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US-Japan-X: The Crucial Network For Regional Cooperation

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Japan's evolving geopolitical landscape continues to provide considerable opportunities, including the strong economic relationships that Tokyo has built with countries in Southeast Asia, India and beyond. Despite this, the region is going through an uncertain and potentially volatile period with a host of critical security challenges in Japan's vicinity.

In order to both enhance Japan's national security and mitigate regional security challenges, the US-Japan alliance remains the key ingredient and "cornerstone" for stability. This fact has been true for decades – under various administrations and political parties from both sides. However, as the geostrategic context becomes more fragile – it has become increasingly clear that the US-Japan alliance should not operate as a "fishbowl" and should instead serve as the central base and facilitator for regional cooperation. It should be clear that this regional cooperation – with allies, partners and multilateral institutions – should not be exclusive to any state in the region and also should be purposed on the provision of public goods to the region.

From Obama to Trump – Networked Security:

From a foreign policy viewpoint in Asia, US President Barack Obama's legacy is yet to be determined as the trajectory and long-term success of his signature "rebalance" or "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific still needs to undergo scrutiny as the region continues to evolve. Under his tenure, the United States has invested considerable time and capital in the nourishment of security networks involving its allies and key partners in the region. As Ash Carter has recently written in *Foreign Affairs*, "The principled security network is not developing in response to any particular country. Rather, it demonstrates that the region wants cooperation, not coercion, and a continuation of, not an end to, decades of peace and progress. More important, since this network is not closed, nations can more easily work together."⁽ⁱ⁾

One of the central drivers behind Obama's "rebalance" was the more tangible integration of core US interests – in economic and security terms – with those of US allies and emerging partners in the region. The idea was to look at relations beyond the crude historical lens of the "hub and spokes" model – which approached Washington's engagement in the region through a series of seemingly disconnected bilateral alliances and partnerships. In effect, the real vision was the creation of a lasting blueprint – or strategy – for US engagement in Asia as a whole, rather than its relations with individual countries.

The most obvious and longstanding examples of this networked cooperation have been on display through the US-Japan-South Korea and the US-Japan-Australia trilateral mechanisms. The grouping of Washington, Tokyo and Seoul is perhaps the most critical trilateral from a near-term strategic lens – as provocations continue to pile up from a volatile and aggressive regime in Pyongyang. Unfortunately the trilateral has also been plagued by persistent historical tensions between Japan and South Korea, which often have impacted the effectiveness of joint cooperation. The US-Japan-Australia network – formalized through a Trilateral Strategic Dialogue – meanwhile has been the smoothest in terms of a desire to press forward on shared interests in the region – namely the freedom of navigation and adherence to international law in the maritime domain.

By contrast, the US-Japan-India relationship has a lower profile and its accomplishments and progress has been less notable to this point. Despite this, there is a growing belief in Washington that India remains a key ingredient to its principled security network approach. And, while there remains considerable room for improvement in the US-India security relationship, Delhi remains one of the most significant defense partners for Washington with multiple joint exercises and exchanges. In a sense, the US-India relationship already has many of the hallmarks of a traditional alliance – minus the security guarantees – but lacks political commitment.

Under the Donald Trump administration, there is uncertainty on how the US might position itself in this multi-varied security web. During the presidential election campaign, Trump made some concerning statements regarding the value of alliances and questioned the equity in burden sharing between the US and its allies. Some of these comments were directed specifically at Washington's relations with key Asian allies, including Japan and South Korea.

Opportunities to Push Forward Cooperative Security:

The volatility in the region underpins the need for Japan to mobilize the diplomatic capital it has amassed under Abe's tenure – in order to push forward the rules-based liberal order. Abe should look to drive forward the expansive – but still relatively nascent – security network in the region made up of several US allies and partners. Specifically, Abe should take it on himself to stress the importance of these trilaterals (such as the US-Japan-Australia; US-Japan-India; US-Japan-ROK, etc.) to Trump.

That said, it is important to not overstate some of the campaign rhetoric thus far from Mr. Donald Trump. While it is clear that Trump will not pursue US involvement in the Trans-Pacific Partnership, there is much uncertainty on the rest of his foreign policy leanings in East Asia. Moreover, Abe made a shrewd calculation by visiting Trump in New York soon after his election victory last year. During their initial meeting, Abe impressed upon Trump the importance of the US-Japan alliance. Therefore, while Trump may have a preference towards bilateral alliances and a “transactional approach” to security relationships – it remains premature and unrealistic to conclude that the US will back Asia's overlapping security networks.

For these reasons, it will be important for Japan and the US to work together as the leaders on regional security. Essentially the US-Japan alliance should be used as the cornerstone or

starting point for security networks in the region and increasingly this cooperation is intended to provide and protect more “public goods” in the region – such as free and open sea lanes, fast and effective response to natural disasters and common approaches to transnational crime, terrorism and counter proliferation.

In order to meet these challenges and promote a coherent regional approach, the US-Japan alliance should look at four different paths to nurturing the current security network in Asia. First, the alliance should look at enhancing its own capabilities, purpose and scope. Second, Tokyo and Washington should increase their reliance on branching out through trilateral groupings – such as the dialogues with Australia, India and South Korea. Third, the alliance should look at promoting and coordinating with other Asian-led networks – such as the Japan-India-Australia dialogue and the Japan-ASEAN dialogue. And finally, the US-Japan alliance should continue to place importance and effort towards engaging with the current security architecture in the region, namely the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus and the Shangri-la Dialogue.

⁽ⁱ⁾Ash Carter, “The Rebalance and Asia-Pacific Security: Building a Principled Security Network,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2016.

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