

#### ***“Inconsistent, Incoherent, and Unpredictable: U.S. Policies in East Asia under President Donald J. Trump”***

Essay by **James I. Matray**, California State University, Chico<sup>1</sup>

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On 8 March 2018, National Security Advisor Chung Eui-yong of the Republic of Korea (ROK) met with President Donald J. Trump at the White House to brief him on his recent talks with Kim Jong Un, leader of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), in Pyongyang. Trump learned that Kim had promised not to stage any further nuclear tests and take steps toward denuclearization. Chung emerged from the meeting to read a statement outside the West Wing announcing that Trump had accepted Kim’s proposal for the two leaders to meet in person.<sup>2</sup> This news shocked people around the world because it constituted a sudden and dramatic reversal in a U.S.-DPRK relationship of intense mutual hostility. In December 2017, under U.S. leadership, the United Nations imposed the last of a series of crippling economic sanctions on North Korea after it launched a missile the previous month that Kim Jong Un claimed could reach any target in the continental United States. By then, Trump had threatened military destruction of the DPRK. On 8 August 2017, at his golf club in New Jersey, he warned that if Pyongyang continued to threaten the United States, it would “be met with fire, fury and frankly power the likes of which this world has never

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<sup>1</sup> In preparing this essay, the author benefited greatly from reading the articles that will appear in the forthcoming theme issue of the *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* titled “The United States and East Asia Under President Trump: A One-Year Retrospective.” He thanks Meredith Oyen, Jennifer M. Miller, and Mitchell B. Lerner for bringing to his attention sources and insightful interpretations of policies and events in their articles on China, Japan, and Korea respectively.

<sup>2</sup> Ali Vitali, “President [Donald J.] Trump Agrees to Meet North Korea’s Kim Jong Un,” *NBC News*, 8 March 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/south-koreans-deliver-letter-trump-kim-jong-un-n855051> (accessed 31 May 2018).

seen before.”<sup>3</sup> A month later at the United Nations, Trump repeated his threat. If the United States “is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea,” he declared. Mocking the DPRK’s leader, Trump then remarked that “Rocket Man is on a suicide mission for himself.”<sup>4</sup> A few days later, Kim Jong Un publicly read an official statement in which he called Trump “a frightened dog” and a “gangster fond of playing with fire.” He added that “I will surely and definitely tame the mentally deranged U.S. dotard with fire,” using an arcane term for a mentally impaired elderly person.<sup>5</sup>

Trump’s decision—without consulting anyone—to meet with Kim Jong Un, however, should not have been surprising. Unpredictability and wild policy swings in fact have been the central features of his incoherent and inconsistent policies toward East Asia during his first year and a half as president. After having more direct contact with Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo than any other world leader, Trump did not inform him of his decision to have a personal meeting with Kim Jong Un.<sup>6</sup> In March 2018, he imposed tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from the People’s Republic of China (PRC),<sup>7</sup> but then in May lifted the ban on ZTE, a Chinese multinational telecommunications equipment and systems firm, for selling goods to Iran and the DPRK in violation of U.S. sanctions.<sup>8</sup> Particularly stunning, in April 2018, he even considered reentering the

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Jeff Seleny, Dan Merica, and Kevin Liptak, “Trump’s ‘Fire and Fury’ Remark Was Improvised but Familiar,” *CNN*, 9 August 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/09/politics/trump-fire-fury-improvise-north-korea> (accessed 22 May 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in David Nakamura and Anne Gearan, “In U.N. Speech, Trump Threatens to ‘Totally Destroy North Korea’ and Calls Kim Jong Un ‘Rocket Man’,” *Washington Post*, 19 September 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/09/19/in-u-n-speech-trump-warns-that-the-world-faces-great-peril-from-rogue-regimes-in-north-korea-iran> (accessed 22 May 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Phil McCausland, “Kim Jong Un Calls President Trump ‘Dotard’ and ‘Frightened Dog,’” *NBC News*, 21 September 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/north-korea-s-kim-jong-un-calls-president-trump-frightened-n803631> (accessed 22 May 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Motoko Rich, “Trump’s Phone Buddy in the North Korea Crisis: Shinzo Abe,” *New York Times*, 5 September 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/05/world/asia/japan-trump-north-korea-abe.html> (accessed 1 June 2018); Ana Fifield, “Japan’s Abe, used to Being Trump’s Buddy, Finds Himself out of Step on North Korea,” *Washington Post*, 13 March 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/japans-abe-used-to-being-trumps-buddy-finds-himself-out-of-step-on-north-korea/2018/03/13/5bf08908-26b7-11e8-ab19-06a445a08c94\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/japans-abe-used-to-being-trumps-buddy-finds-himself-out-of-step-on-north-korea/2018/03/13/5bf08908-26b7-11e8-ab19-06a445a08c94_story.html) (accessed 25 May 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Baker and Ana Swanson, “Trump Authorizes Tariffs, Defying Allies at Home and Abroad,” *New York Times*, 8 March 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/08/us/politics/trump-tariff-announcement.html> (accessed 1 June 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Scott Horsley, “Trump Formally Orders Tariffs On Steel, Aluminum Imports,” *NPR*, 8 March 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/03/08/591744195/trump-expected-to-formally-order-tariffs-on-steel-aluminum-imports> (accessed 25 May 2018); Bob Bryan, “Trump Appears to Backtrack on Sanctions Relief for Chinese Tech Giant ZTE Amid Escalating Concerns,” *Business Insider*, 16 May 2018, <http://www.businessinsider.com/trump-china-zte-sanctions-reverse-national-security-2018-5> (accessed 25 May 2018).

Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), but then disavowed the idea the next day.<sup>9</sup> Early in May, Trump announced his intention to remove U.S. troops from South Korea, only to reverse that decision days later.<sup>10</sup> But his policy flip-flops in dealing with North Korea certainly are the most jarring. After threatening to destroy the DPRK, Trump agreed to meet with Kim Jong Un and then called him “very honorable.”<sup>11</sup> On 22 May 2018, National Security Advisor Chung called the summit scheduled for Singapore on 12 June 2018 a “99.9 percent done deal.”<sup>12</sup> Just two days later, Trump abruptly cancelled that summit after the DPRK criticized Vice President Mike Pence for predicting North Korea would suffer the same fate as Libya if it did not abandon its nuclear weapons program.<sup>13</sup> But a week later, Trump announced that his meeting with the North Korean leader would take place on schedule after all.<sup>14</sup> This pattern of inconsistency and unpredictability has unsettled East Asia, as well as leaving the United States more isolated.

On 20 January 2017, Donald J. Trump took the oath of office and became the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. In his inaugural address, he told the American people that they had “made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon.” Determined to end this alleged exploitation of the United States and also to extract revenge, Trump then issued a declaration of American unilateralism in world affairs. “From this moment on,” he announced defiantly, “it’s going to be

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<sup>9</sup> Erica Werner, Damian Paletta, and Seung Min Kim, “Trump Weighs Rejoining Trans-Pacific Partnership Amid Trade Dispute with China,” *Washington Post*, 12 April 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/trump-weighs-rejoining-trans-pacific-partnership/2018/04/12/37d59500-3e71-11e8-8d53-eba0ed2371cc\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/trump-weighs-rejoining-trans-pacific-partnership/2018/04/12/37d59500-3e71-11e8-8d53-eba0ed2371cc_story.html) (accessed 25 May 2018); Willa Frej, “Trump Floated Rejoining Trans-Pacific Partnership, Walked It Back Hours Later: Report,” *Politics*, 13 April 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-trans-pacific-partnership\\_us\\_5ad08683e4b016a07e9b644d](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-trans-pacific-partnership_us_5ad08683e4b016a07e9b644d) (accessed 25 May 2018).

<sup>10</sup> David Choi, “White House Denies Report That Trump is Seriously Considering Pulling US Troops out of South Korea,” *Business Insider*, 4 May 2018, <http://www.businessinsider.com/trump-could-pull-us-troops-out-of-south-korea-2018-5> (accessed 25 May 2018); Kim Gamel and Corey Dickstein, “Trump Says US Troop Withdrawal from South Korea is ‘Not on the Table’,” *Stars and Stripes*, 4 May 2018, <https://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/trump-says-us-troop-withdrawal-from-south-korea-is-not-on-the-table-1.525352> (accessed 25 May 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Quint Forgy, “Trump Praises Kim Jong Un as ‘Very Honorable’,” *Politico*, 24 April 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/04/24/trump-praise-kim-jong-un-547610> (accessed 5 June 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, “Trump-Kim Summit Meeting Is a ‘99.9% Done Deal,’ South Korea Says,” *New York Times*, 22 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/22/world/asia/trump-kim-jong-un-meeting.html> (accessed 31 May 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Mark Landler, “Trump Pulls Out of North Korea Summit Meeting With Kim Jong-un,” *New York Times*, 24 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/asia/north-korea-trump-summit.html> (accessed 25 May 2018).

