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The La Trobe Asia Brief

A More Dangerous Place
Asia during the Trump Presidency

"This has become a high maintenance relationship for Delhi."

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"Under Trump, U.S. Asia strategy has been incoherent."

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"The United States does not have clearly defined positions or interests."

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Message from the Executive Director

It gives me great pleasure to introduce the fourth issue of the La Trobe Asia Brief, a series produced by La Trobe Asia to provide expert analysis on important international issues facing our region.

This issue is a retrospective of the United States' Asia policy during the Trump Administration's first term. It brings together experts from La Trobe University and the wider academic community to discuss the implications of President Donald Trump's 2016 U.S. election win for Asian states and societies.

This is a pivotal time in Asia, and the Trump Presidency has provided some unexpected changes to the balance of power in the region. Every country and territory is affected by the actions of the United States, and the ability to anticipate, adapt and flourish in these challenging times are a key strategy of every government.

What this collection ultimately reveals is a messy mix of contradictions, uncertainty, incoherence, and opportunism informing U.S.-Asia relations.

On behalf of the La Trobe Asia team, I sincerely hope you enjoy reading this timely and thought-provoking contribution to these important debates.

Dr Rebecca Strating
Executive Director

About the series

The La Trobe Asia Brief is a publication from La Trobe Asia, based at La Trobe University. This series provides a platform for commentary, research and analysis of policy issues that are of key importance in the Asian region. The work will feature La Trobe University academics working with collaborators based in the region. The papers in The La Trobe Asia Brief series are written for an informed audience. Authors will be invited by La Trobe Asia to contribute to this series.

Photos

Front cover: Composite image

Back cover: President Donald Trump waves as he boards Air Force One at Joint Base Andrews, Md. 18 February, 2020. (Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead)

Editor

Matt Smith.
With thanks to Diana Heatherich.

The La Trobe Asia Brief #4

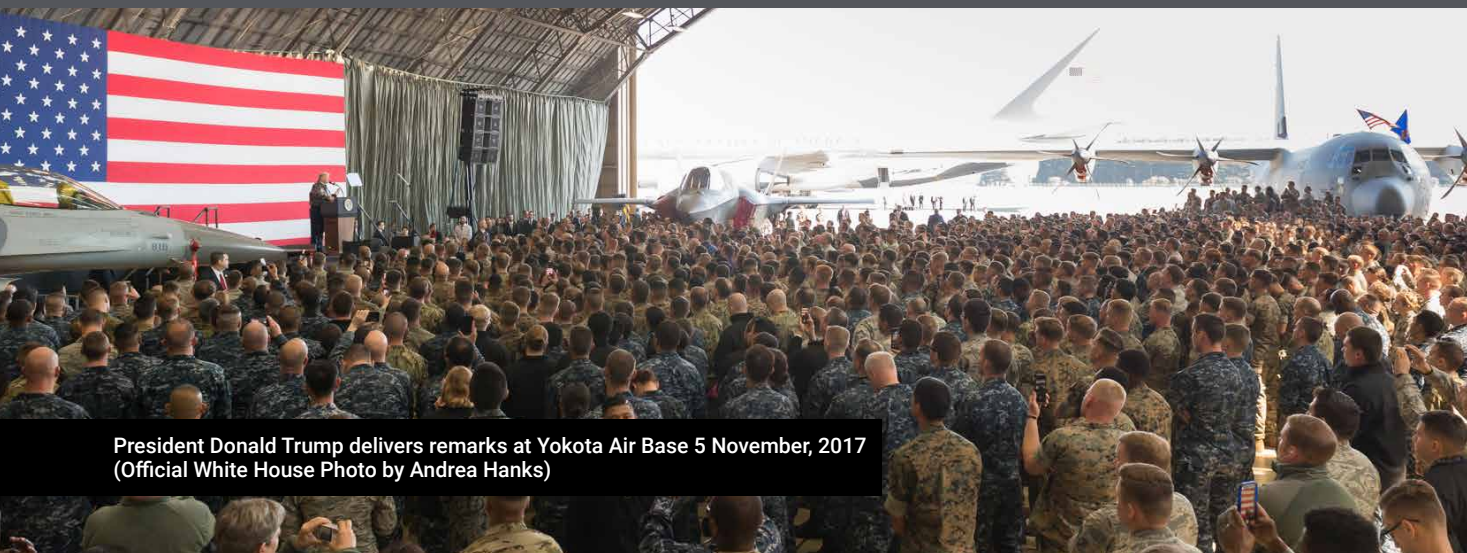
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La Trobe Asia's podcast, *Asia Rising*, covers news, views and general happenings of Asian states and societies. You can listen to interviews with authors from this publication, discussing the Trump Presidency and Asia.



President Donald Trump delivers remarks at Yokota Air Base 5 November, 2017 (Official White House Photo by Andrea Hanks)

Accelerating instability in the region

Professor Nick Bisley

Donald J. Trump's election was met with mixed emotions across Asia.

In Beijing, the first reaction was one of relief as the party elites believed that Hillary Clinton was going to take a harder line on them than her predecessor. As a Republican from the private sector, they assumed Trump would take a more pragmatic line toward China.

Allies were unsettled — the norm busting candidate had made clear he thought that U.S. partners were getting a free ride and believed they had to pay a lot more for their security.

For their part, ASEAN states were sure that Obama's enthusiasm for the Southeast Asian club would not be sustained by someone who was as far removed from the ASEAN way as one could possibly imagine.

Nearly four years on the Trump administration's policy has helped make Asia a more dangerous place than it was in 2016. The risks of war in Asia are greater than before, nuclear proliferation continues, and great power contestation is now the dominant feature of the region's international order.

Clearly, this is not all Washington's fault. But the choices of the country that had hitherto been Asia's key stabilising force have contributed to the further deterioration of the region's geostrategic circumstances.

China is a driver of this with ambitions to become a rule maker and power of global pre-eminence. But U.S. policy is also playing its part. Washington is attempting to sustain an old order without any clear and coherent alignment of ends and means to do so. Indeed, one of the reasons U.S. policy at present is so frustrating is that much remains of the old approach. Yet what in the past was stabilising now contributes to contestation and instability.

From the late 1970s, Washington had pursued a clear and consistent strategy in the region. Through significant forward deployment of conventional power managed through bilateral alliances it sustained a remarkably stable regional setting.

Its strategic public goods allowed Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and even China to spend less on defence and focus more on domestic economic development. Its military position was linked to its economic role as the main source of inbound investment and as the largest export market.

American dominance reflected an alignment of economic and strategic interests for most countries in the region. But as China became more wealthy and powerful, the balance of power is changing and the way Asia's economy functioned has been transformed.



Leaders of ASEAN countries and United States President Donald Trump join hands to mark the 40th anniversary of ASEAN-U.S. dialogue relations in Manila, Philippines. 13 November, 2017. (Photo: Shealah Craighead, Official Whitehouse Photo)

The Obama administration's 'rebalance to Asia' strategy was an attempt to modify U.S. policy to manage these historic changes.

Under Trump, U.S.-Asia strategy has been incoherent. There have been three distinct articulations of policy emanating from Washington. The first, described in 2017's National Security Strategy, set out to transform the U.S. approach to the world by putting great power competition with China and Russia as the core purpose of Washington's global role.

