

**Donald Trump and the Future of U.S. Leadership:
Some Observations on International Order, East Asia, and the Korean Peninsula**

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The United States has never had a president like Donald Trump. He is a real estate investor, golf course developer, casino owner, product brander and television personality with no prior experience in government or in competing for elective office. He ran for president on the Republican ticket, but he has no enduring loyalties to either political party, although he has undeniably tied his political fortunes to the Republican Party. In decided contrast with other recent administrations, there is not a single Democrat in the Trump cabinet, and African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latinos and women are all minimally represented.

Many observers characterize Trump as a populist who speaks on behalf of marginalized citizens, especially those whose economic status has severely eroded during decades of deindustrialization and job loss. This support might have been pivotal to his victory in November, but his actions since the election do not reflect this supposed commitment. Some observers even characterize the new president as a working class billionaire, which constitutes an extraordinary feat in public relations. His cabinet consists largely of individuals with great personal wealth, including a billionaire (Wilbur Ross, the Secretary of Commerce) who profited handsomely from the purchase of depressed industrial assets and

shuttered coal mines at bargain prices. Trump's closest economic advisors include several with ample fortunes garnered at Goldman Sachs. Apart from ideas and policies that he has personally espoused, he enters office with remarkably few political obligations or commitments.

Donald Trump was elected President by exploiting grievances evident across a broad swath of the American electorate. Despite receiving only 46% of the popular vote, he claims a mandate for major change. Trump asserts that he is leading a movement more than a government, and his inaugural address displayed open contempt for many of the practices and policies pursued by his predecessors over the past seven decades.

Donald Trump's open disregard for the established rules of the game and Republican dominance of both Houses of Congress present the new president with an unparalleled opportunity to disrupt the status quo, triggering ample uncertainty in the United States and across the world about the future of U.S. leadership in global and regional affairs. Transitions in American leadership (especially when political power passes between the major parties) are inherently stressful, but rarely has a transition been as anxiety-laden and as uncertain as the one from Barack Obama to Donald Trump.

There is keen interest outside the United States in what Donald Trump might undertake as president. But in many respects nobody knows what Trump might do, nor (based on his often contradictory statements) does he appear to know. It is also far from clear how he and his subordinates intend to organize the inter-agency process and pursue identifiable foreign policy goals. There is the additional question of whether his words should be taken literally as well as

seriously. Though he has moved quickly to carry out an array of campaign pledges (for example, seeking to reverse the Affordable Care Act and to initiate work on extending the wall along America's border with Mexico), many of these policy declarations are intended to placate core support groups, without any clear conception of how to proceed, who will pay for major shifts in policy and what the resulting consequences might be.

I will not attempt to review potential policy options or predict possible courses of action under the Trump Administration. I will instead discuss how Trump is approaching the presidency, especially in international economics and national security policy, and how senior levels of his administration are seeking to shape these priorities. I will focus particular attention on President Trump's personal characteristics, his known beliefs about international affairs, and how power is likely to be organized in the Executive Branch. I will then consider possibilities on the Korean peninsula, with particular attention to how the new president is likely to address the nuclear issue and the risks of a severe crisis.

A President without Precedent

Donald Trump is *sui generis* among U.S. presidents, largely because his path to the White House was wholly without precedent. He needs to be assessed in terms of his personal history and experiences, and then consider how he and his close advisers are likely to organize decision making in the Executive Branch. Despite his outsized personality, he is largely unfamiliar with the governmental process. Having overseen his own business enterprises for decades and having

never had to report to a board of directors or to shareholders, his prior experiences have not prepared him for the most important job in the world.

In addition, many of President Trump's Cabinet appointees have never served in government, notably including his Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson. Though Mr. Tillerson and others have long and deep experience in the corporate sector and in international business, government decision making (including diplomacy and national defense) is a very different process that cannot be reduced to a corporate profit and loss sheet. Tillerson's misstatements in his confirmation testimony, where he asserted that the administration would deny China access to the artificial islands it has constructed in the South China Sea, offered a telling example. He implied a willingness to impose a blockade to prevent continued Chinese access to these locations, which would constitute an act of war. Subsequent clarifications minimized the potential damage, suggesting Tillerson's ability to adjust, and to draw on existing policy and practice.

