

The Trump Hurricane and U.S.-Japan Relations

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In the opening week of the Trump administration, two contradictory developments occurred. The first was President Trump's flurry of 20 executive orders, including a highly controversial temporary ban on immigrants and refugees to the United States from seven majority Muslim nations. That particular order sparked protests in airports across the United States, prompted formal protests from over 100 career State Department diplomats, and led to the White House firing the acting Attorney General when she refused to implement the order. Markets, which had been rising on the hopes of a pro-business Trump administration, suddenly plummeted with the prospect of chaotic politics and the recognition that President Trump might also implement some of the mercantilist and nativist anti-business pledges he had made as a candidate.

That same week, Secretary of Defense James Mattis announced that he would shortly make

his first overseas visit to Japan and Korea. The Pentagon spokesman emphasized that Mattis was not going to make demands or announce new policies, but instead to work on strengthening defense cooperation in the face of common challenges from China and North Korea. Where the President's executive orders sowed confusion and shook U.S. allies, the Mattis trip provided reassurance and continuity. Observers in Japan must be anxious to know which of these two developments reflects the real Trump administration – and what the future holds for U.S.-Japan relations.

Consider first how one might characterize the “real” character of the Trump administration. The honest answer is that even the most experienced political observer in Washington cannot say with confidence what will happen with this inexperienced, brazen and deliberately unpredictable President over the next four years.

The kind of highly transactional bluster that worked before for businessman and candidate Trump has never worked in the office of the President, where relationships and credibility are indispensable. To be sure, there have been anti-establishment reformer presidents before, including Andrew Jackson, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Each of those presidents came into office representing parts of the country that felt left behind by the East Coast elite. Each of them also had somewhat chaotic transitions into power, as populist ideas collapsed in the face of political and economic realities; inexperienced ideological crusaders proved incompetent at governing; and crises forced the President to shake up the White House and the cabinet and put in place political veterans who could advance what was left of the President's governing agenda. The best of those outsider Presidents, like Reagan, were able to recover and implement significant economic and security policy reforms that strengthened the U.S. economy and U.S. alliances. Others, like Carter, never fully recovered.

If this precedent holds true again, then one would expect a coalition of conservative pragmatism to form among key cabinet secretaries, business leaders, Republican leaders in Congress, and Vice President Mike Pence. The action-forcing event could be an economic, political or security crisis that forces President Trump to put in place a more disciplined message and policy-making process. The President himself might remain unpredictable and prone to sudden Twitter broadsides, but most of the world would learn to take these in stride to some extent.

What is profoundly different this time around is that core advisors to President Trump are intent on destroying the establishment, not just reforming it, while President Trump himself has no clear worldview like Reagan or Jackson so much as a core conviction about his own ability to "win" in every deal he encounters. The real question then becomes whether the pragmatists in the cabinet and Congress can shape foreign, defense and economic policies that allow the President to claim he is "winning" by strengthening the military, economic deregulation and alliance relationships... and whether the hardcore anti-establishment radicals within the White House are coopted in that approach or marginalized.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is in a much stronger position to help shape this coming contest than any other leader in the world, with perhaps the exception of Britain's Theresa May. The political risks at home for Mr. Abe are not trivial, particularly given Mr. Trump's apparent predilection for surprising his friends with unwelcome tweets (just ask Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto). Nevertheless, the Kantei (Cabinet Office) is right to try to deepen trust with President Trump. The alternative – distancing from the United States – would only weaken Japan's position vis-à-vis China and reduce the prospects that Japan can, with other allies, return Mr. Trump to a more reliable and traditional vision of America's role in Asia and the world.

Japan begins from a solid foundation. Despite candidate Trump's anachronistic Japan-bashing during the campaign, Japan actually enjoys

unprecedented trust and popularity among the American people and members of Congress. In public opinion polls Japan is ranked the most trusted country in the world after Britain, Canada and (sometimes) Germany. State governors, civil society groups, career diplomats, and military officers are all looking to do more with Japan, not less. Business leaders are also looking again at Japan's prospects under Abenomics.

Prime Minister Abe can also offer positive contributions in all the areas President Trump promised to deliver more for the American people. Mr. Trump wants more manufacturing jobs in the United States – and Japan is the leading investor in the United States for three years running, in addition to being the top job-creator in manufacturing from outside the United States (Britain leads in the service sector, which appears to be of less interest to Mr. Trump).

