

Center for American Progress



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# The U.S.-Japan Alliance in an Age of Elevated U.S.-China Relations

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By Brian Harding    March 2017

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# Contents

**1 Introduction and summary**

**3 Key findings**

**7 Recommendations**

**11 Conclusion**

**12 About the authors and acknowledgments**

**13 Endnotes**

# Introduction and summary

The U.S.-Japan alliance has been an extraordinary public good for more than half a century. Since the beginning of the Cold War, it has provided stability in a potentially volatile region and enabled Japan and its neighbors to forge the most dynamic regional economy in the world. Today, the alliance remains rooted in shared values and interests and continues to make the region and the world more secure and prosperous, with cooperation ranging from countering North Korean missile threats to development coordination in Africa.<sup>1</sup>

But the U.S.-Japan alliance is now far from the only relationship of substance for the United States in the Asia-Pacific region. Most notably, relations with China have become an enormous focus for U.S. policymakers in recent years and will continue to be a high priority for the foreseeable future.<sup>2</sup> While fundamentally different from the U.S.-Japan relationship, the elevation of U.S.-China relations as a major focal point for U.S. foreign policy raises a critical question: How can policymakers ensure that the rise of U.S.-China relations does not come at the expense of the U.S.-Japan relationship?

Throughout the past six decades, the U.S.-Japan alliance has explicitly been the cornerstone of U.S. engagement in Asia, with overall U.S. policy in the region running through Tokyo.<sup>3</sup> This has been prudent, as without a strong and functioning U.S.-Japan alliance, the United States would be in a much weaker position to meet challenges and opportunities in the broader region. And as the region becomes more important to U.S. interests, as well as more complex, it will be critical to keep the alliance at the core of U.S. policy in the region.

If the primary goal of U.S. policy in the Asia-Pacific region was to hedge against China's rise, the challenge for U.S.-Japan relations would be easily manageable. However, the reality is that over the coming decades, U.S. leaders—both Republican and Democratic—are likely to continue to pursue engagement instead of containment, and U.S.-China relations will continue to move along two tracks: managing differences and maximizing cooperation. U.S.-China relations will take extraordinary amounts of time and attention from leaders in both countries.

Already, the annual U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue brings together more U.S. government officials than any other bilateral engagement on the diplomatic calendar.<sup>4</sup>

On the cooperative side of the ledger, as an agenda for U.S.-China cooperation on shared challenges expands, concerns will inevitably rise in Tokyo that Japan's interests will be sacrificed in Washington for the sake of U.S.-China relations. This dynamic cannot become zero-sum. It is urgent that the United States and Japan develop strategic principles to maintain and adapt the U.S.-Japan alliance as power dynamics shift in the Asia-Pacific.

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## Report overview

In 2016, the Center for American Progress endeavored to examine the challenges outlined above and to chart a course for the next U.S. presidential administration to build and deepen U.S.-Japan ties. We partnered with the Rebuild Japan Initiative Foundation to organize workshops in Tokyo and Washington with leading voices on U.S.-Japan, U.S.-China, and Japan-China relations to build understanding of how each leg of this trilateral relationship has developed in recent years and how these developments have been perceived by others. At the Tokyo workshop, we also partnered with the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, or CICIR, to bring leading Chinese voices to the table and to begin to rebuild mutual understanding between the three parties. Each event was a two-day, closed-door dialogue among approximately 20 nongovernment experts who have deep knowledge and experience shaping their respective countries' foreign policies.

This report presents key findings from these two workshops and ideas they generated. It begins with assessments of how the three legs of the U.S.-Japan-China relationship have evolved since 2009, when new administrations took power in Washington and Tokyo. It concludes with recommended principles that the authors of this report believe the Trump administration should follow to ensure that the U.S.-Japan alliance continues to thrive in coming years—not just in a vacuum but also alongside a constructive working relationship with Beijing.

# Key findings

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## U.S.-China relations

Our workshops revealed similar assessments among U.S. and Japanese experts regarding U.S.-China relations from 2009 to 2016. On the political side, we found wide agreement that Washington and Beijing had been able to make significant progress working together on key global priorities, such as climate change and Iran’s nuclear program, but that tensions have been rife on difficult issues in Asia, such as North Korea and the South China Sea.<sup>5</sup>

Stark challenges in U.S.-China economic relations were also observed, which cast shadows on broader policymaking. Underlying these debates is a growing consensus among U.S. experts about the need to change Washington’s approach to China. When the Clinton administration welcomed China into the world economy, many in Washington assumed that economic engagement would boost positive trends in Chinese governance.<sup>6</sup> Now, despite China’s increasing standards of living domestically and robust economic interdependence internationally,<sup>7</sup> U.S. experts see negative trends in Chinese governance and have concluded that the original logic of engagement with China was flawed.<sup>8</sup> At the same time as this reason for engagement has lost its persuasive power, Beijing has implemented drastic restrictions on U.S. businesses and civil society organizations.<sup>9</sup> Moving forward, these severed ties will make it more difficult for the United States and China to connect in a productive way.

