Uncharted Waters

Will Allies, Congress, and Foreign Policy Bureaucrats Keep a Radical Commander-in-Chief on a Responsible Course?

By David Bell Mislan

Donald Trump has been skeptical of Japan for quite some time. In 1987, he took out a full-page advertisement in major U.S. newspapers to deride American foreign policy toward the close Asian ally. The criticisms he levied then are no different than the ones he made on the campaign trail throughout 2015 and 2016. Nearly thirty years ago, he accused the Japanese government of freeloading off the United States on national defense: "It's time for us to end our vast deficits by making Japan, and others who can afford it, pay. Our world protection is worth hundreds of billions of dollars to these countries, and their stake in their protection is far greater than ours." Last August, Trump repeated the sentiment during a campaign appearance in Iowa: "You know we have a treaty with Japan, where if Japan is attacked, we have to use the full force and might of the United States. If we're attacked, Japan doesn't have to do anything. They can sit home and watch Sony television, okay?"

The Japanese people are understandably alarmed by the result of America's presidential election. The victor has an uncommonly negative opinion of Japan's commitment to its partnership with the United States. The Japanese have been listening to Trump's virulent distrust of their government for the last three decades. More broadly, there is uncertainty about how the Trump administration will engage the nascent Pacific Century. Similar concerns are being felt in all corners of the globe.

In truth, we know very little about how Trump will act as the forty-fifth president of the United States. Americans elected a candidate who has absolutely no experience in government. Without a resume or record to evaluate, we are reduced to examining Trump's blow and bluster. There is a good argument that we should not jump to the conclusion that Trump will rule by fiat and bend the course of history to his will.

◁ U.S. Navy ships steaming in formation during a drill in the South China Sea, Oct. 13, 2016. *Will Gaskill/ United States Navy*

In the scholarly study of politics, or the study of society for that matter, there are two general ways of explaining the course of history. The first is structural—the notion that there are big, slow-to-change forces that push societies into acting in particular ways. Think of Marx's claim that a peasant is born into poverty and thus is forced to play the role of the peasant. The second mode of thought is based upon the idea of agency—that individuals can make choices for themselves or for their societies free of the oppressive influence of structure. This is something like the idea of "free will" and emphasizes the role that an individual's make-up plays in individual and collective action. Not surprisingly, presidential scholars tend to think in terms of agency, simply because they focus on the role of one individual in the American government. It would not be very interesting to write a book about a president that claims that he was just a cog in a machine, after all. So, it stands to reason that many of today's Trump watchers, versed in the agency-based way of thinking, are pointing to his character and ideology as the strongest indicators of how his administration will govern over the next four years.

Indeed, the president is the most important and influential individual in the U.S. government. The president sits atop a vast bureaucracy and commands the world's most powerful military. He sets an agenda for the government and, more importantly, a vision for the American people. As Henry Adams once wrote, the American president "resembles the commander of a ship at sea. He must have a helm to grasp, a course to steer, a port to seek."

But there are broad political and social forces at play that will both enable and constrain Trump's agenda and his administration. One needs only look to President Barack Obama's failed efforts to close the Guantánamo Bay detention camp to see how a president is not as all-powerful as the agency approach to presidential politics might suggest. During his first days in office in 2009, President Obama signed an executive order to close the controversial prison where war on terrorism suspects are held indefinitely without trial. Political opposition, legal challenges, bureaucratic red tape, and a lack of cooperation from American allies impeded the president's honest efforts over his two terms in office.

Trump has promised to radically alter American foreign policy, by refusing to send the Trans-Pacific Partnership to the Senate for ratification, by withdrawing from the Paris Agreement on climate change, by not committing American forces to the defense of NATO allies, by reconsidering the "one China" policy, and by ending formal alliances if American allies do not contribute more to U.S. defense budgets. To fulfill these promises—which would amount to the largest peacetime adjustment to grand strategy in the history of the Republic—he will need the cooperation of a large swath of American and international society. Put simply, a lot more goes into making U.S. foreign policy than the whims of the president.

Navigating Without a Map

Trump's lack of experience and expertise, inability to attract top talent to leadership positions, and bombastic personality point to a foreign policy characterized by chaos in the near term. With China's steady rise as a military and economic power, the Asia-Pacific is a critical region to watch. While leaders across the world are anxious to see how a Trump presidency will unfold, those in the Asia-Pacific are particularly nervous. Trump's nationalistic rhetoric is unlikely to reassure the government of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, or the transitional administration in South Korea. Why are they so nervous? They recognize that changes in U.S. foreign policy could set off a chain reaction of adjustments that would jeopardize a very fragile status quo.