<sup>14</sup> David Nakamura, “Trump Reinstates Summit with Kim Jong Un for June 12 in Singapore,” *Washington Post*, 1 June 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/in-historic-moment-trump-welcomes-first-north-korean-official-to-white-house-in-18-years/2018/06/01/6b35c1ae-65b3-11e8-99d2-0d678ec08c2f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/in-historic-moment-trump-welcomes-first-north-korean-official-to-white-house-in-18-years/2018/06/01/6b35c1ae-65b3-11e8-99d2-0d678ec08c2f_story.html) (accessed 11 June 2018).

America First.”<sup>15</sup> His new approach represented a dramatic departure in U.S. foreign policy that had been committed to promoting international cooperation to achieve global peace, freedom, and stability since Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Indeed, it was a repudiation of then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s comment in February 1998 during an interview on *The Today Show* that the United States was “the indispensable nation.”<sup>16</sup> Just three days into his presidency, Trump, fulfilling a campaign promise, withdrew the United States from the TPP. Less than six months later, he announced that the United States would cease participation in the 2016 Paris Climate Agreement. In between, at a meeting in May 2017 of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Brussels, Trump scolded U.S. allies for failing to fulfill their financial commitments to the alliance and pointedly did not reaffirm the U.S. pledge to support mutual defense.<sup>17</sup> As for East Asia, Trump’s security policy toward the region oscillated during his first year and a half in office, largely conceding leadership to the PRC. Aaron David Miller of the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars laments that under Trump, the United States has become “less admired, less respected and less feared than it needs to be, given how consequential a power we are.”<sup>18</sup>

Trump established his erratic approach toward U.S. policy in East Asia just weeks after his surprising victory in early November 2016. On 2 December, he accepted a congratulatory telephone call from Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen. Fears of an impending change in the status quo in the Taiwan Strait escalated when Trump suggested that all U.S. policies, even the “one China” policy, were negotiable. But in early February, President Trump reversed course in a telephone conversation with PRC President Xi Jinping when he reaffirmed that the United States would honor the “one China” policy.<sup>19</sup> While important, U.S. policy toward Taiwan certainly was not the central concern for East Asian leaders after Trump’s election. Bhagyashree Garekar, deputy foreign editor of the *Straits Times*, astutely reports that they want U.S. presidents to advocate for free trade to promote Asian prosperity and continue “to underwrite the security of the region.” Trump created much anxiety regarding both issues during his presidential campaign with promises to reduce U.S. security commitments in East Asia, impose tariffs on China, and abandon free trade agreements. After more than a year in office, he has not acted consistently to achieve any of these objectives. Trump instead has pursued random short-term goals that reflect the absence of any overall strategic plan for

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<sup>15</sup> Donald J. Trump, “Inaugural Address,” 20 January 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/> (accessed 9 April 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright Interview, *The Today Show*, 19 February 2018, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/1998/980219a.html> (accessed 10 May 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Jeremy Diamond, “Trump Scolds Allies over Defense Spending,” *CNN*, 25 May 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/25/politics/trump-nato-financial-payments> (accessed 10 May 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Oren Dorell, “Trump’s Foreign Policy often Put ‘America First’—and Alone,” *USA Today*, 19 January 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/01/19/trumps-foreign-policy-often-put-america-first-and-alone/1036558001/> (accessed 24 March 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Madeline Conway, “Spicer on Trump’s ‘One China’ Agreement: The President Always Gets Something,” *Politico*, 27 February 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/sean-spicer-donald-trump-one-china-agreement-235450> (accessed 22 January 2018).

redefining the U.S. role in East Asia.<sup>20</sup> The result, journalist Sheila Smith correctly predicted in September 2017, has been a regional policy that has been “reactive rather than prescriptive, framed by Trump’s transactional ambitions on trade and counterbalanced by the United States’ longstanding security alliances.”<sup>21</sup> His eccentric style in implementing these policies, political science professor T.J. Pempel at the University of California at Berkeley observes, has been extremely disruptive and has “swung a wrecking ball into the complex and longstanding machinery of US relations with the Asia Pacific.”<sup>22</sup>

Trump’s approach in East Asia has lacked coherence mainly because he relies on his instincts, rather than personal knowledge or informed advice, in policy making. His principal security advisors—Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis and until recently National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster—have been generals with a frame of reference grounded in fighting wars in the Middle East. Far worse, “U.S. allies . . . are alarmed to be dealing with a non-unitary executive, a government whose officials tell them irreconcilably different things about America’s positions,” the Century Foundation’s Sam Heller explains. “And even where policy has sort-of come together, the result has been internally incoherent, with aggressive ends basically unrelated to available means.”<sup>23</sup> Trump’s capriciousness constantly embarrassed Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson, who issued policy statements only to have the president repudiate them,<sup>24</sup> until his boss mercifully fired him in a March 2018 tweet. Until December 2017, Trump did not even have an assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, when he nominated Susan Thornton, a career foreign service officer, for the post. That Trump has formulated U.S. East Asia policy essentially on his own explains its unfortunate outcome. “Over their year of living dangerously with Trump,” *Politico*’s Susan Glaser reports, “foreign diplomats and leaders have learned” that he is “ignorant, at times massively so, about rudiments of the international system and America’s place in it, and in general about other countries.” While largely “immovable from strongly held preconceptions,” he is open to any “opportunity to flout or overturn the policies endorsed by his

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<sup>20</sup> Bhagyashree Garekar, “One Year of Trump: Trepidation, Then Relief for Asia,” *Straits Times*, 21 January 2018, <http://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/one-year-of-trump-trepidation-then-relief-for-asia> (accessed 24 March 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Sheila Smith, “Whither Trump’s Asia Policy,” *East Asia Forum*, 4 September 2017, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/09/04/whither-trumps-asia-policy/> (accessed 3 April 2018).

<sup>22</sup> T. J. Pempel, “Trump Swings a Wrecking Ball at U.S.-Asia Relations,” *East Asia Forum*, 27 August 2017, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/08/27/trump-swings-a-wrecking-ball-at-us-asia-relations/> (accessed 4 April 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Sam Heller, “Trump’s First Year Unsettles World Politics,” The Century Foundation, 17 January 2018, <https://tcf.org/content/report/trump-first-year-unsettles-world-politics/> (accessed 25 March 2018).

<sup>24</sup> For example, after Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson publicly spoke about the prospects for negotiations with North Korea to dismantle its nuclear program, President Donald J. Trump immediately dismissed his suggestion as a waste of time. Donald J. Trump, Twitter Post, 1 November 2017, 7:30 a.m., <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/914497877543735296?lang=en> (accessed 29 April 2017).

predecessors.” “Seasoned diplomats who have seen Trump up close,” she adds, “throw around words like ‘catastrophic,’ ‘terrifying,’ ‘incompetent’ and ‘dangerous.’”<sup>25</sup>

Trump has condemned the policies of former President Barack Obama, focusing particularly on reversing his immediate predecessor’s approach in East Asia. His abandonment of the TPP eliminated the centerpiece of Obama’s pivot toward Asia in 2009, which was the economic component of a three-pronged approach the United States had followed in East Asia since 1945. Reflecting the second objective of promoting regional security, Obama had pledged to move sixty per cent of U.S. naval assets to the Pacific, while Trump decried U.S. military commitments to “free-loader” nations in East Asia. As for the third element, Trump’s public praise of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte’s murderous “drug war” demonstrated that, unlike Obama, he would not engage in public diplomacy or soft power to promote international democracy and human rights. As a substitute for this existing Asia Pacific grand design, Trump, at least rhetorically, proposed his vision of a new “Indo-Pacific” configuration of “partners throughout this region that are thriving, prosperous and dependent on no one.” But the concept was not new, Japanese Prime Minister Abe having first introduced the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or “Quad” involving Australia, India, Japan, and the United States.<sup>26</sup> Secretary of Defense Mattis in June 2017 and Secretary of State Tillerson in September began to trumpet the new strategic framework for a “free and open Indo-Pacific,” emphasizing instead a greater role for India in joining with democratic U.S. allies and partners to promote regional security and prosperity.<sup>27</sup> “The broad outlines of the so-called Indo-Pacific strategy,” Stephan Haggard, director of the Korea-Pacific Program at the University of California at San Diego, explains, “comport with a long-standing Republican preference for an offshore balancing strategy, rooted in a strong naval presence, the alliance relationships, and the expansion of ties with ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] and India.”<sup>28</sup>

Trump proposed his Indo-Pacific idea as a counter to the PRC’s aggressive steps to assert political and economic leadership in East Asia. In 2013, Beijing announced a proposal to finance economic development in Central Asia that in 2016 would become the Belt and Road Initiative. It committed one trillion dollars to help other countries fund large-scale infrastructure projects to expand trade along several overland corridors, as well as financing a new “maritime Silk Road” through Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean that together

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<sup>25</sup> Susan Glaser, “Donald Trump’s Year of Living Dangerously,” *Politico*, January/February 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/01/02/donald-trump-foreign-policy-analysis-dangerous-216202> (accessed 3 April 2018).

<sup>26</sup> David Camroux, “Is Trump’s America the ‘Dispensable’ Power in Asia?,” *East Asia Forum*, 31 December 2017, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/12/31/is-trumps-america-the-dispensable-power-in-asia/> (accessed 25 March 2018).

