U.S.–Japan Dynamics Post Obama

Stephanie A. Weston*

Summary

With the Trump Administration in its second year, upcoming midterm elections this November in the U.S., the LDP general election for party chair this September as well as the present political troubles for the respective U.S. and Japan administrations, it is a good time to analyze U.S.-Japan relation dynamics post the administration of President Obama. Not only the U.S. and Japan’s respective leadership but also domestic and foreign policy issues are impacting on U.S.-Japan relations in various ways. Are these dynamics a positive development bilaterally, regionally and globally? What are some hurdles to overcome for this relationship post the Obama administration? Specifically, this paper examines these points from three angles-international leadership, the alliance and future perspectives.

*Professor, Faculty of Law
Introduction

Over the Obama presidency, U.S.-Japan relations were not only challenged by their respective leadership but also base issues and regional problems such as the continuing rise of China, North Korea’s aggressions and Japan’s historical disputes with its neighbors as well as economic and other major troubles including the Lehman Brothers Shock and the triple disaster of 3.11 in Japan. The two powers, in spite of these hurdles, focused on maintenance of a global international rules based liberal order through such policies as support of TPP, the U.S. “rebalance” to the Asia Pacific region, the strengthening of the U.S.-Japan alliance, the reshaping of Japan’s defense capacities and participation in mini-laterals to multilaterals.

Towards the end of the Obama presidency, some strong images reinforced the importance of the U.S.-Japan relationship - Prime Minister Abe’s speech before both houses of U.S. Congress on April 9, 2015, the visit of the first sitting U.S. President -Barack Obama-to Hiroshima on May 27, 2016 and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s visit to Pearl Harbor on December 27, 2016. Although these images do not resolve the ongoing bilateral trade deficit, the power shift in the region, various transnational issues nor problems related to U.S. bases in Japan, they ‘conveyed the strength of U.S.-Japan historical ties, U.S. and Japan’s commitment to the alliance’ and hopes for the future.

Before President Obama left office, his successor – Donald J. Trump, as

---

a presidential candidate, was critical of Japan. He maintained that Japan had to pay more for its defense and ‘was taking away American jobs.’ He even threatened if they did not, that the U.S. could pull out its troops from Japan. Other criticisms included ‘Japan only exports goods to the U.S.’ or ‘Japan manipulates currency.’ Even after becoming U.S. President and during his visit to Asia last year, “he told U.S. and Japanese business leaders that trade between the U.S. and Japan is neither fair or open.” Presently, trade issues including the low sales of U.S. cars in Japan, recent tariffs on steel and aluminium and a split in opinion between both countries over a possible FTA vs. U.S. participation in TPP 11 promise to be sticking points for upcoming trade negotiations between the U.S. and Japan.

Beyond these kind of statements, the U.S. has reaffirmed its commitment to the U.S.-Japan alliance repeatedly at official meetings between President Trump and Prime Abe as well as among other top level representatives of the respective administrations. Both nations are also working together on various trade issues through dialogues headed by the U.S. Vice President and Japan’s Vice Prime Minister and another by the USTR and Japan’s Foreign Minister. At the same time, the Japanese public ‘is uneasy about Trump’s Japan policy approach. Namely, Trump’s ‘unpredictable decision making, lack of clearly defined policy goals, principles and values cause deep concern.’

---


3 Ditto.

Not only the U.S. and Japan’s respective leadership but also ongoing domestic and foreign policy issues impact on U.S.-Japan relations post the administration of President Obama in various ways. Do these dynamics represent a positive development for the bilateral relationship, the region and the global order? What kinds of hurdles does this relationship need to overcome? Specifically, this paper examines these points from three angles—international leadership, the alliance and future challenges.

**International Leadership**

The U.S. and Japan respective international leadership continues to challenge the dynamics of this bilateral relationship. From President Obama to President Trump, both U.S. and Japan’s international leadership, perceptions of the U.S. and Japan’s roles in the global community and demands on the partnership continue to shift.

Looking back to the Obama presidency (2009-2017), the administration inherited the Lehman brothers’ shock as well as two wars in the Middle East. These were only some of the larger domestic or foreign policy challenges to come under his watch. Although President Obama’s administration was criticized for not taking enough action or being ineffective concerning tensions involving, for example, Syria, North Korea, the Middle East and Russia, his administration did keep the U.S. engaged multilaterally with established part-

---


ners as well as with former enemies; avoided U.S. involvement in unnecessary conflicts and worked towards the maximization of U.S. smart power.

The Obama administration’s smart power, which included a strong push for enhanced multilateral cooperation, for example, was demonstrated by such foreign policies as the “rebalance” to the Asia Pacific region, TPP, the U. S.-ASEAN-Connect Initiative, the Paris Agreement; the Iran Nuclear Deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) as well as his Nuclear Summit initiative.

