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In the last months of 2017, several developments of significant importance happened. In Washington, the Trump Administration issued its National Security Strategy on December 18—much earlier than some of its predecessors in the last decade. Domestically, the Trump administration has been trying to call a victory after the Congress passed the Tax Reform bill, but the Trump administration continues to fight an uphill battle as it keeps getting distracted by unhelpful tweets and other remarks made by President Trump himself, as well as the ongoing Justice Department investigation on Russia’s potential interference in the 2016 presidential election by the team led by former FBI Director Robert Mueller. Even if President Trump tries to claim a victory on passing the health care reform bill, it still remains to be seen whether the law will work for or against the Administration and the Republican Party in the mid-terms election in 2018. In East Asia, the unnecessary diplomatic tension is rising as South Korea poised to announce, at the end of this month, the result of its government’s deliberation of the Japan-ROK agreement in regards to the resolution of so-called the “comfort women” issue in December 2015.

<Washington DC: the Trump Administration issues its first National Security Strategy>

There have been a couple of major developments in Washington in the last month of 2017. On foreign/security policy front, the Administration issued its National Security Strategy (NSS). Organized under four main principles—protect the homeland, promote American prosperity, preserve peace through strength, and advance American influence—the document provides a much-needed window into the Administration’s vision of how it wants to shape US engagement with the rest of the world. Referring to it as “American First National Security Strategy”, the document is also the very first attempt to translate President Trump’s campaign promise of “America First” principle into national strategic goals. Ballistic Missile Defense Report (BMDR) and Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), both of which have been conducted by the Department of Defense (DOD), are also expected to be issued by early next year.

As for the NSS, although continuing to uphold (at least rhetorically) the importance of all-of-the-government approach to pursue US strategic goals, the NSS also clearly reflects one of the unique, “disruptive” nature of the Trump administration. It questions conventional wisdom based on which the past administrations, both Republican and Democratic, have shaped its national strategy since the end of the Cold War, and criticizes it as “strategic complacency”. Such assumptions include past administrations’ aspirational approach to China and Iran to shape them into “responsible stakeholders” by engaging them, taking American military supremacy for granted, and long-held belief in democratic

peace. In this context, the new NSS also honestly admits the complexity of national security challenges the United States face.

We consider this NSS noteworthy in several ways. First, it explicitly singles out China and Russia as the competitors that have emerged to “challenge American power, influence, and interests”. It also recognizes the strategic significance of space and cyber as new domains, and discuss the efforts by adversaries to lower the confidence in democratic institutions. Moreover, it spells out that US adversaries and competitors often resort to the “grayzone” activities that are coercive yet do not meet the threshold of military action or unlawful behaviors.

The portrayal of China throughout the NSS is particularly worth taking notice. Unlike the NSS under the Obama administration, the new NSS not only refers to China as an US competitor that challenges America’s place in the world and the international order it has been leading, but China also has been singled out for its aggressive investment and other economic activities in the areas outside Indo-Pacific region, including Latin America and Africa. Moreover, the NSS talks extensively about how China has been successfully leveraging the most advanced technologies but also utilizes them to tighten the restriction against its people. Furthermore, relationship with Taiwan, which has been scarcely mentioned in the past NSS, has been discussed. The NSS has clearly set the tone for the Administration’s approach vis-à-vis China—it will not shy away from being tough on a wide range of issues including North Korea, maritime disputes in the region, and bilateral trade.

Of course, there are some questions remaining regarding how the principles that were set out will be translated into specific policies and initiatives. For example, although the NSS discusses boosting defense spending, it remains highly uncertain whether the kind of robust increase that the Administration hopes for can be achieved. Furthermore, although the NSS emphasizes energizing the alliances and partnership around the world, it is also uncertain whether such an approach in security issues on one hand while pursuing “America First” trade policy primarily based on bilateral approach on the other can achieve the effect that the Administration aspires for.

Overall, however, the “American First National Security Strategy” laid out in the NSS is a welcome articulation of this Administration’s commitment to ensure that the US can still play a leading role in the international stage, despite some of the approaches it takes may be unconventional. It also represents the best effort made by the National Security Council staff to reconcile President Trump’s campaign promises of “America First” approach to all of his Administration’s policies with a more realistic and pragmatic foreign policy vision that resonates with the traditional Republican foreign policy establishment.

<Tokyo: Japan-South Korea relations remain to be seen>

Diplomatic tensions may rise as South Korea is expected to release the result of the internal deliberation on the December 2015 Japan-ROK agreement on the “comfort women” issue. The Abe administration’s position on the Japan-ROK relations doesn’t seem to have changed as Japan continues to call on the ROK to steadily implement the agreement between the two countries.

On the other hand, last July, the Mun administration launched a task force inside MOFA to verify the negotiation process, the result of which will be announced on December 27. According to many experts in Seoul, although it will not request the Mun administration to either abolish or renegotiate the agreement, there is a possibility that some contents may not satisfy the Japanese side.

Despite opposition from some Blue House aides, ROK Foreign Minister Kang visited Tokyo last week. She invited Prime Minister Abe to attend the opening ceremony of the PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games as well as explained to him the progress of the task force's deliberations. Japanese Foreign Minister Kono told her that it would be difficult for Mr Abe to attend the ceremony as of now. It is expected that Japan wouldn't make a decision on the prime minister's visit to South Korea before the content of the task force's report comes out.

Meanwhile, on December 11 and 12, Japan, the US and the ROK conducted the 6th joint military exercise for ballistic missile detection and pursuit with the assumption that missiles are launched from North Korea. While it is unlikely that further progress will be made on security cooperation between Japan and the ROK anytime soon, it also confirmed that such tripartite joint military exercises can be conducted under the Mun administration.