³² “The Chinese Dream Infuses Socialism with Chinese Characteristics with New Energy,” editorial, *Qiushi*, 1 May 2013, text available on China Copyright and Media Website, <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2013/05/06/the-chinese-dream-infuses-socialism-with-chinese-characteristics-with-new-energy/>, accessed 1 June 2017; also “Potential of the Chinese Dream,” *China Daily USA*, 26 March 2014, http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2014-03/26/content_17380146.htm, accessed 1 June 2017; and numerous other articles on this topic available through the China Daily Website, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/Chinese-dream.html>.

³³ Liu Mingfu, *The China Dream: Great Power Thinking and Strategic Power in the Post-America Era* (New York: CN Times Books, 2015). This work was first published in Chinese in 2010. See also Edward Wong, “In China, A Colonel’s Views Bolster Nationalism,” *International New York Times* (3-4 October 2015).

³⁴ See, e.g., Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: Norton, 2011); Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China’s Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Will Hutton, *The Writing on the Wall: Why We Must Embrace China as a Partner or Face It as an Enemy* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

³⁵ Stefan A. Halper, *The Beijing Consensus: How China’s Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); and Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2012). For further discussion of the Beijing consensus, see Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus* (London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2004); and S. Philip Hsu, Zhao Shuisheng, and Wu Yu-shan, eds., *In Search of China’s Development Model: Beyond the Beijing Consensus* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

United States as a major rival to China. Many like to cite what has become known as the “Thucydides trap,” drawing on the theory put forward by the Greek historian in his classic history of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, that a rising power will inexorably end up fighting an established rival. Whether the intellectual framework employed to describe competition between two small Greek city-states almost two and a half millennia ago offers an adequate explanatory model for relations today between two major global powers located on different landmasses is a question they rarely if ever consider. In the time of Thucydides, and for many years afterwards, war was often considered the normal state of affairs, with peace only a temporary truce between renewed outbreaks of hostilities.³⁶ It is also worth noting that much international relations theory was developed during the twentieth century, and that realism and liberalism each constitute interpretive outlooks that emerged at least in part as efforts to justify aspects of growing U.S. involvement in global affairs.

A more ominously apposite parallel might be the outbreak of World War I. In many respects, China appears to be a power operating by late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century norms, in a twenty-first century world where ostensibly weaker neighbors and internal and external critics and dissenters have recourse to a huge array of international institutions, allies, and stratagems, governmental and non-governmental. Recent scholarship suggests that in 1914 war was precipitated by the decisions of official military and civilian elites in Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Russia who felt that the survival in those nations of their existing autocratic systems of government was increasingly threatened by the spread of liberal values and outlooks within and beyond their borders. Rather than acquiescing in political and social change, they preferred to risk total destruction by choosing war, an option they selected despite the existence of influential and well-publicized books that suggested that the early twentieth-century world’s economic interdependence had made major conflicts between major powers obsolete.³⁷ By the time World War I was over, of course, the authoritarian and monarchical regimes of all three empires had been overthrown.

There is at least one relatively recent example of a hegemonic world power that surrendered the mantle to a successor without a war for supremacy: the replacement of the British empire by the United States that occurred during the mid-twentieth century. Strains and tensions undoubtedly disturbed the Anglo-American relationship, but what the historian David Reynolds has termed “competitive co-operation” was its fundamental *modus operandi*.³⁸ The transfer of power from Britain to the United States was mediated and facilitated by the existence at numerous levels of a wide range of personal and non-governmental contacts and transnational networks, informal links that were often utilized to promote understanding on both sides—especially during crises—and to develop shared policies.

³⁶ See, e.g., Karl Walling, “Thucydides on Policy, Strategy, and War Termination,” *Naval War College Review* 66:4 (Autumn 2013), 47-85.

³⁷ Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, eds., *The Origins of World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), esp. the chapters on Austria-Hungary by Graydon A. Tunstall, Jr., on Germany by Holger H. Herwig, and on Russia by David Alan Rich; Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918* (London: Arnold, 1997); and David Fromkin, *Europe’s Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* (New York: Knopf, 2004).

³⁸ David Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance, 1937-41: A Study in Competitive Co-operation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

China has become a recognized and respected presence on the international scene, even as its leadership somewhat schizophrenically hymns the advantages of globalization, while pursuing nationalistic objectives that result in repressive domestic policies and strained relationships with both its immediate neighbors and more distant states. Donald Trump's unbridled rhetoric and tweets on China, first hostile, more recently admiring, have certainly turned the spotlight on that country to an almost unprecedented degree. As the American President announced his decision to withdraw the United States from the Paris climate change accords, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang stated that China would work with the European Union to implement continued international cooperation to attempt to mitigate the impact of global warming.³⁹ In a somewhat bizarre sequel, a wide range of top U.S. business figures, J.P. Morgan Chase's Jamie Dimon and the heads of Apple and Google among them, together with governors and mayors representing U.S. states and cities that dissented from Trump's climate change reversal, promptly announced their readiness to support and work with China, the European Union, and other signatories of the Paris accords in continuing efforts to implement the policies Trump had just repudiated.⁴⁰

