

The United States in the Asia-Pacific: The Case for More Proactive Engagement

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SINCE WORLD WAR II, THERE has been widespread recognition of the critical pillars of U.S. leadership in international affairs. The pillars are commonly referred to as the “three Ds”: defense, diplomacy, and development. Defense is the essential element in building a national strategy to prevent military conflict, protect U.S. national interests, and ensure peace and stability in several regions of the world. Diplomacy, meanwhile, has been the means for international communication, relationship building, problem solving, and the effective creation of international legal frameworks. Finally, development generally refers to a nation’s efforts to assist countries across the world through direct financial, agricultural, and health-related investments, along with trade agreements and other forms of commercial interaction.

295

In recent decades, there has been a concerted effort to add a fourth D: democracy. During the Cold War, a bipartisan effort led by the two most prominent political leaders of the time, President Ronald Reagan and Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill, resulted in the creation of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Through the NED, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI)—two nongovernmental, nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations—were developed simultaneously in 1983. Together, they began to promote democratic institution building and improve governance in many newly formed democratic republics (in the interest of full disclosure, I currently serve as a Vice-Chair of the NDI). Unfortunately, but

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perhaps necessarily, the four Ds do not each receive an equal share of resources or policy priority. The U.S. commitment to financing defense more than exceeds the other three Ds together, and with each passing year the gap grows larger, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FOUR DS IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

The most successful attempt to apply the four-D international engagement infrastructure since World War II has been in the Asia-Pacific. While all Western European countries benefited enormously from U.S. post-war rebuilding efforts, many had already experienced democratically inclined political systems prior to the war. There was little evidence of democratic governance in the Asia-Pacific during the pre-war period and—in most countries in the region—for many years afterward. While there were significant humanitarian motives for U.S. involvement, the primary incentives for engaging in the Asia-Pacific region were the containment of communism and the development of Asian markets for U.S. export. Over the two decades following World War II, the United States established more than 300 military bases in seven Asia-Pacific countries. This unprecedented military presence was viewed as essential to containing communist aggression, addressing regional tension, and providing stability in a constantly unstable political environment.

In exchange for allowing a ubiquitous U.S. military presence in the region, U.S. allies received military assistance, economic aid, and access to U.S. markets. While not as robust as security assistance, developmental assistance was an important catalyst to the creation of stronger economies. It not only stimulated economic growth, but also created social and political stability. Priority assistance was directed to infrastructure needs, including roads, bridges, power grids, and ports. Total Western assistance to the Asia-Pacific through the Cold War is estimated to have reached nearly \$1 trillion. Following the end of the Cold War and the realization that the then substantial U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific could be reduced, the Nye Initiative articulated U.S. strategy for a gradual, balanced reduction in forward defense forces and an increased focus on economic engagement. As a result, free and open trade along with greater market access became the goal of both Republican and Democratic administrations.

As military, diplomatic, and developmental assistance increased, the United States gave a great deal of attention to governmental institution building and to creating the foundations for democracy. There is no better illustration of the success of these efforts than Japan. Led by General Douglas MacArthur and

with the full support of President Harry Truman and Congress, Japan created one of the most successful parliamentary democracies in the world. While other countries in the region—including Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, and the Philippines—sought to follow a similar path, for the most part these efforts remained a work in progress for several decades. However, it was largely because of U.S. guidance, support, and continued engagement that these fledgling democratic republics became increasingly reliable democracies over the past 75 years.

According to the latest report from Freedom House, a nongovernmental organization that has done research on global political freedoms for over 75 years, the Asia-Pacific has been the only region to record steady gains in political rights and civil liberties. However, there is a clear divide in these countries' democratic experiences. Freedom House notes that while many of them have made impressive gains in political freedom, pluralism, and freedom of expression, the region is still experiencing an overall 38 percent freedom level and a mere 5 percent in press freedom, largely as a result of the repressive governments in China and North Korea. Although there are clear exceptions, the United States' four-D policy of defense, diplomacy, development, and democracy building has proven to be a remarkable achievement in the Asia-Pacific over the past 75 years. Alongside the United States' success in Europe, the Asia-Pacific region has benefitted most from the extraordinary U.S. commitment to these policies.