<sup>27</sup> Mira Rapp-Hooper, “The 5 Things We Learned from Trump’s Asia Trip,” *Washington Post*, 15 November 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/11/15/the-5-things-we-learned-from-trumps-asia-trip> (accessed 27 March 2018).

<sup>28</sup> Stephan Haggard, “Trump in Asia: The Year in Review,” *PIIE* [Peterson Institute for International Economics], 4 January 2018, <https://piie.com/blogs/north-korea-witness-transformation/trump-asia-year-review> (accessed 25 March 2018).

would connect the Chinese economy to markets across Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.<sup>29</sup> But this clearly was a secondary concern for Trump, given how his withdrawal from the TPP meant less U.S. engagement in the region and more leverage for China. Similarly, Trump has signaled that the United States should forsake its historic role as global arbiter.<sup>30</sup> He largely has stood aloof from the PRC's clash with four neighbors for control over a small collection of reefs and submerged islands in the South China Sea. His administration also has been sporadic in applying pressure on the PRC in opposition to its construction of islands for aircraft facilities and radar installations in this disputed area. Despite a 2016 arbitration tribunal ruling that declared its actions illegal, one that received endorsement from provisions in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, Beijing has kept what it took. Under Trump, the U.S. Navy has continued to conduct "freedom of navigation" patrols in the disputed area to assert transit under international law, which Beijing has come to accept without the public protests of the past.<sup>31</sup> U.S. passivity, however, has caused regional nations to look to each other, rather than the United States, to check China's ambitions.

During his 2016 presidential campaign, Trump regularly used blunt rhetoric to blame China in large part for the long-term impact of globalization in eliminating U.S. manufacturing jobs. He also repeatedly attributed the huge U.S. trade deficit with China to the PRC's unfair policies. Trump promised that as president, he would take strong action to end this imbalance. He would declare the PRC a currency manipulator "on day one," prevent the theft of intellectual property, and file complaints at the World Trade Organization to end Chinese export subsidies.<sup>32</sup> But North Korea's launching of four missiles in March 2017 caused Trump to shift his focus to gaining the PRC's support for the imposition of sanctions on the DPRK to force it to dismantle its nuclear program. In April, PRC President Xi Jinping visited with Trump at Mar-a-Lago, his Florida resort, resulting in an agreement to open negotiations to resolve disagreements on trade, diplomacy and security, law enforcement and cyber security, and social and cultural issues.<sup>33</sup> As a result of the talks, the two men, according to Trump, developed "great chemistry" with one another. The Chinese leader skillfully massaged the President's ego to the point of convincing him that the Korean peninsula was once part of

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<sup>29</sup> Jane Perlez and Yufan Huang, "Behind China's \$1 Trillion Dollar Plan to Shake up the Economic Order," *New York Times*, 13 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/13/business/china-railway-one-belt-one-road-1-trillion-plan.html> (accessed 4 May 2018).

<sup>30</sup> "Trump's First Year Unsettles World Politics," The Century Foundation, 17 January 2018, <https://tcf.org/content/report/trump-first-year-unsettles-world-politics/> (accessed 25 March 2018).

<sup>31</sup> Thitinan Pongsudhirak, "Trump Puts America Back in Asia," *Daily Star*, 21 February 2018, <http://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/global-affairs/trump-puts-america-back-asia-1537618> (accessed 3 April 2018); Ben Westcott, "Asia under Trump: How the US is Losing the Region to China," *New York Times*, 27 January 2018, <https://virusfreephone.com/2018/01/asia-under-trump-how-the-us-is-losing-the-region-to-china-2/> (accessed 23 May 2018).

<sup>32</sup> "Reforming the U.S.-China Trade Relationship to Make America Great Again," Donald J. Trump Make America Great Again Campaign Website, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160402081125/https://www.donaldjtrump.com/positions/us-china-trade-reform> (accessed 22 January 2018).

<sup>33</sup> Garekar, "One Year of Trump."

China. Meanwhile, Chinese officials rushed to approve dozens of long-stalled Trump trademark requests.<sup>34</sup> Trump indicated how his priorities with the PRC had shifted when, after the April summit, he suggested that he could offer “more lenient trade consideration and other concessions if Xi helped him solve the DPRK issue...”<sup>35</sup> Thereafter, the PRC did vote in favor of UN sanctions against North Korea, although it did not halt oil shipments. It also signed in May a non-binding agreement paving the way for greater market access in both directions. This did not prevent the U.S. trade deficit with China not only from rising during Trump’s first year in office, but setting a new record at \$275.8 billion.<sup>36</sup>

During his 2016 election campaign, Trump harshly criticized Japan—as he had since the 1980s—for freeloading on defense, manipulating its currency, stealing American jobs, and taking advantage of the United States with unfair trade practices. His election naturally alarmed Prime Minister Abe, who rushed to New York to meet with Trump before receiving approval from the President-elect. Abe also was the first foreign leader to meet with Trump as president, conferring with him in Washington and sharing a round of golf at Mar-a-Lago in February 2017. His visit initiated his efforts to become Trump’s best foreign friend, lavishing him with public praise and presenting him with the gift of a \$3,800 gold-plated golf club.<sup>37</sup> Trump rewarded him with a reaffirmation of the U.S. security commitment to Japan, but the two leaders only agreed to begin discussions about trade and monetary policy. Abe also promised expanded investment in support of Trump’s plan for U.S. economic growth.<sup>38</sup> Another meeting at Mar-a-Lago followed in April, as well as regular telephone conversations, usually about the North Korean nuclear threat. For Japan, Kim Jong Un’s belligerent rhetoric, missile firings, and nuclear saber-rattling represented a dire threat. Predictably, Abe has been the most public and consistent supporter of Trump’s militant policies toward the DPRK. Trump clearly sees the defensive value of the alliance, for example declaring that “the U.S. security umbrella covered the Senkaku-Diaoyu islets that Beijing claims as Chinese territories.”<sup>39</sup> But, as journalist David Nakamura writes, Trump does not treat Japan as a partner, but instead uses his “passive aggressive manner . . . to show who is

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<sup>34</sup> Cary Huang, “Trump’s First Year Failed the China Test. His Second Looks far Worse,” *This Week in Asia*, 21 January 2018, <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/2129545/trumps-first-year-failed-china-test-his-second-looks-far-worse> (accessed 25 March 2018); Pempel, “Trump Swings a Wrecking Ball at U.S.-Asia Relations.”

<sup>35</sup> Lowell Dittmer, “Trump on China,” *Asian Perspective* 41.4 (October-December 2017): 689.

<sup>36</sup> Huang, “Trump’s First Year Failed the China Test.”

<sup>37</sup> David Nakamura, “Japanese Leader Shinzo Abe Plays the Role of Trump’s Loyal Sidekick,” *Washington Post*, 6 November 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/japanese-leader-shinzo-abe-plays-the-role-of-trumps-loyal-sidekick/2017/11/06/cc23dcae-c2f1-11e7-afe9-4f60b5a6c4a0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/japanese-leader-shinzo-abe-plays-the-role-of-trumps-loyal-sidekick/2017/11/06/cc23dcae-c2f1-11e7-afe9-4f60b5a6c4a0_story.html) (accessed 4 April 2018).

<sup>38</sup> “Trump, Abe Pledge to Deepen Trade, Investment Relationship,” *Bridges*, 16 February 2018), <https://www.ictsd.org/bridges-news/bridges/news/trump-abe-pledge-to-deepen-trade-investment-relationship> (accessed 7 June 2018).

<sup>39</sup> Garekar, “One year of Trump.”



the alpha—a price Abe appears willing to pay in his strategic servitude to keep Trump supporting the postwar security alliance that the president had openly questioned in his election campaign.”<sup>40</sup>

Like Japan, Trump targeted South Korea for criticism during his presidential campaign, repeatedly claiming that the ROK was not paying enough for U.S. protection and damaging the American economy with unfair trade practices. He also suggested that the United States should no longer defend South Korea. At a campaign rally in April 2016, Trump proposed letting both Japan and South Korea “protect themselves against North Korea.”<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, he demanded to renegotiate the Korea-U.S. (KORUS) Free Trade Agreement, branding it as a “horrible” deal. His “America First” characterization of these issues as examples of South Korea exploiting the United States, rather than as key sources of regional stability, caused the ROK to doubt Trump’s trustworthiness as an ally after his electoral victory.<sup>42</sup> Trump then only reinforced the message when, as president-elect, he denied a request to meet with an ROK national security delegation.<sup>43</sup> As president, his handling of the North Korean nuclear crisis at first threatened to undermine the U.S.-ROK alliance when in April, Trump said that he “would absolutely [meet with Kim Jong Un and even] . . . would be honored to do it.”<sup>44</sup> His subsequent comment that the ROK should pay for the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile defense system raised questions about Trump’s concern for South Korea’s survival.<sup>45</sup> Initially, the ROK government had trouble reacting because it was preoccupied with the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye, culminating in left-leaning Moon Jae-in replacing her after an election in May. Moon was more worried that Trump’s belligerence and impulsiveness, paralleling that of Kim Jong Un, might spark a conflict on the peninsula for which the South Koreans would pay the price.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Nakamura, “Japanese Leader Shinzo Abe Plays the Role of Trump’s Loyal Sidekick.”