Even if Tillerson's confirmation statement was not intended as a sharp policy departure, his testimony did not reflect extensive internal deliberation about the risks and possible consequences of such actions.¹ As he settles more fully into his responsibilities, Secretary Tillerson will need to rely more on career personnel for guidance. But this will be a learning process for all involved, and no one should assume that it will work seamlessly. President Trump has also appointed retired senior military officers in unprecedentedly large numbers.

¹ [Secretary of State Designate Rex Tillerson Confirmation Hearing Opening Statement](#), U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, January 11, 2017; see also, Bill Hayton, "[Is Tillerson Willing to Go to War Over the South China Sea?](#)," *Foreign Policy*, January 13, 2017.

Though all have had distinguished military careers, none among them have had prior executive experience. At the same time, the long delays and continued battles within the administration about senior appointments below the Cabinet level is a major impediment to effective policy making, and a source of increasing concern.

Donald Trump's business successes and failures have been overseen by a small number of loyal long-time aides and (increasingly) by his children. He has built a business empire and amassed an ample fortune through publicity, audacity and sheer force of will. As observed in one recent assessment, "the Trump Organization [is] a relatively small company with a big reach and a bigger self-image...His company is a distinctly family business fortified with longtime loyalists that operates less on standardized procedures and more on a culture of Trump." In the words of the general counsel of the Trump Organization, "We're not a publicly traded company. At the end of the day, I work for the Trump family."² He is now the world's most powerful leader, but what will he do with the extraordinary powers of the American presidency?

Donald Trump has long sought publicity and adulation, and has regularly voiced opinions about America's place in the world and how the U.S. should pursue its interests. His improbable eighteen-month campaign for the Presidency resulted in the defeat of the political establishments of both major parties,

² For a revealing portrait from which these quotes are drawn, see Megan Twohey, Russ Buettner and Steve Eder, "[Inside the Trump Organization, the Company That Has Run Trump's Big World](#)," *New York Times*, December 26, 2016. According to these reporters, the worldwide number of employees is no more than 4,000, with perhaps 150 employees in the New York headquarters.

including the Clinton and Bush families. He succeeded as a candidate, even as he regularly demeaned his political opponents and belittled other Americans, often in derogatory fashion. Many observers have concluded that he plans to govern as he campaigned. But the two tasks are fundamentally different. The question is whether President Trump grasps the major differences between the two, whether those advising him will convey these differences, and whether they will tell him things he does not want to hear. At the same time, his compulsion to dominate an ever more compressed news cycle might satisfy his need for attention. But it is not helpful in imparting credibility and consistency in U.S. policy making, quite possibly influencing how other countries will perceive American leadership.

The earliest indications of the Trump presidency were very unsettling. His inaugural address (though praised by a clear majority of his political supporters) was a slightly modified campaign speech that offered a dark and decidedly nationalistic view of the future.³ He painted a bleak and grossly inaccurate characterization of economic and social realities in the United States. He also castigated the supposedly decrepit state of the U.S. military, which far surpasses the strength and sophistication of any other military power, even as he plans to appreciably increase the defense budget and expand the size of the U.S. armed forces. His speech was clearly designed with a domestic audience in mind. Other than calls to “unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism... [and] eradicate it completely,” there was no discussion of pressing national security threats, nor were any foreign countries mentioned by name. These omissions suggest that Trump views retention of political support from the core groups that

³ [Inaugural Address of President Donald J. Trump](#), The White House, January 20, 2017.

propelled him to the presidency among his preeminent tasks. In purely political terms this is understandable, but it reveals little about how he intends to conduct policy at home or abroad.

In the week following his inauguration, Trump's actions were replete with tweets and statements about perceived slights to the legitimacy of his presidency and criticisms of his credibility, including his unwillingness to acknowledge incontrovertible facts (for example, photographs that attested to the far larger crowds present for President Obama's first inaugural and at the protest demonstrations the day following President Trump's inaugural). These actions are simply unworthy of a president. Trump also launched repeated attacks on the media for its purported dishonesty, in addition to earlier accusations directed against the intelligence community. These are adversarial relationships that no new president should stimulate, let alone escalate. But he exhibits minimal tolerance for those challenging his perceptions of reality. Americans tend to view the immediate post-inaugural period as a time for bridging the partisan divides of the election campaign and (at least in broad terms) conveying a sense of national unity; President Trump has chosen the opposite course. His early conduct as President made it more difficult to achieve a consensus on crucial national security challenges that the United States could face in the coming months.

