

EAST ASIA INSIGHTS

TOWARD COMMUNITY BUILDING

JCIE Japan Center for International Exchange

July 2016

Trump's Rhetoric and the Future of the US-Japan Alliance

HITOSHI TANAKA, *Senior Fellow, JCIE*

DONALD TRUMP HAS defied all expectations about the US presidential election by emerging as the presumptive nominee of the Republican Party. His rise is indicative of the US public's deep distrust of established political elites, while his extreme yet direct rhetoric, skillfully reviving Ronald Reagan's cry to "Make America Great Again" and talking about restoring US national glory, has resonated with many who are weary of politics and business as usual.

Mr. Trump's extreme rhetoric, set against the backdrop of increasing unease over a perceived weakening of US relations with allies as diverse as the United Kingdom, Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, raises concerns about the future of the traditional US alliance system. The Brexit decision by the people of the United Kingdom adds further uncertainty about trans-Atlantic relations and the Anglo-American "special relationship." Therefore, at least from a Japanese perspective, the US elections have brought to the fore a fundamental question as to the future of US global leadership and its relations with its key partners; namely, will US alliance relationships be weakened as part of the retreat to isolationism espoused by Mr. Trump, or will those alliances

be reconfigured to reflect the shifting geopolitical landscape and to complement and strengthen multi-lateral cooperation?

US-Japan Relations: Trump vs. Reality

Mr. Trump has repeatedly emphasized that the US-Japan security relationship is "not a fair deal" because the United States is obliged to defend Japan while Japan is not obligated to defend US territory. Mr. Trump has stated that he believes Japan should pay the "full cost" for US military troops stationed in Japan, has threatened a US withdrawal if Japan refuses, and has suggested that it would "not be so bad" if Japan were to develop nuclear weapons in order to defend itself. These statements ignore how and why the US-Japan security relationship developed as it has, and they belittle the hard work that the two countries have invested in strengthening the relationship. Ultimately, such a stance will hurt the United States and its political and economic interests in Asia.

Historical Development of the Alliance

After World War II, the new Japanese Constitution included the Article 9 "peace clause" to prevent

Japan from backsliding into imperial militarism. Japan is prohibited from using force to settle international disputes. Therefore, the use of force by Japan to defend United States territory would be considered unconstitutional.

At the same time, forward deployment has been a fundamental element of postwar US security strategy. Rather than dispatching troops after war has already broken out, as was the case during World War I and World War II, establishing US military bases and stationing troops in Europe and Asia during peacetime has allowed the United States to conduct joint drills and training with allies and has acted as an important deterrent to potential conflicts. Assuming that the United States wishes to remain a global leader, forward deployment carries much lower costs as a security strategy than basing troops at home.

A balance of rights and obligations between the United States and Japan has been maintained under the alliance whereby the United States guarantees Japan's security in exchange for the use of the latter's land, sea, and air facilities for the maintenance of international peace and security in the Far East. The ability of the United States to utilize military bases in Japan is indispensable to the US forward deployment strategy and to its status as a Pacific power.

The idea that Japan should pay all of the costs for US bases on its territory clearly does not stand up to scrutiny. American military bases in Japan are not merely for the defense of Japan; rather, they serve a broader regional and global purpose within US security policy. As a politically stable and reliable ally, Japan's hosting of US military bases makes a significant contribution to the maintenance of both regional as well as global peace and stability. The US Navy's Seventh Fleet, for instance, which has an operational mandate covering the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans, has its home port at the Yokosuka Naval Base in Japan's Kanagawa Prefecture. From there, it supports American operations in the South China Sea, Afghanistan, and Iraq—all of which are intended primarily to further US interests. Similarly, US Marines based in Okinawa are regularly deployed to the Middle East and throughout Asia Pacific. These bases underpin the US forward deployment strategy.

Mr. Trump's demands show a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of the US forward deployment strategy and seem to mistake the US military for

a mercenary army involved in a protection operation. Japan is not purchasing military protection. Rather, the US forward deployment is designed, first and foremost, to advance American interests and a US vision of the regional order. Abandoning such a strategy would not benefit anybody in the region, let alone the United States.

Japan's Evolving Regional Contributions

Despite its constitutional constraints, Japan has gradually taken on a greater responsibility for advancing shared Japanese and American interests in Asia. Finding ways to expand Japan's security role and reduce the US burden has been a central issue for the alliance ever since Japan's postwar economic miracle propelled it to become the second-largest economy in the world. While Japan's Constitution still limits its use of force abroad, there has been noticeable progress made on the expansion of Japanese roles in recent decades.

Beginning in 1978, Japan rapidly increased its host-nation support for US bases. Under the most recent agreement, signed in December 2015, Japan will pay ¥190 billion (US\$1.67 billion) per year in direct costs for US bases over the next five years in addition to hundreds of billions of yen more in related costs to support the US presence. Japan's level of host-nation support is overwhelmingly more generous than that of Germany, South Korea, or any other US ally.

