DIPLOMAT MAGAZINE
October 2020

The Asia Inheritance: Trump and US Alliances

U.S. alliances have been tested under the Trump administration – but have also proven more durable than many expected.

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The French philosopher Albert Camus once wrote, "In the middle of winter, I at last discovered that there was in me an invincible summer." He may as well have been describing U.S. alliances in East Asia after nearly four years of the Donald Trump administration. Despite weathering tremendous challenges, U.S. alliances with Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea have proven to be more resilient than many would have expected.

The Trump administration's approach to traditional allies in Asia can be characterized by two disparate — and contradictory — impulses: A view that deeper cooperation between the United States and its allies will be critical amid deepening competition with China, and a unilateralist impulse that is highly skeptical about the value and fairness of alliances. This dichotomy has resulted in a chaotic approach, in which the United States has demanded that allies align closer to U.S. policies on China while Washington has concurrently engaged in a series of tit-for-tat trade disputes with the same allies, requested significant increases of payments to offset U.S. costs, and threatened to withdraw U.S. forces and abrogate security commitments.

After nearly four years in office, a U.S. administration that promised to be disruptive has certainly lived up to that expectation. President Trump's deep misgivings about the value of alliances has been a consistent feature of his expressed worldview for nearly three decades, and his policies have rattled U.S. alliances in East Asia to a degree unseen for more than 40 years. Yet Trump's record on East Asian alliances has included some bright spots as well. After four years these alliances have certainly been damaged, but they have also demonstrated significant resilience.

Chaos and Clarity

The Trump administration's approach to the Indo-Pacific has been defined by articulated statements of policy intent that were soon followed by other clear statements of entirely different policy intentions. Implementation of policies has been haphazard and inconsistent, reflecting the inconsistency of the policies themselves as well as the president's strategic unpredictability.

Across its nearly four years in power, the Trump administration has been on both sides of most critical issues in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific, from relations with China and North Korea to human rights. On the role of alliances in particular, Trump has described U.S. allies as taking advantage of the United States and complained they would not come to America's aid. By contrast, his National Defense Strategy called alliances "the backbone of global security" and the White House's "Strategic Approach to the PRC" identified the top U.S. priority as "improv[ing] the resiliency of our institutions, alliances, and partnerships."

Such inconsistency has driven deep anxieties in the minds of U.S. allies and partners across the Indo-Pacific. According to the nonpartisan Pew Research Center, the percentage of people in Japan and Australia with a positive view of the United States has plummeted to 41 percent and 33 percent, respectively – record lows. These plummeting levels of support can be attributed to broad public perceptions ranking the U.S. response to the COVID-19 pandemic as lowest in the world, and a lack of confidence in Trump, specifically. For example, South Korea's confidence in Trump in 2020 was at 17 percent, compared to 88 percent for then-President Barack Obama in 2016. Overall, the majority of people in Japan and Australia have an unfavorable opinion of the United States (54 percent and 64 percent, respectively), while South Korea's view of the United States has remained generally positive (an unfavorable rating of 39 percent).

These concerns have also percolated among allied foreign policy leaders and bureaucracies. Several U.S. allies have increased spending on defense as they considered the implications of a less reliable United States, and Japan's pursuit of offensive strike capabilities was reportedly driven by fears of the continued deterioration of its alliance with the United States. Additionally, Japan's push for like-minded countries to sign on to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Partnership (CPTPP) arose after the United States withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Similarly, the Trump administration's lack of leadership in international institutions raised concerns that the United States was no longer interested in leading the world and setting the international agenda, thus creating a geopolitical vacuum for China to fill.

Yet there have been other aspects of the Trump administration's approach to the Indo-Pacific that some allied and partner foreign policy experts have supported. Specifically, the Trump administration's willingness to explicitly accept friction with Beijing in the pursuit of U.S. interests has been welcomed by those in Japan and elsewhere with a more hawkish view of China. Recently, an anonymous official from Japan's Foreign Ministry writing for the American Interest also saw advantages from Trump's approach – clarity mixed with chaos – especially when compared to what the official saw as a more conciliatory Obama administration strategy. "[H]aving a poorly implemented but fundamentally correct strategy [under Trump] is better than having a well-implemented but ambiguous strategy [under Obama]," the official wrote. As James Crabtree highlighted in Foreign Policy, similar opinions have been expressed by scholars and officials from Singapore, India, and Taiwan.