In contrast, Chinese experts at our Tokyo workshop argued that only three issues detract from an overall positive U.S.-China bilateral relationship: the South China Sea; negative media coverage; and so-called third-party hijackers of the bilateral relationship—namely, the Philippines, Vietnam, Japan, North Korea, and Russia.<sup>10</sup> Chinese experts emphasized the need for a new regional order and better crisis management. From the perspective of one Chinese expert at the workshop, the U.S.-China economic relationship is becoming balanced, though U.S. “politicization” of Chinese investment via national security review mechanisms remains a point of complaint.<sup>11</sup>

Our workshops made clear that the Obama administration's approach to U.S.-China relations created anxiety in Tokyo that Japan's interests would be sidelined in efforts to keep U.S.-China relations on course. For instance, several Japanese experts argued that former national security adviser Susan Rice's embrace of President Xi Jinping's "New Model of Great Power Relations" rang alarm bells in Tokyo, which saw this concept as Beijing's attempt to create a U.S.-China G2 order in Asia.<sup>12</sup> As several workshop participants stated, these concerns were realized in the process in which the 2014 U.S.-China climate agreement came to pass and the sense that the United States would concede to China on certain regional security issues to make progress on global issues.<sup>13</sup>

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## U.S.-Japan relations

U.S. and Japanese experts largely agreed that U.S.-Japan relations were managed well following a trough from 2009 to 2011 during the early days of the Democratic Party of Japan's leadership in Tokyo. However, ties were seen to have rebounded to an all-time high under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's leadership in Tokyo, with revisions to bilateral defense guidelines and bilateral agreement on trade issues that were necessary to finalize the Trans-Pacific Partnership, or TPP, negotiations as major demonstrations of progress. Experts also noted that government-government relations have been undergirded by strong support for the alliance in both the United States and Japan.<sup>14</sup>

However, participants agreed that difficult bilateral issues remain present, including in the way ahead on defense realignment in Okinawa and the issue of U.S. reliability if the TPP does not come into force. Furthermore, it was clear that the 2016 U.S. presidential election caused concern in Tokyo, with U.S. domestic opposition to trade and to the foreign policy establishment more generally being particularly problematic. President Donald Trump's comments casting Japan as an economic competitor and questioning the importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance were also deeply unsettling.<sup>15</sup>

While many agreed that strictly bilateral matters were managed well by the Obama, Noda, and Abe administrations, it was clear that the U.S. approach to broader regional security issues has at times created friction and confusion in bilateral U.S.-Japan relations. Much of this has had to do with the China factor in the relationship. Japanese experts in our workshops often cited a threat perception gap, given Japan's proximity to China's rapid military modernization and the fact

that Japanese and Chinese maritime vessels operate in close proximity every day in the East China Sea.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, there was concern that the United States and Japan have not reached agreement on how to handle gray zone coercion, or coercion below the threshold requiring a conventional military response, in the East China Sea, particularly if it escalates beyond the capacity of Japan's Coast Guard to handle. Perceived U.S. reticence to challenge Chinese sovereignty claims in the East and South China Seas also clearly worries Japanese experts.<sup>17</sup>

Many experts in our workshops also noted that China saw these developments in similar ways, often assessing U.S.-Japan relations as even smoother than did Tokyo and Washington.<sup>18</sup> It was also clear that China felt threatened by the strength of U.S.-Japan relations and that there was a need for a *modus vivendi* with China to minimize friction. Several U.S. and Japanese participants also noted the paradox that closer U.S.-Japan relations have the ability to create the exact kind of Chinese policies that both the United States and Japan seek to avoid.<sup>19</sup>

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## China-Japan relations

Our workshop discussions also reached the clear conclusion that China-Japan relations are by far the weakest side of the U.S.-China-Japan trilateral relationship. Participants agreed that China-Japan relations began to deteriorate acutely in 2012 after Japan nationalized the Senkaku Islands.<sup>20</sup> However, our discussions also revealed sharp disagreements concerning the facts of certain events surrounding the nationalization—whether the government of Japan sought to diffuse tensions by nationalizing the islands and whether China truly imposed an export ban on rare-earth metals in retaliation.<sup>21</sup>

