



ISSN: 0976-3376

Available Online at <http://www.journalajst.com>

ASIAN JOURNAL OF
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Asian Journal of Science and Technology
Vol. 09, Issue, 09, pp.8655-8660, September, 2018

RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERPRETING TRUMP'S EAST ASIA POLICY FROM BILATERALISM-BASED "AMERICA FIRST" TO BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL NEXUS

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 10th June, 2018
Received in revised form
26th July, 2018
Accepted 17th August, 2018
Published online 30th September, 2018

Key words:

East Asia, North Korea,
China, security, Economics.

ABSTRACT

Since Donald Trump assumed power as the U.S. President in early 2017, the world has witnessed an unprecedented level of uncertainty about U.S. East Asia policy and other regions alike. Yet, now there is enough supporting evidence to interpret Trump's East Asia policy highlighted by a shift from his enthusiasm to pursue bilateralism-based "America First" posture to both bilateral and multilateral approaches through economics-security nexus. In any case, Korea peninsular nuclear crisis, and the China factor to a lesser extent, serves as the determinant to this noticeable shift. Also, after the first 90 days in power, Trump may have learned more about the correlation between regional economic and security cooperation in the pressing quest for engagement, thus also marking a shift from removal to embrace of the legacy of predecessor Obama's regional policy.

Citation: *Nguyen Huu Quy et and Dinh The Dinh. 2018. "Interpreting trump's east Asia policy from bilateralism-based "america first" to bilateral and multilateral nexus", Asian Journal of Science and Technology, 09, (09), 8655-8660.*

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INTRODUCTION

Since Trump's entry into power in early 2017, it has been generally assumed that there is a great deal of uncertainty about the newly elected president's approach to U.S. East Asia foreign policy given more or less differences between his rhetoric and practices of action. However, much evidence was ushered in Trump's clear-cut regional stance during his first 90 days in power and, subsequently, a noticeable shift, particularly in the wake of the Korea peninsular nuclear crisis. What then was Trump's posture to the East Asian region in early months of his presidency? Why and how has Trump's regional policy been adapted afterwards? Are there elements of Obama's legacy of regional policy under Trump? This article endeavors to address these questions. The first part discusses Trump's bilateralism-based "America First" approach towards economic and security realms during his 90 days in power. The second part examines Trump's revised policy towards the region in wake of the nuclear crisis, at the same time exploring the China factor and economics-security nexus pressures in the region as the aside motives for Trump's policy shift. The final part looks into Trump's some positive developments in light of Obama's legacy of regional policy.

Trump's stance towards East Asia during 90 days in power: Unlike President Obama's clear-cut multilateral regional policy in tandem with the alliance system to engage

East Asia in all fields, the newly-elected President Donald Trump's approach to U.S. foreign policy on the East Asian Asia-Pacific and elsewhere alike was centered on bilateralism in early months of Trump's presidency. In his first week in office, Trump stressed "America First" approach and made it clear that multilateral venues are not his thing. Rather, Washington would take one relationship at a time and define it in terms of Washington's priorities. The new president's bilateral preferences in terms of both economic and security interests, as he believed, were beneficial to the US. On the economic front, Trump believed bilateral trade deals are better than regional or multilateral agreements as the US is facing trade deficit as a consequence of unfair multilateral trade at the U.S. expense in terms of tariff disparity, asymmetrical rules or currency misalignment, and protectionist trend. Moreover, Trump's embrace of bilateral negotiations is borne out of his understanding of the global economy as a zero-sum competition. This economic philosophy is structured around how benefits of any trade deal are distributed between countries and who's getting the biggest slice of the pie, rather not whether a trade deal creates overall economic gains. At this point, Trump worried that in previous multilateral trade negotiations, U.S. negotiators allowed other countries, especially smaller ones, to gain at the U.S. expense. But in one-on-one negotiations, Trump suggested "the U.S. would have greater leverage and thereby be able to capture a greater share of the gains from any agreement" (Geoffrey, 2017, February 8). To that end, right on his inauguration day, Trump announced his executive order to withdraw the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