The second appeared in the notion of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' first set out in a speech to Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) business leaders in November 2017.

It sketched out what was in essence a policy of continuity with the past and was echoed by senior officials, whether based in Washington or posted to missions in the region. Where the National Security Strategy set out a transformation in U.S. attitudes, this declared that U.S. policy had not changed. Washington was a reliable ally pursuing the same regional ambitions it had for decades.

The third came from the President himself whose theatricality seemed informed by a belief that the performance of statecraft was statecraft.

Beyond the daily mess of tweets, his focus on crises, personalisation of bilateral relations and economic mercantilism compounded the problems of trying to maintain both a status quo and a transformational approach to regional ambitions.

Beyond this, Washington has failed to grapple with the complex reality of Asia's new economic landscape. Under Trump the U.S. has a regional economic policy at odds with what can be discerned of its strategic ambitions.

China is now the number one trading partner of all key countries in Asia. While the U.S. remains important – both as a trade and an investment partner – Washington needs a more sophisticated approach than a thoughtless tearing up of trade agreements and bluster about great big new deals.



Leaders of ASEAN member states and dialogue partners during a gala dinner hosted by the Philippines. 12 November, 2017. (Photo: Karl Norman Alonzo, Presidential Photo)

America's allies have been shaken both by the inconstancy of U.S. policy - from Former Australian PM Malcolm Turnbull's widely publicised 'bad phone call' to the virtual ignoring of South Korea in the Trump-Kim dalliance - as well as the uncertainty about its long term power and purpose. While in many countries debates are beginning about options beyond the U.S. alliance, the extent to which countries like Japan and Australia depend on US military capacity and intelligence means that they have little choice but to continue on their current trajectory.

Under Trump, U.S.-Asia strategy has been incoherent.

The one exception to this may well be in South Korea. Four years ago no one would have contemplated that any ally would move out of the U.S. orbit. But the combination of what feels like stand-over tactics on host nation payments, the lack of consultation, inclusion or indeed consideration of Seoul's interests and the literal abuse heaped on the country by the president means that it is now thinkable, even if unlikely, that the ROK could move away from the U.S. This act would truly revolutionise Asia's strategic setting.

Four years ago, Asia was on a trajectory of greater contestation. Now competition among the major powers, particularly between China and the United States, is the dominant feature of the region's international relations.

To be clear, the U.S. position in Asia and the order which it has sustained has been changing for a long time. The Trump administration's approach has accelerated these trends – China's influence has grown, doubts about Washington's power and purpose have further increased and allies find themselves in a world very different from that which they had grown used to over the past four decades.

One salutary effect of the first Trump administration's Asia policy, however, is that it should remind us that no country should be assumed to always think of its regional interests in the same way.

Equally, it should also prompt serious policy makers to realise that stability, security and prosperity in contested Asia will not be achieved by simply winding back the clock to a time when everyone accepted U.S. dominance and were content with their lot.



Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen speaks by phone with U.S. President-elect Donald Trump. 2 December, 2016. (Photo: Office of the President of Taiwan)

Taiwan's wildcard

Natasha Kassam

"The President of Taiwan CALLED ME today to wish me congratulations on winning the Presidency. Thank you!" read the now-infamous tweet by then President-elect Trump on 2 December 2016.

The phone call – thought to be the first communication between a Taiwanese and U.S. president-elect since 1979 – was met with optimism in liberal democratic Taiwan. In the days after the call, that buoyancy dissipated, as it became clear that President Trump's unpredictability was going to be a liability for Taiwan's already-fraught security.

The reality of the United States' policy towards Taiwan since 1979 – when Washington disavowed Taipei in favour of Beijing - has been 'strategic ambiguity'. The United States sells Taiwan arms, but does not provide security guarantees. It acknowledges China's claim over Taiwan, but sails U.S. military vessels through the Taiwan Strait in defiance of China.

While China and Taiwan are the most important players in cross-straits tensions, the United States is the wildcard. Beijing and Taipei have relatively transparent ambitions. China has threatened to annex Taiwan since the People's Republic was founded, unmoved by its years of independence and democratic transition in the 1990s. More recently, China has upped the ante by freezing official contact, poaching diplomatic partners, stepping up military threats, preventing Taiwan from attending international organisations and restricting Chinese tourists.

Beijing's red line would be Taiwan declaring independence. Taiwan's position is also well-known, if not more constrained by Beijing's power. Taipei needs to defend its sovereignty, and manage the growth of an independent Taiwanese identity, and with it a younger generation of Taiwanese that have known nothing except democratic and de facto sovereign Taiwan.

By contrast, the United States does not have such clearly defined positions or even interests. The U.S. stance towards Taiwan is the known unknown. In part this is because of the institutionalised policy of ambiguity that President Trump inherited. But while most Taiwanese officials work on the assumption that the United States would come to Taiwan's defence in the case of an invasion, no such guarantees have been publicly forthcoming from President Trump, or previous U.S. administrations.

The Taiwan Relations Act, passed by Congress the year that Washington terminated diplomatic relations with Taipei, requires the United States to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defence capability. In 2019, the United States authorised major sales of M1 Abrams tanks and F-16 Viper jets to Taiwan. Taiwan is often criticised for purchasing inappropriate capabilities, but these sales serve a deterrent function. Taiwan is effectively signalling to China that it continues to extract political commitments from the United States.

In March 2020, President Trump signed the TAIPEI Act, to assist Taiwan in retaining its few remaining diplomatic partners and called on the United States to assist Taiwan with its participation in international organisations. The U.S. Congress has also passed the Taiwan Travel Act, followed by a number of high-level delegations from the U.S. Defense and State departments. Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen made significant transit through U.S. territory in 2019, and the Vice President-elect William Lai visited Washington in 2020.

At surface-level, this may look like the highest level of U.S. support for Taiwan since 1979. Previous U.S. Presidents (Nixon, Carter and Reagan) cut deals with Beijing at Taipei's expense, signing the first three U.S.-PRC communiques. Both George W. Bush and Barack Obama avoided signing a fourth, but oversaw freezes in arms sales to Taiwan.

But this uptick in support for Taiwan is more likely a reflection of the moving centre of gravity for China policy in Washington. Rather than genuine support for Taiwan as a liberal democratic partner, Taiwan is at risk of becoming collateral damage in great power competition.

Increasing scepticism of China in Washington has drawn more attention to Taiwan's plight. But treating Taiwan as a conduit to frustrate Beijing imperils Taiwan's security. Already many in China's party-state suspect that the United States intends to promote Taiwan independence, and this paranoia has only risen in recent years. The risk here is that U.S. policy encourages an overreaction from China, upsetting the cross-straits status quo or whatever remains of it, and then the United States abandons Taiwan to deal with the consequences.

And there is little to suggest this White House cares about Taiwan in the absence of China as a threat. If U.S. priorities can be identified via the tweets of President Trump – a fraught barometer at best - Taiwan barely rates a mention.

The Taiwanese public have watched President Trump describe Chairman Xi Jinping as a good friend – the same leader that threatens to annex Taiwan on a regular basis. They have seen President Trump take a wrecking ball to partners and allies that rely on security guarantees from the United States – criticising Germany's Angela Merkel, United Kingdom's former PM Theresa May and Canada's Justin Trudeau, while showering praise upon strongmen leaders like North Korea's Kim Jong-un and Russia's Vladimir Putin. And it did not go unnoticed in Taiwan when Trump said Hong Kong legislation could be vetoed if it affected trade talks with China.

