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The following is a latest copy of East Asia Quarterly Review by Canon Institute for Global Studies' Foreign Affairs and National Security (CIGS/FANS) Team for the third quarter of 2017.

The fall of 2017 was a busy season for East Asia and the United States. With the tension over North Korea's nuclear program continuing, Japan's Shinzo ABE held a snap election in October 2017, in which the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)-Komeito ruling coalition enjoyed another landslide victory. Mr. Donald Trump completed his first Asia trip as US President that included stops in Japan, South Korea, China, Vietnam and the Philippines with a mixed review both at home and in the region. Boggled down with the problems at home, the United States will likely remain distracted, especially with the mid-term elections coming up in less than a year. What happens between now and then in East Asia may have a profound impact on the future of geostrategic environment in this region.

<LDP/Komeito coalition DIDN'T win in the snap election in Japan>

In the election for the House of Representatives (Lower House) on October 22, the LDP/Komeito ruling coalition enjoyed another landslide victory. The ruling coalition now occupies significant 313 seats, as this means that the LDP and Komeito together now have the two-thirds majority in the Lower House. In the days following the election, all the media attention has been focused on how Prime Minister Abe chooses to take advantage of this newly-won supermajority by the ruling coalition. In particular, pundits' speculation has intensified on whether Abe, buttressing his confidence with his power base, a great deal of attention has been on whether he would now prioritize constitutional revision over other agenda, including economic reform.

However, the political reality was that the LDP/Komeito did not win. Rather, the opposition imploded by dividing itself and collapsed. Indeed, the coalition's "big win" in October snap election was not necessarily a reflection of voters' support for the coalition's policy platform. Rather, the result was due to yet another implosion among the opposition. the election results demonstrate that the opposition once again failed to counter the ruling coalition with

a set of credible policy alternatives and clearer messages. In fact, as the members of the DPJ essentially broke up into three groups—those who joined Party of Hope (founded by Tokyo governor Ms. Yuriko Koike), those who joined CDP (newly established Constitutional Democratic Party), and those who ran as unaffiliated candidates—they ended up splitting anti-LDP/Komeito votes. Although the de facto breakup of the DPJ (Democratic Party of Japan) may have a long-term benefit of streamlining the opposition groupings, it still benefited the ruling coalition in the election.

Shinzo Abe is very well aware of this. Given such nature of LDP/Komeito's "victory", therefore, Abe will more likely prioritize the economic and other domestic issues that the voters care more about in coming days.

<Trump completes his first presidential trip to Asia, leaving more questions behind>

Mr. Donald J. Trump completed his first Asia trip as US president on November 13. His 10-day tour included Japan, ROK, China, Vietnam and the Philippines.

Although not much attention was paid to Trump's visit in the US due to major domestic incidents that happened throughout his Asia trip including two mass shootings in Texas and California, the countries in Asia naturally paid close attention to his trip. His trip, having taken place as tensions on the Korean Peninsula continue to rise, was considered in the region as the first real opportunity to hear directly from Trump regarding his Administration's vision for the Asia-Pacific region. In particular, there was anticipation that Trump may finally offer his Administration's comprehensive strategy toward the region under the banner of "free and open Indo-Pacific region".

However, Trump's Asia trip only left the region with more questions than answers about the US strategy toward Asia. If anything, his trip seems to have sent mixed signals not only to the countries in the region but also to many of the US allies in Europe and the Middle east, in regards to the trajectory of the US security commitments.

In his stops in Northeast Asia, the central message he was expected to deliver was his Administration's unwavering resolve to counter the nuclear threats posed by North Korea. His visits to Tokyo and Seoul achieved this goal somewhat, but the questions were raised regarding Trump's approach when he was in Beijing. On the one hand, while he reiterated US' firm commitment to the defense of Japan in Tokyo, he also panned Japan for its trade

practice during his speech in front of US and Japanese business leaders. On the other hand, during his stay in Beijing, he took unusually conciliatory tone in his public remarks, in so far as to say he “would not blame” China for its trade imbalances with the US. While some interpreted this as an example of Trump’s “America First” policy or his own way of trying to draw further cooperation out of China on the North Korean issues, others considered Trump’s behavior as excessively domestically oriented or deferential. Some suggest that Trump, by allowing Chinese president Xi to refer to “new types of major power relationship” in their joint media appearance, effectively gave China the impression that his administration is open to a US-China relationship under this Chinese model.