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Trump's decision to pull the US out of the multilateral trade pact marked a huge letdown for Australia and Japan in particular that had invested a huge amount of time, effort, and political capital betting on the deal's success. It also depressed U.S. long-standing trade partners such as Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, and Vietnam, which view the US as a counterweight to China's heft (Hunter, 2017 January 23). However, by jettisoning the deal, Trump fulfilled a campaign promise and he ended all hopes for a deal Obama wanted as a major part of his legacy. Although Trump's rhetoric about his enthusiasm to negotiate with the individual members of the TPP over bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs), it is uncertain about the possibility of such a trade deal since Japan, Vietnam, and Malaysia are listed as countries that cause trade deficit at the expense of the US. In the security realm, Trump geared his priorities towards U.S. allies in the region, but held the view that Washington's allies took advantage of its aids and were apparently enjoying at the U.S. expense, intimating that the US might withdraw its forces and not come to the defense of its allies if they did not contribute more, through his clear message: 'Pay up or you're on your own' (Abraham, 2017, February 8). Trump mused upon a distant scene that Japan and South Korea should develop their own nuclear capabilities for self-defense or contribute more to the US for alliance system was a clear indication of the new administration's "America First" agenda. Similarly, Trump's preference for security bilateralism schemes which presented at the NATO and G20 meetings with European allies, along with the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, revealed that the new president found the formalities of multilateral diplomacy tiresome and awkward.

China and the South China Sea

In contrast to the Obama administration's 'pivot to Asia' with an overwhelming focus on economic sphere and diplomatic effort over military component to rebalance China's growing regional power, there were signs that Trump was intent on a newly assertive policy, one more reliant on hard power. Prior to assuming office, Trump had tweeted several times about being willing to rethink the 'one China' policy. In the wake of the phone call with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, Trump questioned why the US has to be "bound" by the one-China principle. During a December 11 television interview, he also stated, "I don't want China dictating to me" (David, 2017). Trump's rhetoric ratcheted up tensions with Beijing to a level not seen since 1996 when President Bill Clinton sent two carrier battle groups through the Taiwan Strait. Notably, some of Trump's advisors, who were associated with the election campaign, sparked the need for a harder line towards Beijing, both in terms of taking a different approach to reducing the U.S. trade deficit and upping U.S. naval power in the region, to contend with China's maritime expansion. At the same time, Team Trump offered the "peace through strength" vision, calling for the president to strengthen U.S. military might in the Pacific by expanding its presence of navy ships. It seems that the Asia hawks on Team Trump thought that by preemptively eliminating tools like economic statecraft from U.S. foreign-policy toolbox, a show of force is necessary to counteract China's ambitions or to persuade Beijing to relent in its quest for regional domination. Washington's arm deal worth of \$1.42 billion to Taiwan in April 2017 despite Beijing's protest was an indication of this new move. However, from Beijing's perspective, military strategists in the

People's Liberation Army (PLA) view Taiwan as a paramount security threat to internal stability, so using this island state as a bargaining chip would be likely to empower hard-liners in the Communist Party and PLA who advocate a more assertive military strategy. In tandem with the hard power approach as one of its priorities in addressing China's growing regional influence, the White House pursued an assertive posture towards Beijing in the South China Sea dispute. In his Senate confirmation hearing on January 11, 2017, Trump's nominee for Secretary of State Rex Tillerson warned of a more confrontational South China Sea position from Washington, saying that 'We're going to have to send China a clear signal that, first, the island-building stops and, second, your access to those islands also is not going to be allowed' (David & Matt, 2017, January 12). This drew a quick response from China. Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Lu Kang discouraged the US from getting involved in the dispute, stating, 'The situation in the South China Sea has cooled down as countries in the region have come round to the agreement. We hope that countries outside the region will respect such an agreement that serves the common interests of the region and beyond' (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017, January 12). One month later, Tillerson got tough with China, writing 'China cannot be allowed to use its artificial islands to coerce its neighbors or limit freedom of navigation or overflight in the South China Sea,' and 'The United States will uphold freedom of navigation and overflight by continuing to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows' (Abraham, 2017, January 8). Tillerson's remarks may signal the beginnings of a far more assertive U.S. policy of containment aimed at curbing China's control of the South China Sea. This position is true as a couple of weeks prior to Trump's inauguration, the U.S. Navy conducted a freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea, a demonstration of our commitment to protecting the right to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows. In response, China deployed its Liaoning aircraft carrier passing through the Taiwan Strait, then transited past Okinawa, which hosts more than half of the 50,000 American troops in Japan, into the SCS. This reaction was largely interpreted as a stern position directed at Taipei and the incoming Trump administration's intervention in the South China Sea.