As with other longstanding U.S. partners, White House decisions have had unfortunate consequences for Taiwan. The United States withdrew from negotiations to form the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a free trade agreement that Taiwan had wanted to join in order to reduce its economic reliance on China. Taiwan is subject to U.S. aluminium and steel tariffs, and was vulnerable to the U.S.-China trade war given the number of Taiwan-based companies that manufacture in China. The United States has reportedly pressured the world's largest computer chipmaker, Taiwanese company TSMC, from selling to Chinese technology giant Huawei. Taiwan already struggles to retain local engineering talent in the face of substantial attempts to lure them to China by the Communist Party.

President Trump's administration has arguably provided more tangible and symbolic support for Taiwan than any other since 1979. But the instinct to be hard on China is not necessarily the same as being pro-Taiwan. Relations between the United States and China are unravelling at an unforeseen pace. The risk is that Taiwan is a pawn on a greater chessboard as President Trump and Chairman Xi preside over a diplomatic fracture. And whether President Trump leaves office in months or years, the question as to what the United States would put on the line for a liberal democracy in East Asia remains unanswered.

What happened to “gatchi gabsida (we go together)”?

Sea Young Kim

The United States and North Korea both share a desire to achieve a breakthrough, but to different ends.

The Trump administration has clarified such a breakthrough could be North Korea providing a roadmap for denuclearisation or disclosing a comprehensive list of its nuclear facilities.

On the other hand, the Kim Jong-un regime sees a breakthrough based on its long-standing demands for sanctions relief and other concessions such as the reduction of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula.

However, North Korea's nuclear problem is not one that's likely to be easily resolved by either the U.S. or North Korea, alone. Judging by the history of U.S.-DPRK engagement throughout Trump's presidency, an important element that will allow the U.S. to achieve its objective is not unilateral power, but the collective power it draws from its decades-long alliance with South Korea.

In January 2020 at a Central Committee meeting of the North Korean Worker's Party, Kim Jong-un reaffirmed Pyongyang's commitment to a position of self-reliance on its own economic development and defence capabilities to achieve a “head-on/frontal breakthrough” of domestic and international obstacles. The declaration, while it may have broken the still water in U.S.-DPRK bilateral engagement, is relatively consistent with North Korea's continued efforts to maintain and develop its nuclear arsenal while utilising diplomacy to acquire concessions including sanctions relief.

The declaration and numerous short-range missile tests by North Korea in 2020, however, call to question the overall effectiveness of Trump's North Korea policy, including his three “historic” meetings with Kim Jong-un at Singapore in June 2018, at Hanoi in February 2019, and at the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) in June 2019. While Trump's foreign policy strategy may have been a subject of critical debate by both U.S. and South Korean experts, optimists had maintained that his unique leadership style of acting individually, from a top-down approach that engaged Kim directly and in an unplanned manner, may help move North Korean denuclearisation talks forward.

Despite his success in re-opening summit-level talks with North Korea, Trump has been domestically criticised for leaving key positions vacant and failing to communicate with those within his administration. In an interview in December 2019, former national security adviser John Bolton admitted that Trump's North Korea policy of



United States President Donald Trump and Republic of Korea President Moon Jae-in participate in a bilateral meeting. 30 June, 2019 (Photo: Tia Dufour, Official White House Photo)

“maximum pressure” has morphed into something more “rhetorical” than substantial without a set agenda and definition on denuclearisation.

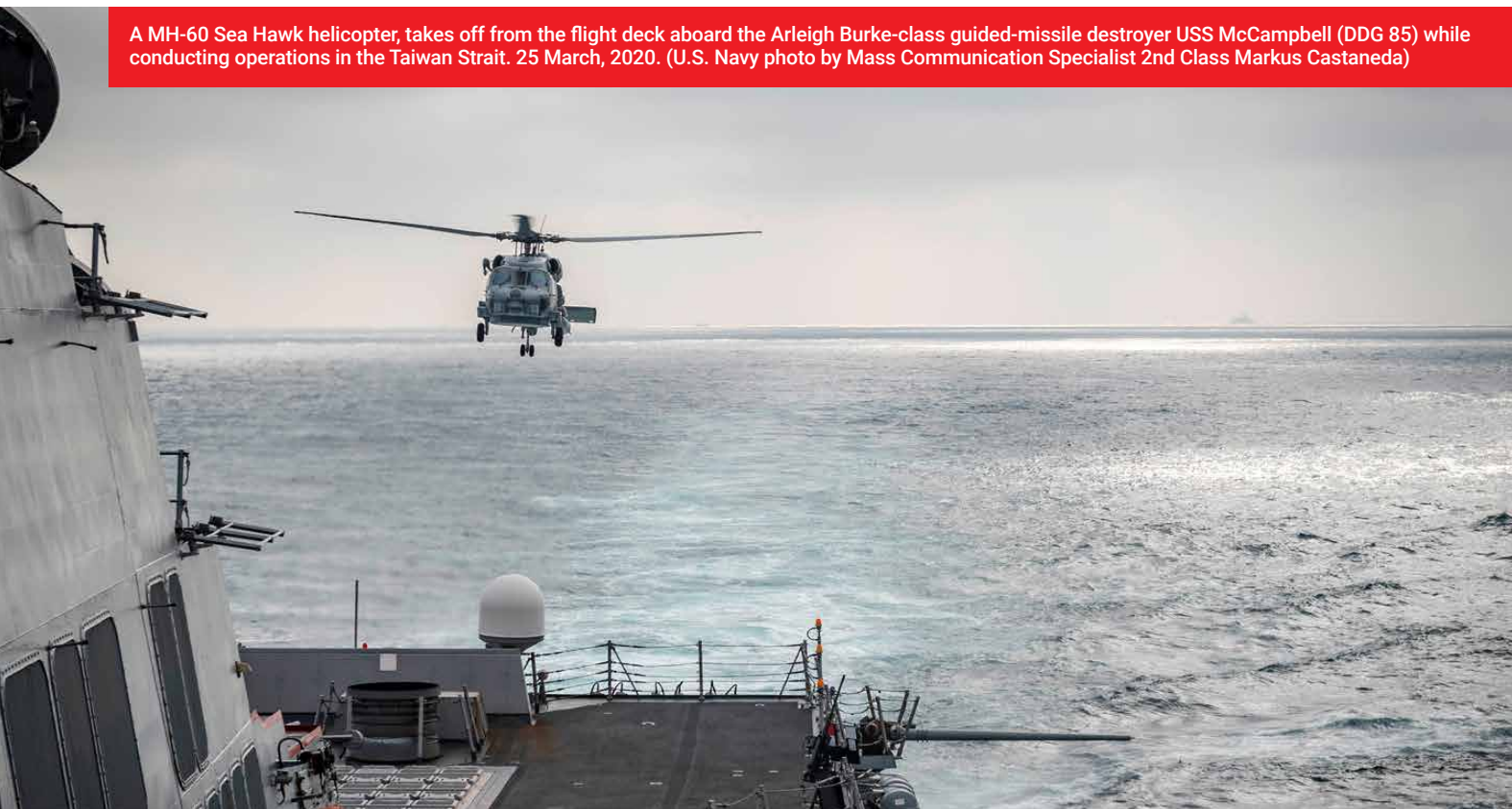
Such loopholes within Trump's North Korea policy may have left the door open to further negotiations with Pyongyang but are unlikely to yield tangible outcomes.