<sup>41</sup> “Donald Trump Defends Arming Japan, South Korea with Nuclear Weapons,” *ABC 13 Eyewitness News*, 3 April 2016, <http://abc13.com/politics/trump-defends-controversial-policy-on-nuclear-weapons-/1274498/> (accessed 24 April 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Rapp-Hooper, “The 5 Things We Learned from Trump’s Asia Trip”; Pempel, “Trump Swings a Wrecking Ball at U.S.-Asia Relations.”

<sup>43</sup> Opinion, “Few Allies in US,” *Korea Times*, 14 December 2016, [http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2016/12/137\\_220163.html](http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2016/12/137_220163.html) (accessed 24 April 2018).

<sup>44</sup> Jeremy Diamond and Zachary Cohen, “Trump: I’d be ‘Honored’ to Meet Kim Jong Un under ‘Right Circumstances,’” *CNN*, 2 May 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/01/politics/donald-trump-meet-north-korea-kim-jong-un/> (accessed 24 April 2018).

<sup>45</sup> Alex Macfarlane and Taehoon Lee, “Trump: South Korea Should Pay for \$1B Missile Defense System,” *CNN*, 28 April 2017, <http://money.cnn.com/2017/04/28/news/trump-south-korea-thaad-trade> (accessed 24 April 2018).

<sup>46</sup> Haggard, “Trump in Asia.”

In March 2017, Secretary of State Tillerson declared an end to Obama's policy of "strategic patience" toward the DPRK, implying that a preemptive military strike was possible.<sup>47</sup> During his presidential campaign, Moon publicly opposed any U.S. action that might ignite war on the peninsula, urging diplomatic engagement instead. His position established the foundation for a frosty relationship with Trump after Moon assumed power. But by summer, Trump learned that there were constraints that limited his options, causing him to adopt a policy of imposing economic sanctions to apply "maximum pressure" on North Korea. Success would depend on Trump gaining the cooperation of the ROK, as well as the PRC. This new approach would set the stage for Moon to develop a reasonable working relationship with the U.S. President after he initially expected to play a more independent role in dealing with North Korea.<sup>48</sup> Late in June, Moon visited the United States for his first meeting with Trump, who reaffirmed the U.S. security commitment to South Korea, but was more determined to force Moon to take steps to reduce the \$27 billion U.S. trade deficit with the ROK. He demanded renegotiation of the KORUS to allow for the sale of more U.S. cars in South Korea and an end to the ROK's "dumping" of steel on the American market. Moon agreed to support Trump in imposing stiff sanctions on the DPRK, but also called for diplomatic engagement. His arrival with a \$25 billion agreement to buy American natural gas left Trump unimpressed after his silence on issues related to trade.<sup>49</sup> In September, Trump's frustration with the ROK caused him to instruct his advisors to prepare to withdraw from the KORUS, making cooperation on North Korea more difficult.<sup>50</sup>

Trump's twelve day, five nation trip to East Asia in early November 2017 demonstrated his preference for using bilateral channels to advance U.S. global interests, rather than relying on multilateral agreements. His emphasis on the need to maintain sovereignty also signaled how his "America First" approach precluded U.S. interference in internal matters, with a focus instead on economics and trade, rather than human rights or local conflicts. But it also provided a powerful example of how achieving economic goals became steadily less important during his first year in office than uniting East Asia against North Korea to compel it to dismantle its nuclear weapons program.<sup>51</sup> His first stop was in Japan, where Abe continued to court Trump, playing golf with him and professional golfer Matsuyama Hideki before eating hamburgers at the Kasumigaseki clubhouse. As for serious business, Trump, during his meeting with Abe, complained that their bilateral trade relationship was neither open nor fair, resulting in a \$68.9 billion U.S. trade deficit in 2016. Changing the subject, Abe replied that the larger need was to "create a broad economic order in the Indo-Pacific that is fair

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<sup>47</sup> WRM, "No More Strategic Patience," *The American Interest*, 17 March 2018, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/03/17/no-more-strategic-patience-on-north-korea/> (7 June 2018).

<sup>48</sup> Westcott, "Asia under Trump"; Haggard, "Trump in Asia."

<sup>49</sup> Mark Landler, "Trump Takes More Aggressive Stance with U.S. Friends and Foes in Asia," *New York Times*, 30 June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/30/world/asia/trump-south-korea-china.html> (accessed 7 June 2018).

<sup>50</sup> "Trump Wants to End 'Horrible' South Korea-U.S. Trade Deal. Koreans Disagree," *Washington Post*, 17 September 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/trump-wants-to-end-horrible-south-korea-us-trade-deal-koreans-disagree/2017/09/13/fb528b3e-9627-11e7-a527-3573bd073e02\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/trump-wants-to-end-horrible-south-korea-us-trade-deal-koreans-disagree/2017/09/13/fb528b3e-9627-11e7-a527-3573bd073e02_story.html) (accessed 24 April 2018).

<sup>51</sup> Dan Merica, "Trump's Asia Trip: 6 Takeaways," *CNN*, 14 November 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/14/politics/donald-trump-asia-trip-takeaways> (accessed 27 March 2018); Sheila Smith, "Whither Trump's Asia Policy"; Camroux, "Is Trump's America the 'Dispensable' Power in Asia?"

and effective.”<sup>52</sup> Trump also met with Japanese business leaders, encouraging them to invest in the United States. His only reward for these efforts were promises from Abe to pay more for U.S. protection, buy more defense equipment, and persuade Japanese companies to invest and create jobs in the United States. Addressing a key issue for Japan, Trump met families of Japanese citizens whom the North Korea regime had abducted. Abe agreed with Trump’s statement that “all options were on the table” in dealing with the DPRK.<sup>53</sup>

Trump then traveled to South Korea, where a good outcome was not at all a certainty. President Moon, however, copied Abe’s flattery strategy when at a state dinner he enthused that “President Trump’s election victory one year ago is already making America great again.”<sup>54</sup> In a muscular speech at the ROK National Assembly hammering on the “menace” of North Korea, Trump reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to defend South Korea and warned North Korea that any strike against the United States or its allies would be a “fatal miscalculation...History is filled with discarded regimes that have foolishly tested America’s resolve.” He noted that the United States had stationed three aircraft carriers nearby “loaded to the maximum with magnificent F-35 and F-18 fighter jets,” as well as appropriately positioned nuclear submarines.<sup>55</sup> Trump also urged Moon to buy advanced U.S. military equipment, from fighter aircraft to reconnaissance systems. The ROK President promised to increase purchases of U.S. weaponry, pay more for U.S. protection, and encourage greater investment in the U.S. economy. As for the KORUS, Trump and Moon instructed their officials to “conclude an improved agreement expeditiously.”<sup>56</sup> Trump was to skip visiting the infamous demilitarized zone between North and South Korea because, a White House official had said, it is “becoming a bit of a cliché, frankly.” But instead, foggy weather thwarted a surprise trip, forcing the Marine One presidential helicopter to abort the mission.<sup>57</sup>

In Beijing, President Xi played to his U.S. counterpart’s ego in staging what Trump called a “state-plus-plus” visit, complete with a sunset tour of the Forbidden City, a military honor guard welcoming ceremony in front

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<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Garekar, “One year of Trump.”

<sup>53</sup> Ashley Parker, “Trump’s Asia Trip was mostly Free of Incidents—until It Wasn’t,” *The Debrief*, 14 November 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-asia-trip-was-mostly-free-of-incidents-until-it-wasnt/2017/11/14/3b0aa1f2-c8d8-11e7-8321-481fd63f174d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-asia-trip-was-mostly-free-of-incidents-until-it-wasnt/2017/11/14/3b0aa1f2-c8d8-11e7-8321-481fd63f174d_story.html) (accessed 28 March 2018); “Trump Says US will Arm Japan to Knock Down North Korea Missiles,” *Associated Press*, 6 November 2018, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/943499/north-korean-missile-crisis-donald-trump-shinzo-abe-us-japan-relations> (accessed 7 June 2018).

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Parker, “Trump’s Asia Trip was mostly Free of Incidents—until it Wasn’t.”

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Merica, “Trump’s Asia trip” and Roncevert Ganan Almond, “The Policy Significance of Trump’s Asia Tour,” *The Diplomat*, 18 November 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/the-policy-significance-of-trumps-asia-tour/> (accessed 28 March 2018).

<sup>56</sup> Wendy Cutler, “Trade Storms Brewing after Trump’s Asia Trip,” *The Hill, Opinion Contributor*, 14 November 2017, <http://thehill.com/opinion/finance/360338-trade-storms-brewing-after-trumps-asia-trip> (accessed 2 April 2018).