It is apparent that during his 90 days in power, the Trump administration geared its priority to bilateralism-based "America First" approach towards to East Asia both in economic and security realms to be pragmatically exploited to U.S. interests. However, this penchant for bilateralism could produce counterproductive outcomes of the US in the region. In security, it would suggest a diminished U.S. role in the ASEAN-centered multilateral regional security forums and dialogues. Moreover, such a new move could make Washington's regional policy quickly politicized, and U.S. allies in the region could be subject to greater popular scrutiny with little or no strategic assessment of their value to the region. Notably, the new administration's move in its dealings with Beijing over its regional influence expansion and encroachment into the South China Sea through the preoccupied vision of "peace through strength" vision could inflame antagonism of Chinese hard liners, thus possibly intensifying China-U.S. rivalry, if not conflicts—the outcome neither both parties nor the Southeast Asian states wish to witness. In the economic realm, Trump's trade policy destined for bilateralism would put U.S. allies and the regional states in

a difficult spot as they have long cooperated with the US through both bilateral trade and through the dynamics of multilateral trade and investment networks in the region. Equally important, Trump's withdrawal from multilateral trade pacts would put the U.S. regional interests at risk as there has been a dense net of multilateral economic arrangements in East Asia, especially since the wake of the 1997-98 East Asian crisis, many of which marked U.S. absence. At this point, China will be much likely to reap large gains if the United States pulls back. It is evident that all the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreements, which do not include the United States, have almost entered into effect with some nudging from China. Although U.S. allies and long-standing partners in the region might not be enthusiastic about the comparatively modest RCEP, they support the developing trade architecture out of pragmatism. Thus, Washington's pragmatic bilateralism in its trade policy would provide an arena for China to draw the regional countries into its orbit. As Lee Kuan Yew, the former prime minister of Singapore, warned of this outcome in 2013 when he told a journalist from the *Atlantic*, "Without an FTA [with the United States], Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and the ASEAN countries will be integrated into China's economy — an outcome to be avoided" (Hunter, 2017 January 23). This is to say, for decades, U.S. partners and allies in the region have looked to Washington not just as a security guarantor, but also as trade and investment facilitator; therefore without popular support for Trump's 'all-sticks, no-carrots' approach, the US will find it increasingly difficult to engage the region.

North Korea on radar and Trump's revised stance towards East Asia: Against the above background, after his 90 days in power, Trump seems to have revised his East Asia policy, endorsing both bilateral and multilateral approaches through economics-security nexus. In any case, Korea peninsular nuclear crisis, and, to a lesser extent, the China factor as well as economics-security nexus pressures, serve as the driving motives for the policy departure.

North Korea nuclear threat and Washington's dilemma: A nuclear-armed and belligerent North Korea has presented the Trump administration with an urgent and dangerous challenge. Since April 2017, North Korea has conducted a series of missile and nuclear tests that demonstrated the country's ability to launch ballistic missiles beyond its immediate region and suggested that North Korea's nuclear weapons capacity was developing at unprecedented pace. In the six years since he assumed power, Kim Jong-Un has tested eighty four missiles—more than double the number that his father and grandfather tested (Evan, 2017, September 18). Yet, from April to September of 2017 alone, North Korea had tested altogether 22 medium-range ballistic missiles, including the launch of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that can reportedly deliver nuclear warheads to targets thousands of miles away. With the new advancement in its nuclear weapons proliferation, North Korea can probably already target South Korea, Japan, and U.S. bases in those countries with nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles. Pyongyang will also be likely to be able to strike more distant targets, including U.S. bases in Guam and Hawaii, and eventually the continental United States itself, within two to three years (Evans, 2017). North Korea is also developing solid-fuel ballistic missiles that would enable it to disperse and hide those missiles and give the regime a survivable second-strike capability.