It is just possible that the rise to power of Donald Trump will lead China to reassess its policies and produce a genuinely new model of international leadership, one that will offer a new and attractive alternative to current practices and address issues of real importance to the world as a whole. Unfettered market capitalism plus authoritarian domestic repression is unlikely to do the trick. In the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping broke iconoclastically with the PRC's past adherence to central planning and Marxist-Leninist tenets, to align China not just with Western capitalism, but specifically with the neoliberal free-market model that—despite definite compromises in its implementation by even those Western governments that formally adhered to this outlook—was winning increasing intellectual acceptance and acclaim in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Arguably, by focusing on economic development at almost any price, from the 1970s onward China deliberately aligned itself with the world's have rather than have-not powers, seeking to become a player at the international top table, and abandoning its earlier self-identification with Third World and developing nations and anti-colonial forces. China's dramatic tilt in this direction undoubtedly helped to legitimize the ascendancy of hard-edged neoliberal economic principles, which international institutions urged enthusiastically upon former communist states and developing nations from the 1990s onward. A populist rebellion against this new orthodoxy was one major impulse propelling Trump's capture of the presidency.

Short cuts to global standing and prestige are few and far between. But China now has an opportunity to define itself as the representative and spokesperson of forward-looking forces—which might well include many major corporate leaders around the world—that embrace globalization, but seek to mitigate its impact on vulnerable individuals, groups, and states, and no longer favor untrammelled neoliberal capitalism. Its size and wealth, not to mention its espousal of the Belt and Road Initiative, its ambitious program to promote economic development across Asia, Latin America, and Africa, and perhaps even Europe and North America, give China a perhaps unique opportunity to articulate an alternative developmental vision that draws on its own traditions, dating back more than sixty years, and encapsulating the 1955 Bandung spirit, while rejecting simplistic versions of free market economics and neoliberalism that ignore human considerations and the need

³⁹ "World leaders renew vow to fight climate change after Trump pulls U.S. out of Paris agreement," *South China Morning Post*, 2 June 2017.

⁴⁰ "A matter of principle': U.S. business leaders slam Trump's withdrawal from Paris climate deal," *South China Morning Post*, 3 June 2017.

to cater to those who lose as well as those who gain from the latest economic model. Doing so would require a verve, imagination, and confidence rarely evident in international affairs, especially in the often dour and formulaic *pronunciamentos* of uncompromising Chinese officialdom. But perceptive commentators have also noted that a new generation of Chinese diplomats, familiar with the outside world, has begun to display an unprecedented level of excellence, skill, and charm.⁴¹

Faced with the twin crises of Trump and North Korea and the need to deal with not one but two volatile, unpredictable, and uncompromising leaders, one an ocean away and the other uncomfortably close to home, it is not inconceivable that Asia-Pacific nations might pragmatically decide to shelve past disputes and antagonisms and make an effort to work together to meet these new challenges. In early May 2017, the finance ministers of China, Japan, and South Korea came together at the annual meeting of the Asian Development Bank and issued a joint statement in which they pledged to “resist all forms of protectionism.”⁴² Although he did not attend the recent Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, Prime Minister Abe of Japan sent a personal letter to President Xi Jinping, a new departure that might herald further moves to set current antagonisms to one side.⁴³ Instead of talking past each other and repetitively rehashing old wrongs and grievances, Japan and China are now making admittedly tentative efforts to resolve their own fraught relationship, which has deteriorated dramatically in recent years. Paradoxically, in Asia it might even be something of a blessing, admittedly well-disguised, that the United States can no longer simply be taken for granted. The reliable predictability of past U.S. policies may of itself have helped to stifle any sense of urgency that greater maturity and restraint on all sides were desirable, even essential. With uncertainty now the hallmark of American dealings with the rest of the world, the appearance on the scene of Donald Trump conceivably might serve as a wake-up call for nations around the Asia-Pacific, impelling them to focus less on their differences and competing claims, and more on their common interests.

At present, China faces challenges in Hong Kong that arise at least in part from deep-rooted unhappiness by those who feel powerless in the face of rampant free-market economics and the political dominance of unrestricted big business interests. *Mutatis mutandis*, similar discontents drove both the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump. Before long, comparable dissenting voices—despite all efforts to silence them—are likely to be heard with increasing force in mainland China. Will China’s current leaders continue to suppress them, and fall back on models of national glory that would have done credit to Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany or Nicholas II of Russia? (Following revolutions, one spent the last two decades of his life in exile, while the second was murdered, together with his family). Or will they come up with something better, offering an approach that addresses and redresses the shortcomings of the model purveyed by Western neoliberal forces from the 1970s onward? Can China—in company with other international partners—put forward a different and superior model of international relations, based on the imperatives of 2017, rather than those of Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War? Realistically, the odds are that the answer is No. But

⁴¹ David M. Lampton, *The Three Faces of Chinese Power: Might, Money, and Minds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

⁴² “China, Japan, South Korea pledge to resist economic protectionism,” *South China Morning Post*, 5 May 2017.

⁴³ “Belt and Road could be a way for Japan and China to repair ties,” *South China Morning Post*, 23 May 2017.

how exhilarating it would be, from so many perspectives, if the answer should be Yes. The ‘last best hope’ of mankind would suddenly be not the United States but China.

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