<sup>57</sup> Parker, “Trump’s Asia Trip Was mostly Free of Incidents—until it Wasn’t.”

of the Great Hall of the People, and a Peking opera performance.<sup>58</sup> Trump reciprocated, touting his “incredibly warm” feelings toward Xi and the “great chemistry” between the two men. He heaped praise on Xi for his consolidation of power at the recent 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and called him “a very special man.” Trump’s apparent concern with ingratiating himself to Xi exceeded any interest in pressing the Chinese leader to impose greater sanctions on North Korea.<sup>59</sup> However, he did continue Washington’s high-level dialogue with Beijing on a range of pressing global challenges from cybersecurity to nuclear proliferation. As for economic issues, Trump welcomed the announcement of business deals valued at over \$250 billion between U.S. and Chinese companies in a wide range of sectors, including energy, transportation, and agriculture.<sup>60</sup> However, these were mostly deals already in the works or, as journalist Lim Yan Liang notes, “non-binding agreements that may not materialize.” More important, “Trump failed to secure what American investors really wanted: structural reform to the bilateral trade ties that can bring about lasting change, like greater access to the Chinese market” to lower the U.S. trade deficit.<sup>61</sup> “I don’t blame China,” Trump avowed in a stunning reversal of his campaign rhetoric. “After all, who can blame a country for being able to take advantage of another country for the benefit of its citizens?” He instead gave “China great credit.”<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Trump said virtually nothing about the PRC’s awful record on human rights, nor did he insist that journalists be able to ask questions when the two leaders faced the press.<sup>63</sup>

On 10 November, Trump arrived in Danang, Vietnam, where he delivered an address at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum that resembled his harangues at political rallies. His “America First” message explicitly maligning multilateral trade must have perplexed his listeners, since economic collaboration is the mission of APEC. Trump denounced “chronic trade abuses” that “stripped [U.S.] . . . jobs, factories and industries,” vowing that he was “not going to allow the United States to be taken advantage of anymore.” He warned that he would use tariffs and quotas to rectify the imbalance, but otherwise offered as a long-term remedy only a vague U.S. willingness to “make bilateral trade agreements with any Indo-Pacific nation that wants to be our partner and that will abide by the principles of fair and reciprocal trade.” But the United States, he proclaimed, “will no longer . . . enter into large agreements that tie our hands, surrender our

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<sup>58</sup> Almond, “The Policy Significance of Trump’s Asia Tour.”

<sup>59</sup> Heather Hurlburt, “The Winners and Losers of Trump’s Asia Trip, So Far,” *New York Magazine Daily Intelligencer*, 10 November 2018, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/11/the-winners-and-losers-of-trumps-asia-trip-so-far.html> (accessed 31 March 2018); Rapp-Hooper, “The 5 things We Learned from Trump’s Asia Trip.”

<sup>60</sup> Cutler, “Trade Storms Brewing after Trump’s Asia Trip”; Nishant Dahiya, The ‘Missed Opportunity’ Of Trump’s Asia Trip,” *NPR*, 18 November 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/11/18/564790958/the-missed-opportunity-of-trumps-asia-trip> (accessed 30 March 2018).

<sup>61</sup> Lim Yan Liang, “China Gained the Most from Trump’s Asia Visit: Experts,” *Straits Times*, 15 November 2017, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-gained-the-most-from-trumps-asia-visit-experts> (3 April 2018).

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Merica, “Trump’s Asia Trip.”

<sup>63</sup> Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “Trump in Asia: A ‘Very Epic’ Charm Offensive,” *New York Times*, 14 September 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-trip-asia/> (accessed 3 April 2018).

sovereignty, and make meaningful enforcement practically impossible.”<sup>64</sup> Mira Rapp-Hooper offered a scathing assessment of his performance in the *Washington Post*:

Trump has no positive economic agenda for Asia thus far. With his mercantilist message, Trump only isolated himself from a region that is increasingly dynamic, open and prosperous. Trump also hobbled his own message on trade, blaming past U.S. leaders rather than China for the bilateral deficit and praising some of Beijing’s exploitative economic policies.<sup>65</sup>

By contrast, President Xi in his address outlined a vision of the region moving forward together in using innovation and technology for economic growth. This was the latest example of how he was exploiting Trump’s retreat to advance the PRC’s claim to be the new world leader on issues related to globalization, international investment, free trade agreements, and climate change.<sup>66</sup>

Evidence that East Asian leaders had rejected Trump’s vision for future trade relations in the region surfaced quickly. Trade ministers from eleven of the 21 members of APEC moved forward after the summit under the leadership of Japan and Australia to agree on the provisions of a revised multinational trade agreement—TPP-11—excluding the United States.<sup>67</sup> Meanwhile, Trump arrived in Hanoi to confer with Vietnamese leaders. His behavior had been presidential until that morning when, in response to North Korea’s recent reference to him as a “lunatic old man,” he responded with one of his typically disparaging and loutish tweets:

Why would Kim Jong-un insult me by calling me “old,” when I would NEVER call him “short and fat?” Oh well, I try so hard to be his friend—and maybe someday that will happen!<sup>68</sup>

During talks with Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, he asked why Vietnam was not buying more military hardware from the United States. At a joint press conference with President Tran Dai Quang, Trump congratulated Vietnam on its recent economic reforms, recommending that it purchase more goods and services from the United States. Not surprisingly, he had nothing to say about Vietnam’s denial of free speech

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<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Editorial, “Trump’s Asia Trip Comes off as Lightweight,” *Washington Post*, 13 November 2017, <http://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/editorials/article184451558.html> (2 April 2018) and Almond, “The Policy Significance of Trump’s Asia Tour.”

<sup>65</sup> Rapp-Hooper, “The 5 Things We Learned from Trump’s Asia Trip.”

<sup>66</sup> Aleem Maqbool, “Donald Trump’s Asia Tour Leaves Observers Perplexed,” *BBC*, 12 November 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41959339> (30 March 2018).

<sup>67</sup> Liang, “China Gained the Most from Trump’s Asia Visit”; Merica, “Trump’s Asia Trip.”

<sup>68</sup> Donald J. Trump, Twitter Post, 11 November 2017, 5:48 p.m., [https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/929511061954297857?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref\\_url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.latimes.com%2Fpolitics%2Fpol-updates-everything-president-trump-taunts-kim-jong-un-on-twitter-1510450639.htmlstory.html](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/929511061954297857?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.latimes.com%2Fpolitics%2Fpol-updates-everything-president-trump-taunts-kim-jong-un-on-twitter-1510450639.htmlstory.html) (accessed 8 June 2018).

and imprisonment of activists and bloggers.<sup>69</sup> When a newsman asked him about the second half of his Kim tweet, the president said a friendship with the North Korean dictator was “certainly a possibility.” “Strange things happen in life,” Trump mused.<sup>70</sup> In a joint statement, Trump and Tran “expressed grave concern over North Korea’s nuclear weapons and ballistic-missile programs and tests” and “agreed on the importance of the peaceful denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”<sup>71</sup>

Manila, the capital of the Philippines, was the final stop on Trump’s trip, where he participated in celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ASEAN. There, he delivered his second speech identifying unrealistic goals and using rhetoric more suitable at a political campaign rally than a diplomatic summit. “The United States remains committed to ASEAN’s central role as a regional forum for total cooperation,” Trump declared. “This diplomatic partnership advances the security and prosperity of the American people and the people of all Indo-Pacific nations.” However, he later stated contradictorily that the United States wanted its “partners in the region to be strong, independent and prosperous, in control of their own destinies, and satellites to no one.”<sup>72</sup> His vision for the region therefore was for each nation to follow the U.S. lead in taking care of itself alone. But Trump also reaffirmed the strategic importance to the world community of “free and open access” to the South China Sea, the importance of “unimpeded” lawful commerce, the need to respect freedom of navigation and over-flight, and other lawful uses of the sea.<sup>73</sup> During his meeting with Vietnam’s President Tran, he in fact offered his skills as a dealmaker to mediate the disputes in the South China Sea. But his “America First” agenda had given reason for Asian nations not to rely on U.S. support in challenging the PRC. Indeed, just a week earlier, Philippine President Duterte had stopped construction on a sandbar in disputed waters, which provided an example of the regional trend of countries seeking more cooperative relations with Beijing.<sup>74</sup>

Just before leaving Manila to return home, Trump told reporters he had repaired what he claimed had been a “horrible” relationship between Duterte and the United States. “We have a very good relationship,” he said. “I would actually say, probably better than ever before.” This was because Trump said nothing about how Duterte’s drug crackdown had led to an estimated 12,000 extra-judicial killings that had received sharp

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<sup>69</sup> Maqbool, “Donald Trump’s Asia Tour Leaves Observers Perplexed”; Steve Herman, “Trump Touts Benefits of Trade with Vietnam,” *VOA*, 12 November 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/trump-vietnam-quang-trade-economic-ties/4111492.html> (accessed 8 June 2018).

<sup>70</sup> Parker, “Trump’s Asia Trip was mostly Free of Incidents—until It Wasn’t.”

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Xuan Loc Doan, “Donald Trump’s Asia Tour: Success or Disaster?,” *Asia Times*, 17 November 2017, <http://www.atimes.com/donald-trumps-asia-tour-success-disaster/> (accessed 3 April 2018).

<sup>72</sup> Donald J. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump at 5th U.S.-ASEAN Summit,” 13 November 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-5th-u-s-asean-summit/> (accessed 8 June 2018).

<sup>73</sup> Almond, “The Policy Significance of Trump’s Asia Tour.”