President Trump also says he wants allies to pay more for their own defense. Japan is increasing its defense budget incrementally and shoulders more cost for stationing U.S. forces than Korea or any individual NATO country. Frankly, it would be good for Japan to do more. On a per capita basis, Japan still ranks with Barbados and Bermuda in defense spending; and unlike those tranquil Caribbean states, Japan lives in a very dangerous neighborhood. But defense spending needs to be put in context. The most important metric of alliance contributions should be output in terms of security provided. With the defense guidelines review, relaxation of the Three Arms Export Principles, and the some right of collective

self-defense, Japan is now poised to be far more joint, interoperable and reliable in a crisis. Those efforts should be accelerated –not to please Mr. Trump, but because North Korea's nuclear and missile programs as well as the Chinese challenge in the East and South China seas are all getting more serious. With a mutual set of milestones to strengthen Japan's role and the alliance itself, Mr. Trump and Mr. Abe can both claim a win.

President Trump is also clearly organizing his Asia policy around pushing back against China in every domain from cyberspace to trade. If the new administration tries to do this unilaterally, it will quickly find itself isolated and outflanked by Beijing. Many on Mr. Trump's team have visions of unilateral moves, but other officials beginning to consider working with Japan on more of a joint strategy. Prime Minister Abe's Kantei has thought through China strategy in a far more comprehensive way than either the outgoing Obama administration or the incoming Trump administration. A deliberate and comprehensive U.S.-Japan strategic dialogue on China would improve the rather simplistic approach being advocated by some of Mr. Trump's advisors now, and would also help open the way for related coordination on issues like regional institutional architecture, where Mr. Trump's advisors have no formed positions yet.

The problem is that Japan cannot take a transactional approach to the U.S.-Japan agenda the way Mr. Trump likely will. It would be a mistake to get into a tit-for-tat negotiation (one in which, for example, Mr. Abe asks for a

commitment that Article V of the security treaty applies to the Senkakus and Mr. Trump responds by demanding greater opening of the Japanese auto market in return). There are certain key features of American leadership in Asia and the world that Mr. Trump seems extremely reluctant to embrace. It was striking, for example, when Prime Minister May of the UK tried to prompt the President to say he was committed to NATO at their first joint press conference. The President appeared to grunt agreement, but the effect was almost counterproductive. Mr. Trump never speaks about shared values with allies or the indispensable role of American leadership in the world. He has declared the Trans Pacific Partnership dead and will tolerate no effort by his cabinet or advisors to bring it back. Efforts to entice him to change his rhetoric on these issues with offers of greater contributions from Japan will not work—at least not now. This was also the hard lesson that the Mexican President learned.

Prime Minister Abe would be better off laying the groundwork for the recalibration in American foreign policy that many expect (or hope) will happen after the first year or two. There is little evidence that the American people want weaker alliances, protectionism, or a reduced U.S. role in the world. Polls all point in a different direction. However, enough voters were indifferent to Mr. Trump's attack on these pillars of America's role in the world that he was able to win the electoral college vote and become president. Just as the DPJ (Democratic Party of Japan) came into power in 2009 on a simple pledge of "Seiken kotai (Change government)" —Mr. Trump won on a platform of

punishing the establishment and showing strength. Like the DPJ's early supporters, most Trump voters did not care about his specific policies per se. Ultimately, the DPJ attacked the establishment, struggled with internal contradictions, and failed to do more than remove the LDP (Liberal Democratic Party). Still, the party did adjust, but it took some time. The Hatoyama government failed spectacularly, Kan muddled through, and Noda finally established a reasonably effective and pragmatic government. The lesson is that these kinds of political "revolutions" do not turn around on a dime. Politicians who win on "change" are the most resistant to changing themselves when their assumptions prove wrong. Yet all the fundamentals about the U.S.-Japan alliance were still there during the DPJ years—and they are also very strong in the United States today.

Japan would do well to make the alliance work well. More and more of the Trump team will come to appreciate and depend on this. And even if the historical pattern is broken and the early weeks of chaos in the administration become the norm, the groundwork will be in place to continue the strong upward trajectory of U.S.-Japan cooperation further down the road.