Societies and governments around the region are at politically sensitive junctures. Japan is considering changes to its pacifist constitution. Slowing economic growth threatens to exacerbate social cleavages in China. South Korea remains embroiled in a political crisis following the impeachment of scandal-plagued President Park Geun-hye. North Korea shows no intention of stopping its nuclear weapons program. The populist president of the Philippines recently called for a "separation from America" in its foreign policy. Malaysia, Thailand, and Myanmar are hedging between Chinese and American spheres of influence.

Perhaps the most ominous developments are the maritime territorial disputes between China and its neighbors that are stoking nationalist sentiment across the region. A promising regional free trade agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, has been signed by twelve states but only ratified by Japan. China's creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank presents a direct challenge to an American-led development agenda. The list goes on. The Asia-Pacific is crowded, wealthy, and inseparable from the global economy; and the United States is an indispensable part of its complex dynamic.

Trump's hostile rhetoric toward China and Japan indicates turbulence ahead for the fragile balancing act at the heart of U.S. foreign policy toward the Asia-Pacific. During his campaign, Trump portrayed China as a country that was taking advantage of the United States. He claimed that it was manipulating the value of the renminbi in order to maximize Chinese exports to the United States while minimizing American imports. He also pinned much of America's economic woes on China, saying that the country was stealing away jobs from American workers. Trump also described China as a threat to American national security, often referencing alleged Chinese cyber attacks on the American private and public sectors. Perhaps most alarming was Trump's outrageous claim that the Chinese government fabricated the idea of climate change in order to gain some sort of advantage in the global economy, at the expense of the United States. Remarkably, China's leadership has shown considerable restraint in its response

to Trump's broad and often baseless accusations. Such claims, however, have a negative impact on bilateral relations in two ways. First, they will frame perceptions on both sides of the relationship in a more hostile context. Second, they heighten the stakes in Sino-American relations. Chinese leaders will have to "stand up" to the tough-talking Trump or face a backlash from the Chinese public, and vice versa, thus constraining the ability of both sides to find common ground on a host of shared issues.

The same dynamic would play out in America's relationship with Japan. Because of Trump's bluster on Japan, there is little room between the allies for compromise. And Trump's campaign rhetoric on Japan highlights another problem for his foreign policy formulation—his lack of knowledge or respect for facts. Candidate Trump repeatedly claimed that the United States is losing money by defending Japan, and that the Japanese government does not contribute to the effort. This could not be further from the truth.

Japan's "sympathy budget" is a cash transfer to the United States government intended to offset the expenses of forward deploying U.S. forces in the country. When combined with the land and utilities that Japan provides to the U.S. military gratis, Japan pays for about 70 percent of the total costs associated with the American troops. Trump seems to be unaware of this fact, or he chooses to ignore it. Moreover, Trump has threatened to remove U.S. troops from Japan if the Japanese government refuses to contribute more to the effort and claims that this is a cost-cutting measure. In reality, returning Japan-deployed American forces to the U.S. mainland would mean a new and significant annual expense because Japan would no longer be subsidizing those soldiers.

Judging from his inexperience and rhetoric, Trump badly needs a crash course in international relations. He becomes president with the mistaken notion that diplomacy is a set of bilateral negotiations. Instead, world politics is a system of interrelated relationships, interests, and problems. It requires policymakers to think in terms of the system and all of its interdependent variables. For example, a change in U.S.-Japanese relations would affect the U.S.-Chinese relationship, the Chinese-Japanese relationship, and so on. And small changes can have large ripple effects. Acting on the false premise that international relations are a set of unrelated business deals would lead to a series of unintended consequences for American foreign policy and world politics more generally. This would reduce certainty and encourage governments throughout the Asia-Pacific to adjust accordingly, all to the detriment of American interests.

For instance, an American withdrawal from Japan would guarantee changes to the pacifist Japanese constitution, which limits the arming of the country's military. Such a move would result in a rapid military build-up, perhaps even in the extreme case with Japan seeking to become a nuclear power. At any rate, changes to Japanese force posture would encourage an arms race in the East Pacific, with the potential of drawing in India and Pakistan. This would threaten two of the few consistent goals

of American foreign policy since the turn of the twentieth century: a stable balance of power and peace among the great powers of Eurasia.