More than any president since Richard Nixon, Donald Trump is what Americans would describe as a sore winner. This is an issue of temperament. He possesses an extraordinarily thin skin, quick to anger in very public ways and largely oblivious to glaring inconsistencies in his words and actions. Unlike Mr. Nixon, he exhibits little intellectual curiosity and (according to some reports)

claims to have never read a book from cover to cover. Most of his interviews and speeches on foreign policy during the campaign and since his election victory have simply repeated his earlier views.⁴ He has yet to convey a larger awareness of the centrality of the United States to the future of international order, and the risks if narrow nationalism increasingly dominates the thinking and actions of states. He is largely dismissive of enhanced international cooperation and (at least in his words) seems to view foreign policy as a war of all against all. What will he do if the United States confronts an acute international crisis and urgently needs the support of others?

However, some lead officials are avowed supporters of U.S. alliances, including with the Republic of Korea. Defense Secretary Mattis, Secretary of State Tillerson and other senior members of the Cabinet have begun to put forward views about US leadership that align much more closely with long-standing policy practices. Secretary Mattis's early February visit to Seoul and Tokyo (the first overseas travel by a member of the Cabinet) offered a very reassuring signal to anxious allies. But the early indications of an "us versus them" attitude emanating from senior members of the White House staff are very disquieting. A fortress mentality often develops in American presidencies following political setbacks and policy reversals, but it is a troubling sign that these phenomena have surfaced during the presidential transition and in the earliest months of the Trump administration, with particular animosities directed against the American media.

⁴ See, for example, his [interview on his foreign policy views](#) with the *New York Times*, March 26, 2016; his [speech](#) to the Center for the National Interest, April 27, 2016; and his [interview](#) with the *Times of London*, January 16, 2017.

Like all political leaders, President Trump's conduct in office will reflect traits and experiences acquired over the course of a lifetime. But unlike most leaders he has no previous experience in the political arena that prepare him for the job. President Trump exhibits a degree of impatience and (at times) outright impulsiveness that do not serve U.S. interests. Words count in international politics, and there is a need to demonstrate discipline, consistency and restraint. The key questions will be how the new president responds when domestic and international realities do not conform to his expectations and when other leaders do not bend to his will; whether he is able to accept advice and information that he does not want to hear; whether he can effectively harness the extraordinary powers of his office; and whether more prudent officials in his administration will balance or counteract some of the more extreme judgments voiced within the administration.

President Trump's Worldview

Donald Trump has long maintained deeply held views about American foreign policy. His campaign slogans emphasized "America first" and "making America great again," and he reiterated them during his earliest days in office, including in his inaugural address. These statements seem to hark back to an idealized past, which he has never explained in any detail. As my Brookings colleague Tom Wright argues persuasively, President Trump "has a small number of core beliefs dating back three decades about America's role in the world. His overarching worldview is that America is in economic decline because other nations are taking advantage of it."

Wright contends that three core beliefs dominate Donald Trump's views of the world: repeated criticisms of U.S. security alliances and an insistence that America's allies pay vastly more for U.S. security protection; outright opposition to every trade deal signed by the U.S. across many decades (especially multilateral agreements); and "a soft spot for authoritarian strongmen, particularly of the Russian variety." However, this soft spot does not appear to extend to China, which he appears to view as the preeminent threat to American predominance. His allegations of predatory Chinese economic practices, including currency manipulation, are very similar to comparable accusations he directed at Japan in the 1980s in virtually the same language. As Wright concludes: "Trump's frustration is that [he believes] the United States gets little for protecting other countries or securing the global order, which he sees as a tradeable asset that America can use as a bargaining chip with friend and foe alike."⁵

Trump's slogans constitute an economic nationalist agenda that point in protectionist and unilateral directions. The president's immediate renunciation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, initiated late in the Bush Administration and then pursued through great effort during President Obama's two terms in office fulfilled a campaign pledge. (It bears mention that had she been elected president Hillary Clinton promised to do the same.) Even in the absence of detailed policy prescriptions, Trump's pronouncements continue to generate ample popular support, emanating from segments of the American electorate whose social standing and economic well-being have eroded precipitously in recent decades. He now must deliver on his promises, lest those who voted for

⁵ Thomas Wright, "[Trump's team of rivals, riven by distrust](#)," Brookings Order from Chaos Blog, December 15, 2016.

him in November turn against him in the future. But they also suggest major shifts away from international economic policies favored by previous presidents, and forgoing America's long-standing global leadership role.