For decades, dealing with Pyongyang's nuclear proliferation programs has remained a deadlock for Washington. Bill Clinton signed a deal in which North Korea agreed to freeze its nuclear development in exchange for oil and a civilian reactor, but neither side fulfilled its commitments. George W. Bush refused bilateral negotiations, then switched tacks and convened what are known as the Six-Party Talks, but eventually got stuck afterwards. Obama first offered inducements, and later adopted a stonewalling policy called "strategic patience," but no feasible outcome was presented. Trump is the fourth U.S. President who has vowed to put an end to North Korea's nuclear program by his mandate in the name of the US to lead the U.N. Security Council in its passage of sanctions against North Korea. Yet, the Kim administration's nuclear program is still going, and consequently, the US now faces the nightmare of a nuclear-armed North Korea that is threatening to use those weapons. Trump's tough rhetoric directed at the Kim administration has generated an "unprecedented" level of escalating tensions since the end of the Korean War in 1953. Just before Donald Trump took office, in January, he expressed a willingness to wage a "preventive" war in North Korea, a prospect that previous Presidents dismissed because it would risk an enormous loss of life. Trump said that in his one meeting with Barack Obama, during the power transition, Obama predicted that North Korea, more than any other foreign-policy challenge, would test Trump. In private, Trump told aides, "I will be judged by how I handle this" (Evan, 2017, September 18). Quickly, Trump and Kim entered a war of fiery words, with the former threatening to "totally destroy" North Korea and calling Kim a "rocket man" on a "suicide mission" while the latter called Trump a "mentally deranged US Dotard," adding that "a frightened dog barks louder" (John, 2017, August 9). This is widely interpreted as one of the principal causes that flame anger of the leadership in Pyongyang to intensify ballistic missile tests in response.

What Pyongyang's goal behind its nuclear weapon proliferation remains controversial. For years, some argued that Pyongyang's nuclear weapons were "bargaining chips" to be "traded" for aid, concessions, and inducements, including diplomatic normalization and security guarantees. But over the years, U.S. diplomats negotiating with North Korea came to realize that the incentives were of little value. They discovered that Pyongyang was not building nuclear weapons just to trade them away (Evans, 2017). Today, it might be clear that Kim's nuclear weapons programs pursue two grand strategies for the regime. First, nuclear weapons ensure the regime's survival. Pyongyang is convinced that the US will not attack a country that has nuclear weapons and is prepared to use them. Second, with its nuclear weapons and missiles in hands, Pyongyang wants to have the US "deterred": Representatives from Pyongyang assert that the US must now live with a nuclear-armed North Korea and accept its demand to negotiate a peace treaty for the reunification of the peninsula on its terms and to conduct Washington-Pyongyang "arms control talks." The goal of these talks, they declare, would be to remove the U.S. "threat," which they define as the U.S. alliance with South Korea, U.S. troops there, and the U.S. "nuclear umbrella" (Evans, 2017). That is why Pyongyang has declared the goal of denuclearization dead, and why it spells out continuation of expanding its nuclear arsenal. By making its intentions explicit, Pyongyang hopes to force the US to choose either

accepting a nuclear-armed North Korea or risking war to prevent it.

The China factor in a troublesome North Korea: Many believe that Beijing is the key to solving the North Korea nuclear challenge, but China is increasingly part of the problem. China's position on North Korea is increasingly driven by broad, geopolitical factors, especially Beijing's growing strategic rivalry with the US. In this context, China's leaders do not necessarily see North Korea as a liability. For that matter, "China's leaders continue to believe it is better to keep a troublesome North Korean ally afloat than to risk the chaos that might result if the regime collapses" (Evans, 2007). That is why Beijing's actual response appears limited, if not reluctant. It is evident that Chinese cooperation in implementing international sanctions has been grudging and filled with loopholes, and efforts to approve a tough UN Security Council resolution after Pyongyang's fifth nuclear test were fraught with difficulties. Similarly, amid and after Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Washington, Trump expected Xi to use the economics-security logic towards North Korea—using economic pressure to influence Pyongyang's security policy—but China's past efforts in this regard have not proven very stringent or successful, neither has the US and other countries had any success. Beijing knows that Washington has limited options and that its quest for economics-security pressure on Pyongyang depends on the choices that China makes (Brendan, 2017). This reduces U.S. bargaining power over China, although Trump may have been obfuscating this reality through a confusing pattern of alternating positions by praising China for putting pressure on Pyongyang, including its halt on coal imports from North Korea (John & Meng, 2017, April 11). But the evidence was mixed: although Beijing rhetorically agreed upon the UN sanctions against North Korea, China-North Korea trade appeared to be increasing (Jane & Yafan, 2017, April 13). Trump then complained that China was doing not nearly enough, intimating the US would place sanctions on a small number of Chinese firms with close North Korean connections.