The maximizing of this smart power also included the strengthening of existing alliances. In line with this foreign policy emphasis, the U.S.-Japan alliance became stronger in spite of revolving Japanese prime ministers during the first term of the Obama presidency; how both nations interacted with China at different times; lingering issues around U.S. bases in Japan including the transfer of Futenma Air Base to Northern Okinawa and Japan’s historical issues with its neighbors. For example, the U.S. confirmed for the first time officially that the Senkakus, a principal Japanese concern, fell under alliance protection. The U.S. welcomed as well Japan’s proactive pacifism policy including its possible exercise of collective self-defense in certain scenarios. The importance of the alliance itself was also reconfirmed through Operation Tomodachi – a joint collaboration between Japan’s SDF and U.S. military – to help with rescue and recovery after Japan’s 3.11 triple disaster. And Japan supported President Obama’s “rebalance” to the Asia Pacific region. Moreover, at the end of Obama’s presidency, the relationship witnessed a historic exchange of visits - President Obama to Hiroshima and Prime Minister Abe to Pearl Harbor. This kind of defense cooperation as well as historic visits are
a positive legacy for this very important bilateral relationship.

Some of President Obama’s critics felt, that thanks to his leadership, the U.S. was internationally leading from behind. However, at the end of the Obama presidency, according to a Pew Center Survey, ‘the majorities in 13 out of 15 countries surveyed had positive views of the United States. And the Poles (74%), Italians (72%), Japanese (72%) and Swedes (69%) gave the highest ratings.” Finally, the same survey showed that while “77% of the Japanese had confidence in Obama to do the right thing regarding world affairs. 85% polled had no confidence in Donald Trump to do so.”

President Obama, a former Illinois state senator as well as U.S senator, was succeeded by Donald J. Trump, who became the 45th U.S. president on January 20, 2017. Unexpectedly, Donald J. Trump, a businessman and celebrity with no political experience, beat out sixteen other Republican opponents to win his party’s nomination in 2016. He then defeated Hillary Clinton to win the nation’s electoral vote and the presidency. His presidency is supported by many who felt left out by Obama’s economic reforms, ‘others who fear social changes in the U.S. including the election of a woman as U.S. President’, others who protest the forces of globalization, still others who fear terrorism and increased refugees and or illegal immigration as well as others who espouse racial nationalism.

---

http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/06/28/americas-international-image/

7 Ditto, 1.
Whereas President Obama was seen as a pragmatic internationalist, Trump, a populist, is increasingly seen as as a disruptor of the established order, a user of blunt talk over political correctness, a deal maker and a unilateralist. And after more than one year in office since Donald J. Trump became president, a 2018 NHK poll found that only 18% of Japanese respondents had a favorable opinion of President Trump compared to 33% of respondents in the U.S.\(^8\) Also a majority of respondents had a “negative opinion on “America first””\(^9\)–one of Trump’s key policies. Previously, another poll in 2017, conducted by the Pew Research Center, found that although ‘51% of Japanese polled said Trump is a strong leader, they also felt he is arrogant (80%), intolerant (62%) and even dangerous (56%).\(^{10}\)

As the Trump administration has entered its second year, President Trump’s international leadership continues to be a progress in the works.\(^{11}\) This situation is not helped by the F.B.I.’s ongoing investigation about the President’s, his administration officials and or his associates’ possible collusion with Russia over the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. Moreover, many of his high level staff have been fired including prominent senior advisors, the pre-

https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/english/reports/summary/201805/05.html

\(^{9}\) Ditto.


vious heads of the F.B.I., the State Department, the National Security Council as well as the first Chief of Staff and Director of Communications due to differences with the Commander in Chief or possible connections to the aforementioned investigation. Some of his senior advisors including his own son-in-law have not been able to receive the appropriate level of security clearance to carry out the jobs assigned them.

A dysfunctional White House along with Trump’s political troubles and surprising policy shifts continue to cast a shadow over his presidency, impacting negatively on U.S. international leadership. Furthermore, President Trump’s lack of historical knowledge about issues, his unilateralism regarding previous agreements, lack of strategic vision, hyperboly and erroneous statements have also weakened U.S.’ international leadership.

As the Trump administration continues to battle with the U.S. Justice Department, mass media and the mechanisms of U.S. democracy to protect his presidency, the question of retreating U.S. international leadership has become more pronounced. This worrisome trend reinforces the idea that the U.S. is in relative decline albeit its possession of the largest economic and military powers. Moreover, U.S. participation in many key foreign policy initiatives, endorsed by the Obama administration has been upended such as TPP, the Paris Agreement, the Iran Nuclear Deal or downsized such as U.S. reapproachment with Cuba, adding to this image of U.S. decline. At the same time, Trump has alienated some allies and or trading partners including Japan, Great Britain, Germany, Canada and Mexico through his foreign policies including the leveraging of tariffs and obstructive moves at WTO. In fact,
allies, friends and competitors, given U.S.’ withdrawal from key multilateral agreements, are moving on without the U.S., becoming increasingly antagonistic towards the U.S. or ‘feeling unease about the U.S. role in the Asia Pacific.’ These dynamics not only affect U.S.-Japan dynamics but also regional and global security. Overall these trends are not positive for U.S.’ national interests.