A Worsening Security Environment

These deepening challenges to U.S. alliances in East Asia have coincided with an increasingly concerning regional security environment triggered by worsening threats from North Korea and China. Although these trends certainly predate the Trump administration, they nevertheless weigh heavily on the geopolitical calculations of countries across the region, and are especially worrisome for U.S. East Asian allies that are on the front lines of these issues.

North Korea

Just days after being elected president in 2016, President-elect Trump visited the White House to meet with President Obama, who reportedly warned that North Korea's nuclear program would be the most significant national security problem Trump would inherit. Days before his inauguration, Trump signaled his intention to take a hard line toward Pyongyang, tweeting "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!" What followed after Trump's inauguration was a remarkable four years, in which U.S. policy swung wildly from one extreme option to the next – both confrontation and engagement were maximized to a degree unseen since the dawn of the North Korean nuclear issue.

For roughly the first year of the Trump administration, the United States and North Korea engaged in what may have been the most dangerous confrontation since the Cuban missile crisis. North Korea launched dozens of ballistic missiles – including a missile some assessed likely to be capable of striking most of the U.S. homeland – as well as conducting what many estimated to be its largest nuclear test. Fears of an impending conflict escalated in August 2017 when Trump declared that more threats from North Korea "will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen." Tensions peaked in October 2017 when Trump publicly denigrated past efforts at diplomacy as failures and the White House announced that the president had met with his national security team to discuss "a range of options to respond to any form of North Korean aggression or, if necessary, to prevent North Korea from threatening the United States and its allies with nuclear weapons."

As concerns about a possible conflict with North Korea intensified, leaders in South Korea and Japan were both concerned that the United States was going to precipitate a conflict that could lead to catastrophe. Seoul was particularly worried that the United States may decide to strike North Korea without prior consultation, and the Moon Jae-in government repeatedly sought to reassure the South Korean people – and send an unambiguous message to Washington – that the United States could not attack North Korea without Seoul's permission. Yet there were few indications that North Korea took these threats seriously enough to dissuade it from pursuing a credible nuclear capability. In fact, the dichotomy of deep anxiety coming from Seoul but little indication of fear from Pyongyang drove a former senior U.S. diplomat to comment to one of the authors during this time, "Trump is scaring the shit out of the wrong Koreans."

Yet Trump's radical reversal from nuclear confrontation to "love letters" and photo-op summitry also exposed challenges in U.S. alliance relationships. For South Korea, this era of engagement was seen as a period of remarkable strategic alignment. Trump's sudden interest in charting a new path with North Korea seemed to represent an opportunity to make historic progress toward Moon's long-standing goal to achieve inter-Korean reconciliation. Meanwhile, although publicly supportive of these efforts, many Japanese leaders were deeply skeptical that engaging Pyongyang in this way would lead to significant steps toward North Korea's denuclearization. They were also concerned that Washington's focus on North Korea's ICBMs would drive Trump to accept an arms control agreement that removed the threat to the U.S. homeland but allowed Pyongyang to retain missiles that could strike Japan.

Despite all the Trump-Kim summitry and Trump's declarations that peace had been achieved, substantial progress toward denuclearization never came to pass. Instead, the dynamic seemed to

revert back to the norm: North Korea resumed missile launches in 2019, conducting 18 missile launches that year and nine in March 2020 alone – the most North Korean missile tests ever conducted in a single month. U.S. policy toward North Korea lost its ambition and energy after the summits failed to produce tangible results, and Trump preferred to declare victory and minimize inconvenient indications that the North Korean threat had not disappeared.

After four years, despite its confidence and showmanship, the Trump administration's approach to North Korea has achieved little of substance and the security of the United States, Japan, and South Korea has measurably worsened. North Korea's missiles have also grown more advanced, with some being assessed as capable of avoiding U.S. and allied missile defenses. A report from Stanford University determined that North Korea was able to produce as many as seven nuclear weapons during denuclearization talks in 2018 alone.