Trump's revised stance towards East Asia in the wake of the nuclear crisis: In the wake of the nuclear threat posed by North Korea from April onwards and Washington's deadlock to the crisis resolution, Trump has turned his attention to the East Asian region. However, alongside its preoccupation of North Korea, the Trump administration is looking to broader economic-security nexus. A noticeable shift in Washington's regional posture was marked by Vice President Mike Pence's 10-day visit to Asia that included South Korea, Japan, Indonesia and Australia, from April 15 to April 25, 2017. The main goal of the visit was to bring commitment to U.S. allies in the Asia-Pacific—both on security and the economy. In South Korea, Pence met with the acting President Hwang Kyo-ahn to reinforce the U.S. commitment to security alliance with Seoul and both sides consulted over North Korea's ballistic missile and nuclear programs. Similarly, in Tokyo, Pence reiterated U.S. commitment to Japan's defense in the face of threats from North Korea and China. Pence also discussed with Japan's Prime Minister about possible sanctions against North Korea, at the same time stressed the Trump administration's commitment to economic engagement in the region, and commenced the US-Japanese economic dialogue, which was first announced in February during Abe's visit to

the White House (Abigail, 2017, April 14). This move appears sharply different from most of Trump's tough rhetoric during early months in power, such as withdrawing troops from Japan and South Korea if they don't pay more responsibilities. Also, prior to Pence's visit, Trump had sent Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to visit both Japan and South Korea, and received Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe twice to reassure Japan of U.S. obligations. In tandem with its priorities towards the alliance system in terms of economics-security nexus since the wake of the Korea peninsula nuclear crisis, there are also signs that the region of Southeast Asia has now appeared on the White House's radar. The Trump administration's first serious outreach to region began with Pence's April 20 visit to Indonesia, part of a larger trip to northeast Asia and Australia. In Jakarta, he visited a mosque and called Indonesia's moderate brand of Islam an "inspiration" to the rest of the world. In particular, Pence stopped by the ASEAN Secretariat, signaling the Trump administration's interest in continuing to engage the regional grouping. Pence also announced that Trump would attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Vietnam and the East Asia Summit in the Philippines in November. Afterwards, Trump made personal phone calls to the leaders of Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand, inviting them to the White House for visits. Days later, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson met with the ten AEAN ministers at the Special ASEAN-U.S. Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Washington. In late May, Trump welcomed the Vietnamese prime minister, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, to the White House, the first Southeast Asian leader to meet one-on-one with Trump. The U.S. President also reiterated his expectation to attend the APEC, U.S.-ASEAN Summit, and other multilateral meetings later in the year. These indications reveal that the Trump administration has now embraced multilateral approach in conjunction with "America First" bilateral posture.

It is much likely that alongside with sending the key message of maintaining U.S. commitment to regional engagement, the Trump administration is seeking to place an early emphasis on mitigating its pressure over U.S. trade deficit with the regional countries as a way of taking a back seat to isolating North Korea. In a call with the Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte, Trump urged Manila to cut trade and diplomatic exchanges with North Korea as part of U.S. efforts to force the Pyongyang regime to abandon its nuclear and missile program. The next call went to Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, who was also urged to cut his country's economic and diplomatic dealings with North Korea. Murray Hiebert (2017), Deputy Director of the Southeast Asia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, is convinced that the Trump administration's shift from trade deficits to isolation of North Korea could be true for ASEAN member countries, adding that "by 2015, Thailand and the Philippines emerged as North Korea's fourth and fifth largest trading partners, respectively, so their cooperation could prove useful in Trump's efforts to isolate North Korea." Similarly, it was reported that at the Special ASEAN-U.S. Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Washington in May 2017, it was largely about the US drawing representatives from the ten Southeast Asian nations into discussion about how to cut their ties with North Korea (Prashanth, 2017, May 13). Also, in his visit to Myanmar as part of a broader trip to the region from July 11 to 18, the U.S. Special Envoy for North Korea Joseph Yun tried to convince the Pyongyang's longtime military partner to join

