

Anticipating the Trump Administration's North Korea Policy

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On January 20, 2017, President Barack Obama will hand over the keys to the Oval Office to his successor, Donald Trump. Even after the inauguration, however, the new administration will be filling important foreign policy and national security posts for months to come. But it is not too early to speculate about future U.S. policy towards North Korea.

Although the presidential campaign was marked more by unprecedented hyperbole than by policy pronouncements, President-elect Trump has sought to reassure the world since his surprise election. Indeed, there is apt to be more continuity than disruption in Washington's approach to the world in general and North Korea in particular. At the same time, President Trump is apt to want to leverage fear and uncertainty to gain more purchase with respect to American interests and security.

Among the elements of continuity that should be expected in U.S. policy is a continued commitment to the ironclad U.S.-ROK alliance, as a bulwark of deterrence and defense against North Korean proliferation, provocation, and aggression.

Retired Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, who has been tapped by President-elect Trump to become National Security Advisor, recently reaffirmed the alliance in no uncertain terms. Flynn told Deputy National Security Advisor Cho Tae-yong, along with other members of a high-level South Korean delegation, that the U.S.-ROK alliance was "vital" and that North Korea would be among the new administration's highest priorities.¹⁾

1) See Chang, Jae-soon, "Flynn Calls U.S.-Korea Relations 'Vital Alliance'." *Yonhap*, November 18, 2016 (<http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2016/11/19/43/0301000000AEN20161119001151315F.html>).

The incoming Trump administration is also certain to put a premium on deterrence and defense. As two influential voices regarding a possible Trump Asian policy opined, the next U.S. administration wants to ensure that rhetoric is matched by strength. Alexander Gray and Peter Navarro charged the Obama administration with failing to fully resource the military dimension of the rebalance to Asia: “This pivot has also turned out to be an imprudent case of talking loudly but carrying a small stick, one that has led to more, not less, aggression and instability in the region.”²⁾

A Trump administration is likely to seek a Reagan-era defense buildup, including support for missile defenses. To be sure, the fiscal challenge of paying for such a buildup will limit some of the ambitions.

Just as important as a ramping up of armed forces is a shift in strategy. In particular, the next president is sure to adopt a more Realpolitik posture for dealing with major powers China and Russia. This shift should enable the United States to home in on more immediate threats from radical Islamist terrorism and rogue states like North Korea and Iran.

In the wake of North Korea’s fourth nuclear test, Rep. Mike Pompeo, the man tapped by Trump to be the next head of the Central Intelligence Agency, said, “We cannot continue President Obama’s policy of turning a blind eye to North Korea and Iran.”³⁾ Or as candidate Trump casually opined, there are worse ideas than assassinating Kim Jong-un, because “this guy’s a bad dude.”⁴⁾ As with many campaign utterances, Trump should be taken more seriously than literally.

This is not to say the near-term future is not very dangerous. In September, I predicted that the next year or two on the peninsula could be especially fraught with peril, given that Kim could well seek to leverage his apparently imminent acquisition of nuclear-armed missiles to threaten the United States and South Korea in the midst of democratic transitions. If anything, this prediction may have understated the potential danger, given the unexpected election of Trump and the unforeseen political crisis facing President Park Geun-hye.⁵⁾

2) Gray, Alexander and Peter Navarro, “Donald Trump’s Peace Through Strength Vision for the Asia-Pacific,” *Foreign Policy*, November 7, 2016 (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/07/donald-trumps-peace-through-strength-vision-for-the-asia-pacific>).

3) “Pompeo on North Korea’s Nuclear Test,” Press Release from the Office of Congressman Mike Pompeo, January 6, 2016 (<http://pompeo.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=398780>).

4) “Trump on Assassinating Kim Jong Un: ‘I’ve Heard of Worse Things,’” *CBS News*, February 10, 2016, (<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/donald-trump-assassinating-north-korean-leader-kim-jong-un-china-role>).

5) Cronin, Patrick M., “Will Kim Jong-un Exploit U.S. and South Korean Elections?” *The National Interest*, September 29, 2016

Less urgent but still central to a Trump administration's approach to dealing with threats is a desire to strike a new alliance bargain regarding both the division of labor and burden sharing. The campaign rhetoric at times approached the surreal, with candidate Trump seeming to suggest he supported the acquisition of nuclear weapons by East Asian allies. However, Trump has long since clarified this point, including immediately following the election.⁶⁾

Instead, something akin to Trump's idea of seeking a more equitable burden sharing with allies has been summarized by a couple of strategic analysts. They recently wrote that under Trump's notional approach, "the United States would focus on meeting its treaty commitments, but would also require its partners, if the threat emanated from their region of the world, to assume primary responsibility for action, including shouldering the costs." Nikolas Gvosdev and Derek Reveron add, "The era when U.S. policymakers were willing to see vital interests at stake in every corner of the globe is coming to an end."⁷⁾

In the year ahead, there are at least five things we might reasonably expect from a Trump administration that could have an impact on the future of the Korean Peninsula and U.S.-Korean relations.