297

THE ASIA-PACIFIC TODAY

Although today they obviously deserve the lion's share of the credit for their own successes, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea exemplify U.S. foreign policy achievements in developing four-D engagement in the Asia-Pacific. Large-scale importation of Japanese, South Korean, and Taiwanese automobiles, televisions, computers, cameras, and cell phone components to the United States facilitated this engagement. Today, Japan remains the fourth largest exporter and the third largest economy in the world.

JAPAN

While the Asia-Pacific region now also has some of the world's largest militaries, Japan has maintained a constitutionally-limited military infrastructure since the end of World War II. The Japanese government currently commits over two billion dollars to the United States to maintain over 50,000 military personnel and another 8,000 civilian employees in the U.S. Department of Defense. In

recent years, the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has made the buildup of Japanese military strength a national priority. With increasing threats from both China and North Korea, Japan has seen an urgent need for greater self-defense capabilities. The Abe government has consistently called for changes to and reinterpretations of the statutory and constitutional limitations that were enacted in the years following World War II.

CHINA AND TAIWAN

Military buildups in the region are not restricted to the case of Japan; the South China Sea, for instance, is becoming an increasingly contentious issue. Tension in the region has significantly increased through an aggressive buildup of Chinese military forces and facilities in the South China Sea, especially around territorial claims to the Spratly and Paracel Islands. The risk of conflict continues to grow, and territorial, jurisdictional, and mineral rights are at the center of overlapping claims. But navigational freedom, pivotal to the economic flow of goods and services in the region, is also at stake.

298

Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (also called the Republic of China, ROC) have become known globally as the “Four Asian Tigers” largely as a result of their navigational freedom, economic integration with the West, and stability. With major infusions of U.S. economic assistance, Taiwan’s gross national product (GNP) grew by 360 percent in the twenty years following 1965.

From 1947 onward, the mainland Chinese government has claimed sovereignty over Taiwan. China’s One China policy remains at the heart of the permanent tension between the mainland and the ROC. China refuses diplomatic relations with those countries that recognize the government in Taipei. The United States and mainland China established diplomatic relations on 1 January 1979. Since then, in place of an official embassy in Washington, D.C., the title for Taiwan’s facility and the center of its activities in the country has been the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office. Taiwan is now the tenth largest global trading partner with the United States. If conflict came to Taiwan, the results could be disastrous for the United States as well.

THE KOREAN PENINSULA

In recent years, and especially this past year, North Korea has become increasingly bellicose both in its rhetoric and military activities. It has aggressively prioritized the development of its nuclear weapon capabilities and warned of a

preemptive nuclear attack on the United States with missiles that can now reach the United States' western coast. This presents one of the most complicated and vexing foreign policy challenges to the Trump administration in the Asia-Pacific and in the rest of the world. Because of North Korea's increasing aggressiveness, global tensions have risen palpably. South Korean military forces include personnel strength estimated to exceed 3.5 million, one of the largest in the world. Daily propaganda broadcasts from giant loudspeakers emanating from the South and the North are part of a surreal verbal war. The United States has increased its military activity, including through its significant naval presence in waters surrounding the Korean Peninsula.

Over this past year, President Trump and Kim Jong-un have dramatically intensified the tension between the United States and North Korea with increasingly incendiary rhetorical exchanges. In his first speech to the UN General Assembly, referring to the North Korean leader, Trump asserted that "rocket man is on a suicide mission for himself." Kim has responded by calling Trump "the sworn enemy of all Korea" and a "mentally deranged U.S. dotard." More and more, he warns of a nuclear holocaust, something Russian President Vladimir Putin recently agreed is now possible. Renewed efforts to impose increasingly severe economic sanctions on North Korea have been only marginally successful. China's reluctance to fully engage stems in large measure from its fear of the North Korean regime's political collapse and the potential for a Syria-like crisis at their border.