In addition to domestic liabilities, Trump's regional strategy toward North Korea undervalues communication with allies in creating incremental and coordinated changes. An important ally that the Trump administration has increasingly neglected and mismanaged is South Korea. This was most evident when Trump unilaterally announced the suspension of large-scale joint military exercises with South Korea following the Singapore summit in June 2018, without prior discussions with his counterparts in Seoul.

In fact, suspension of joint military exercises has done very little in pushing North Korea towards actual denuclearisation. General Robert Abrams of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) confirmed in early 2019 that “little to no verifiable change has occurred in North Korea's military capabilities” since the Singapore summit.

However, Trump maintains that joint military exercises are too expensive for the U.S. and is looking for opportunities to downscale or have South Korea pay more for them, even with the fall-out of the Hanoi summit in February 2019.

A MH-60 Sea Hawk helicopter, takes off from the flight deck aboard the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS McCampbell (DDG 85) while conducting operations in the Taiwan Strait. 25 March, 2020. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Markus Castaneda)





North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un and United States President Donald Trump share greetings and a handshake while standing at the border of the the Korean demilitarised zone. 30 June, 2019. (Photo: Shealah Craighead, Official White House Photo)

Trump's unilateral statements and actions reflect how he views South Korea more as an economic "free rider" than a security ally for addressing the North Korean threat. When commenting on the costliness of allied cooperation to the Special Measures Agreement (SMA), Trump specifically demanded that Seoul pay up to 5 billion USD to Washington, annually. Yet disagreements over the SMA are also largely based on Trump's misinformed and overestimated understanding of the exact costs borne by the U.S. in maintaining its troops on the Korean Peninsula.

What is more concerning is that Trump's individual cost analysis of the U.S.-South Korea bilateral alliance could fundamentally impair the level of trust shared by the two allies, even amongst their citizens.

For instance, in an October 2019 survey by the East Asia Institute (EAI), 88.9 percent of the Korean public perceived U.S. cost-sharing demands as excessive. These demands by the U.S. carry the potential to raise anti-U.S. sentiments within South Korea and damage bilateral public relations.

Similarly, further suspension or consequent termination of joint military exercises could reduce alliance readiness capabilities, embolden North Korea, and erode South Korean beliefs in deterrence. In the same EAI survey, twice as many Korean respondents (61.1 percent) stood against the termination of joint military exercises than those in support (30.5 percent).

Ultimately, North Korea gains from declining U.S.-South Korean ties as it has been one of the Kim regime's strategic goals to decouple and break this alliance by forcing the U.S. to withdraw its military presence from the Korean Peninsula. Currently, both U.S.-DPRK diplomatic

engagements and U.S.-ROK joint military exercises rest at a standstill, providing North Korea insufficient pressure other than sanctions to step up denuclearisation efforts.

With likely improved capabilities, North Korea has ramped up a series of ballistic missile tests in early 2020 and sent an ultimatum to South Korea that it would remove the inter-Korean Mt. Kumgang tourism facilities.

In order to facilitate tangible outcomes in successive negotiations with North Korea, the U.S. and South Korea need to mend their bilateral alliance. This means that before returning to working-level negotiations, Washington and Seoul must coordinate their steps through the joint U.S.-ROK working group by pursuing compromise over disputed issues such as burden sharing talks and inter-Korean economic cooperation.

This also means that Seoul needs to be willing to reciprocate Washington's hand in shaping the North Korea policy, which will also be impacted by the respective level of South Korean public support towards the United States. Public support in both countries is a critical variable considering the outcome of the April general election in South Korea, and the upcoming November presidential election in the United States. The U.S. should seek to resolve the North Korea problem through a jointly coordinated effort with its allies including South Korea, and not just on its own.

The article represents the author's views and does not reflect the position of her employer, East Asia Institute.

Strongest in the region?

Dr Huong Le Thu

The United States Presidency of Donald Trump was initially met with a cautiously positive reception in Vietnam. In 2017, I wrote a report assessing the potential trajectory of the U.S.-Vietnam relations. Rather counter-intuitively, the relationship had a chance to improve despite President Trump's unusual approach to managing international affairs. Most of that prediction turned out to be true.

While there have been a number of unexpected turns that risked souring the still fragile ties, U.S.-Vietnam relations continue to strengthen. In fact, relative to its neighbours in Southeast Asia, Hanoi seemed to handle the challenges related to Trump's foreign policy well.

There is also a strong convergence in the strategic priorities of the two nations, with Vietnam emerging as one of the more "like-minded" and reliable partners in the Indo-Pacific region.

Vietnam has hosted President Trump more than any other Southeast Asian nation, who visited Vietnam twice in his first term. The first was in 2017 - the first year of his presidency - while attending the APEC Summit, which remains the only regional diplomacy summit that President Trump has fully attended (unlike the East Asia Summit in Manila that year) to date. The second visit was to attend the second Trump-Kim summit hosted by Hanoi in February 2019.

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 U.S. elections surprised most political observers, including those in Vietnam. The country was enjoying a recent upswing in U.S. relations in the later years of the Obama presidency. In May 2016, President Barack Obama visited Hanoi to announce an historic moment of annulling a remaining legacy from the Vietnam War – the embargo on the sale of arms. It was under Obama that the two nations signed a much-

anticipated comprehensive partnership in 2013 when Vietnam's then-president Tran Truong Sang visited Washington DC. Two years later, Nguyen Phu Trong – first time Vietnam's Communist Party Secretary General - was hosted in the oval office by President Obama. Despite its flaws, Obama's Rebalance policy did pivot attention towards Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam, which benefited from a surge in defence assistance funding.

Just as Hanoi was starting to adjust to the momentum in the relationship with the U.S., Washington's foreign policy was thrown in flux with the election of Trump, creating anxieties in Vietnam about its position on the new President's priority list.

The worries around Trump's conduct in international affairs were related to his approach to trade, and his hints that he'd seek to 'strike a deal' with China and even with North Korea. This made many think that he might 'sacrifice' the South China Sea for quick gains in the Korean Peninsula nuclear issues.

This, of course, did not happen and as the Trump administration's Asia policy evolved, the South China Sea issues only gained prominence in its emerging Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy.

Two major stress points were exposed at the beginning of Trump's presidency: the multilateral trade and U.S.-Vietnam bilateral trade balance.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was something that Hanoi, despite some necessary adjustments in regulations, was looking forward to. This was not only because of the economic value of gaining access to Pacific markets and benefiting from advancing its economy to the standards set by the TPP members. The TPP also carried a strong geostrategic value. Trump's first decision after taking the office was to withdraw the United States from the TPP. This was a significant disappointment for all the members, not least Vietnam. No other economic alternatives have emerged from Washington since, making America's Asia strategy hollow on the economic front. The TPP decision has since become a symbol of America's perceived withdrawal from the region.

The bilateral trade balance also became an issue under Trump, who was adamant about preventing other countries from taking advantage of America. The United States had a large trade deficit with Vietnam. In recent years Vietnam-U.S. trade had increased and in 2016 amounted to US\$32 billion. Despite economic concerns, two-way trade kept growing, deepening the U.S. deficit to \$55.7 billion by the end of 2019.



