



## Donald Trump's security Pivot to East Asia: US primacy with a twist

Ted Galen Carpenter

December 21, 2017

There has been an enormous amount of speculation in the media, both in the United States and abroad, about the probable direction of President-elect Donald Trump's foreign policy. That is especially true of policy regarding East Asia, and speculation has redoubled following Trump's unprecedented telephone conversation with Taiwan's president on December 2nd.

Trump's impatience with Washington's traditional East Asian allies during the campaign was second only to his criticism of NATO's European members for their chronic free-riding on America's security exertions and their overreliance on US defense guarantees. His sarcastic comment that the Japanese would probably just watch another country's attack on the United States on their Sony television sets captured the extent of his cynicism. That statement and the underlying attitude it implied was jarring to Shinzo Abe's government, and it seems to have accelerated the policy that Abe had already embraced to make his country a more serious military player in the region.

Trump's campaign rhetoric certainly implied a willingness to offload some of the security responsibilities onto Washington's East Asian allies. And he mortified the nuclear nonproliferation crowd by indicating he believed Japan and South Korea might need to acquire nuclear weapons. Horrified arms control advocates charged that such comments underscored his unfitness to be president. His outnumbered defenders countered that China and, more recently, North Korea, already possessed nuclear weapons. Why, then, was it improper, for conservative democracies to acquire such weapons to restore some measure of balance?

Moreover, as international relations scholars note, US policy in both Europe and East Asia has been one of *extended deterrence* – a willingness of the United States to wage war, even nuclear war, to protect allies. But as Christopher Layne, the University Distinguished Professor of International Affairs and Robert M. Gates Chair in National Security at Texas A&M University, points out, extended deterrence has an inherent credibility problem. Both the client states receiving the guarantee and possible adversaries tempted to challenge it have reason to doubt whether the guarantor power would really risk suicide to protect an ally. And if the guarantor power is serious, extended deterrence poses enormous, perhaps fatal, dangers. Extended deterrence seems especially risky when confronting a bizarre, volatile state like North Korea.

Although Trump's comments did not indicate that he would encourage US allies to join the global nuclear weapons club, they did suggest that he would not necessarily block Japan and

South Korea from building their own arsenals. If they did so, that would create a situation of *primary deterrence*, which has greater credibility. An adversary is almost certain to believe that a direct victim of aggression may respond with nuclear weapons if conventional forces prove insufficient. In the case of East Asia, a move to primary deterrence would both reduce America's risk exposure and increase the credibility of the deterrent directed against the likes of North Korea. That combination is likely to appeal to the Trump administration.

It would be a mistake, though, to assume that the administration would aim to relinquish US strategic primacy (dominance) in East Asia. Donald Trump's rhetoric has more closely resembled that of an aggressive nationalist than the cliché of an "isolationist" or a member of the "realism and restraint" camp. His administration is likely to maintain security relationships with significant allies such as Japan and South Korea – as long as they are willing to do more for the collective defense effort. The most likely change is that Tokyo and Seoul will encounter unprecedented demands for burden sharing. That means that the Trump administration will have little patience with South Korea's continuing to spend a mere 2.5% of the country's annual Gross Domestic Product on defense. There is likely to be even less patience with Japan's self-imposed ceiling of a paltry 1% of GDP.

In short, a Trump administration will expect Japan and South Korea to be genuine military allies, not security dependents masquerading as allies. And although none of the governments may say so publicly, such an alliance will be implicitly directed against China. Trump's complaints about China's trade practices suggest a further chill in what has already become a somewhat frosty bilateral relationship during the Obama years. Likewise, it is difficult to imagine the new President retreating from Washington's established position regarding the South China Sea. For its part, Japan may not rush into a US-led containment policy against China, but Chinese actions have already led to more robust Japanese behavior in the security arena. Indeed, Shinzo Abe's government, perhaps recognizing that Japan could not forever rely on the United States for its security, has been taking gradual steps to boost its own military capabilities and to establish security ties with other Asian states to balance against Beijing.

While a Trump administration may goad Japan and South Korea into becoming more effective allies, it is likely to jettison small or feckless so-called allies. High on that list would be the Philippines – v especially under the erratic and obnoxious rule of current President Rodrigo Duterte. In all aspects of his dealings, both business and political, Donald Trump has placed great emphasis on loyalty. Duterte's disrespect of its long-time treaty ally and protector, the United States, and Manila's willingness to flirt with China, are precisely the types of behavior that would incline President Trump to execute a strategic divorce.

The biggest question mark regarding the Trump administration's approach to East Asia is policy toward Taiwan. In this case, the selection of policy advisers could be crucial. Trump said next to nothing about Taiwan during the campaign, and putting America at risk to defend a small security dependent would seem to violate his "America First" standard. But the celebrated telephone conversation with Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen points in a different direction. So does the selection of former US Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton as deputy Secretary of State. Bolton is on record even urging the United States to formally recognize an independent Taiwan.

Such a step would create an immediate confrontation with China. Already, Beijing has responded with a serious provocation of its own, capturing a U.S. naval drone that was mapping the floor of the South China Sea. Although China has now indicated that it will return the drone, the primary message – that U.S. forces were vulnerable – was delivered clearly.

The Trump administration's East Asia policy will almost certainly differ from that of its predecessors. Just how great that difference will be and exactly what forms it will take is not yet easy to discern. But change is coming, and the entire region had better be prepared.

*Ted Galen Carpenter is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.*