<sup>74</sup> Landler, “Trump’s Mixed Messages Fail to Reassure Asian Allies.”

criticism from President Obama.<sup>75</sup> Instead, one reporter dubbed Trump's interaction with the Philippine president a "love fest" in which at one point the U.S. president patted the authoritarian leader on the knee in a sign of approval of his leadership. For his part, Duterte, at a summit dinner, serenaded Trump, singing the love song "You are the light."<sup>76</sup> The next day, photographers captured Trump grimacing while jostling with Southeast Asian leaders for an awkward cross-armed handshake signaling the end of the forum. Otherwise, in terms of public relations, a *New York Times* reporter thought the trip went well:

Trump appeared to be making an effort to be a good sport. He joined other leaders in donning the matching, culturally appropriate shirts that are slightly silly staples of Asian summitry: an electric-blue silk one at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Da Nang, Vietnam, and a white sheer embroidered one in Manila at the gathering of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.<sup>77</sup>

Trump left Manila for the United States before the final ceremony, but doing so was certainly understandable given how at age 71, he had completed an exhausting schedule. His lengthy trip included eight flights to, from, and around Asia, with numerous ceremonies and meetings.<sup>78</sup> On Air Force One, Trump offered a vague, but upbeat assessment of what he had accomplished:

We all worked hard. But I think the fruits of our labor are going to be incredible. Whether it's security of our nations, whether it's security of the world, or whether it's trade. And it's going to really amount to a lot.

He highlighted, however, success in building personal ties. "I think we made a lot of progress, just in terms of relationship," Trump said. "I think we have done a really fantastic job."<sup>79</sup>

Trump returned to Washington on 14 November 2017 in triumph. The following day, he delivered a speech summarizing what his trip to East Asia had achieved. "Everywhere we went, our foreign hosts greeted the American delegation, myself included, with incredible warmth, hospitality, and most importantly respect," Trump boasted, providing "further evidence that America's renewed confidence and standing in the world has

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<sup>75</sup> Previously, in a 29 April telephone call, Trump had praised President Rodrigo Duterte for his "unbelievable job on the drug problem," <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/23/us/politics/trump-duterte-phone-transcript-philippine-drug-crackdown.html>; Merica, "Trump's Asia Trip."

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Louis Nelson, "Trump Touts '\$300 Billion' in Trade Deals with Asia," *Politico*, 14 November 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/11/14/trump-asia-trade-deals-244877> (8 June 2018); Jessica Estepa, "Trump's Asia Trip: The Most Memorable Moments, from Putin Talks to North Korea Warnings," *USA TODAY*, 14 November 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2017/11/14/most-memorable-moments-president-trumps-trip-asia-putin-meeting-calling-north-k-short-and-fat-insult/847684001/> (accessed 30 March 2018).

<sup>77</sup> Davis, "Trump in Asia."

<sup>78</sup> Xuan Loc Doan, "Donald Trump's Asia Tour."

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Andrew Restuccia, "Trump Returns Home from Asia with Few Clear Wins," *Politico*, 14 November 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/11/14/was-trump-asia-trip-a-success-244890> (accessed 8 June 2018).

never been stronger than it is right now.”<sup>80</sup> Most commentators, however, were unimpressed. Eurasia Group President Ian Bremmer, for instance, noted at the time that while Trump’s hosts provided him with lavish receptions and glowing praise at every stop, the U.S. president made “virtually zero progress on any issue that matters to the Americans.”<sup>81</sup> Indeed, East Asian leaders were purposeful in treating Trump like a king to distract him from pressing them to act in ways that contradicted their desires and interests. As David Shambaugh, professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University, observes, “most Asian leaders, have figured out Trump”—he loves being feted and flattered.<sup>82</sup> Feeding Trump’s ego had the beneficial impact of contributing to keeping a president known for his erratic and obnoxious conduct on script and displaying responsible and respectful behavior throughout the trip. Robert E. Kelly, associate professor of international relations in the Department of Political Science at Pusan National University, went further. “We should be happy this trip was so bland and normal,” he argues. After all, Kelly reminds, it did not lead to war with North Korea, a fight with the PRC over trade, or Trump using bombastic rhetoric.<sup>83</sup>

Other observers characterized the trip as a “lost opportunity” because of Trump’s failure to articulate a coherent U.S. Asia strategy and clear vision of the new U.S. role in the region.<sup>84</sup> Significantly, *NPR*’s Satu Limaye points out,

he never linked his call for a “free and open Indo-Pacific” with a call for cooperation among alliances and democratic friends. Such a vision marginalizes the shared values and interests of long-held alliances, as well as an ongoing effort to network American allies and friends together...<sup>85</sup>

In fact, Trump avoided references to U.S. leadership in East Asia, even though the United States has been the central promoter of peace, security, and prosperity in the region since World War II. He therefore placed in doubt the guarantee his predecessors had made of a continuing U.S. presence and commitment to promoting

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<sup>80</sup> Donald J. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump on His Trip to Asia,” 15 November 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-trip-asia/> (accessed 3 April 2018).

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Restuccia, “Trump Returns Home from Asia with Few Clear Wins.”

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Dahiya, “The ‘Missed Opportunity’ Of Trump’s Asia Trip”; Maqbool, “Donald Trump’s Asia Tour Leaves Observers Perplexed.”

<sup>83</sup> Robert E. Kelly, “Trump’s Asia Trip: A Confirmation of the Status Quo,” *The National Interest*, 20 November 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/trumps-asia-trip-confirmation-the-status-quo-23286> (accessed 31 March 2018).

<sup>84</sup> Xuan Loc Doan, “Donald Trump’s Asia Tour: Success or Disaster?”; Rapp-Hooper, “The 5 Things We Learned from Trump’s Asia Trip”; Dahiya, “The ‘Missed Opportunity’ Of Trump’s Asia Trip.”

<sup>85</sup> Satu Limaye, “Trump in Asia: A ‘Rebalance’ Toward Trade,” *NPR*, 13 November 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/11/13/563722510/trump-in-asia-a-rebalance-toward-trade> (accessed 4 April 2018).



these goals.<sup>86</sup> As a result, Trump's "mixed messages," *New York Times* reporter Mark Landler observes, "left allies unsure of America's staying power and fed a growing sense that China, not the United States, drives the agenda in the region."<sup>87</sup> This explains why he had only limited success in uniting East Asia behind his policy of "maximum pressure" against North Korea. In Tokyo, Trump stood with Abe in urging all "responsible" nations to implement fully UN sanctions on the DPRK, as well as severing all ties in trade and technology and downgrading diplomatic relations. He received mostly rhetorical, rather than substantive support. "By asking America's Asian allies to be united to deal with North Korea's nuclear threat while deciding to go alone on trade," *Asia Times* reporter Xuan Loc Doan perceptively concludes, "Trump is behaving contradictorily and hypocritically."<sup>88</sup>

During 2017, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak began the year as a good friend of Trump, but three months later, he denounced the U.S. president for deciding to name Jerusalem the capital of Israel. By December, Najib had become a vocal public defender of the rights of Palestinians. "Yes, Donald Trump is my good friend," he proclaimed at a political rally. "But based on principles, I will never pawn the purity of Islam." Nevertheless, some analysts predict that Trump's presidency will have no effect on relations between Malaysia and the United States. "Bilateral ties have always tended to be robust, irrespective of who's in charge in Putrajaya or Washington," Shahrizan Lockman, senior analyst at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia, observes. "There has always been a divergence between popular and elite sentiments towards the US," he continues; "Perhaps because of the rise of other major powers, the US remains indispensable as a security and economic partner for Malaysia."<sup>89</sup> Similarly, the Trump administration has continued to offer vigorous U.S. financial support to Indonesia to maintain its anti-terror campaign. But Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric and immigration ban has caused friction with Jakarta, while thousands in Indonesia protested the Jerusalem decision in streets. But for Trump, another source of tension is Indonesia's massive trade surplus with the United States, which stood at thirteen billion dollars in 2016. It ranks second to last on Trump's list of sixteen countries that he has said his administration could investigate for trade abuses.<sup>90</sup>

Despite Trump's campaign message raising questions about the value of U.S. alliances in East Asia, as president, he in fact reaffirmed defense relations with Japan and South Korea, while assisting the Philippines in defeating Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militants. He also strengthened military ties with Thailand. U.S.-Thai relations hit rock bottom after the military seized power in May 2014. President Obama, in response, imposed a range of sanctions against the new Thai regime, including a ban on high-level official visits and reduced participation in the annual Cobra Gold operation, Asia's largest multinational military

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<sup>86</sup> "Mixed Reviews for Trump's Asia Tour," *Japan Times*, 16 November 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/11/16/editorials/mixed-reviews-trumps-asia-tour> (31 March 2018).

<sup>87</sup> Mark Landler, "Trump's Mixed Messages Fail to Reassure Asian Allies," *New York Times*, 14 November 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/14/world/asia/trump-asia-trade-north-korea.html> (23 May 2018).

<sup>88</sup> Liang, "China Gained the Most from Trump's Asia Visit"; Xuan Loc Doan, "Donald Trump's Asia Tour"; Almond, "The Policy Significance of Trump's Asia Tour."

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Garekar, "One Year of Trump."