Trump's very public failure to secure Kim Jong Un's genuine commitment to denuclearization, or to even make significant progress on the issue, will also represent a hurdle for future administrations to overcome. Moreover, Trump's unilateral cancelling of joint U.S.-South Korean military exercises, his regular criticisms of alliances in general and South Korea in particular, as well as his decision to brush off North Korean missile testing in order to project an image of success, all reinforce worries that the United States is not concerned about the security of its allies.

The Trump administration's extreme and unpredictable positions toward North Korea, when combined with its direct criticisms and skepticism of U.S. alliances in East Asia, had three broad results: Revealing deep uncertainties and anxieties about the United States held by leaders in both Japan and South Korea; allowing North Korea to substantially improve its military capabilities; and making North Korea's peaceful denuclearization appear more unachievable than ever before.

The U.S.-China Conundrum

In addition to the problems associated with North Korea, the deteriorating military balance between the United States and China, and Beijing's increasingly assertive behavior, is an even deeper concern across the Indo-Pacific. China's leaders seek to turn the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into a "world-class" military by the end of 2049 and have invested heavily in military capabilities for decades to achieve that vision. According to the Pentagon, China is already ahead of the United States in military capacities such as shipbuilding, and fields the world's largest ground force and navy, while its air force, when combined with China's naval aviation capabilities, constitutes the largest aviation force in Asia and the third largest in the world.

The rapid modernization of China's military capabilities is deeply concerning for U.S. allies in East Asia for two reasons. First, according to the Pentagon, China's improving military capabilities are gradually eroding longstanding and significant U.S. military technical advantages in key warfighting domains, such as air power. The PLA is developing capabilities specifically tailored to dissuade, deter, or defeat a U.S. military intervention in a regional conflict along

China's periphery, which has direct implications for the ability of the United States to come to the aid of its East Asian allies.

And second, China's military modernization is also concerning for Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia because the PLA's capabilities are most robust within the so-called first island chain. As Beijing's capabilities expand and it grows increasingly comfortable wielding its forces as a tool of coercion, ships from China's navy, coast guard, and probably from its maritime militia have harassed, rammed, and at times sunk ships from countries that dispute China's maritime claims. With the PLA more capable than ever before and China's behavior suggesting that Beijing seeks to establish itself as the dominant power in the region, allied anxieties about the ability and will of the United States to come to the defense of its allies have grown measurably.

The Trump administration's open embrace of competition with China has been met with mixed reviews among U.S. allies in East Asia. While many are pleased with the Trump administration's willingness to tolerate turbulence in the U.S.-China relationship, most foreign policy leaders across the region fear that competition will drive Beijing and Washington to pressure them to "choose sides." This would present a painful strategic conundrum for most Indo-Pacific nations, as all allies and some partners see China as a critical economic partner and the United States as a necessary source of security. Outside of a crisis, any country would seek to avoid such a difficult choice.

In the security space, these dynamics have driven each U.S. ally in East Asia to broadly pursue a complex hedging strategy that involves four elements: engaging China, maintaining a robust and effective alliance with the United States, enhancing their own defensive capabilities, and strengthening intra-regional cooperation among like-minded countries. While each ally has pursued this strategy in its own way, the strategic imperative for each country has been the same: Maintain productive relationships with both the United States and China regardless of contemporary strategic headwinds, or at least avoid a catastrophic collapse of either relationship.

In the past two years, both Australia and Japan have undertaken a complete review of their approach to national security. Both announced plans to increase their military budgets and enhance their defense capabilities in areas normally dominated by the United States – a clear indication of their perceptions that their security environment is worsening, and a signal that such investments are insurance against the possibility that the United States may not fulfill its alliance obligation when called upon.

Manila has navigated this complex and challenging environment in a way that reflects the personality of its president, Rodrigo Duterte: bold, unpredictable, quick to decide, and equally quick to reverse course. For most of the past four years, the Philippines has sought to engage China and diminish its relationship with the United States in an apparent attempt to assuage Beijing's suspicions. Despite these efforts, however, Manila has not abrogated its treaty alliance with the United States nor the visiting forces agreement (VFA). Instead, Manila has remained in a gray area of strategic ambiguity between Beijing and Washington. Yet it is impossible to ignore the fact that Manila's decision not to suspend the VFA came in the wake of a spate of provocations by China in the South China Sea. As others have assessed, China's assertiveness –

and a perceived greater willingness by the United States to oppose Chinese ambitions in the South China Sea – may have weighed on Manila's decision.