Trump's election in part reflects the transformation and dislocation within the U.S. economy that until now both party establishments have largely ignored. Once-secure manufacturing jobs (especially in industrial regions that the Democratic Party long dominated) have vanished as a result of technological change and of globalization. Numerous U.S. companies have relocated factories to lower-wage economies outside the United States, especially in Asia and in Mexico. Ironically, many of the products with the Trump brand name are manufactured in locations abroad. But President Trump argues that retaliatory penalties against U.S. firms investing abroad and punitive tariffs on nations for what he deems unfair trade practices (for example, allegations of currency manipulation) will convince or compel U.S. manufacturers to return jobs to the United States. These arguments undoubtedly appeal to some of President Trump's core political constituencies, but they seem largely oblivious to the consequences of a globalized economy, and the extent to which unilateral actions could undermine the mechanisms that have helped foster growth and prosperity, especially in Asia.

The grievances that vaulted Donald Trump into the presidency have been directed against two principal targets: highly educated elites concentrated in major metropolitan areas in the U.S.; and overseas economic competitors that Trump accuses of taking advantage of the United States. But it is much easier to imagine villains than it is to provide meaningful opportunities for lesser educated

citizens lacking the necessary skills to compete in a service-oriented, increasingly automated economy. It also neglects the reality of shared risks to global prosperity and major threats to international peace and security that cannot be addressed without ever deeper cooperation among states with closely shared interests. Relations between Korea and the United States rank very high on this list.

Trump's intensive domestic focus suggests that he will devote less time and attention to major foreign policy and national security issues that have been the hallmark of all American presidents since World War II. To some extent, he might devolve responsibility to various Cabinet secretaries, though the concentration of power at the White House make this less likely. If there is a major international crisis, it is difficult to imagine that President Trump would remain on the sidelines. But his international priorities seem predominantly economic and trade related, and to building up American military power. Some of his important appointments, including University of California professor Peter Navarro to head a newly created White House office for trade and industrial policy and Robert Lighthizer as U.S. trade representative, reflect a belief that trade imbalances are an indicator of the health of the U.S. economy. Navarro's conceptions of Chinese behavior and policy goals border on the demonic and clearly appeal to the new president, but his claims generate no support among leading economists and policy analysts.⁶ But the pronounced skepticism of leading experts affirms claims

⁶ For a troubling portrayal of Navarro's views, see Adam Davidson, "[Trump's Muse on U.S. Trade with China](#)," *The New Yorker*, October 12, 2016.

within the President's inner circle that policy experts outside of government are beholden to foreign interests.

Trump views the world in highly transactional terms. When he has been able to negotiate deals that benefit his business interests, he has pursued them in single minded fashion. When he has not been able to achieve satisfactory results, he has either continued to negotiate, or pursued other business opportunities. He clearly relishes "winning," and detests the idea of "losing." Tough negotiating skills and fierce commercial rivalry are inherent in the business world, but business transactions are not inherently zero-sum. He nonetheless appears to believe that public hectoring of China and other major U.S. trading partners (including Japan and the ROK, though he has thus far said little about the KORUS FTA) create leverage that can be exploited to U.S. advantage. In the case of China, it extended to early threats by Trump to revisit the "one China" policy that has defined Sino-American relations since Richard Nixon.⁷ But subsequent assurances (including in a telephone conversation between President Trump and President Xi Jinping) have returned administration policy to a position that accords much more closely with long-standing US policy.