The optics of strong U.S. international leadership is also being eroded by the Trump Administration’s weak emphasis on diplomacy as important tool to formulate strategic foreign policy. Diplomacy in the Trump White House is not dead. However, many top positions in the State Department remain unfilled. And President Trump threatened to cut State’s and USAID budgets for FY 18 and 19 in such areas as “democracy promotion, peacekeeping, the fight against disease and climate change.” In addition, Trump’s first Secretary of State-Rex Tillerson, a former Exxon Mobile Corporation CEO, was effectively sidelined by the administration. The relationship between the two principals became increasingly antagonistic as Trump did not defer to Secretary of State Tillerson’s policy advice. This year Tillerson was replaced by Mike Pompeo, the former head of the C.I.A. and a four term U.S. Congressman. Will Pompeo, who presently has the ear of the president, be able to utilize more fully the powers of the State Department than his predecessor did


to help formulate strong U.S. foreign policy strategies for bilateral, regional and global security as well as prosperity?

What are some of the key guiding principles of the Trump administration which impact on U.S. international leadership including the U.S.’ partnership with Japan? Without a doubt, America First is an important underlying philosophy. In Trump’s speech before the U.N. last year, Trump clearly defined this concept.

“As President of the U.S., I will always put America first, just like you, as the leaders of your countries will always, should always put your countries first..... The U.S. will forever be a great friend to the world and especially its allies. But we can no longer be taken advantage of or enter into a one sided deal where the U.S. gets nothing in return. As long as I hold this office, it will defend America’s interest above all else.”

In line with the America First concept, Trump is strongly advancing economic nationalism including trade protection. This emphasis has brought on conflicts with China, Japan as well as EU allies. Most recently at the G 7 summit held in Canada this June, the clash between the U.S. and G 7 partners was strongly evident over Trump’s recent tariffs on steel and aluminium.

**Peace through Strength** is another important theme of Trump’s international leadership. This strength, interpreted not only militarily but also eco-

---

nomically, is also a means to achieve America First. President Trump has specifically stated “As we rebuild America’s strength and confidence at home, we are also restoring our strength and our standing abroad.”\(^\text{15}\) In addition, the Trump administration’s 2018 National Defense Strategy also speaks to building peace through strength, for example, by dealing with “challenges to the U. S. military advantage,” promoting “rapid technological advancement,” “strengthening alliance and attracting new partners.”\(^\text{16}\) Accordingly, the Trump administration, for example, has increased the U.S. defense budget; ‘reversed the Obama administration’s position to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons and is considering the development of the low yield nuclear weapons on submarine-launched ballistic missiles;’\(^\text{17}\) “dropped the biggest non nuclear bomb in the U.S. arsenal on Afghanistan,”\(^\text{18}\) carried out two strikes on Syria, increased rhetoric and sanctions against North Korea and initiated various high tariffs against many trading partners.


(11)
Make America Great Again, Trump’s campaign slogan, is another important concept for this administration. It means “America First, better trade deals, strict immigration laws, secure border, a bigger and better military, less gun control and religious freedom. To the supporters of Mr. Trump, Mr. Obama stole these things from them and in doing so, destroyed America’s prestige. This policy, which also embraces both the concepts of America First and peace through strength, is about a strong America including economic and ethnic nationalism.

Underlying all of these principles is Trump’s appeal to his base who the administration hopes will reelect him in 2020 to a second term. Since he assumed office, President Trump continues to fulfill his campaign promises to his base which includes withdrawal from many Obama administration policies previously mentioned. However, the President’s rush to fulfill campaign promises and appeal to his base without sufficient planning for new policies, especially in the foreign policy arena, are dynamics which endanger alternatively U.S. international leadership and bring dramatic consequences for the international liberal rules based order. And as the pressure heats up on the Trump administration with not only the ongoing U.S. Justice Department’s investigation but also the approaching U.S. Congressional mid term elections, will Trump’s disruption of the international liberal rules based order intensify? Is this disruption also an effective way to direct public attention away from the troubles surrounding the administration?

One measure of these strategies’ success evidently will be the results of the upcoming U.S. Congressional midterm elections. President Trump’s own party politicians, including Vice President Pence, are concerned about these elections and whether the Republicans can maintain their majority in both houses of U.S. Congress. Related to these concerns, as the President continues to appeal mainly to his base, is a divided America over, such areas as health, social justice, immigration and guns. Moreover, the president’s present handling of various domestic and international issues may further erode the support of his base and party. Already, some Republican Congressmen, including the Speaker of the House, have already decided not to run for re-election this fall.

If around election time, Trump is still battling with the F.B.I. and backlash to his administration’s policies, this situation may lead to the Democrats’ takeover of the ruling party’s congressional majorities. This kind of electoral outcome would box in the administration. In addition, it would not only further impede its policymaking but also diminish even more the President’s international leadership. Concurrently, Trump’s generated international chaos through disruptive actions or surprise foreign policy announcements could increasingly isolate the U.S. and offer additional incentives for strategic competitors and allies to work closer together without America.

During the Obama administration, the Japanese Prime Minister he had the most dealings with was Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Even before Barack Obama became president, Prime Minister Abe had started his first term which ended on September 26, 2007. Then PM Abe’s second term as prime
minister began in September of 2012, the same year Obama was elected to a second term. And now PM Abe’s premiership has continued through the election of Donald J. Trump to the White House. Although there was not a strong Barack–Shinzo relationship, the U.S. and Japan jointly were able to achieve important initiatives during both administrations.