South Korea has also taken a more circumspect approach to U.S.-China competition, preferring to keep its relations with Beijing focused on trade and its relations with Washington focused on anything but China. Yet Seoul's strategic "Overton Window" has shifted in recent years, likely as a result of Beijing's continued support for North Korea and its unofficial sanctioning of South Korea after Seoul's decision to approve the deployment of the THAAD missile defense system. As a result of this shift, some scholars in South Korea have grown more willing to discuss how the U.S.-South Korean alliance should relate to questions regarding U.S.-China competition. Although South Korea's close proximity to China, its dependence on the Chinese economy, and China's critical role on anything relating to North Korea will likely prevent Seoul from explicitly embracing a more confrontational approach to Beijing, strategic imperatives nevertheless seem to be driving South Korea's leaders to consider China as an increasingly pressing strategic challenge.

Taken together, after nearly four years of the Trump administration, U.S. alliances in East Asia have weathered significant headwinds, but have emerged intact. Although its reputation is damaged, foreign policy elites across the region continue to see the United States as their partner of choice, and as the only country that can credibly check Chinese assertiveness and coercion. Many in the region remain unsure if the Trump administration represents a fundamental change in how the United States views its role in the Indo-Pacific or if the next administration will return the United States to its traditional leadership position, and they have therefore adopted a "wait and see" approach to the United States.

The current situation could still be turned to a U.S. advantage. With allies investing more in their own defense and increasingly concerned about China's rise, a U.S. administration that understands the strategic value of its allies in East Asia may have an opportunity to harness the capabilities and resources of its allies, and empower them to contribute toward shared strategic objectives and address mutual concerns. Yet it will take a commitment to rebuild the fundamental sources of U.S. power, and that goes far beyond considerations of military balances. Economics will also be a key arena for competition between China and the United States, and will be of utmost concern for U.S. allies in East Asia.

Competing Visions of East Asia's Economic Future

In contrast to security relations based on formal bilateral military alliances between the United States and its partners, there has never been a common approach for regional growth. U.S.-driven values of open markets, free trade, and adherence to the rule of law have been promoted by Washington since the end of World War II. But neither a formalized multilateral network nor a series of bilateral partnerships, like the hub-and-spoke security network that has put the United States at the center of Asia, has ever existed on the economic front.

Yet with the end of the Cold War, the rise of China, and a seismic shift in the regional economic order, existing rules for growth are increasingly coming under scrutiny. The Trump presidency has brought doubts about how U.S. economic interests could be best served in Asia in the

coming years. At the same time, expectations for the United States as an economic power have come into question, too, and over the past four years, Asia is beginning to develop a framework for growth with U.S. participation as optional, rather than critical.

The competing visions for new rules of economic engagement envisaged by the United States and by Asian powers have become particularly stark when it comes to trade. By the time Trump was elected president in 2016, China was comfortably established as the world's second-largest economy, easily overtaking Japan, and confident in its growing influence as a powerhouse of international growth. Meanwhile, even as the U.S. security umbrella was key for regional stability, China surpassed the United States as the single biggest trading partner for most Asian countries, forcing them to grapple with the challenges of ensuring healthy economic relations with Beijing on the one hand while staving off Chinese military threats and encroachments on the other.

For the United States, its strategic economic interests in Asia should have been apparent by 2016, not least because of the region's tremendous potential for growth. Asia's upward trajectory contrasted sharply with Europe's turmoil, in particular.

So, even as Trump the presidential candidate was singularly focused on addressing the U.S. trade deficit in goods not only with China, but also with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, expectations were that his words would simply be that: words on the campaign trail, not actual policy. In hindsight, however, it should have been clear that the Trump administration was laser-focused on reversing the trade deficit of goods. After all, Democrats had also rallied against the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, and widespread disgruntlement about the downside risks of globalization and the need to accommodate the losers as much as the winners of free trade had become apparent. Nevertheless, the consensus across East Asia immediately after the presidential election in 2016 had been that Washington would remain committed to the regional economic order that it had been so instrumental in building and actually benefited the most from.