U.S. efforts to rein in Kim Jong-Un's nuclear efforts. Yun's first stop in Singapore for talks at the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue, a multilateral forum for discussing security issues, also touched on Singapore-based businesses' linkages with North Korea, helping it evade sanctions. Similar stance was also applied to China once Trump said Chinese President Xi in his visit that Washington would look more favorably on U.S.-China trade questions if Beijing punished North Korea. At about this time it became known that China was not being listed in a prominent U.S. report as a currency manipulator (Robert, 2017).

U.S. continued engagement as the embrace of Obama's legacy?

Judged by the current situation and trend, it is safe to say there is more continuity than change in Washington's East Asian policy. It is undeniable that the Trump administration's preoccupation with the Korea peninsula nuclear crisis has served as one of the driving forces that help revise the regional policy in recent months, U.S. engagement in the East Asian Asia-Pacific appears continued, if not active. In the security realm, Trump's strategy has inherited his predecessor's emphasis on the alliance system, especially with Japan, South Korea and Australia, in order to further boost Washington's security presence and clout in the region, particularly in the context of a nuclear-armed North Korea and China's increasing regional power, along with its expansion in the South China Sea. On the economic front, though Trump has withdrawn from the TPP, it does not necessarily mean the new administration has given up economic engagement with the region, but rather put U.S. interest high above others in the name of "fair and balanced trade." For instance, to persuade Japan to open FTA negotiations, imply to South Korea the possibility to renegotiate KORUS (the US-ROK FTA) and to engage with Indonesia and Australia heavily in economic affairs with the bid to further open those markets and reduce tariffs, Pence put economic issues as the central theme on the agenda in his visit, which aimed to spread the message that Trump is open to boosting U.S. trade in the region, despite abandoning the TPP (Yang, 2017, May 4). Commenting Pence's visit to Asia on *CNBC*, Meredith Sumpter, Asia director for the Eurasia Group, is convinced that "The vice president is well aware that the U.S. needs to do more in the wake of walking away from the TPP to message U.S. economic staying power," and that "Washington is very intent on pursuing bilateral trade negotiations, not only with Japan, but with other trade partners in the region" (*CNBC*, 2017, April 19).

In similar fashion, there have been evidences of Washington's continued engagement in regional multilateral forums, one of the pillars of Obama's rebalance, in recent months. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis's presence at the regional multilateral security forum, Shangri-La, in June—calling for regional cooperation in addressing emerging nontraditional security issues, touching on China's militarization of the SCS, and emphasizing "regional norms" such as freedom of navigation and denuclearization—shows that the US remains engaged and plays an active role in regional affairs. Noticeably, Trump's plan to attend such multilateral meetings as the APEC, US-ASEAN Summit, and East Asia Summit as Pence declared during his visit to the ASEAN Secretariat, sufficiently spells out a key message of U.S. commitment to engaging in regional

multilateral arrangements. Perhaps in the run-up to those meetings, Trump will begin to learn more about the benefits and necessity of multilateralism and will bring to the table tangible steps toward renewed U.S. leadership in Asia, apart from his main concern about the North Korea nuclear issues.