Japanese experts reflected that developments in China-Japan relations demonstrate that long-held confidence that economic interdependence would ensure political relations stay on track, or at least mitigate the effects of political tension, have proved to be misplaced. As Chinese, American, and Japanese participants described, the relationship is increasingly characterized by “cold economics, cold politics” as China's economy slows, labor costs increase, and political conflict intrudes into the economic sphere.<sup>22</sup>

Participants observed that China has five concerns for China-Japan relations: a strengthened U.S.-Japan alliance, which China sees as a mutual deterrence against China; Japan's more proactive stance in the South China Sea, especially with U.S. support; Japan's relationship with Taiwan; Japan's maritime rule of law campaign; and historical problems and a lack of trust among the public.<sup>23</sup>



Chinese experts are pessimistic about the bilateral relationship's prospects because of structural problems arising from the U.S.-Japan relationship, which China perceives as intended to deter China.<sup>24</sup>

American participants argued that unstable Japan-China relations are a major concern for Washington, as this dynamic makes the entire region less stable. Most acutely, tensions surrounding the Senkaku Islands are a concern, as U.S. alliance commitments could draw the United States into direct conflict with China in the East China Sea.<sup>25</sup> More broadly, weak Japan-China relations reduce the likelihood that the two can come together to address issues of common concern, including adapting to the impacts of climate change, building greater regional connectivity, and deepening economic integration.

# Recommendations

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## 5 principles for managing the U.S.-Japan alliance in an era of elevated U.S.-China relations

Developments in trilateral relations in recent years offer lessons for how the Trump administration should approach its relations with both Japan and China and how to manage the interplay between those two relationships. While collateral damage is inevitable as one relationship affects the other, U.S. policymakers should do everything they can to manage this dynamic. To do so effectively, lessons should be learned from instances when close U.S.-China coordination weakened confidence in the alliance in Tokyo and when developments in U.S.-Japan relations drove Chinese policy in negative directions in recent years.

Below this strategic level, the agenda for the incoming corps of U.S.-Japan alliance managers is substantial, which makes having strategic principles in mind all the more important. In particular, three critical issues are likely to consume the attention of these policymakers: 1) deeper defense integration in the face of North Korea's increasingly capable missile and nuclear forces; 2) reinforcing deterrence against China in gray-zone situations in Japanese-administered waters in the East China Sea; and 3) managing issues surrounding U.S. military presence in Japan, particularly in Okinawa.

Given this full agenda, having a straightforward, strategic framework is critical. But this framework should also not be based on solely reinforcing U.S.-Japan cooperation that inadvertently drives undesirable Chinese behavior.

Washington and Tokyo should follow the following five guiding principles as they forge the next steps in the alliance, each keeping in mind the impact on one another's relations with China.

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## 1. No surprises

The 2014 U.S.-China climate deal was a landmark achievement for the Obama administration and for U.S.-China relations<sup>26</sup>—but it came as a major surprise to many, including Japan. As such, despite its obvious public good, it sowed fears in Japan that the United States seeks G-2 solutions on key priorities, even if it means bypassing the traditional cornerstone of U.S. policy in Asia—the U.S.-Japan alliance.<sup>27</sup> Even more importantly, many Japanese workshop participants argued that the United States acted in a conciliatory way with China on issues of acute interest to Japan, including maritime issues in the East and South China Seas, in the name of getting a deal with China.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, U.S.-China consultations in the U.N. Security Council on North Korea have been perceived to be a means—even if inadvertent—to bypass the U.S.-Japan alliance, despite U.S. insistence that it is the cornerstone of U.S. policy in Asia.<sup>29</sup>

U.S.-China surprises fundamentally undermine the premise that U.S. policy in Asia begins with the U.S.-Japan alliance, which ultimately weakens broader U.S. policy in the region. While the United States and China should continue to pursue game-changing cooperation on issues of common concern, these developments should never come as a surprise to Tokyo.

President Trump’s stated penchant for the value of being unpredictable<sup>30</sup> will need to be amended to manage this dynamic. Even before he assumed office, President-elect Trump displayed this tendency with his decision to speak directly with Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen.<sup>31</sup> While not necessarily objectionable to Japanese policymakers, this seemingly rash decision was unsettling. Coupled with President Trump’s tendency to be a “deal maker,”<sup>32</sup> the possibility for major U.S.-China developments without consultation with Tokyo is real.<sup>33</sup> Early in the new U.S. administration, President Trump and Prime Minister Abe should agree to consult closely on all developments in Asia policymaking.