United States President Donald Trump and Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc greeted by schoolchildren waving flags. 27 February, 2019. (Photo: Shealah Craighead)

To prevent trade imbalances becoming an issue in bilateral relations, Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc made an early trip, as one of the first Asian visitors to Trump's Washington, and signed deals valued at \$15–17 billion USD in exchange for technological goods and services, which President Trump described as a 'win-win' outcome. But the imbalance remains a thorny issue, as Trump reminded Vietnam after he launched a 'tariff war' on China when he warned Vietnam - "the worst abuser of all" - that it would be targeted next.

Despite those challenges, Vietnam and the U.S. share some similarities in their views about the region, in particular their threat perceptions of China.

It was in Da Nang, Vietnam, at the APEC Summit when President Donald Trump spoke about the "Indo-Pacific" for the first time. That speech was a prelude to the administration's FOIP strategy. His remarks referred to Vietnam's proud history of independence and sovereignty, alluding to the current struggles over the territorial maritime claims against China.

These comments were well received in Hanoi. The theme of supporting other claimants and denying the PRC's expansive claims and coercive behaviour in the South China Sea has become the major guiding principle of America's policy under Trump.

Such a view suits Vietnamese maritime interests, and while the FOIP continues to struggle for regional acceptance and support across Southeast Asia, Vietnam has been particularly more supportive than other actors. And while the general perception of Trump's America across Southeast Asia has been deteriorating over the

past years, views in Hanoi seem to be more lenient towards Trump's policies than in most of its neighbours.

Under Trump, America has gone through a drastic transformation in its attitude towards China. It has characterised China as its peer competitor and vowed to address many of Beijing's sins, including intellectual property thefts, unfair trade and debts, and coercive practices.

Washington famously has not taken sides in the South China Sea disputes, but in an unprecedented turn, the State Department has issued three statements condemning China's coercive actions towards Vietnam and affirming Hanoi's sovereign rights to exploit natural resources within its claimed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

Most recently, following Chinese ships sinking Vietnamese, the State Department issued a similar statement condemning China's actions amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. This form of support has been greatly appreciated in Hanoi.

Donald Trump's first term was not as disruptive for Vietnam as it was for some other neighbours. But maybe for the reasons less positive: other agendas had higher priority, crises (such as COVID-19) prevented Trump from further expanding his tariff war, and - more simply - expectations were low from the beginning.

Nonetheless, there is every reason for the two countries to continue on a positive trajectory. This is a remarkable turnaround considering the long history of complex relations between Vietnam and the United States.

Geostrategic decoupling or deflating

Professor Zha Daojiong

The Trump administration is arguably the first in the past four decades to have seen attempts to "get China right" transcend the season of presidential campaigns.

Trump's China-related tweets suggest that China policy has become something of a routine for the Trump White House, at times bordering on an obsession. On both sides of the Pacific, there has emerged a consensus about the heart of the new de facto U.S. policy doctrine towards China: geostrategic decoupling.

From the U.S. Navy's warships sailing through the Taiwan Straits and the South China Sea to curtailment of bilateral trade, investment and educational and research exchanges, the U.S. under Trump works to keep China in its "proper place". Formal adoption of the 'Indo-Pacific' framing of a U.S.-led security alliance is part of the policy package too.

One necessary caveat to state up front is that, particularly in the age of instant social media messaging, prevailing descriptions and diagnostics about the United States and China are by nature an extension of economic and political manoeuvring on their respective domestic fronts. Both countries are resourceful actors in regional and global affairs. Henceforth, it is always a good idea to be mindful of the folly that comes with accepting on face value the generally held assumptions that seemingly say it all about the nature and/or direction of ties between the two countries.

No country accepts itself becoming a freight car on a train with either China or the U.S. as the locomotive, with no other options available.

One of those assumptions is that former U.S. President Richard Nixon's "re-opening" of China was premised on China accepting a grand bargain and agreeing to eventually go the way of South Korea and Taiwan by installing a multiparty competitive political system.

Over the years China became more prosperous and self-confident in its style of governing and, disappointingly for the U.S., it began to project itself as an alternative model of development. Therefore, the fundamental basis of U.S. policy towards China requires a strategic recalculation.

Such sentiments are met, on the Chinese side, with a line of argument that goes like this: the fundamental premise for what began with Nixon's National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger's first secret trip to Beijing in July 1971 was the U.S. accepting the political structure of China wholesale.



United States President Donald Trump and Vietnam President Tran Dai Quang observe troops marching during a presidential visit to Vietnam around the ASEAN summit. 11 November, 2017. (Photo: Shealah Craighead, Official Whitehouse Photo)



United States President Donald Trump, joined by Chinese Vice Premier Liu He, sign the U.S. China Phase One Trade Agreement in the East Room of the White House. 15 January, 2020. (Photo: Shealah Craighead, Official White House Photo)

This was a reversal - initiated by the U.S. - of a strategic choice made in 1949. Relationships between countries are geographically-based to begin with. The countries agreed that China would make no demand on the U.S. regarding its political system, and the rest of the world should have a chance to choose their own model of government. Therefore, it is the U.S. that is breaking its end of the bargain.

Phrased in such modes, an ideological lock-horn is perpetual and an endless escalation of conflict is the only future. Yet they each err on at least two fronts.

One is to project their own political system as impeccable. Neither system is perfect. It is highly doubtful if such projection is conducive to improving domestic governance, essential for external attraction.

The other is that each assumes the nature of ties between itself and a third country is core-periphery, whereas no country accepts itself becoming a freight car on a train with either China or the U.S. as the locomotive, with no other options available or allowed.

Another taken for granted assumption is “reciprocity” in economic ties. Though not clearly defined in international treaties for trade and investment, it resonates well among the citizenry as “common sense”, but there is nothing quintessentially American or Chinese about the idea.

It was not so much that Washington and Beijing never practiced reciprocity in managing bilateral economic ties. For example, the initiation of the Strategic Economic Dialogue between the George W. Bush and Hu Jintao administrations brought an “all-of-government” approach to tackling a thick package of issues. Dozens of ministries participated.

That was in 2006, barely five years after China joined the World Trade Organization. The Dialogue continued through the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, only to be jettisoned by the incoming Trump administration. Over two days of round-table meetings, the Dialogue series reached a number of promised deliverables, a list which grew longer with each session, but suffered from the absence of a bureaucratic mechanism to follow up.

A probable explanation is that global economic dynamics change fast and therefore diluted part of the necessity in taking the other to task. After all, the kitchen of global economic affairs is full of chefs.

In 2013, China’s dissatisfaction with the world financial system led to its initiation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The United States’ response was to work to block it, just as it did fifty years prior when Japan launched the Asia Development Bank (ADB).

In hindsight, China would have benefited from taking a page from Japan’s book and table its ambitions by nudging small and poor Asian neighbours to loudly call for a new regional financial vehicle. The AIIB, more than anything else, proved America’s accusations of China’s assertive foresight.

On the other hand, the evolution of the AIIB since its establishment is a good case in point for assessing specific developments initially projected as disruptive: it has proved to be just like other regional development banks. The point here is that claims of inflection points can and should be put in context and given time to test themselves.

