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Shoring Up the US-Japan Alliance under the Trump Administration

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PRESIDENT-ELECT DONALD TRUMP'S win in an unprecedentedly grueling and divisive US presidential election came as a major surprise to Japan and the rest of Asia. He enters the Oval Office as a political outsider and will be the first president in US history to take the job without any prior government or military experience. Trump's controversial campaign rhetoric questioned a number of bipartisan pillars of US foreign policy, including the value of US alliance relationships as well as its commitment to free trade and its willingness to protect regional stability in Asia Pacific. There is an air of uncertainty across the region regarding the extent to which this rhetoric might translate into policy and what that might portend for the future of the post-1945 liberal international order and the role of the United States in global affairs.

Yet the region must find a way to work with a Trump presidency. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe signaled Japan's intention to do so by becoming the first foreign leader to meet with President-elect Trump, stopping over in New York on November 17 on his way to Peru. Looking ahead, however, the region faces a

number of challenges that require intensive consultations and cooperation.

The Evolving Regional Role of the United States

US global leadership has, from a Japanese perspective, traditionally rested on four key pillars. The first is the fact that the United States is the world's foremost military power and has been willing to use that force as a public good to maintain the international order. The second is that the United States is the world's largest economy and leader of the liberal international economic order. The third is that America's democratic institutions make it a model for political governance. And finally, there is the role the United States has played in setting the agenda for the promotion of democracy, free markets, the rule of law, human rights, and nuclear nonproliferation.

Even before the 2016 presidential election, the capacity of the United States to shape the international order was receding. While the United States remains the world's foremost military power in *absolute* terms,

the rise of emerging nations such as China and India means the balance of power is shifting and US *relative* power is declining. This is in fact a result of the success of the United States, together with its allies and partners, in underwriting a stable regional order in Asia, and that in turn has unleashed the region's economic potential and enabled Asia to become the engine of global economic growth that it is today. At the same time, antiglobalization sentiments and growing income inequality in the United States were key contributing factors in Trump's electoral success. The US public also appears to be more focused on short-term interests and increasingly less willing to put US boots on the ground overseas or to accept a broad conception of the US national interest as spanning all corners of the world.

Trump's "America First" foreign policy rhetoric appears to be moving the United States away from its traditional role as a global leader at a time when the domestic and international political environments are undergoing significant changes. His rhetoric mistakenly scapegoated the US-Japan alliance, depicting it as a burden to the United States and implying that it is solely benefitting Japan. This overlooks the US forward deployment strategy, whereby the United States stations troops and engages in training exercises on foreign territory—in this case Japan—as a way to project US power for its own national interests and to deter aggression in the region. The core tenet of the US-Japan alliance—that the United States guarantees Japan's security in exchange for the use of Japan's land, sea, and air facilities for the maintenance of international peace in the Far East—is of fundamental benefit to both the United States and Japan, as well as to the regional order, and it should be maintained.

Where campaign rhetoric ends governance must begin. Continued US leadership and intensive cooperation with allies and partners is critical to the maintenance of regional peace and prosperity. To this end, the Trump administration will need the right type of input during the presidential transition and its first year in office. The Trump team would be well advised to listen to advice from the Obama administration and the US foreign policy establishment, as well as from traditional US allies and friends who should strive to make their views heard clearly.

It is worth underscoring the point that a US retreat from its leadership role would be detrimental to the

peace and prosperity of both the United States and the world as a whole. Unilateral disregard of international commitments—such as the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Iran nuclear deal—would also undermine the credibility of the United States on a range of other issues. This is particularly important at a time when Russia and China are challenging liberal internationalism as Asia gradually shifts toward a multipolar order. US allies in Asia sincerely hope that the United States will continue to play a constructive role in the international order.

The Growing Need for Deeper US-Japan Cooperation

While the Trump administration contemplates the approach it will take to foreign policy and the type of leadership role that the United States will play in global affairs under the Trump presidency, America's allies must review their regional approaches as well. Given that Japan remains the most important US ally in Asia, it is critical that the two countries move forward and further build up the infrastructure of the alliance. The shifts in the international security environment make it increasingly difficult for any one country, including the United States, to go it alone, and this is amplified by changes in US domestic politics. Additionally, the United States still faces defense budget pressures in light of the billions spent on Afghanistan and Iraq and the economic damage from the global financial crisis. Therefore, it is time to think in pragmatic terms about how we might further maximize bilateral cooperation through the formulation of more closely coordinated US-Japan approaches to the region that span the political, economic, and military dimensions.