Japan has also been contributing to regional security in a number of other ways. It promotes regional prosperity through the provision of large-scale official development assistance to developing nations. And it has been increasing its contributions to the US efforts to promote regional stability. For instance, the US-Japan Defense Cooperation Guidelines were revised in 1997, expanding the provision of Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) rear-area support for the US military to "areas surrounding Japan." The Guidelines were revised again in April 2015, paving the way for the September 2015 security-related bills and recognition of the SDF's exercise of limited forms of collective self-defense. These changes were all warmly welcomed by the United States as supporting the US-Japan alliance.

Having said this, moving out from under the US nuclear umbrella and developing an indigenous

nuclear capability is at present unthinkable for Japan. The Japanese development of nuclear weapons would destroy the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regime and elicit condemnation from the international community. The domestic political costs in Japan would be tremendous as well, given the legacy of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The withdrawal of the US nuclear umbrella would be a deal breaker for the US-Japan alliance. In no way would this be in the national interest of the United States.

Japan has also significantly changed its economic practices, in part in response to US pressure. Free rider accusations—i.e., that Japan achieved its economic prosperity on the back of the US security guarantee—intensified after the opening of a vast trade deficit between the two countries. In response to US criticism, Japan began enacting voluntary export restraints in the 1960s, first on textiles, for example, and then later on automobiles, iron and steel, and machine goods. Given the undesirability of export restraints as a long-term measure, Japan started down the path toward market liberalization and concluded a number of bilateral agreements with the United States. Japan also allowed the yen to appreciate dramatically as a result of the 1985 Plaza Accord and undertook major structural reforms in the 1990s to expand domestic consumption. The country's remarkable assent to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was intended to be a final step in removing barriers to US-Japan trade. In this context, Mr. Trump's vehement opposition to the TPP is ironic given the comprehensive US-Japan agreements it contains on deregulation and the elimination of trade barriers, which will further liberalize the Japanese market.

The Risks of Rhetoric

Even if Mr. Trump ultimately fails to win the US presidency, the rhetoric of his campaign has already put US-Japan relations at risk in several ways.

First, the question of the US role in the world and how it positions itself geopolitically will be a critical issue for the incoming administration. Mr. Trump's rhetoric fails to recognize the interconnected nature of shared global challenges, such as climate change, and it conflates reckless unilateralism with responsible multilateral cooperation, pushing public opinion toward blind isolationism. A recent public

opinion poll (Pew Research Center, May 5, 2016) indicates that 57 percent of Americans would rather the United States “deal with its own problems, while letting other countries get along as best they can.” A much greater number of respondents (41 percent) said that the United States “does too much” to solve global problems rather than “too little” (27 percent). A tilt toward isolationism will undermine alliance relations, US economic and political interests, and overall regional stability.

Second, Mr. Trump's rhetoric risks undermining confidence in the US security guarantee to Japan. The fact that the presumptive candidate of one of the two major US parties has openly suggested abandoning the alliance is forcing Japanese policymakers to start more actively contemplating previously unthinkable scenarios in case the United States were to actually walk away. This risks setting in motion an evolution in thinking on both sides of the Pacific that is ultimately harmful to US interests.

Third, Mr. Trump's zero-sum, protectionist approach to trade erodes the credibility of US economic leadership at a time when China is promoting its state-led capitalism development model. The challenge from China makes it even more critical that the TPP be approved by Congress by the end of the year. Failure to move forward will further strengthen perceptions that the United States is withdrawing from the region.



What, then, must the United States and Japan do in order to continue strengthening alliance cooperation? For one, they should be bolstering cooperation with mutual partners in the region such as South Korea, Australia, India, and ASEAN nations. Japan should also continue to explore options to reduce the US burden, including further expanding the contributions of the SDF, helping to make US military troops stationed in Japan as compact as possible, and instituting joint drills, training, and base-sharing arrangements between the US military and the SDF. At the same time, the question of reducing Okinawa's burden—including how to move forward on the issue of the relocation of US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma—needs to be addressed in earnest.

The danger of isolationist foreign policy must be firmly resisted. The US-Japan alliance has played a

critical role in securing shared peace and prosperity in Asia Pacific. Throwing away more than 70 years of an alliance that continues to benefit both nations and the region would be a tragic mistake.

Hitoshi Tanaka is a senior fellow at JCIE and chairman of the Institute for International Strategy at the Japan Research Institute, Ltd. He previously served as Japan's deputy minister for foreign affairs.

East Asia Insights

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

Please direct any comments or questions to eainsights@jcie.or.jp.

Japan Center for International Exchange
www.jcie.or.jp

Japan Center for International Exchange, Inc. (JCIE/USA)
www.jcie.org