Today we are going through a time of deep anxieties about the future, much like the days of a purported geostrategic ‘triangle’ among the Soviet Union, the United States, and China of the 1970s. If there is anything that the two years of ever escalating trade tariffs by China and the U.S. should have proved, it is that the two economies are not as entangled as was described: each moved on and the stress turned out to be bearable for both.

In the final analysis, China and the United States may well be going through less of a pivotal point of decoupling than one of deflating established expectations. Both are on their respective learning curves about themselves and factual roles the other plays in the other’s domestic evolutions, in addition to options of foreign policy. The real competition lies in introspection and self-change, which is historically not in short supply in either country.

The empire wants you back

Associate Professor Nicole Curato

‘I don’t really mind if they would like to do that. It will save a lot of money.’

This was President Donald Trump’s reaction after the Philippines scrapped a twenty-two-year-old military agreement with the United States last February.

While the termination was later temporarily suspended in favour of joint exercises, the announcement did not come as a surprise for observers of Philippine politics. Since President Rodrigo Duterte assumed power in 2016, he was clear in telling the United States to back off from its former colony’s affairs.

The rationale was not so much driven by nationalism. Duterte, after all, has been vocal about the Philippines’ need to keep close ties with China and his admiration for Vladimir Putin. Duterte has no issues with Trump. In fact, he wished him a second term.

The issue was America’s pontification. The U.S. Senate’s pontification, to be precise.

It came to President Duterte’s attention that Philippine Senator Ronald (Bato) Dela Rosa, a neophyte senator and chief architect of Duterte’s drug war, was barred from entering the United States. This ban came into effect after the U.S. Senate voted in favour of Senate Resolution 142 – the Global Magnitsky Act – which empowers the U.S. executive branch to impose travel restrictions and financial sanctions against violators of human rights around the world.

The Empire wants the Philippines back. It will save them a lot of money.

In retaliation, Duterte cancelled the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which provides the legal architecture for U.S. military presence in the country. Under this agreement, American troops can enter the Philippines without a passport or visa, engage in joint military exercises with the Armed Forces of the Philippines, and closely cooperate on matters of defence, maritime security, counter-terrorism and disaster response.

This assistance, some argue, enhanced the under-resourced defence capabilities of the Philippine military, with the U.S. providing up to \$1.3 billion USD of defence assistance.

The reactions to the termination of the VFA was mixed. U.S. Defence Secretary Mark Esper called it ‘unfortunate.’ Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr declared in a Senate hearing that the ‘continuance of the agreement is deemed to be more beneficial to the Philippines, compared to any benefits were it to be terminated.’ In the same hearing, Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana enumerated the critical role of U.S. military support but also emphasised the need for the Philippines to be self-sufficient in its defence capability.

Meanwhile, Duterte found support from his critics. Activists who have long protested the abuses of American military presence in the Philippines finally got the outcome they want, although it was delivered by a man whom they also criticise for abusing power.



U.S. President Donald Trump and Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte discuss matters during a bilateral meeting. 13 November, 2017. (Photo: Karl Alonzo)

‘The agents of historic change may not always be the ones we wish they were,’ was how public intellectual Walden Bello described the strange position of supporting a mass murderer who terminated a one-sided military agreement.

As the Philippines takes a new direction in its relationship with the United States, many questions come to mind. What kind of relationship will the Philippines and the United States have in the aftermath of the VFA’s termination? Can both countries continue to claim an ‘ironclad relationship’? How does China fit in this picture?

It may take some time before these questions find definitive answers, but a global health crisis gives a window into how changing foreign relations are experienced in the everyday lives of Filipinos today. There are two noticeable changes with the way this crisis unfolds.



USS Chief (MCM 14) transits the South China Sea with the aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis (CVN 74). 5 March, 2019. (Photo: U.S. Navy photo by Jordan Crouch)



Chinese Ambassador Huang Xi Lian and Philippines Foreign Affairs Secretary Teddy Locsin Jr. bump elbows in greeting while exchanging medical supplies donated by the Chinese government which include fast-test kits, surgical masks, N95 masks and personal protective equipment to aid in the coronavirus pandemic. 21 March, 2020. (Photo: Department of Foreign Affairs, Philippines)

First, the United States, it seems, performs the role of a secondary player in crisis response. In his testimony at the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Defence Secretary Lorenzana recognised the role of the American military when responding to disasters.

When the world's strongest storm ravaged a cluster of islands in Central Philippines in 2013, it was a U.S. aircraft carrier that first delivered assistance to disaster survivors. Thanks to the VFA, the U.S. forces deployed in Okinawa were efficiently deployed to the Philippines to respond to a calamity.

The COVID crisis tells a different story. The U.S. government pledged \$2.7 million USD for the pandemic response in the Philippines, but there seems to be no comparable heroic effort to look after one of its key allies in the region.

One could surmise that this is not due to the termination of the VFA per se, but an indication of America's increasingly inward-looking orientation and a refusal to take leadership in a global health emergency.

Filling this void is China, whose aid package in the Philippines includes '100,000 COVID-19 test kits, 100,000 surgical masks, 10,000 N95 masks, and 10,000 sets of personal protective equipment.'

Photographed in a widely circulated tweet is Foreign Secretary Locsin elbow-bumping Chinese Ambassador Huang Xilian in a warehouse filled with boxes of medical supplies labelled 'China Aid: For shared future.' Locsin thanked China for its 'tremendous help' and considered their pandemic response as a role model for the world.

Meanwhile, as the Philippines says thank you to China, Beijing continues its militarisation of the South China Sea, installing research facilities in reefs claimed by the Philippines.

Second, that America tends to be inward-looking does not mean it sees fewer opportunities outside its borders to solve the pandemic. In March 2020, the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs reached out to medical professionals, 'particularly those working to treat or mitigate the effects of COVID-19' to schedule a visa appointment in their closest embassy.

This announcement was not exclusively directed at the Philippines, but historical ties between the two give this announcement a different valence.

It is a reminder that support does not flow unilaterally from the superpower to the periphery, but that the periphery is very much constitutive of the superpower.

Since its independence from the United States, the Philippines has been a steady supplier of nurses in America. With over 150,000 Filipino nurses migrating to the U.S. since the 1960s, it is not an overstatement to say that Filipinos are front liners in America's COVID crisis.

Indeed, as U.S. military operations scale back in the Philippines, what is increasingly clear is that in times of crisis and uncertainty, the Empire wants the Philippines back. It will save a lot of money.

A President yet to make his mark

Dr Dina Afrianty

On the side of the G20 meeting in Germany in 2017, Indonesian President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo met with America's new President Donald Trump for the first time. Jokowi opened his speech by saying that he would like to convey greetings from millions of Trump's supporters in Indonesia. He smiled warmly, which was reciprocated by Trump.

The American President may not have been aware that 90 percent of Indonesian respondents to a South China Morning Post survey prior to his 2016 win over Hillary Clinton stated a preference for the Democrat contender.

This obvious flattery may reflect the way Javanese culture plays an important role in Jokowi's leadership. It may also have simply been tactical flattery to make a good impression. Fundamentally, the meeting was said to focus largely on improving trade between the two countries. There is a good reason for this.

Indonesian foreign direct investment in American is very small, and U.S. foreign direct investment in Indonesia has fallen dramatically in recent years. President Jokowi has sought to promote investment opportunities with other large partners in recent years including China and Saudi Arabia.