Trump appears to be drawing heavily on the views of several close advisers, notably Navarro and Stephen Bannon, both of whom are closely identified with economic nationalism. These aides reinforce Trump's preexisting beliefs, leaving

⁷ In a series of tweets, Donald Trump announced he [accepted](#) a phone call from Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen and criticized China for [currency manipulation](#) and [military buildup in South China Sea](#). Trump subsequently questioned U.S. adherence to the longstanding One China policy in a [Fox News interview](#), December 11, 2016.

it an open question whether the president receives any contrary advice. His initial appointee as National Security Advisor, Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn (Ret.), was obsessed with solidifying opposition to radical Islamic movements, which President Trump also views as the dominant if not exclusive national security threat to the United States. Flynn's abrupt resignation following disclosures of contacts with Russian officials that he failed to acknowledge in discussions with Vice President Pence enabled an early recalibration of the policy process at the White House. Flynn's successor as National Security Advisor, Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, is a highly respected senior officer, with deep knowledge and combat involvement with counter-insurgency, though he lacks experience and familiarity with Asia and the Pacific. McMaster continues to draw heavily on the counsel retired military officers with ample operational experience, but the absence of strategic thinkers remains a matter of ample concern. Synthesis and policy integration is a very difficult task under the best of circumstances, and Trump's own management style renders this task even more complicated.⁸ Issues and people compete for attention and time at the highest decision making levels, with various lead officials maneuvering for advantage. But will Trump receive the carefully considered strategic advice that all presidents need?

There is the additional question of whether Trump's experiences as an investor and businessman are relevant to foreign policy and national security as a whole. He initially appeared to believe that severe public criticisms of China and

⁸ For a discerning assessment, see David Rothkopf, "[Who Will Really Be the Next President of the United States?](#)," *Foreign Policy*, December 27, 2016; see also Mark Landler, "[Trump National Security Team Gets a Slow Start](#)," *New York Times*, January 18, 2017.

threats to alter long-standing tenets of U.S. policy would compel Beijing to make major concessions to the United States. But this was an inherently risky strategy, and it is not at all certain that the United States would by most measures “win” any such test of wills. Moreover, other important U.S. economic partners (including both Korea and Japan) fear that they could easily become embroiled in larger policy battles between Washington and Beijing. Even though many leaders in Asia and the Pacific are wary about the growth of Chinese power, they are equally worried about the potential for a major rupture in U.S.-China relations and the diminished ability of Washington and Beijing to cooperate on matters of major concern, including the Korean Peninsula. But subsequent developments (including the announcement of Secretary of State Tillerson’s first visit to Asia in mid-March) suggest that senior officials recognize the need to rebuild close consultative relationships in Northeast Asia.

Trump also has an obvious aversion to multilateral trade accords, including NAFTA and TPP. If he has a preference, it is for bilateral agreements, and he might try to renegotiate various accords, including KORUS FTA. But this raises an additional question: to what extent will he seek to alter or even dismantle existing agreements, potentially triggering retaliatory actions by major trading partners that could undermine an already fragile global economy? Predictions of an impending trade war seem exaggerated: too much is at risk for all involved parties. But an awareness of the potential repercussions of turning away from decades of carefully crafted agreements should not be minimized: all countries have options, and that includes close allies of the United States.

It nonetheless remains premature to predict the full contours of the administration's international strategies. The government is far from totally staffed at present. Many of the appointments at the sub-Cabinet level (though widely rumored) have yet to be announced. This has the effect of greatly strengthening the power of the White House staff, who are not subject to confirmation by the U.S. Senate. But if there is a major crisis it will not matter whether the Trump administration is yet at full strength, and the possibility of serious crisis with North Korea looms very high on this list.

Implications for the U.S.-ROK Alliance

Three immediate policy questions loom in relation to the Trump Administration's priorities in Korea. First, does the new administration seek to sustain and advance the U.S.-Korea alliance developed across the decades? Second, to what extent will President Trump insist upon renegotiated burden sharing arrangements between the U.S. and Korea, even if they trigger adverse reactions in Korea's domestic politics as the ROK's own presidential election approaches, and even if they engender uncertainties in Korean security? Third, how does the Trump administration plan and prepare for renewed threats from North Korea that senior officials in both countries foresee, and are effective crisis management mechanisms in place to deal with them? What paths might the U.S. and the ROK pursue if North Korea's nuclear and missile programs continue to advance?

President Trump has not been oblivious to the dangers on the peninsula.⁹ When he met with President Obama two days after his electoral victory, Obama purportedly told his successor that North Korea would be among his most pressing security issues and potential crises. Despite his repeated criticisms of the intelligence community, he also requested and received a briefing about North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities. His telephone call with President Park only two days after his election (among his very first conversations with a foreign head of state) reflected this awareness. His pledges of "strong and steadfast" support in the face of potential instability were not empty words. A subsequent meeting between then National Security Advisor Flynn and Kim Kwan-jin, his counterpart in the Blue House, affirmed and strengthened these ties. Flynn even characterized the alliance as a "sticky rice cake."¹⁰ The visit of Secretary of Defense Mattis to the ROK and Japan, scheduled for February 2 and 3 (his first overseas trip in his new position) reinforces the growing awareness within the administration of the potential dangers on the peninsula, all at a time of great political uncertainty in the ROK.