299

In spite of the relentless tension on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea has become the fourth largest economy in Asia and the eleventh largest—and one of the fastest growing—in the world. It is also an increasingly popular destination for tourism, with more than 11 million foreign tourists a year. In the last South Korean election, it was the economy and not North Korea that generated the greatest attention among the electorate.

THE UNITED STATES' ROLE IN THE TRANS-PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP (TPP)

U.S. treaty alliances with Asia-Pacific countries have extraordinary bearing on virtually every aspect of economic, security, diplomatic, and democratic global strategic interests. This is especially true as the United States becomes increasingly reliant on Asian markets and economic integration. Following the election of President Barack Obama, the United States announced that it would "rebalance" its military and economic strategy with a "pivot" to more emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region. It was reported that 60 percent of both Navy and

Air Force resources would be deployed there by 2020. U.S. military personnel in the region totaled over 365,000 in 2015, representing more than half of all U.S. military forces overseas.

The complex security circumstances of U.S. relations with China and North Korea, coupled with the growing realization that Asia-Pacific economic integration is critical to U.S. interests, have only reconfirmed the need for

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increased emphasis on, and presence in, the Asia-Pacific. China and the United States have grown increasingly focused on the ongoing competition for influ-

ence in global economic and military spheres. That focus became the subject of national and international debate beginning with the inauguration of President Barack Obama.

In a piece entitled “America’s Pacific Century” in *Foreign Policy* in October 2011, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton articulated the diplomatic case for the American rebalance strategy:

Just as Asia is critical to America’s future, an engaged America is vital to Asia’s future. The region is eager for our leadership and our business—perhaps more so than at any time in modern history. We are the only power with a network of strong alliances in the region, no territorial ambitions, and a long record of providing for the common good. Along with our allies, we have underwritten regional security for decades—patrolling Asia’s sea lanes and preserving stability—and that in turn has helped create the conditions for growth.

According to the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, U.S. trade with Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) countries now exceeds \$3 trillion, with exports amounting to nearly half that total. The Department of Commerce reports that U.S. exports to the region support more than six million jobs. Agricultural exports total more than \$100 billion per year. Furthermore, the World Bank reports that annual growth in the region is expected to remain strong. Accordingly, the poverty rates in these countries should continue to fall. The 21 countries in the region (nearly half of the world’s population) have a combined GDP of over \$40 trillion (over 50 percent of the world economic output) and a near equal percentage of total U.S. trade.

On 4 February 2016, after seven arduous years of negotiation involving

twelve countries on both sides of the Pacific Ocean, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement was signed by representatives of the participating countries. Its purpose was to reduce both tariff and non-tariff trade barriers while creating a mechanism for investor-state dispute settlements. Disagreements over agriculture, intellectual property, foreign investment, and service-related limitations created significant obstacles to a final agreement. However, on 23 January 2017, newly inaugurated President Donald Trump signed an executive order to withdraw the United States from the agreement. Since then, all of the remaining signatories have continued to meet in an effort to implement the TPP without U.S. participation. Many see the U.S. withdrawal from the TPP as a rare opportunity for China to fill the void, especially in the Asia-Pacific. China's alternative, 16-member organizational effort is called the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and includes both the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and states with whom these countries have existing trade agreements.

Just prior to the G-20 meeting in Hamburg in July 2017, leaders from the European Union and Japan announced a major new trade agreement that is estimated to involve 40 percent of global trade and 30 percent of the global economy. While still subject to formal approval, Prime Minister Abe called it the "world's largest free advanced industrialized economic zone... and [it] will hoist the flag of free trade high amidst protectionist trends." This development has great potential to threaten many of the economic and trade advantages that the United States has experienced with both the European Union and Japan in recent decades.

There is substantial evidence of the correlation between economic growth and democratic freedoms. As Asia-Pacific countries experienced their rapid growth in GDP along with U.S.-guaranteed national security, the environment for political freedom and democratic institutions was immeasurably enhanced. With its four-D strategy, the United States has long served as the world's principal security guarantor, diplomatic interlocutor, economic motivator, and democratic mentor. However, that role has attracted skepticism from a growing number of Americans who remain dubious of the value of U.S. security and foreign assistance commitments abroad.