This is particularly important in light of recent setbacks to the US rebalance to Asia. Trump has declared that the United States will quit the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) on his first day in office, and China is already stepping forward to take up the banner of leadership in forging the economic rules-of-the-road in East Asia. Further, the Philippines, under President Rodrigo Duterte, appears to have moved away from security cooperation with the United States, opting instead for closer relations with China. America's credibility in Asia will be undermined if the Trump administration does not act to address these challenges to US leadership and engage constructively with the region.

Japan, under Prime Minister Abe, has responded to the changing security environment with a remarkable suite of defense reforms aimed at expanding its “proactive contributions to peace.” This has included the establishment of a US-style National Security Council, the loosening of arms export restrictions, the passage of bills that recognize limited forms of collective self-defense, and increased security cooperation with partners beyond the United States, including Australia, India, the United Kingdom, and ASEAN nations. Japan will need to continue to expand its contributions to the US-Japan alliance and regional stability, but must do so in a way that is anchored by its identity as a peace-loving nation that does not use military means to pursue its economic or political agenda. Any move by Japan to abandon its exclusively defense-oriented approach to security policy—such as the abolition of the Article 9 peace clause of the Constitution, an excessively rapid expansion of the defense budget above the customary cap of 1 percent of GDP, the acquisition of offensive power projection military capabilities, or the pursuit of a nuclear deterrent capability outside the US umbrella—would challenge existing taboos in ways that undermine regional stability.

With the right sort of cooperation, however, the outcomes can be greater than the sum of the inputs. Given that Trump appears keen on having Japan expand its share of the security burden, the best option would be intensive US-Japan consultations that aim to forge a common approach to key challenges as an initial step toward a joint US-Japan strategy for the region. The overarching objective would be to retain and enhance US engagement in Asia while bolstering Japan’s security roles and functions within the alliance framework and its contributions to peace without opening a regionally destabilizing Pandora’s box.

Four Key Issues for the US-Japan Alliance

In addition to upholding the alliance’s role for the maintenance of regional stability, the Trump and Abe administrations should focus on the following four key areas.

A New Approach to North Korea

“Strategic patience” has failed to change North Korean behavior. The Kim Jong-un regime appears content with a “weapons first, negotiations later” strategy,

and North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missile development program is edging closer to producing a miniaturized nuclear warhead that can be mounted on a long-range missile. This poses a serious threat to South Korea, Japan, and even the continental United States, as well as to the future of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime and to the overall stability of Northeast Asia.

Resolving the situation on the Korean Peninsula requires comprehensive and coordinated efforts between the United States, Japan, and South Korea to bring China into the fold. It has been fashionable to blame China for failing to rein in North Korea. While Chinese patience with North Korea has worn thin, Beijing is still hesitant to apply crippling pressure to the extent that it would seriously undermine the Kim Jong-un regime’s political control and run the risk of causing North Korea to lash out or collapse. In part, this is because North Korea’s continued existence acts as a buffer against the establishment of US military bases on China’s border and prevents waves of North Korean refugees from flooding into China.

However, if North Korea becomes a full-fledged nuclear state, that will also pose a significant security concern for China and undermine its position as one of the five recognized nuclear powers under the NPT. That concern should outweigh the possibility that a unified Korea would remove China’s buffer zone. To gain Chinese cooperation, the United States, South Korea, and Japan must also do more to reassure China that a full break with the regime in Pyongyang will not end up being antithetical to its national interests. This requires joint contingency planning among the allies as well as intensive discussions with China to prepare for worst-case scenarios on the peninsula. This should include discussions of the types of measures needed to locate and secure North Korean nuclear weapons and deal with refugee flows, and on what can be done regarding buffer zones with China. The aim of such coordination and diplomatic reassurances should be to shift China’s strategic calculus to the point where it no longer sees a possible Kim Jong-un regime collapse as more damaging to its interests than a full-fledged nuclear North Korea. Through joint planning that leads China to bring much greater pressure to bear on Pyongyang, we may be able to open the door to credible nuclear negotiations with North Korea. Despite some initial missteps, such as Trump’s phone

call with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, Trump's election may in fact allow the United States to have a fresh start with China in discussing its shared interests vis-à-vis North Korea.