The proximate factor triggering these concerns is the prospect of North Korea undertaking a long range missile test, and perhaps another nuclear test, or other coercive actions that place the ROK at severe risk. In his New Year's Day address, Kim Jong-un claimed that the country's nuclear and missile advances in

⁹ This section draws on my more extended essay, "[The Trump administration contemplates its North Korea strategy—Following Obama's lead?](#)," Brookings Order from Chaos Blog, January 13, 2017.

¹⁰ "[Flynn likens Korea-U.S. alliance to 'sticky rice cake'](#)," *Yonhap News Agency*, January 11, 2017.

2016 meant that Pyongyang had “entered the final stage of preparation for the test launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile.” In a January 3 tweet, Trump declared: “North Korea just stated that it is in the final stages of developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the U.S. It won't happen!”¹¹

But Trump did not intimate why or how a test could be prevented, leaving most observers wondering what (if anything) his message implied. Five days later, outgoing Defense Secretary Ash Carter stated that the United States was prepared to shoot down any such missile “if it were coming towards our territory or the territory of our friends and allies.”¹²

It remains to be seen if Kim will make good on his apparent threat to test launch such a missile, if a launch could succeed, or whether the United States could successfully intercept it. More recent North Korean statements seem less equivocal, though it is not clear what kind of missile Pyongyang might be preparing to test, and in what mode. But Trump has inherited the threat of North Korea’s weapons programs from the Obama administration, much as President Obama inherited it from President George W. Bush, who inherited it from Bill Clinton, who inherited it from George H.W. Bush. However, the issue is now measurably more worrisome than when President Obama entered office. The continued growth of North Korean weapons capabilities has led former senior

¹¹ Refer to @realDonaldTrump Twitter [page](#) on January 2, 2017.

¹² “[North Korea says can test-launch ICBM at any time: official news agency](#),” *Reuters*, January 9, 2017.

American officials (including former Secretary of Defense William Perry), to recommend resuming diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang.¹³

Perry's proposal—"talk first and get tough later"—puts the cart before the horse. North Korea has long maintained a singular obsession with its nuclear weapon and missile capabilities, and has repeatedly made clear it will not negotiate an end to its weapons programs. (Nuclear weapons possession is now enshrined in the North Korean constitution.) The leadership somehow believes that possession of an operational nuclear force is the key to the survival of the Kim regime (it is not clear why or how) and to legitimating its international status, as well as to enabling psychological dominance over the Republic of Korea. More important, as Perry himself acknowledges, possession of nuclear weapons might convince North Korea that it could launch much riskier actions against South Korea and Japan without fear of retaliation. Though the ultimate goal of North Korean denuclearization persists, the preeminent U.S. policy objective is now less the near-term reversal or cessation of the North's weapons programs, and more to disabuse Pyongyang of any belief that its capabilities provide it added advantage or protection from the consequences of actions that it might contemplate.

Despite criticism from both left and right, President Obama pursued a consistent, multiple track policy over the course of his administration. He sought to deny Pyongyang any claims to nuclear weapons status, to impose economic and political sanctions on North Korea for its weapons programs, and to

¹³ See William J. Perry, "[To confront North Korea, talk first and get tough later,](#)" *The Washington Post* Opinions Column, January 6, 2017.

appreciably heighten its security commitments to the ROK. Though these policies did not compel Pyongyang to shift course, they enabled the United States to build an international coalition that is wholly unwilling to accept the North's claims to nuclear weapons status, while the administration has also advanced more coercive options should deterrence not prove ironclad.

All experts agree that Pyongyang now possesses an appreciably larger nuclear force than it possessed at the outset of the Obama administration. Its nuclear inventory is generally estimated at between 10 to 20 weapons, and some analysts believe the size of the force could grow significantly in the next few years. On approximately two dozen occasions during 2016, North Korea launched a wide array of ballistic missiles that included failures as well as successes, with several presumably envisioned as candidate means of delivery for a nuclear warhead. North Korea undertook four nuclear weapons tests over the course of the Obama administration, including two in 2016. Pyongyang claims that the two most recent tests were of a hydrogen bomb (viewed by most experts as a boosted fission device rather than a thermonuclear device), with the latest test (in September) supposedly a successful test of a nuclear warhead.