First, there could well be a crisis, and almost immediately following the election the Trump transition team agreed to participate in two "Black Swan" exercises to ensure senior officials are familiar with basic emergency procedures for coping with a range of domestic or foreign crises, including not just another 9/11 attack but very possibly also a nuclear crisis that could be brought about by North Korean provocations.⁸⁾

Second, the Trump administration may well step up its information-based campaign for dealing with North Korea, especially for dealing with a potential crisis but also potentially for shaping Pyongyang in the longer term. It may pursue something akin to that Navy SEAL Skip Vincenzo recommends: namely, an alliance information-based

(<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/will-kim-jong-un-exploit-us-south-korean-elections-17879>).

- 6) "Trump Denies Saying Japan and South Korea Should Acquire Nuclear Weapons," *Kyodo News*, November 15, 2016 (<http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/2046149/trump-denies-saying-japan-and-south-korea-should-acquire-nuclear>).
- 7) Gvosdev, Nikolas K. and Derek S. Reveron, "Searching for a Trump Grand Strategy," Foreign Policy Research Institute, November 15, 2016 (<http://www.fpri.org/article/2016/11/searching-trump-grand-strategy>).
- 8) Mallin, Alexander, "Black Swan' Exercise to Give Trump's Team Practice for Security Crisis," *ABC News*, November 11, 2016 (<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/black-swan-exercise-give-trumps-team-practice-security/story?id=43475031>).

strategy in which “designed to reduce the risks of conflict or regime collapse by convincing regime elites that their best options in these circumstances would be to support ROK–U.S. Alliance efforts.”⁹⁾

Third, look for a Trump administration to go beyond the idea of emplacing a single Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense battery on the Korean Peninsula. Instead, the incoming team may look for additional, more advanced systems to help neutralize North Korea’s nuclear missile arsenal. Short-term measures to strengthen missile defense capabilities can go beyond THAAD deployment to “wider deployment of the advanced Standard Missile-6 (SM-6), which can be used both for missile defense and conventional strike,” as well as accelerating hypervelocity powder-gun technology. “...the U.S. and ROK militaries should concentrate on developing quick hits, such as fully exploiting current technological capabilities, to complicate North Korean planning and demonstrating the capability to fight limited war and shoot down mass missile salvos.”¹⁰⁾

Fourth, in line with Trump’s idea of peace through strength, remaining unpredictable, and seeking deals, the new president could pursue a surprise summit meeting with North Korea. Certainly a “hamburger summit” is more likely than “strategic patience” from President-elect Donald Trump. As with Barack Obama before he entered the White House, candidate Donald Trump expressed an openness to meet with Kim Jong-un. “Why not? What is wrong with talking?” he was quoted as saying in May. “I won’t host a state dinner for him. Same goes for the Chinese and others who rip us off. But a chat over a burger might be acceptable.”¹¹⁾ The reason to be skeptical about this happening any time soon, however, is the greater likelihood of North Korean provocations.

Fifth and finally, the new administration is likely to pursue both a new burden sharing arrangement and freer trade with its ROK ally. After all, the U.S.–ROK alliance is set

9) Commander Frederik “Skip”, Vincenzo, USN, “An Information Based Strategy to Reduce North Korea’s Increasing Threat: Recommendations for U.S. & ROK Policy Makers,” October 2016, co-published by the Center for a New American Security, the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service Center for Security Studies, the U.S.–Korea Institute at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, and the National Defense University (<http://www.ndu.edu/Portals/59/Documents/INSS/Info%20Based%20Strategy%20to%20Reduce%20NK%20Threat%20Final%20PDF.pdf>).

10) See Cronin, Patrick M. in Patrick M. Cronin, editor, *Breakthrough on the Peninsula: Third Offset Strategies and the Future Defense of Korea* (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, November 2016).

11) Evans, Stephen, “What Will President Trump Do About North Korea?” *BBC News*, November 17, 2016 (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38001843>).

to negotiate a new Special Measures Agreement, and candidate Trump made it clear he wanted South Korea to pay all and not just half the cost it currently pays to station U.S. forces on the Peninsula.¹²⁾

Although many take Trump literally rather than seriously, on trade he is more likely to seek fairer trade from a U.S. perspective rather than rip of existing trade accords, including KORUS. As influential conservative economist Peter Morici has argued, “Instead, the next president should renegotiate and better enforce existing agreements to ensure more balanced trade. That would boost exports, redirect U.S. consumer demand to American factories, substantially increase GDP growth and tax revenues, and reduce budget deficits.”¹³⁾

In short, a Trump administration will remain focused on the North Korean threat first and foremost. But it will systematically work with counterparts in Seoul to alter the division of labor, distribution of burdens, and achieve fairer trade over the ensuing four to eight years. South Korea should do more for its own defense but not at the expense of deterrence. At least in the early weeks after the election of Donald Trump, these are some of the plausible analytical and political directions one might assume from a new administration.

12) Chang, Jae-soon, “Trump May Seek to Complete OPCON Transfer to S. Korea: Victor Cha,” *Yonhap*, November 10, 2016 (<http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2016/11/10/0401000000AEN20161110000600315.html>).

13) Morici, Peter, “Re-establishing the Meaning of Free Trade,” *The Washington Times*, May 17, 2016 (<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/may/17/peter-morici-re-establishing-the-meaning-of-free-t>).

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