There is much to do to build this relationship into a more substantial one, reflecting Indonesia's size and influence.

Trump himself is no stranger to Indonesia and has a number of business relationships in the country. He is known to have an interest in land development in Bali and West Java. Some reports suggest locals are ignorant of the Trump role in these projects, but the President's business partners in Indonesia are prominent and influential. Chinese tycoon and media mogul Hari Tanoesudibjo, who is also a leader of a newly established political party, attended Trump's inauguration and is Trump's business partner in Indonesia.

There is also known to be political connections between Indonesian political operatives and the Trump camp. Indonesia's former speaker of the House of Representatives, Setya Novanto, along with a member of Indonesian Parliament from a populist party, Fadli Zon,

attended Trump campaign events in 2015. Novanto is known to be among the richest Indonesian politicians but is currently in jail for corruption. Zon is a senior member of the party established by Prabowo Subianto, who is known for his past human rights abuse and banned from travel to the U.S. for this reason. He unsuccessfully ran for President twice, losing in close races on the back of a populist agenda.

The links between political operatives in the countries' respective Presidential campaigns is of course telling. It demonstrates quite plainly how common the modern phenomenon of populist politics is, and how its tactics and techniques are easily translatable.

The most obvious subject which attracted public attention in Indonesia early in Trump's tenure was his rhetoric about Muslims and Muslim nations.

It appears that the reaction to Trump's controversial policies about Muslim travel bans may have had a negative impact on his already limited popularity. Indonesia's foreign affairs minister was concerned that his policy would jeopardise the global fight against terrorism and cause a refugee crisis. There were also fairly large public demonstrations at the time.

His decision to relocate the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem also led to rallies in Indonesia. This is not surprising, since both conservative and mainstream Muslim organisations actively protest America's handling of the Israel-Palestinian conflict.



Indonesian President Joko Widodo and United States President Donald Trump meet on the side of the G20. 8 July, 2017 (Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead)

Indonesians, however, made a big deal about the Presidency of Trump's predecessor Barack Obama. Known in Indonesia affectionately as 'Barry', Obama's Presidency was marked by significant levels of warmth from the Indonesian people and he had a pop-star level of popularity. This was due to his personal history of schooling in the capital Jakarta. It was also due to his minority social status and less strident policies against Muslim nations.

It is important of course to distinguish personal Presidential profiles from Indonesia's approach to America as a nation. Prior to 'reformasi', or the arrival of modern democratic Indonesia, Indonesia's Soeharto regime developed close intelligence, military and commercial ties to America.

America was notoriously involved behind the scenes in the national tragedy of anti-communist massacres in 1965. Commercial engagement, particularly around resource development (extraction), remains important and continues to be a challenging area of public policy.

Against this background, there remains little tangible evidence of specific public attitudes and opinions. A major study was conducted by the Indonesian Survey Institute or Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI) in 2004 and 2005 at the height of post-September 11 tensions globally. Not surprisingly, Indonesia recorded relatively high levels of negative views about America at this time.

About 40 percent of respondents believed the American-led war in Iraq and Afghanistan was a war against Islam and a violation of human rights. At the same time, however, about the same percentage viewed the U.S. favourably. A few years earlier, surveys showed a much higher disapproval level of around 80 percent.

More recent global surveys indicate Indonesian attitudes are – broadly – similar today. Recent Pew research reveals favourable attitudes toward America in Indonesia is again around 40 percent, double the level in another large Muslim democracy, Turkey.

The Indonesian figure is not far off the global average of 53 percent. Equally the expressed level of support for Trump in Indonesia is 30 percent, almost exactly the same as the global average and a clear improvement on attitudes to him when presidential nominee in 2016.

While President Jokowi planned to visit America, his plans were interrupted by the arrival of the Coronavirus pandemic, and an envoy was sent to set up discussions around trade and investment in Indonesia in his place. Most recently, Trump has agreed to provide ventilators to assist Indonesia's fight against the virus.

These are all positive signs, but the fact of the matter is there is much to do to build this relationship into a more substantial one, reflecting Indonesia's size and potential influence.

More importantly, it is surely to the benefit of Indonesia and the region that there be a strong and fruitful relationship between two such large and healthy democracies.

The alternative to American investment is that from the Middle East and China. Business is business, and partnerships with other nations should not be avoided where they bring benefits. There is a risk that Trump may end his Presidency with a resort in Indonesia, and little else to show for it.

A more high-maintenance relationship for India

Tanvi Madan

"Fasten your seatbelts, it's going to be a bumpy ride" describes the feeling in India on 8 November, 2016, when there were twin surprises: demonetisation of certain currency at home and Donald Trump's victory in the United States, which had arguably become India's most important partner.

In the years since, policymakers in Delhi have tried to limit the bumpiness, developed shock absorbers to minimise or mitigate the volatility, and move the India-U.S. relationship forward where possible. Overall, in the Trump years there has been more continuity in India-U.S. ties than some might have expected, but enough change to keep Indian policymakers on their toes.

The most significant progress has come in the diplomatic, defence and security sphere, driven by shared concerns about a rising China and complementary Indo-Pacific visions, as well as counter-terrorism cooperation.

The two countries' bilateral engagement has deepened, as has its institutionalisation. For example, there is now an annual foreign and defence ministers' dialogue (with a 2+2 intercessional at the assistant secretary level), an Indian liaison at the U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, and U.S. consideration of placing a liaison at India's Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean region. They also have ongoing dialogues on homeland security and issues like the security of 5G networks.

Shedding its earlier reluctance, India has signed "foundational" agreements with the U.S., enhancing their militaries' interoperability and enabling intelligence sharing. Moreover, a change in U.S. policy has enabled Delhi to acquire additional American equipment, and the U.S. and India have expanded their military exercises, which include the new multi-service Tiger Triumph and the revived bilateral air force exercise Cope India.

Delhi has also become more comfortable in working with the U.S. to engage other partners. This has resulted in the upgrading of the trilateral with Japan to the leader level, and the revival and upgrading of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which includes Australia. Furthermore, these years have witnessed the inclusion of Japan as an observer in the India-U.S. air force exercise, and the U.S. as an observer in the Australia-India naval exercise. The American and Indian navies have also undertaken a group sail with their Filipino and Japanese counterparts through the South China Sea.