Over the past four years, however, not only has Washington doubled down on its opposition to existing global trade rules, but it has also intensified its hostile stance toward China. Moreover, there is growing expectation that both economic rivalry with China and a focus on domestic competitiveness will persist, regardless of who wins the presidential elections in November. At the same time, the gradual U.S. retreat from Asia has not only lowered expectations for regional economic leadership from Washington, but it has also led to the development of alternative leadership models that both include and exclude the United States.

U.S. withdrawal from the TPP soon after Trump took office was undoubtedly a defining moment in shaping relations with U.S. allies in Asia, both from an economic as well as a diplomatic perspective. Coupled with the White House's decision to impose tariff barriers in the name of national security even on long-established allies, Washington's determination to accelerate protectionism became all too clear. That, in turn, led even the staunchest of U.S. allies and partners to begin to imagine and act upon a regional economic order in which Washington did not play a central, and certainly not a unifying, role. The fact that TPP negotiations did not collapse following Washington's withdrawal, but rather concluded successfully with the remaining 11 member countries was certainly a concrete example of regional powers prepared to

uphold the tenets that have been critical to post-World War II growth. At the same time, the successful conclusion of the CPTPP gave confidence to Asian countries that free trade principles could flourish without the United States and even attract new members within the region and beyond.

In contrast to Trump's trade policies, which have been seen in much of Asia as erratic and short-sighted at best, the administration's tough stance against China has been largely welcomed by its allies. What's more, a hawkish approach is expected to persist regardless of a Republican or Democratic win in the November elections, which would allow countries like Japan, Australia, and South Korea to cooperate more closely on issues of mutual economic interest vis-a-vis China, most notably violation of intellectual property rights, forced technology transfer, and unfair trade practices with regard to state-owned enterprises. Still, for the middle powers of the region, there can be no black-and-white choice between siding with Washington or with Beijing when it comes to economic ties.

For example, Abe Shinzo's approach to trade relations with Trump was appeasement. The long-time Japanese prime minister, who officially stepped down in September, signed a bilateral free trade agreement with the United States in 2019 that effectively gave Washington all the concessions it would have received to enter the Japanese market had it remained in the TPP framework. But at the same time, Japan has also sought to further economic relations with China.

Meanwhile, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement, which would bring together the 10 ASEAN member countries as well as China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, is expected to conclude in November. That development would have less significance had the United States actually been a TPP signatory, as planned. But now, China will undoubtedly dominate RCEP at a time when the United States has concentrated on concluding bilateral trade deals focused narrowly on reducing its own trade deficit of goods, rather than establishing new rules of economic engagement.

The need to keep India close was made clear during the RCEP negotiations. Even if political considerations made it impossible for New Delhi to sign on to RCEP, keeping India close and part of the coalition to push back against Chinese domination has taken on greater urgency at a time when U.S. regional leadership is on shaky grounds. As such, the concept of a trilateral Supply Chain Resilience Initiative was floated in August, which would bring Japan and Australia together with India to diversify their supply chains away from China. Of course, India, Japan, and Australia are hardly alone in realizing the downside risks of over-relying on Chinese-based supply chains, risks made especially acute amid the outbreak of a pandemic. The Trump administration had also called for a return of manufacturing capabilities from overseas well before the coronavirus struck worldwide, albeit motivated by political as much as economic considerations.

The drive to reshore production back to home countries has gathered steam since the outbreak of COVID-19 and has certainly been a rallying cry across Asia. Indeed, having pushed for years to encourage Japanese companies to retreat from China and return back home or invest in Southeast Asia, Tokyo has been able to leverage the momentum created by the coronavirus to begin the move to divest from China in earnest. The move to relocate manufacturing bases away from

China and into Southeast Asia, in particular, is expected to continue, invariably leading to a change not only in the global supply chain network, but also the potential creation of new regional trading blocs.