<sup>90</sup> Garekar.

exercise. In another example of his reversing the policies of his predecessor in East Asia, Trump received coup-leader and Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha in October at the White House. In February 2018, 6,800 U.S. personnel—twice as many as in the prior three operations—participated in the 37<sup>th</sup> Cobra Gold military exercise. According to Assistant Professor Jittipat Poonkham at Thammasat University, the Trump administration has “refocused the military cooperation as a way to have a better say in other issues, including trade, intelligence and anti-terrorism.” Trump’s actions in Asia so far, he argues, have been “reactionary, not visionary,” an approach earning this harsh critique:

There is no so-called Trump’s grand strategy in Asia—neither a pivot to Asia nor a rebalancing strategy. One of the most defining aspects of Trump’s policy towards Thailand, and perhaps the Asia-Pacific, is an inevitable reaction to the so-called rise of China.<sup>91</sup>

Thitinan Pongsudhirak, a professor at Bangkok’s Chulalongkorn University, advances a more favorable assessment, insisting that Trump “is putting America back in Asia’s power equation” to reduce the region’s susceptibility to dependence on the PRC. Guiding his approach, he contends, is “an Indo-Pacific geostrategic framework that prioritises US interests on a transactional basis when it can do so, but also relies on regional platforms when it has to.”<sup>92</sup>

Shortly after Trump took office, Vietnam sought to reaffirm the cooperative relationship it had been developing with the United States during the prior decade. In late May 2017, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc visited the White House and engaged in discussions about increased trade with the new president. He announced that he would sign deals for U.S. goods and services worth \$15 to \$17 billion, mainly for high technology products and services.<sup>93</sup> Although Vietnam did not welcome U.S. withdrawal from the TPP, it sought to maintain the strategic partnership that had emerged with the United States under the Obama administration, in particular maritime assistance that bolstered its capability to defend its interests in the South China Sea. As a signal to the PRC of the continuing U.S. strategic alignment with Vietnam, in March 2018, the USS *Carl Vinson* docked at Danang, the first U.S. Navy vessel to visit the nation since the Vietnam War.<sup>94</sup> By contrast, the Trump administration has maintained cooler relations with Myanmar as a result of its government’s brutal treatment of Rohingya Muslims. During Secretary of State Tillerson’s visit to Myanmar in mid-November 2017, he called for a credible investigation into the allegations of atrocities. Upon his return to Washington, Congressional criticism forced him to brand Myanmar’s actions “ethnic cleansing.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Quoted in Garekar.

<sup>92</sup> Thitinan Pongsudhirak, “Trump Puts America back in Asia.”

<sup>93</sup> David Lawder and David Brunnstrom, “Vietnam to Sign Deals for up to \$17 Billion in U.S. Goods, Services: Prime Minister,” *Reuters*, 30 May 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trade-vietnam/vietnam-to-sign-deals-for-up-to-17-billion-in-u-s-goods-services-prime-minister-idUSKBN18R02N> (accessed 9 June 2018).

<sup>94</sup> Garekar, “One year of Trump”; Westcott, “Asia under Trump.”

<sup>95</sup> Antoni Sladkowski, “Tillerson, in Myanmar, Calls for Credible Probe of Atrocities,” *Reuters*, 14 November 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya/tillerson-in-myanmar-calls-for-credible-probe-of-atrocities-idUSKBN1DF0GM> (accessed 9 June 2018); Ben Westcott and Laura Koran, “Tillerson: Myanmar Clearly ‘Ethnic

Beijing has acted to defend Myanmar, forcing the United Nations to accept limitations on its involvement. More important, it devised a three-phase plan that all parties accepted to address the issue. Trump's disinterest in the matter has been consistent with his refusal to act as global leader in defense of civil rights, allowing China once again to act as the dominant player in East Asia.<sup>96</sup> Not surprisingly, Communist Cambodia and Laos only have become more dependent on the PRC during the Trump presidency.

After one year as president, Trump's schizophrenic approach in East Asia had made little progress toward achieving his oft-stated primary goal of fair trade practices. In the process, his inconsistency, incoherence, and unpredictability had undermined the confidence of U.S. allies in the dependability of the United States as a security partner, all to the benefit of the PRC. "In just one year, Trump has changed the way the Asia looks at U.S.," journalist Ben Westcott observed in January 2018. "No military assets have been withdrawn, no embassies closed, but the lack of interest expressed by a US administration focused on 'America First' has deeply shaken its status in the region."<sup>97</sup> By then, Trump had recognized that China's emerging dominance in East Asia posed a threat to U.S. interests. In December 2017, the Trump administration announced a new National Security Strategy that named both the PRC and Russia as "rival powers" who sought to "challenge American power, influence, and interests." On 19 January 2018, Defense Secretary Mattis announced how the United States would respond, releasing a summary of a new National Defense Strategy that would focus on "strengthening allies and partners, increasing the lethality for the war fighter and reforming the business practices of the Pentagon."<sup>98</sup> "Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism," the Trump administration had determined, was the "primary concern in US national security."<sup>99</sup> Just days later, Trump called President Xi to complain about how the U.S. trade deficit with China had risen to \$275.8 billion—a new record—in 2017, warning him that this was not sustainable. At that moment, Trump was considering imposing tariffs against the PRC and other nations in retaliation for their refusal to end unfair trade practices.<sup>100</sup>

During his first year as president, Trump had not been consistent in pressing the PRC for changes in its economic policies because of his desire to cultivate a friendship with Xi to enlist his support in compelling North Korea to denuclearize. This had led to wild swings in the Sino-American relationship between

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Cleansing' the Rohingya," *CNN*, 22 November 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/22/politics/tillerson-myanmar-ethnic-cleansing> (accessed 9 June 2018).

<sup>96</sup> The Century Foundation, "Trump's First Year Unsettles World Politics"; Camroux, "Is Trump's America the 'Dispensable' Power in Asia?"

<sup>97</sup> Ben Westcott, "Asia under Trump: How the US is Losing the Region to China." See also Pempel, "Trump Swings a Wrecking Ball at U.S.-Asia Relations." Haggard, "Trump in Asia: The Year in Review."

<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Jeremy Diamond, "5 Things to Know about Trump's National Security Strategy," *CNN*, 18 December 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/18/politics/5-things-to-know-about-trumps-national-security-strategy> (10 June 2018).

<sup>99</sup> Quoted in Aaron Mehta, "National Defense Strategy Released with Clear Priority: Stay ahead of Russia and China," *Defense News*, 19 January 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/breaking-news/2018/01/19/national-defense-strategy-released-with-clear-priority-stay-ahead-of-russia-and-china/> (10 June 2018).

<sup>100</sup> Huang, "Trump's First Year Failed the China Test."

cooperation and confrontation. In late June 2017, for example, the Trump administration imposed sanctions on Chinese firms that continued to do business with North Korea. Trump also approved a \$1.4 billion sale of U.S. weapons to Taiwan, prompting an angry protest from Beijing. But just weeks later at the G-20 summit in Germany, Trump and Xi reaffirmed their friendship and cooperation against North Korea, despite the U.S. President's growing frustration with his counterpart's insistence on limiting UN sanctions and linking them to direct talks with the DPRK.<sup>101</sup> Kim Jong Un's continuing missile tests in the fall of 2017 forced Xi to endorse a UN resolution in December imposing the most stringent sanctions yet on North Korea, but he still refused to embargo oil, defying Trump's persistent demands that the PRC do so. By early 2018, the DPRK's ability, allegedly with the PRC's assistance, to endure "maximum pressure" ended Trump's reluctance to take action on trade. Administration officials initiated inquiries into Chinese steel and aluminum exports and announced an investigation into potential intellectual property theft, patent violations, and unfair practices related to technology transfers. Trump also approved imposing new tariffs on imported Chinese solar panels. In response, the PRC prepared to impose tariffs on U.S. imports. Indeed, during March and April 2018, Trump proposed additional tariffs on Chinese goods that have resulted in retaliatory measures from the PRC, signaling the likelihood that a damaging trade war was imminent.<sup>102</sup>

On 25 February 2018, President Trump delivered his State of the Union address. His only reference to Asia was to describe Kim Jong Un as an oppressive and brutal leader who persisted in committing abhorrent human rights crimes against his own people. Present at the address, at his invitation, not only were the parents of Otto Warmbier, a college student who died shortly after the DPRK released him from jail, but also a physically impaired North Korean who escaped to South Korea on crutches.<sup>103</sup> On one hand, this was not surprising, given Trump's alarming tweet in response to Kim Jong Un's New Year's statement that the "United States is within range of our nuclear weapons, a nuclear button is always on my desk." Trump responded with a taunt: "Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!"<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Beijing protested the sanctions that the United States imposed between September and November 2017 on Chinese banks and individuals doing business with North Korea as "unilateral" actions outside the structure of the United Nations. Jeff Mason, "Trump Keeps it Friendly with Xi at G20 on North Korea Threat," *Reuters*, 8 July 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-g20-germany-trump-xi/trump-keeps-it-friendly-with-xi-at-g20-on-north-korea-threat-idUSKBN19T0SP> (accessed 25 January 2018).