Another concern for American foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific and elsewhere is how Trump set up his administration. One of the most pivotal presidential appointments is the White House chief of staff, the de facto manager of the president's daily operations. He or she serves as a gatekeeper and controls the flow of information to and from the Oval Office. In recent years, newly elected presidents have chosen strong personalities or proven managers as their first chief of staff, and for good reason. The president has to learn on the job, and having a seasoned hand will reduce embarrassing mistakes in the first hundred days. Trump's choice was Reince Priebus, a Republican Party insider who rose to prominence on his abilities as a campaign fundraiser. Putting a mainstream GOP figure in a prominent White House role might be good for reconciling party divisions, but it does not bode well for a smooth transition of American power. It is likely that Trump will be inundated with information, requests, and influences from all directions if the chief of staff is not up to the task. In this environment, costly foreign policy mistakes are much more likely to happen. A poorly managed White House will struggle to manage a crisis in the Asia-Pacific.

Since 2001, there have been several near collisions and one actual collision between American and Chinese military crafts in the South China Sea. The root cause is a disagreement over whether or not China has the right to expel foreign militaries from its exclusive economic zone, the two hundred nautical mile zone that extends from its shores. Perhaps the most infamous of these incidents was the collision between a Chinese fighter jet and a U.S. Navy EP-3 in 2001. George W. Bush's administration was tested by this diplomatic incident and relied heavily on Secretary of State Colin Powell, a man with extensive security policy experience, to find a peaceful resolution. Trump will have a very different secretary of state—Rex Tillerson, the CEO of ExxonMobil. It is doubtful that Tillerson will bring the same assets to crisis management that Powell did and unlikely that Trump will handle a high-level diplomatic incident as well as Bush did.

Power and Politics

The overall political and social structure governing American foreign relations may limit the chaos and resulting political damage. A strong reason to doubt a radical change of course is that other world leaders will nudge Trump toward responsible choices. At the highest levels of diplomacy, personal relationships shape outcomes. Take the friendship between Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom and President Ronald Reagan, for example. Their rapport encouraged the close and indispensable cooperation between their two governments in the waning days of the Cold War. If Shinzo Abe can build a solid relationship with Trump, his government—which greatly

prefers the status quo in world affairs today—can influence the president in a way that constrains rash action and dramatic changes to U.S. foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific.

American presidents are also constrained by institutional rules and regulations. The White House needs the support of federal agencies and Congress to lead the country. While Republicans will control Congress for at least the next two years, there are deep divisions among the GOP itself about the future of America's foreign relations. On the issue of trade and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, for example, there is an irreconcilable divide that cuts right down the middle of the party. When the president has the first-mover advantage—as he does with submitting trade pacts to Congress for ratification—he will have greater freedom to shape foreign policy. On other issues, such as the defense budget and the use of military force, Trump will need, at the least, agreement among factions of the GOP. Finding common ground among Republicans has become so difficult in recent years that it drove House Speaker John Boehner into early retirement. Trump will face similar, if not more acute, political obstacles if he chooses to radically alter America's Asia-Pacific strategy and other foreign policy traditions.

Finally, Trump will not make foreign policy alone. He heads a mammoth network of government agencies that are responsible for two indispensable dimensions of foreign policymaking—analysis and implementation. In both dimensions, the bureaucracy can act as a balance to the whims of a president. Considering the fact that bureaucracies are hard-wired to maintain the status quo, we can expect that the federal bureaucracy will be a cautious and careful foil to Trump's chaotic character.

In a foreign policy crisis, or even when considering changes to long-term strategy, bureaucrats use their resources and expertise to present options to the president. While the president and his advisors have the ability to influence what gets put on the agenda, the bureaucracy has multiple institutional advantages. This is especially true in an administration that is staffed at the highest levels by political novices, as the Trump administration appears to be.

There is an old joke in Washington about bureaucrats and policymakers. When a bureaucrat presents a policymaker with three options, the only correct answer is always B. This is because the bureaucrat shapes the choices to push the policymaker into the choice that the bureaucracy wants. A is always a horrible choice that no one would ever want. By comparison, B looks much better. C is a less attractive version of B. Thus, B is always the logical choice. A seasoned policymaker would not be fooled by this trick, but someone without much experience dealing with a huge bureaucracy would. So, we can expect the bureaucracy to game the choices that Trump will make over the next few years. Since the bureaucracy tends to prefer the status quo, this will serve as a strong constraint on Trump's agency as chief foreign policymaker.