Absent an observable atmospheric test and a demonstrated ability to successfully launch a warhead from a missile—singular international norms upheld for 36 years that even Pyongyang has not violated—definitive proof of the North's capabilities remains lacking. But North Korea clearly wants the United States and other powers to believe that it possesses such enhanced capabilities. The threat to launch an ICBM is one more part of this strategy, though there is little reason to believe that the Trump administration (any more than the Obama

administration) would be prepared to validate North Korea's claims to standing as a nuclear weapons state. A central element in U.S. strategy must therefore be to deny North Korea the means to exploit perceived or actual capabilities for coercive advantage.

Donald Trump will be the fifth U.S. president since the end of the Cold War to address North Korea's nuclear and missile activities and programs. In his confirmation testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Rex Tillerson stated that North Korea and Iran posed "grave threats" to international security. He also chastised China's "empty promises," saying: "It has not been a reliable partner in using its full influence to curb North Korea." He claimed that China's unwillingness to enforce sanctions to the satisfaction of the United States "must end," without specifying how this admonition would be carried out. But finger wagging at Beijing has never proven an effective strategy to elicit Chinese cooperation. Tillerson's mid-March visit to Beijing (following stops in Tokyo and Seoul) will purportedly focus heavily on inducing more active Chinese cooperation on the nuclear issue, and will afford an opportunity to engage in serious discussions over this pressing issue.

Do the new administration's policy options look appreciably different from Obama's? This seems doubtful. The Obama administration patiently and persistently sought to work with China on imposing additional costs on North Korea for its nuclear and missile pursuits. Even though China objects strongly to the impending deployment of a U.S. THAAD ballistic missile battery in South Korea, China is an increasing participant in strengthened U.N. Security Council sanctions against North Korea, and played a central role in drafting the new

sanctions resolutions.¹⁴ As North Korea's nuclear and missile programs accelerated, American officials warned Beijing that if China was not prepared to heighten cooperation, the United States (along with Seoul and Tokyo) would act separately to protect its core national interests. An amply strengthened sanctions regime and heightened deterrence measures have been the result. At the same time, Beijing increasingly concedes that the North's weapons programs are a danger to all the states of Northeast Asia, including China.

President Trump's national security team seems well aware of the risks Pyongyang poses on the Korean Peninsula and beyond, and of the need to defend against and mitigate these risks, if at all possible short of war. In his meeting with Kim Kwan-jin, then National Security Adviser Flynn reaffirmed the U.S. decision to proceed as expeditiously as possible with the THAAD deployment and to ensure that deterrence and robust sanctions would be sustained under the Trump administration. These steps represent important correctives to Trump's decidedly unhelpful campaign statements that accused South Korea of free riding on U.S. security commitments, when Seoul's contributions to the alliance and its own level of defense effort amply surpass virtually all other U.S. allies.

None of these measures guarantee that a severe crisis will be avoided on the peninsula, but they leave the new administration far better prepared to cope with one. Its approach to crisis prevention and risk mitigation draws directly on the Obama administration's enhanced security commitments to the ROK,

¹⁴ Refer to my earlier blog posts, "[South Korea's THAAD decision: Neither a surprise nor a provocation](#)," Brookings Order from Chaos Blog, July 8, 2016; see also, "[China and North Korea: The long goodbye?](#)," Brookings Order from Chaos Blog, March 26, 2016.

including new procedures to strengthen extended deterrence between the two countries. Diligent, intensive security consultations and careful policy deliberation, not impulsive tweets, are essential for imparting to Pyongyang and to Beijing that the United States fully intends to uphold its security commitments in Northeast Asia. Though not explicitly acknowledged by the Trump administration, the President's national security leadership is drawing heavily on the tools and practices the Obama administration left behind. They represent useful reminders that no administration begins with a blank slate, and that it should not lightly discard what its predecessors put in place. Whether President Trump continues to adhere to this advice will be among the principal tests of American leadership during his presidency, and it provides a cautionary, slightly more optimistic note at a very troubled and uncertain time.