Under the Abe administration, Japan’s international leadership has grown stronger with Japan’s increased contributions to the global community including more active participation of the Self Defense Forces. Japan under PM Abe also continues to move further along the path towards becoming a so called normal nation. Since his second term as prime minister started, PM Abe has visited 111 countries and regions, held 600 summits, expanded Japan’s cooperative defense agreements, increased capacity building support in Southeast Asia and adopted the Proactive Contribution to Peace policy.

The Abe administration has also strengthened his nation’s autonomous international leadership outside of U.S.-Japan relations both during the Obama and Trump administrations. Specifically, these include Japan’s ongoing involvement in RCEP; active participation in the China, Japan and South Korea Trilateral Summits, possible engagement in China’s OBOR and AIIB; the signing of TPP 11 and the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement

---


(JEEPA) as well as the expansion of defense cooperation agreements such as Japan’s Defense Cooperation Initiative with ASEAN and Japan’s defense cooperation agreement with Australia. Moreover, Prime Abe’s promotion of a Free and Open Indo Pacific Policy (FOIP) has become a key Japanese strategy to secure protection of and access to the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Japan’s FOIP is also a hedge against the rise of China in the region and ‘Trump’s unpredictability.’

During the era of President Obama and Prime Minister Abe, the U.S. and Japan revised The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation (2015); signed a revised Japan U.S. Acquisition-Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) (2017) and worked as well on different triangular relationships – South Korea, Japan and U.S.; U.S., Australia and Japan and U.S., Japan and India. Both governments also signed the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) (2016), which they considered important for their respective economies as well as for regional and global prosperity.

After the election of Donald J. Trump to the U.S. presidency, it became important that Japan’s leadership interact well with the new president and maintain a close relationship as a longstanding ally. Notably, Prime Minister Abe, even before Donald J. Trump entered the White House, visited Mr. Trump at Trump Towers to make an initial courtesy call. The personal contact made it subsequently easier to meet or engage in conference calls about various issues with the new president. Since then, President Trump and PM Abe issued a joint statement in February of 2017, during PM Abe’s first summit meeting in the U.S. with the new President, which attests to the strength
of the alliance and the economic relationship. Overall, the top leader meetings and exchanges between President Trump and Prime Minister Abe have been frequent including President Trump’s first official visit to Japan in November of 2017 and subsequent visits by the Prime Minister to meet the President in the U.S. this past April and June especially over trade and North Korea. Besides these exchanges, many other top officials on both sides have been engaged in bilaterals held either in the U.S. or Japan including Japan’s Foreign and Defense Ministers as well as the U.S. Secretary of State and Japan’s Foreign Minister. And new frameworks such as the U.S.-Japan Economic Dialogue, headed by Vice President Mike Pence and Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso have been established.

After President Trump’s inauguration, although there are official declarations about bilateral commitment to the alliance; Prime Minister Abe’s visits to Mar-a-Lago and Washington D.C.; the leaders’ golfing rounds and talk of U.S. also backing Japan’s Free and Open Indo Pacific Strategy, Japan, as do other allies, worry about Trump’s foreign policy positions. There is fear, for example, about ‘the U.S. backing away from the international liberal rules based order.’ The Trump administration’s emphasis on America First, withdrawal from TPP and other key multilaterals as well as its recent leveraging of tariffs on trading partners including allies has only helped to strengthen this concern.

---


22 Interview with a researcher at The Japan Institute of International Affairs on March 29, 2018, Tokyo, Japan.
The Trump administration’s linking of ‘national security to economic issues’\(^{21}\) also worries U.S. trading partners including Japan. In line with this linkage, the U.S. is presently carrying out an investigation under Section 232 of the U.S. Trade Expansion Act of 1962 auto imports to determine whether they “threaten to impair the National Security of the U.S.”\(^{25}\) This kind of U.S. trade protectionism represents an important challenge for U.S.-Japan relations. Although the U.S. economy is improving with an unemployment rate now of 3.8%\(^{26}\) and has a ‘GDP growth rate which is expected to remain between the 2-3% range,”\(^{27}\) Trump’s widespread leveraging of tariffs is inviting backlash and counter tariffs with fallout for the U.S. economy. And at the same time, U.S. protectionism impacts negatively on Prime Minister Abe’s Abenomics. Abenomics includes a strong push for globalization and the maintenance of the international liberal rules based order for not only Japan’s economic recovery but also for regional and global stability as well as prosperity.


Besides these concerns, Japan worries about being drawn into some conflict by U.S. actions. In addition, Japan fears “abandonment” by the U.S. either by omission of Japanese interests in key negotiations in the region or by the ‘U.S. moving too close to China.’ A recent example of this was when the U.S. did not inform South Korea nor Japan of its initial intention to meet with Kim Jong-un this year. Alternatively, there is also concern that the U.S. may give away too much to North Korea to avoid a military clash.