It is generally assumed that Washington has changed the U.S. strategic priority in the region by putting the North Korea issue at the forefront and that Washington expressed a reactive, rather than comprehensive, strategy in the region, accordingly. True enough; however, this contention also needs to take into account what Trump has learned more about the regional issues after 90 days in power as Trump himself and his advisors may have clearly seen the possible consequences of being left out of regional trade and security networks to be exploited to China's own advantage if the US is not enthusiastic about its engagement in the ASEAN-centered multilateral arrangements and if it does not reinforce a prevailing drift in its Southeast Asian policy. Trump's November visit to Vietnam and the Philippines for multilateral summit meetings and Washington-hosted U.S.-ASEAN Special Foreign Ministers' Meeting in May—which touched on not just North Korea but also regional developments like the South China Sea and aspects of U.S. policy to Southeast Asia in terms of trade and investment—has spelled out this strategy. Similarly, the recent broad agreement within the Trump government which is also supported by congressional leaders on the need to strengthen the U.S. security position in Southeast Asia along with the rest of the Asia Pacific through the Asia Pacific Stability Initiative and the Asian Reassurance Initiative Act has presented an apparent indication of this positive development in Trump's regional policy. As Susan Thornton, acting assistant secretary for East Asian Affairs put it, the Trump Administration will "have its own formulation" for policy in the region, which can be interpreted as having three parts: fair and free trade, regional security and "a rules-based, constructive, peaceful, stable order in Asia." Although this administration openly rejects using "rebalance" to define its strategy, remaining active and engaged in Asia is something the U.S. government, no matter who occupies the White House, has to stick to due to the huge economic and security interests underlying in its relations to the region (Yang, 2017, May 4). If so, this would be a positive development not only because it suggests an embrace of Obama's policies and strategies toward the region, but also because it suggests that Trump is willing to adapt his approach as he has learned more about the issues in the region. This would not be unprecedented: President John F. Kennedy, for example, campaigned on closing the so-called "missile gap," but changed course when he learned that the gap did not, in fact, exist (Abraham, 2017, February 8). Good leaders adapt when presented with new information, and an adjustment by Trump in the East Asian economic dynamics and security architecture would be a step in the right direction.

Conclusion and recommendations

During 90 days in power, Trump geared priorities towards "America First" approach which was framed by Trump's bilateral preferences over both economic and security realms, namely the longstanding security alliances, to be pragmatically exploited to U.S. interests. Yet, in the wake of Korea peninsular nuclear crisis marked by ballistic missile tests from April onwards after fiery rhetoric between Trump and Kim Jong-Un, the region of East Asia has appeared on

Washington's radar, revealing the Trump administration's revised policy by downplaying trade deficit pragmatism, ensuring U.S. continued commitment to defending the regional alliances and engaging in multilateral security and economic arrangements as well as with Southeast Asian countries. In any case of U.S. adapted posture, a nuclear-armed North Korea is put at the forefront. Also, the China factor—both defined behind Washington's nuclear crisis dilemma and in terms of the Asian giant's expansionism in the South China Sea as well as its increasing regional influence—serves as one of the driving forces in Trump's regional policy adaption. Equally important, the dynamics of East Asian trade networks and a changing regional security architecture at U.S. stake appear to be pressing motives for Washington to engage the region with no choice, given that the regional states has long been looking to the US not just as a security guarantor, but also as a facilitator of trade and investment for their growing economic powerhouse. Trump's East Asia policy could therefore be seen as an embrace of Obama's legacy of regional policy despite the new administration's vision on its own formulation for regional policy.

Washington's recent revised policy towards the region falls short of a comprehensive strategy, however. Trump's attention to the region seems preoccupied by North Korea nuclear programs, which has also become an acute concern for the regional countries as they are all feeling a bit threatened and destabilized. Similarly, Trump's move in regional multilateral engagement remains nascent. At this point, if the US desires collective responses from the regional states to halt what's going on with North Korea now and in the long term and if it expects to get the regional states' endorsement for U.S. engagement, the new administration needs to elevate a comprehensive U.S. regional presence. To this end, there is nothing better that Washington could do than remain widely engaged in economics-security nexus in the region. This could be done by deepening economic engagement and increasing effective security partnership, along with bolstering diplomatic presence and sustaining strategic commitment, at both multilateral and bilateral levels. Equally important, the US could also exploit economics-security connections in the competitive quest for regional influence vis-à-vis China, and such an active U.S. role will enable smaller and medium powers, namely the Southeast Asians, to work closely with both great powers in order to encourage a regional equilibrium—the strategic vision that ASEAN as a grouping and its member countries have long pursued. At the same time, instead of its “peace through strength” vision, Washington needs to move in its dealings with China through “hedged engagement”—the strategic and security hedging against China's growing regional power combined with engagement on a range of bilateral and regional governance issues—to rebalance China's rise. One way of doing this is to exploit economics-security links in their relationships with other powers, as well as with each other.

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