<sup>102</sup> Sui-Lee Wee, "China Opens Inquiry into U.S. Sorghum as Trade Tensions Worsen," *New York Times*, 5 February 2018, <http://www.chinafile.com/links/china-opens-inquiry-us-sorghum-trade-tensions-worsen> (accessed 22 January 2018); Keith Collins, "The U.S.-China Trade Conflict: How We Got to this Point," *New York Times*, 5 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/04/05/business/china-us-trade-conflict.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=513164EB419096154DC543ECCE86282A&gwt=pay> (accessed 22 January 2018).

<sup>103</sup> Donald J. Trump, "President Donald J. Trump's State of the Union Address," 30 January 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-state-union-address/> (accessed 6 April 2018).

<sup>104</sup> Bruce Harrison, Stella Kim, Mac William Bishop, and Lauren Suk, "Kim Jong Un Highlights His 'Nuclear Button,' Offers Olympic Talks," *NBC News*, 31 December 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/north-korea/kim->

On the other hand, Trump's silence in his speech about what he had accomplished in the Asia Pacific after a year in office was surprising, given that he had hailed his recent East Asian trip as a tremendous success. He also made no mention of how Kim Jong Un also had proposed that the two Koreas participate jointly in the February Winter Olympics at Pyeongchang, South Korea. ROK President Moon certainly did. Reflecting the emerging pattern of East Asian nations acting independently from the United States to pursue their interests,<sup>105</sup> he arranged with the DPRK not only to have its athletes participate in the games, but walk with South Korea's team in the opening ceremony. Kim Jong Un's sister represented him at the Olympics, meeting before departing with Moon to deliver an invitation for the two leaders to meet. This set in motion a succession of events leading to Moon and Kim conferring at Panmunjom on 27 April and Trump's meeting with Kim on 12 June.<sup>106</sup>

Movement toward resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis allowed Trump finally to prioritize his "America First" economic agenda. On 8 March 2018, he announced imposition of tariffs on steel (25 percent) and aluminum (ten percent)—coming just hours after eleven East Asian nations signed a revised TPP excluding the United States. Significantly, South Korea—as well as Canada and Mexico—received temporary exemptions from the duties.<sup>107</sup> Undoubtedly, this was because the ROK had agreed to renegotiate the KORUS, even though the U.S. trade deficit with South Korea had declined steadily during 2017.<sup>108</sup> Motivating President Moon was a desire to curry favor with Trump—he already had said publicly that Trump deserved consideration for the Nobel Peace Prize—to ensure his continued pursuit of reconciliation with North Korea. In late March 2018, South Korea agreed to allow double the number of U.S. cars exempt from ROK safety regulations to enter its market, but removed none of its limits on U.S. agricultural imports.<sup>109</sup> Unlike the ROK, Japan received no tariff exemption, perhaps because the administration was

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[says-north-korea-s-nuclear-weapons-will-prevent-war-n833781](#) (accessed 10 June 2018); Donald J. Trump, Twitter Post, 2 January 2018, 4:49 p.m., <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/94835557022420992> (10 June 2018).

<sup>105</sup> Don Lee, "Trump's Asia Trip Shows U.S. at Risk of Being Sidelined in the Region's Economic Future," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 November 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-trump-asia-trade-20171109-story.html> (3 April 2018).

<sup>106</sup> "Kim Jong-un to Meet Moon Jae-in at Korean Border for Summit," *BBC*, 26 April 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43903155> (accessed 10 June 2018).

<sup>107</sup> Baker and Swanson, "Trump Authorizes Tariffs, Defying Allies at Home and Abroad"; Anna Fifield and Michael Birnbaum, "U.S. Allies See Trump's Steel Tariffs as an Insult," *Washington Post*, 8 March 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-allies-see-trumps-steel-tariffs-as-an-insult/2018/03/08/a3b1382a-22f0-11e8-946c-9420060cb7bd\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-allies-see-trumps-steel-tariffs-as-an-insult/2018/03/08/a3b1382a-22f0-11e8-946c-9420060cb7bd_story.html) (accessed 13 April 2018).

<sup>108</sup> Cutler, "Trade Storms Brewing after Trump's Asia trip The Hill."

<sup>109</sup> Daniel Shane, "US and South Korea Revamp Trade Deal That Trump Called 'Horrible'," *CNN Money*, 26 March 2018, <http://money.cnn.com/2018/03/26/news/economy/south-korea-us-trade> (accessed 11 June 2018).

applying pressure to negotiate a bilateral free trade agreement.<sup>110</sup> Abe thus learned that being Trump's golf buddy would not win special U.S. treatment for Japan. When Trump announced more tariffs against China on 22 March, he made this point crystal clear:

I'll talk to Prime Minister Abe of Japan and others—great guy, friend of mine—and there will be a little smile on their face...And the smile is, "I can't believe we've been able to take advantage of the United States for so long." So those days are over.<sup>111</sup>

But China was Trump's main target. On 29 May, the administration announced plans to impose 25 percent tariffs on Chinese imports worth \$50 billion. Sino-American negotiations in Beijing to resolve differences on trade collapsed on 2 June, prompting a warning from the PRC that U.S. imposition of sanctions would end trade talks permanently.<sup>112</sup> An open trade war seemed near.

Trump's East Asia policies during the first year and a half of his presidency have shown a profound lack of understanding that a nation's effectiveness and success in world affairs requires consistency, coherence, and predictability. Admittedly, President Richard M. Nixon shocked the world in the summer of 1971 when he announced that he would visit the PRC and allow the U.S. dollar to float on global currency markets. Japan, South Korea, South Vietnam, and Taiwan all feared imminent U.S. abandonment. But Trump's abrupt policy shifts have been unprecedented in number and extent. His policy toward North Korea provides the most obvious example. After demanding unconditional, complete, verified, and irreversible denuclearization, Trump met in person with Kim Jong Un and won only the DPRK's leader renewed promise to dismantle his missile and nuclear weapons programs.<sup>113</sup> Before achieving this empty victory, Trump thought he could rely on the personal relationship that he had built with President Xi to force the North Koreans to submit to his original demands. In the process, he abdicated U.S. leadership in East Asia to the PRC on a host of issues. Trump has as yet not articulated a comprehensive strategic framework for future U.S. involvement in the region, repeatedly declaring only that the United States wants fair and reciprocal trade to reduce large U.S. trade deficits with Asian nations. But his insistence on negotiating bilateral deals to achieve his objective only has allowed the PRC to entice Asian nations interested in multinational agreements to join its Comprehensive

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<sup>110</sup> Motoko Rich, "Misreading Trump: Ally Japan is Spurned on Tariff Exemptions," *New York Times*, 23 March 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/23/world/asia/japan-trump-tariffs-trade.html> (accessed 14 April 2018).

<sup>111</sup> "Remarks by President Trump at Signing of a Presidential Memorandum Targeting China's Economic Aggression, 22 March 2018," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-signing-presidential-memorandum-targeting-chinas-economic-aggression/> (accessed 14 April 2018). During Trump's visit to Japan, a naïve Prime Minister Abe Shinzo only half in jest remarked that "when you play golf with someone not just once, but for two times, the person must be your favorite guy." Quoted in Merica, "Trump's Asia Trip."

<sup>112</sup> "Trump's China tariffs Could be Imposed in June," *BBC News*, 29 May 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-44294131> (11 June 2018); "China Warns US Sanctions with Void Trade Talks," *BBC News*, 3 June 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-44346461> (11 June 2018).

<sup>113</sup> Kevin Liptak, "Trump's North Korean Gamble Ends with 'Special Bond' with Kim," *CNN*, 12 June 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/11/politics/trump-kim-summit-singapore> (accessed 12 June 2018).

Economic Partnership.<sup>114</sup> Trump has placed long-standing U.S. partnerships in East Asia at serious risk, with what Korea-Pacific expert Haggard labels an approach that is “unilateral, disengaged, erratic, and even solipsistic.”<sup>115</sup> In sum, as Brian Katulis of the Center for American Progress concludes, “‘America First’ means America alone, and the world will continue to move on without it.”<sup>116</sup>

**James I. Matray** has been professor of history at California State University, Chico, since 2002. His research focuses on U.S.-Korean relations during and after World War II. He has written or edited nine books, as well as publishing more than fifty scholarly articles, essays, and book chapters. Matray’s latest major publication is *Crisis in a Divided Korea: A Chronology and Reference Guide* (ABC-CLIO 2016). He also is editor-in-chief of the *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*. His current research project on the Battles of Pork Chop Hill will result in the publication of a monograph with Indiana University Press.

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<sup>114</sup> Lee, “Trump’s Asia Trip Shows U.S. at Risk of Being Sidelined in the Region’s Economic Future.”

<sup>115</sup> Haggard, “Trump in Asia: The Year in Review.” See also, Smith, “Whither Trump’s Asia Policy.”

<sup>116</sup> “Beneath the thin cover of Trump’s ‘America First’ slogan and bombastic rhetoric,” Brian Katulis adds, “is a formula for America’s retreat on the global economy, climate change, migration, conflict resolution, championing freedom and human rights, and defeating extremist ideologies.” Brian Katulis, “Trump’s First Year Unsettles World Politics,” The Century Foundation, 17 January 2018, <https://tcf.org/content/report/trump-first-year-unsettles-world-politics/> (accessed 25 March 2018).