Building Confidence in Northeast Asia

Greater confidence building among the five powers in Northeast Asia—the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and South Korea—is sorely needed in order to de-escalate tensions, defuse nationalism, and build relations rooted in win-win cooperation. Confidence building should initially focus on the low-hanging fruit of nontraditional security issues, which are of common concern to all. This should include the joint establishment of concrete mechanisms for reporting on, preventing, and responding to natural disasters, major industrial accidents (including at nuclear facilities), acts of terrorism, and cyber attacks. It should also include a commitment to nuclear nonproliferation. This is underscored by the fact that a number of major global events, including three Olympic Games (PyeongChang 2018, Tokyo 2020, Beijing 2022), will be taking place in Northeast Asia in the near future. Security and counterterrorism cooperation will thus be especially crucial to ensure the highest level of safety possible while the eyes of the world are on the region. While these steps may be hard to envision based on Trump's election rhetoric, operational-level cooperation that is already underway between the United States, Japan, and other likeminded countries in the region can gradually be expanded, giving the Trump and Abe administrations an easy win in the region.

Nurturing a Stable and Inclusive Regional Order

On its current trajectory, the Asia-Pacific regional order risks fracturing into a two-tiered structure comprised of the US-led liberal international order and an emerging Chinese sphere of influence. Given China's political system, many recent Chinese initiatives—including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the One Belt One Road (OBOR) strategy, as well as its assertive approach in the South China Sea—raise concerns as to whether China intends to challenge the United States and overturn the current regional order or if it is attempting to exercise influence within the existing order. China is certainly

becoming increasingly confident, as demonstrated by Xi Jinping's enunciation of his China dream. However, it should be remembered that China has greatly benefitted from the current order, particularly in terms of its rapid economic growth after its accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. Thus we should be careful before accusing China of full-fledged revisionism. The measure of any initiative's legitimacy—Chinese or American—should be based not on its country of origin, but on whether it promotes the communal good in the region and is based on liberal internationalism.

The United States and Japan must also consider how to restructure rules-based trade relationships in Asia Pacific in the absence of the TPP. Negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) among the ASEAN+6 countries should and will proceed. But on issues such as intellectual property and government procurement, the RCEP is insufficient to cover the gaps that would otherwise have been dealt with by the TPP. A reformulation of the TPP to operate without US participation is unlikely to make sense for countries such as Malaysia and Vietnam, which have banked on access to the US market to offset the costs of domestic reforms. Therefore, some mechanism that links the United States and the 11 remaining TPP members and that meets the objectives that were tackled in the TPP negotiations is still necessary.

The United States and Japan should also prioritize engagement with China and they need to find some way to coordinate among regional institutions and advance functional cooperation among Asian powers. Even though the Trump administration is likely to place lower priority on international institutions, it is in the US interest to find some way to promote smoother coordination between the AIIB and the OBOR initiative on the one hand and the IMF, World Bank, and Asian Development Bank on the other hand. There is also a pressing need in the region to develop environmental guidelines for best practices in international development and infrastructure projects and to address other challenges that accompany economic growth—for example by promoting energy cooperation, efficiency, and sustainability; carbon emission mitigation; and the management of urbanization as the Asian middle class continues to expand.

Deeper Consultation on Russia Policy

The United States will need to find a balance between cooperation with Russia in areas of mutual interest while also maintaining a unified front within the international community against unlawful Russian behavior, such as its unilateral annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Trump has hinted at the possibility of cooperating with Russia in Syria to fight the so-called Islamic State militant group. On the other hand, Russian interference in the US election, including its hacking of the Democratic National Committee, is a further example of provocative behavior that sets a dangerous precedent.

Meanwhile, Japan appears to be seriously considering how to resolve the long-standing Northern Territories issue by expanding cooperation with Russia. President Vladimir Putin is scheduled to visit Japan in mid-December. For Japan, Russia's isolation and its strong desire to improve bilateral relations present a rare opportunity to find a solution to the territorial question. Japan must pursue diplomacy with Russia on this issue, but not without due consideration of the interests of the international community in preserving a unified front against unlawful actions by Russia. There is therefore a strong need for intense consultations between Japan and the United States on this front.



There is a deep sense of uncertainty regarding the future role of the United States in East Asian affairs in light of President-elect Trump's campaign rhetoric. However, as Trump prepares to take office and begins the process of establishing his administration, it will be crucial that his team, with advice from the Obama administration and the US foreign policy establishment, make a concerted effort to understand the positions and views of US allies and friends. As US domestic politics and the regional balance of power undergo changes, intensive consultations and cooperation with allies and partners will be critical. Forging a joint approach on key regional challenges in a way that opens the door to a shared US-Japan strategy for the region will provide both countries with the best path to maximize the benefits of US engagement in Asia, to bolster Japan's more proactive role in the alliance, and to ensure regional stability.

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East Asia Insights is an occasional newsletter focusing on East Asia community building from the Japanese perspective.

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