Nevertheless, the U.S.-led Economic Prosperity Network, which had been touted in May by the U.S. State Department as a means to bring like-minded countries in Asia together to reduce dependence on China, has remained a mere concept rather than an actionable initiative motivating economic allies in the region. Although staunch U.S. allies, including Japan, would embrace Washington's return to the TPP and continue to push for Washington to recommit to multilateralism, the appetite to join a new U.S.-led initiative that clearly puts U.S. interests above all else is tepid at best.

Given that the outbreak of the coronavirus has led the Trump administration to double down on its America First economic policy, including the introduction of export restrictions on much-needed medical supplies, Asian countries are increasingly looking to find their own solutions within the region, with or without the United States. With Washington reducing its commitment to the World Health Organization at the height of the global pandemic, a new sense of realism regarding U.S. policy has emerged across Asia. Expectations for collaborative global development led by the United States, be it for medical research or for post-pandemic international recovery, have diminished. At the same time, no Asian country (including China) has emerged as a credible leader in the United States' stead.

Yet the fact that the global economy has remained resilient to the pandemic demonstrates the power of central bank coordination and cooperation among industrialized countries, including the U.S. Federal Reserve. This is also evident in the ability of financial markets worldwide to recover swiftly from the sharp sell-off of assets in the first half of 2020, and continued confidence in the global banking system. Despite the Trump administration's tumultuous trade policies putting long-standing U.S. allies at a disadvantage, confidence in U.S. economic policy and the Fed, in particular, have remained steady and have proven to be the anchor in keeping strong economic relations between Washington and its allies in Asia.

Looking Ahead

The United States is still best poised to lead in the Indo-Pacific. Its power remains unrivaled (for now), and its problems pale in comparison to the domestic challenges China will face in the coming years. Most foreign policy leaders (with some notable exceptions) in Canberra, Manila, Seoul, and Tokyo continue to see their alliances with the United States as their best option, and highly preferable to either Chinese leadership or a region defined by bellum omnium contra omnes, the war of all against all.

Yet this view of the United States, and U.S. leadership in the Indo-Pacific, is not self-sustaining.

A future U.S. administration will in all likelihood seek to repair U.S. alliances in East Asia, modernize them to better address challenges and opportunities, and expect its allies to make the

investments necessary to contribute more to their own defense and the achievement of shared objectives. But to accomplish these goals, the United States will need to adjust its vision of the Indo-Pacific's future to one that is positive, credible, and compatible with the interests and values of its allies and partners themselves. That will include a conception of competition with China that is not primarily aimed at limiting Chinese influence, but rather founded upon U.S. leadership, strength, and a positive, compelling vision of a regional order that garners the enthusiastic support of U.S. allies and partners.

Justified frustrations over China's unfair trade practices from forced technology transfer, intellectual property theft, and Beijing's protection of state-owned enterprises show no signs of abating, and concerns about the security implications of Chinese investments and access to critical infrastructure are only likely to grow. Washington therefore can play a key role not only in highlighting the security and geopolitical risks involved in China's economic and infrastructure initiatives, but also in uniting like-minded countries to push back against China's playbook and find an alternative path. But any such effort, especially in the areas of infrastructure investment and technology competition, will ring hollow if the United States offers no compelling, affordable, alternative roadmap for development or innovation.

Some have posited that, absent American geopolitical leadership, the Indo-Pacific will necessarily evolve into a Sino-centric sphere of influence. While that almost certainly represents Beijing's preferred vision for the region's future, it is not a likely scenario. If the United States proves unable to sustain its leadership in the Indo-Pacific, what is more likely to occur is the devolution of the regional order more generally into one that is more atomized, less prosperous, less stable, and more prone to proliferation and intra-regional rivalry and conflict.

Alliances in East Asia are a tremendous geopolitical advantage for the United States and crucial for preventing atomization within the region. Over the decades, U.S. allies have proven to be reliable partners in pursuing shared objectives and critical avenues for America's continued access and influence in the Indo-Pacific. While these relationships have faced trying times during the nearly four years since Trump was inaugurated, they remain vital elements of U.S.strategy and a critical aspect to the strategic fabric of the Indo-Pacific.

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The views expressed are of the authors alone, and do not represent the views of the Wilson Center or the U.S. government. The authors would like to thank Lucas Myers for his excellent research assistance and editorial suggestions.