Finally, Prime Minister Abe is trying to overcome his own administration’s scandals or controversies including favorable central and or local government support of two different educational institutions operated by friends or acquaintances of the Prime Minister. In one case, the Prime Minister’s wife was also temporarily the head of an associated kindergarten. And some documents related to these transactions were allegedly deleted. Other controversies involve the cover up or missing records about GSF activities in Iraq and South Sudan. If Prime Minister Abe successfully overcomes these scandals and keeps the economy on track, he hopes to be reelected to a third term as prime minister. His reelection would help to foster the current direction of a strong U.S.-Japan alliance, economic recovery and stronger Japan leadership regionally and globally.

---


(18)
Undoubtedly, U.S. and Japan international leadership directions respectively impact on their bilateral relationship dynamics. And these directions also bring important questions for the future. If the U.S. leadership is retreating, does this mean that Japan will increase even more positively its regional and global roles? One indication of this is the Prime Minister’s FOIP Strategy and Japan’s enhanced involvement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue involving the U.S., Japan, Australia and India. Under President Trump and Prime Minister Abe’s watch, will we see an even more equal partnership between the U.S. and Japan? In any event, as both leaders are trying to keep their political balance domestically, U.S.-Japan relations must continue to address issues which impact on their roles bilaterally, regionally and globally.

**Make the Alliance Even Greater**

When Prime Minister Abe visited Trump in February of 2017 at Mar-a-Lago, he gifted President Trump among other things the golf cap which is written “Donald-Shinzo Make the Alliance Even Greater”. The catch phrase is reflective of where the alliance is at now and emphasis on both nations’ leadership to make that occur. Importantly, “many Americans and Japanese still regard each other’s countries as a reliable ally.”\(^{31}\) Moreover, in the 2017 Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee (2+2) Ministerial Meeting reaffirmed that the U.S.-Japan alliance is

“the cornerstone of the Asia Pacific region’s peace.” The statement also confirmed the allies’ “share intent to develop specific measures an actions to further strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance, including reviewing roles, missions and capabilities to ensure seamless Alliance responses across a full spectrum of situations amid an increasingly challenging regional security environment. To that end, Japan intends to expand its role in the Alliance and augment its defense capabilities with an eye on the next planning period for its Mid Term Defense capabilities. The U.S. remains committed to deploying its most advanced capabilities to Japan.\textsuperscript{32}

During Prime Minister Abe’s visit to Washington D.C. in April of 2018, the leaders reconfirmed their mutual stance concerning the denuclearization of North Korea, commitment to the alliance and “free and fair trade in the Indo Pacific region.” They also decided to “launch new talks for free, fair and reciprocal trade deals.”\textsuperscript{33}

Beyond these statements, Japan’s increased defense budget including allocation for the purchase of additional U.S. military equipment; joint training exercises; the alliance’s continued push and work towards the transfer of Futenma base and reduction of land used by U.S. bases; reaffirmation by the U.S. of its protection of the Senkakus under Article 5 of The U.S.-Japan Secu-


rity Treaty and U.S. involvement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue34, for example, reinforce the message of making the alliance even greater. Moreover, Japan’s 2018 Midterm Defense Plan, which should be finalized before the end of the year has the potential to further strengthen the alliance through ‘improvements to missile defense (Aegis) and standoff deterrence (cruise missiles) as well as in interoperational technology, better intelligence and surveillance capabilities.’35

Arguably even before President Trump’s administration, there was a steady upgrade of U.S.-Japan alliance capabilities under President Obama and the PM Abe’s administrations. Notably, for example, there was the coordination of U.S. military forces and Japan’s SDF in the aftermath of 3.11. Moreover, the passage of the Legislation for Peace and Security (2015) and the Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets (SDS) (2013); establishment of the Alliance Coordination Mechanism (2015)36 and the Bilateral Planning


36 “In November of 2015, the Japanese and U.S. Governments established the ACM in order to address seamlessly and effectively any situation that affects Japan’s peace and security or any other situation that may require an Alliance response.” Ministry of Defense, Defense of Japan 2017 (Tokyo: MOD, 2017), 270-271.
Mechanism (2015)\textsuperscript{37} as well as the reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese constitution to allow limited collective defense also enhanced U.S.-Japan defense cooperation.

Although there is mutual commitment to make the alliance even greater, it does not mean that everything will proceed smoothly. Both the U.S. and Japan’s economies are improving but the challenges remain of further job creation, closing income inequality, reduction of national debt and increased investment in infrastructure. At the same time, there is no national consensus over Japan’s forward movement on increased SDF capacities and roles in the alliance. And although both the Trump and Abe administrations have increased defense spending\textsuperscript{38} in line with the Trump administration’s peace through strength concept and Japan’s steps to become a normal nation, balancing respective domestic demands and or resistance towards making the alliance even greater will be an ongoing challenge for Prime Minister and President Trump.