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## 2. Consult, consult, consult

It is critical to deepen U.S.-Japan consultations on U.S.-China relations and U.S. policy toward China. Agreeing to the importance of such consultation early in the administration is particularly important given the lack of deep Asia expertise in the top ranks of the Trump administration and President Trump’s apparent

lack of appreciation for the value of the alliance and the broader international order that the alliance helps uphold. Such discussions would go a long way toward relieving Japanese unease regarding uncertainty in the contours of China policy under President Trump.

For U.S.-Japan consultations on China to be effective, they must include American experts across the interagency, particularly the American experts working on areas of growing U.S.-China cooperation, who tend to have less engagement with Japan than do U.S. security experts. While consultations between defense and security establishments are important, these alone provide a skewed vision of overall U.S.-China relations. The reality is that, despite many challenges, there remain important areas of U.S.-China cooperation of which Japanese experts should be aware. If only defense and security consultations take place, only the negative aspects of U.S.-China relations are discussed.

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### 3. Seek ways to be transparent with China

China has a valid reason to ask what the U.S.-Japan alliance is about if it is not directed at China. Fortunately, the United States and Japan have a strong answer: that it has undergirded stability and prosperity in Asia over half a century and continues to do so today. It anchors the United States in Asia, which is seen by nearly the entire region as fostering greater peace and growth, and it is essential for managing the most urgent threat in the region—North Korea.

But simply stating that the alliance is about upholding stability does not mollify Chinese fears. This has been proven time and again.<sup>34</sup> The United States and Japan should therefore proactively seek opportunities to provide China a clearer window into the alliance to build confidence that it is not in fact an anti-China arrangement. This approach would also help demonstrate that Japan and the United States have independent national interests and that Japan is not an appendage of the United States in Asia.

As such, the United States and Japan should find opportunities for China to observe select U.S.-Japan military exercises and activities, particular those geared toward the North Korean threat. Washington and Tokyo should also proactively provide Beijing with updates on developments in U.S.-Japan relations, such as following summits and major meetings. These actions would provide opportunities to share the wide range of issues on which the two countries collaborate regionally and globally.

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#### 4. Find ways to actually work with China

The United States and Japan should also seek ways to work with China when possible and practical to solve problems and to demonstrate to the region that the major powers are not simply locked in competition. Rather than perceiving any regional Chinese initiative as some sort of threat to U.S., Japanese, or alliance interests, they should be evaluated on their merits.

Lessons should be drawn from the U.S. and Japanese responses to the introduction of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which was met with skepticism and hostility in Washington and Tokyo, to the puzzlement and frustration of the rest of the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>35</sup> U.S. and Japanese rejection of the bank also deepened skepticism in Beijing that Japan and the United States truly welcome China as a constructive player in the region.<sup>36</sup>

It is in U.S. and Japanese interests to show the broader region that they are capable of working with China, who is generally seen to be a positive contributor to regional affairs, particularly in Southeast Asia. Trilateral cooperation would be heartily welcomed in this subregion, which is often frustrated by China-Japan and China-U.S. competition. Low-hanging fruit for trilateral cooperation and/or coordination includes environmental stewardship, Myanmar's political and economic development, and regional connectivity.

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#### 5. Be confident and ambitious

While effort should be made to support transparency and inclusivity, alliance managers should also be ambitious as they craft an agenda for U.S.-Japan cooperation, and they should be confident based on the fact that the U.S.-Japan alliance and the values and norms it represents are widely supported throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

As such, the United States and Japan should continue to unabashedly stand up for the liberal international order that has undergirded regional peace and prosperity for decades. While it needs to evolve to keep up with the times—including by integrating China as a leading player—order based on law and norms remains popular and essential. The United States and Japan should also unapologetically promote environmental and labor standards and political liberalism and openness, which are also popular and necessary to our shared future. Finally, while finding ways to work and be transparent with China, Beijing must also never have a veto over the United States and Japan on national security matters, such as military cooperation to counter North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile programs.

# Conclusion

The rhetoric of then-candidate Trump on the campaign trail sowed enormous concerns in Tokyo that the United States might seek to cut a deal with China that would fundamentally undermine Japanese interests. Therefore, it is urgent that President Trump and his team frankly engage counterparts in Tokyo on how to manage this trilateral dynamic. While the future seems more unpredictable than ever, developing a clear strategic framework for relations with China and Japan, undergirded by strong principles, is essential early work for the Trump administration.

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