India has also found Washington to be helpful in two crises: in 2017, during the Sino-Indian stand-off at the



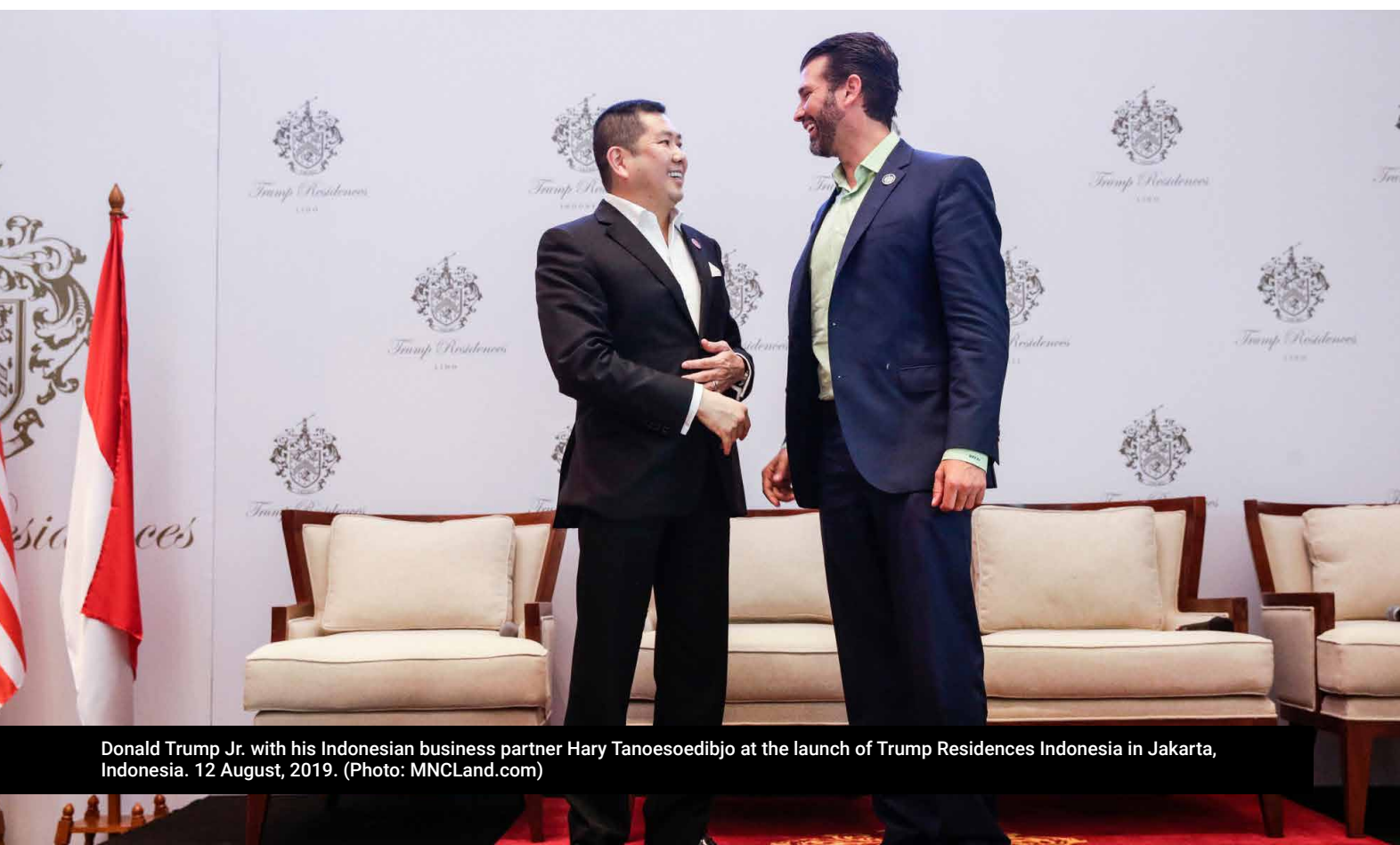
Narendra Modi and Donald Trump in conversation during a visit to the home of Mohandas Gandhi. 24 February, 2020. (Photo: Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead)

Bhutan-China-India tri-junction, and in 2019 following a terrorist attack in Kashmir that led to heightened India-Pakistan tension. This assistance has involved rhetorical support, behind-the-scenes help, as well as coordinating action in international organisations. The U.S. has also tempered its criticism of India when Delhi moved to change the status of Jammu & Kashmir last year and helped blunt Chinese action against India at the UN Security Council.

The strategic side of the relationship has not been without differences, though the two countries have largely managed them. For Delhi, neither the U.S. drawdown from Afghanistan nor the related U.S.-Pakistan bonhomie has been its preferred outcome. Washington has been upset with India's defence ties with Russia that could open it up to U.S. sanctions. India, in turn, has largely gone along with U.S. sanctions on Iran and Venezuela, but they have reinforced concerns about Washington weaponising interdependence.

The two countries also have differences on China, including on whether it poses an ideological challenge and how far to go in confronting Beijing.

Economic differences have been tougher to manage. On the one hand, trade, investment and revenue-generating people-to-people (tourism, education) ties have grown, and the American trade deficit with India has decreased. On the other hand, friction in the economic sphere has increased.



Donald Trump Jr. with his Indonesian business partner Hary Tanoesoedibjo at the launch of Trump Residences Indonesia in Jakarta, Indonesia. 12 August, 2019. (Photo: MNCLand.com)

Beyond market access problems, investment restrictions, and price controls on medical devices, the Trump administration has expressed concern about India's e-commerce regulations and data localisation plans. India, in turn, has been the target of tariffs, lost certain trade benefits, and worries about certain aspects of Trump's immigration approach. As things stand, the two countries are working toward a phase-one trade deal.

The third leg of the U.S.-India relationship—involving shared values—has not been a major feature. The two countries have rhetorically emphasised their democratic nature. However, India's actions vis-à-vis Kashmir and its Citizenship Amendment Act have raised human rights concerns in Washington. While the administration has largely refrained from public criticism (something the Modi government has appreciated and might have even counted on), members of Congress have been less shy reticent.

Perhaps the bigger adjustments in the relationship have been in India's approach. This has become a high maintenance relationship for Delhi. It has had to cater to President Trump's style and priorities.

That has meant highlighting deals in ways that prime ministers were loathe to in the past on the grounds that it would seem too "transactional." It has meant giving the president public platforms in Ahmedabad and Houston that his campaign has used for political purposes. It has meant downplaying statements that would otherwise have caused offence in India—whether reports of Trump making fun of Modi's accent, or his offers to mediate the Kashmir dispute, or his praise of Pakistan in India, or his indication of retaliation if India did not deliver on supplies of hydroxychloroquine, a drug Trump claimed to be effective in treating coronavirus.

It also has also meant Modi encouraging the Indian diaspora in the U.S. to make contributions not in India—as was the emphasis he emphasised in the past—but in the U.S.

Finally, it has meant Modi personally investing in wooing Trump, just as President Obama made an a special effort to engage Modi in 2014-15.

It is difficult to conclude that Modi and Trump have chemistry. But Trump has indicated that he sees Modi as a strongman and a winner—impressions likely reinforced by Modi's re-election. And whatever Modi thinks of Trump, he has catered to his preferences, recognising the importance of the U.S. for his domestic and foreign policy objectives. This attention has seemed to pay off in dealing with differences.

India has also adjusted its regional and global approach as a result of reliability concerns and uncertainty about America's continuing role and commitment in the Indo-Pacific. Delhi has highlighted India's willingness to burden share, and simultaneously pointed out that, as a non-ally, the U.S. does not have obligations toward it.

India's willingness to revive the quadrilateral has also been partly shaped by this uncertainty. Policymakers recognised that the Quad was important to senior Trump administration officials and thus one way of incentivising the U.S. to stay involved in Asia. But that revival was also shaped by another calculation Delhi has made in the Trump era: i.e. that it is important to double down on diversifying its portfolio of partners.

This has benefited not just as Australia and Japan, but also resulted in India's rediscovery of Europe and the reinvigoration of its defence relationship with Russia.

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Crowds cheer and wave flags as the motorcade of United States President Donald Trump passes by in Ahmedabad, India. 24 February, 2020. (Photo: Official White House Photo by Andrea Hanks)



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