Although Japan is the U.S. ally which foots the largest bill for American bases, the U.S.-Japan alliance is still asymmetrical due to legal and historical

\textsuperscript{37} “Based on the Guidelines, the Japanese and the US. Government established the BPM in November 2015 for the purpose of implementing the development of bilateral plans in peacetime in line with the Guidelines in order to enable effective bilateral response to contingencies relevant to Japan’s peace and Security. Ministry of Defense, Defense of Japan 2017 (Tokyo: MOD, 2017), 271.

restraints. The Abe administration’s efforts to make the alliance even greater are also linked to his push for constitutional reform to include recognition of the SDF in Article 9 by 2020. At some point, PM Abe also hopes that SDF will be recognized as a regular military. However, there is a lack of consensus in Japan or even in the SDF about such changes. In spite of these trends, it remains to be seen if Abe, if reelected for a third term, can push forward on this kind of constitutional amendment to Article 9 given increasing threats in the region. At the same time, even without national consensus, Abe’s cabinet was behind the reinterpretation of the interpretation of Article 9 in 2014 which led to the Legislation for Peace and Security and the revised U.S.-Japan Guidelines for Defense Cooperation in 2015.

One of the biggest issues in the region and for the alliance remains the stability of the Korean peninsula. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un’s missile and nuclear weapon testing and development are ongoing threats. Japan hopes that President Trump will be able to negotiate with the North Korean leader about not only long range but short range missiles which can hit Japan. During the recent Trump-Kim Jong-un Summit, Trump did, as requested by Japan, speak about the abduction of Japanese issue to the North Korean leader. However, the previous concern was not mentioned in the joint statement between the two leaders issued on June 12, 2018 in Singapore.

Positive developments this year concerning North Korea have occurred due partially through U.S. and U.N. stricter sanctions; aggressive U.S. rhetoric about its military capacity; South Korea’s role as mediator as well as North Korea reaching certain levels of missile and nuclear capacity to deal with the
U.S. from a position of strength. In any event, South Korean and North Korean leaders this year have met and showed signs of reconciliation and cooperation. However, soon afterwards North Korea cancelled a follow up meeting with South Korea President Moon Jae-in response to military exercises held by South Korea and the U.S. The cancellation also followed the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal. Also the fact that Vice President Mike Pence and National Security Advisor John Bolton held up the Libyan model for denuclearization as a North Korean solution invited backlash from North Korea. However, after reversals on both sides about the first ever meeting between a sitting U.S. President and a North Korean leader, President Donald J. Trump and North Korean Leader Kim Jong-un held a historic summit in Singapore on June 12, 2018.

In the future, what role will the alliance play in furthering peace on the Korean peninsula? And what about the other key actors in the area close to North Korea? In the past, China hosted the six party talks. South Korea has also acted as a mediator between North Korea and the U.S. At what point will Japan and China and possibly Russia become more involved in this process with North Korea? We have already seen an important leaders summit take place between North Korean Leader Kim Jong-un and PRC President Xi Jinping in March of this year prior to the former’s historic meeting with South Korean President Moon Jae-in in April of 2018. And a second meeting between Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping took place in May prior to the Kim Jong-un-Trump Summit. And in June, a third meeting occurred post the Trump-Jong-un summit in Singapore. Importantly, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov visited North Korea this May, the first time since 2009. And Kim Jong
-un has also been invited by the foreign minister to visit Russia as well.

In any event, the Trump-Kim Jong-un initial meeting could be the window to re-engage North Korea in multilateral talks. The U.S., along with key actors in the region, needs to keep the momentum going towards CVID (complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement) of the North Korea nuclear weapons program; cessation of the launches and development of short and long range missiles as well as a peace treaty on the peninsula. However, if U.S. leadership concerning North Korea falls short in the future, China and Russia will continue to press that situation to their advantage. And in turn this will become a growing concern for the alliance and other actors in the region.

Another important problem for the alliance is the aggressive expansion of China in the East and South China Seas. China has declared an Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea; threatened to do the same over the South China Sea and ignored the International Court of Justice’s ruling on China’s claims to territory in the South China Sea. Moreover, China has already constructed and “militarized” various artificial islands in the South China Sea. In addition, China retaliated economically in response to Japan’s purchase of two Senkaku island as well as engaged in military exercises close to Taiwan to rattle the present Taiwanese administration of Tsai Ing-wen and possibly send a warning to Trump about his Taiwan policies. Neither the U.S. or Japan want to become embroiled in a conflict with China over territorial issues. China is watching how both the U.S. Japan together or separately support Taiwan, one of the PRC’s core interests.
Besides these issues, maintaining trust between the U.S. and Japan for a strong alliance is also key. Related to this concern is the keeping of Japan in the loop as Trump moves forward on initiatives in the region to avoid Japan passing or bashing. For example, after President Trump’s historic meeting with Kim Jong-un, U.S. leadership’s follow ups with Japan, South Korea and China will especially be important.

On another note, the Trump administration’s current ‘connecting of economic security to national security’ could not only impact on U.S.-Japan trade relations but create additional pressure on the alliance as well. Finally, as Trump withdraws from various multilateral agreements, this could also impact negatively on the bilateral relationship, eroding confidence in U.S. leadership and further enhancing Japanese anxieties about U.S. abandonment.