As a candidate, Donald Trump frequently articulated that skepticism. "Japan is better if it protects itself against this maniac of North Korea," he said in a campaign interview. "We are better off frankly if South Korea is going to start protecting itself... they have to protect themselves or they have to pay us." Trump was also harshly critical of U.S. security obligations to Japan. He com-

mented: “You know we have a treaty with Japan where if Japan is attacked, we have to use the full force and might of the United States. If we’re attacked, Japan doesn’t have to do anything. They can sit at home and watch Sony television, OK?” He has also called for a 45 percent tariff on Chinese imports.

Since taking office, President Trump and those in his administration have sounded and acted in ways that mimic their predecessors. Shortly after being sworn in, Secretary of Defense James Mattis made an early visit to both Japan and South Korea to reassure them of continued U.S. support. President Trump made similar assurances to Prime Minister Abe during their February meeting at Mar-a-Lago. Despite some prior public uncertainty, the president also reiterated U.S. recognition of the policy in his first phone conversation with President Xi Jinping.

THE ASIA-PACIFIC: A FOUR-D FUTURE?

THE FUTURE OF NORTH KOREA

A looming question regarding U.S. security interests in the Asian Pacific involves North Korea. Secretary Tillerson and Vice President Pence provided some clarification and amplification of the Trump administration’s policy early last spring. They both declared that the “strategic patience” policies often ascribed to the Obama administration were over and reiterated that “all options were on the table.” With a hyperbolic rhetorical flourish, President Trump warned in August 2017 that he would unleash “fire, fury and frankly power, the likes of which this world has never seen before.”

The administration’s decision to install the most sophisticated U.S. anti-missile system in South Korea without adequately consulting the government or allies in the region was an indication of a clear lack of diplomatic sensitivity and an inadequate understanding of the nuances involved in these relationships. President Trump’s suggestion that the Korean government pay for it added even more fuel to the fire. In June, newly elected President Moon Jae-in suspended the deployment of the antimissile system. In September, Trump accused the South Korean government of appeasement toward North Korea.

Regardless of the outcome, in addition to the relentless rhetorical attacks on North Korea, the Trump administration’s decision to commit sophisticated technology and significant resources to the region is a clear sign of U.S. intent to maintain historical security commitments. In fact, the question is no longer one of U.S. military commitments in the region. The real question is whether

the United States can avert a nuclear war with North Korea. While all options, spoken and unspoken, are always on the table when dealing with North Korea, few have inspired enthusiasm or confidence among U.S. administrations. There is widespread agreement that any military option is almost completely untenable given North Korea's likely ability to strike preemptively or in retaliation, endangering the lives of potentially millions of people in the region. However, economic sanctions have not worked well either. Unified action on new hard-hitting economic sanctions involving both China and the West has been largely unattainable.

While as a candidate Trump was aggressively critical of Chinese policies and U.S. policies toward China, President Trump initially appeared much more positive in both regards. After his first official meeting with President Xi, he was effusive:

The relationship developed by President Xi and myself I think is outstanding. We look forward to being together many times in the future. And I believe lots of very potentially bad problems will be going away... And again, progress has been made.

In recent months, however, President Trump has appeared to lose patience with President Xi and his lack of engagement. In two tweets on 5 July, Trump exposed his increasing frustration:

Trade between China and North Korea grew almost 40% in the first quarter. So much for China working with us-but we had to give it a try.

The United States made some of the worst Trade Deals in world history. Why should we continue these deals with countries that don't help us?

Prior to the G-20 meeting and after the successful test of an intercontinental missile, President Trump warned that North Korea could face "some pretty severe" consequences. China and Russia issued a joint statement calling on North Korea to cease its nuclear development while simultaneously demanding that the United States cease military training operations in the region. Taking her cue from the president later in the same week, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley harshly accused both Russia and China of "holding hands" with Kim Jong-un.