In Southeast Asia, Trump’s speech in Danang—where he was anticipated to unveil his Administration’s strategy to achieve “free and open Indo-Pacific”—was not only thin on the details of the strategy itself but also regarded as yet another occasion for Trump to reiterate his Administration’s “America First” bilateral approach to trade. His not mentioning the concerns about the brutality with which Filipino president Duterte has been responding to the drug problem in his country also raised criticism within the US as the departure from traditional US diplomatic approach that emphasizes universal values. Finally, his last-minute cancellation of his attendance to the East Asia Summit in the 11th hour only aggravated the doubts about his own interest in ensuring US leadership in this region.

<ROK finds itself in a dilemma-again>

As tensions on the Korean Peninsula rise, the ROK finds itself in a difficult position yet again. On the one hand, it needs the US as its ultimate security guarantor. On the other hand, however, its deep economic dependence on China makes the ROK more vulnerable to China’s attempt to drive a wedge into the US-ROK alliance. The so-called “three No’s” policy that President Moon Jae-in reportedly agreed to in his meeting with Chinese president Xi Jinping is a vivid example of this.

In some sense, Moon’s current position is somewhat to be expected. Although the current tension on the Peninsula has pushed him to take a harder stance vis-à-vis North Korea since his inauguration, he has always been a proponent of engaging North Korea. His announcement of “Responsible Northeast Asia Plus Community” initiative, which is a refreshed version of the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) advocated by his predecessor Park Geun-hye, is the latest demonstration of his commitment to seek solution through multinational dialogue.

Although it is easy to criticize his administration's approach as being "too soft", it also makes sense, given the reality in today's Republic of Korea. The ROK, which had nothing to lose in 1950, is now a developed industrial democracy with the per-capita income of more than 30,000 USD annually. Seoul knows exactly what would happen if a Second Korean War broke out and, therefore, will do its best to avoid any military confrontation with North Korea in the years to come. Now that the Trump administration's "America First" approach to trade has resulted in the renegotiation of Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS), Seoul's vulnerability to the economic pressure from China will also only increase.

That said, from political-military standpoint, such a wavering in Seoul will continue to complicate the efforts to ensure the maintenance of credible deterrence underpinned by US defense commitment in Northeast Asia. Needless to say, Moon's said agreement to so-called "three no's", in addition to his less-than-lukewarm position on the deployment of Terminal High-Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) in the ROK, has already begun to create tension in the US-ROK alliance. As ROK's most recent refusal to have Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) participate in US-ROK joint naval exercise in the Sea of Japan in early November, it will also continue to make the tripartite coordination among the US, Japan and South Korea further more difficult.

<Xi Jinping hosts Trump after solidifying his power base after the CCP Congress>

Mr. Xi Jinping was reelected in the 19th party convention as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. The new Standing Committee of the Politburo does not include any future leader candidates in their 50s. This may hint that Mr. Xi did not wish to (or could not) nominate future party leaders in the next generation because Mr. Xi may wish to stay in power for the third term after 2022. Under such political environment, China gave Mr. Trump a "super state guest" treatment when he visited Beijing. As written earlier, Mr. Trump was criticized in the US for either being too soft or naive vis-a-vis China.

Also seen from Tokyo, this kind of deferential US approach did not work well and therefore should not continue forever. Mr. Trump, in a sense, might have behaved himself as a state guest in Beijing, without making the gracious host lose face in public by, for example, criticizing Mr. Xi for not doing enough to North Korea, for the lack of meaningful economic reforms or for the more assertive Chinese military activities in the South China Sea. However, it was easily expected that Mr. Trump would not keep silent. In fact, the US Department of State redesignated North Korea as a State Sponsor of Terrorism and

imposed additional sanctions against some Chinese firms on November 20 immediately after the visit of Mr. Xi's special envoy to North Korea bore no fruits.

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