**Future Perspectives**

Post the Obama presidency, U.S.-Japan relations still remains interdependent and asymmetrical. Japan is the U.S.’ 4th largest export market, 3rd largest FDI and largest financial supporter of U.S. bases. Concurrently, the relationship has evolved towards a more balanced partnership with Japan’s economic power as well as increased SDF capacities within the alliance in the region and globally. Japan also sees the alliance as key to the preservation of Japan’s prosperity and security. The alliance, for which realignment remains an important goal, is still needed to address many ongoing traditional and non- traditional threats. The power of the alliance will become even more critical as issues with the Korean Peninsula continue to evolve, China expands its
presence in East and South China Seas and non-traditional threats continue to challenge the global community.

As the Trump administration continues to fight an ongoing F.B.I. investigation about any collusion with the Russians, deal with the constant overturn of staff in the White House as well as a divided America, its political, economic and security policies have a strong impact on U.S.-Japan dynamics post the Obama administration. As President Trump works to fulfill his campaign promises, his policy moves may serve to save some congressional seats in November and or distract the rest of America about his administration’s troubles. At the same time, President Trump’s policies, such as raising tariffs on competitors and allies; trading aggressive rhetoric with rogue states or enemies; pushing China over trade as well as Taiwan and withdrawal from multilateral agreements not only test U.S.-Japan dynamics but also regional and global security as well as the international liberal rules based order.

Trump administration policies have already pushed Japan unexpectedly, for example, in the area of tariffs. As part of President Trump’s push for American First including fair trade, the administration has levied high tariffs on steel and aluminium. Although some nations were initially exempted, Japan, the U.S.’ top ally in the Asia Pacific, was not. Also, Japan hoped reap the benefits of a TPP with U.S. participation versus renegotiating with the U.S. for a separate bilateral FTA. Although the head of USTR Robert Lighthizer and Japan’s Foreign Minister Taro Kono have been designated to further flush out various trade and economic matters and report back to U.S. Vice President Pence and Vice Prime Minister/Finance Minister Taro Aso,
Japan hopes that tougher trade demands will not be made against it. Negotiating away the recently imposed tariffs on steel and aluminium is another challenge.

Present trade friction between the U.S. and Japan involves both tariffs and non-tariff barriers as well as a “goods trade deficit of $68.8 billion in 2017.”30 One of the biggest bilateral trade conflicts between the two partners involves the low import of U.S. cars by Japan. For example, at the beginning of his presidency, President Trump pressured Toyota over the latter’s plans to build a car factory in Mexico instead of in the U.S. And recently, President Trump spoke about about possibly imposing a 25% tariff on auto imports which would have a negative impact on the Japanese auto industry.

It is clear that the idea of both countries working together for an international liberal rules based order for prosperity, common values and security has not ended. This goal is affirmed by each country’s respective top leaders and official documents. Moreover, it is still in the national interest of both countries to do so. The future challenge for both powers, however, is to keep finding common ground towards this goal in spite of the U.S.’ current push for trade protectionism and isolationism.

At the same time, the Trump administration policies, whether America First, peace through strength, unilateralism or fair trade, encourage Japan to

further strengthen its own policies outside of the U.S.-Japan partnership. In fact, as one Japanese author asserts, ‘the election of Trump has given Japan a miraculous opportunity to become more independent of the U.S. and to pursue its own national interest more actively.’ Already Prime Minister Abe’s administration’s involvement with TPP 11 and its development of the FOIP have demonstrated Japan’s will to do so. Japan’s balancing of U.S.-Japan dynamics while it pursues more independence from U.S. is another important future challenge. Already Japan’s adoption of its “proactive contribution to peace based on the principle of international cooperation”\(^1\) is one way to meet this challenge.

As mentioned previously, the continued rise of China is a challenge for the U.S.-Japan alliance as well as regional security. Moreover, with the growth of U.S.-China trade frictions, both U.S. and Japan markets will feel the impact across various goods and services. The U.S. has already started a trade war with China with whom it holds a 375.2 billion trade deficit\(^2\). On July 5, 2017, for example, the Trump administration levied a 25% tariff on $34 billion worth of Chinese imports. And prior to that, China was one of the countries targeted by U.S. with the imposition of a 25% tariff on steel and aluminum. The threat of additional tariffs, however, still remain depending on fu-

---

\(^1\) Masanichi Hanabusa, トランプ登場で激変する世界—自立した日本外交と安全保障 (Tokyo: Art Days, 2017), 374.


(29)
ture Chinese counter actions. Successful negotiations by the U.S. with China to end the current trade frictions over tariffs and other restrictions will benefit not only U.S.-Japan relations but also the global economic order. In any event, U.S. trade protectionist policies play well to Trump’s base and reinforce his America First stance. How the U.S. stands up to China will also test U.S.-Japan dynamics and reshape the balance among the three powers.

As Japan already worries about any deals made between the U.S. and China impacting negatively on Japan,\(^4\) it is important that the U.S. keeps Japan in the loop about American policies concerning China. On the other hand, Japan and China have grown closer in a recent round of talks. Japan’s possible involvement in China’s OBOR and other multilaterals where China is a key actor and the U.S. is not, also helps Japan to meet the challenge of China’s rise. Further cementing Japan-China relations on the 40\(^{th}\) anniversary of their Friendship Treaty, PM Abe may visit China this year. And in 2019, Xi Jinping may visit Japan to attend a G-20 summit meeting. If so, it will be the first visit by China’s President since President Hu Jintao in 2008 to Japan.