THE FUTURE OF CHINA AND TAIWAN

Ever transactionally inclined, the president has referenced his preference for

using both incentives and disincentives, including trade, to encourage Chinese cooperation. After six months of diplomatic experimentation with China, and even with Trump's increasingly belligerent rhetoric, it appears that the administration has tacitly accepted most of the policies used by its predecessors. However, in early July, the administration announced its decision to sell \$1.42 billion worth of arms to Taiwan. This announcement was made nearly simultaneously with the Treasury Department's decision to sever U.S. financial ties with one of China's most important financial institutions, the Bank of Dandong. China strongly protested the arms sale and demanded cancellation.

While they were generally well received in both Taiwan and the United States, these actions clearly complicate what is certain to be the second most consequential military factor in U.S.-China relations: the ongoing tension in the South China Sea. Secretary Tillerson's remarks during his confirmation hearing originally received considerable attention in the Asia-Pacific. In his most confrontational tone, the secretary said that the United States would send a clear signal that island building should stop and brazenly asserted that access to the islands would not be allowed. Subsequent statements from the president and others in his administration indicate a not-so-subtle desire to back down from Tillerson's bombast. Some have even suggested a negotiated accommodation.

304

Yet many countries in the region continue to maintain that they have far greater legal right to the islands than China. For these countries, in addition to their historical arguments, the dispute has enormous implications for commercial fishing, mineral rights, and open and secure navigation. The region contains some of the most active shipping lanes in the world. This matter will continue to have immensely critical economic consequences that will dictate, in large measure, the U.S. security strategy.

In spite of President Trump's initial effusiveness about President Xi, most analysts believe that the Trump administration will be both transactional and unpredictable in developing this new relationship with China. Tension between the two countries has increased considerably in recent months and is likely to result in greater volatility not only with China but also with U.S. allies in the region. The uncertainty will unquestionably create significant diplomatic challenges that will require careful and frequent coordination.

CONCLUSION

If the Trump administration's actions in its early months are any guide, there may be cause for cautious clarity about the future of the first component of

the U.S. four-D foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific, defense; uncertainty about the second and third, diplomacy and development; and significant pessimism about the fourth, democracy. President Trump's determination to eschew most multilateral engagement in the Asia-Pacific is certain to make the development of a strategy for dealing with economic, security, and diplomatic challenges even more daunting and unpredictable. Continuity and stability in the Asia-Pacific, which have long been the underlying objectives of Republican and Democratic administrations, will be

difficult to maintain.

Even less clear is the outlook for democracy and human rights.

While bilateral engage-

ments on economic and military priorities are anticipated, there appears to be little respect for human rights or interest in democratic institution building in this administration.

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At this point in the Trump presidency, three conclusions regarding the four Ds can be offered. First, the Trump administration appears inclined to de-emphasize the long-held four-Ds model. It is unclear how much resistance the administration will experience from Congress. There have been hopeful signs in the early stages of the budget and appropriations process that funding for democracy-related programs remains secure. There is also significant interest from many states and the private sector in maintaining close diplomatic and economic relationships in the region.

Secondly, U.S. policy in the Asia-Pacific will be more volatile. Amid that volatility, those with positions of responsibility in the administration should do all they can to fortify the efforts around the second D, diplomacy. Constant communication, clarification, and perhaps retraction of an ill-advised tweet emanating from the White House will be essential.

Finally, the economic, diplomatic, and military importance of the Asia-Pacific will become even more evident to this administration and the broader country as the economic and geopolitical effects of the Trump administration policies are fully understood. Since the president's rhetoric may not always match reality, it is vital to U.S. interests that clear and positive actions involving all four Ds continue from other sources including Congress, businesses, nongovernmental organizations and, perhaps most importantly, the regional organizations that already exist.

Opponents of the United States' longstanding four-D approach in the

TOM DASCHLE

Trump administration and elsewhere may want to simply replace it. But as we have already witnessed, unless and until a comprehensive and viable replacement is found, there is no better solution to the many daunting challenges that the United States will continue to face in the Asia-Pacific than to stay the course. 