Amidst the Trump administration’s ongoing foreign policy issues, engagement and negotiations with North Korea will continue to be one of the U.S.’ largest geopolitical concerns. The North Korea situation is not something that can be resolved easily with Trump’s brand of transactional diplomacy and unilateralism. Not only Japan but also South Korea, China and Russia


(30)
have vested interests in the evolving situation on the peninsula. How to bring all of these actors together for the denuclearization of North Korea and peace on the peninsula is an important challenge for the region.

U.S.-Japan dynamics post the Obama administration challenge not only the two powers but also the regional and international order. U.S. actions on all these levels can create disruption or foster new channels, frameworks and policies that will create a win-win situation for prosperity and security. Presently, the Trump Administration and what it represents—America First, a divided U.S., backlash against globalization and resurgence of ethnic nationalism—has generated disruption not only in the U.S. but also in Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Is the dysfunctional Trump administration symbolic of a U.S. incapable of reversing its relative decline? Generating disruption while emphasizing America First, will U.S. leadership for an international liberal rules based order remain credible? Rather than the maintenance of the traditional U.S. led international liberal order, will other nations keep moving ahead, leaving the U.S. behind?

In response to these trends, Japan could continue to hedge its options to deal with “Trump’s unpredictability” and the power shift in the region. Also Japanese international leadership could become even more proactive. In any event, Japan will need to thread carefully in the future to avoid political, economic and security fallout from U.S. unilateral foreign policies.

Finally, both U.S. and Japanese administrations have problems on their homefronts – personal scandals and investigations, socio economic problems (31)
and political divisions. Both President Trump and Prime Minister Abe must overcome their respective political challenges effectively this year to avoid becoming lame duck leaders or ousted from office. At the same time, a greater U.S.-Japan alliance as well as global partnership is still beneficial for both countries. And both nations’ contributions to the international community is still essential for maintenance of an international liberal rules based order. Post the Obama presidency, resilient U.S.-Japan relations should be ready to meet and respond effectively to the cross currents and power shifts to come in an increasingly divided world.
Bibliography


https://www.thebalance.com/us-economic-outlook-3305669


*BBC News*. “Trump’s campaign promises—has he delivered on them?” February 28, 2018, par. 11.


https://www.politico.com/story/2018/05/29/trump-china-trade-relations-610845

https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/05/lessons-obama-era-foreign-policy-officials-should-learn-from-trump/560387/


http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/01/20/will-trump-snap-japans-tenuous-tightrope/


http://chicagoshimpo.com/e-community/17_0519_Glen_Fukushima.htm


Hanlon, Michael E. “Obama the Carpenter: The President’s National Security Legacy.” Brook-
https://www.brookings.edu/research/obama-the-carpenter-the-presidents-national-security-legacy/

Interview with a researcher at The Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) in Tokyo, Japan on March 29, 2018.


Kubo, Fumiaki. “Trump Prompts Japan’s Cautious Shift to Self Reliance.” East Asia Forum
(2017).
https://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspenia-online/article/trumps-indo-pacific-vision-solid-idea-hard-pull


http://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/english/reports/summary/201805/05.html


https://www.mofa.go.jp/na/st/page4e_000649.html

http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/02/08/back-to-the-future-for-us-japan-relations/

http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/12/21/jeepas-message-to-the-us-from-japan/


https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/japanese-leader-shinzo-abe-plays_the-role-of-
trumps-loyalsidekick/2017/11/06/cc23cae-c2fl-11e7-afe9-4f60b5a6c4a0_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=65c0c4c0610d


https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/u-s-china-putting-trade-war-hold-treasury-secretary-mnuchin-n875816


Smith, Nicola. “Kremlin invites North Korea’s Kim Jong-un to Russia.” The Telegraph.


http://cc.csis.org/2017/01/us-ja@an-relations-trump-effect/

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pentagon-unveils-new-nuclear-weapons-strategy-ending-obama-era-push-to-reduce-us-arsenal/2018/02/02/td72ad34-0839-11e8-ac28-e370674ea9a7_story.html?utm_term=.7c6be5a0e1c7

Stokes, Bruce. “Troubles with the U.S. relationship?” In *Japanese Divided on Democracy’s Success at Home but Value Voice of the People*.

https://www.jfir.or.jp/e/special_study/201506.pdf

http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/01/22/shoring-up-the-us-japan-alliance-under-trump/

http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/816859.html

*The Japan Times*. “China’s President Xi may visit Japan in June 2019, diplomatic sources say,” May 4, 2018, par. 1-3.


and-China-move-to-mend-ties.html


https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-state-union-address/

https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/whitehouse/america-first-read-trumps-full-united-nations-speech-n802676


USTR. *USTR Lighthizer, Japan Foreign Minister Kono Agree to Accelerate Bilateral Trade Engagement.* Washington D.C.: USTR, 2017  


http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/06/28/americas-international-image/

https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/04/280134.htm