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2016

Bhubhindar, S., & Kei, K. (2016). The Rise of Trump and Its Global Implications – Impact on US-Japan Alliance. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 281). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/84252>

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The Rise of Trump and Its Global Implications

Impact on US-Japan Alliance

By Bhubhindar Singh and Kei Koga

Synopsis

President-elect Trump has had some strong words against America's traditional allies, including Japan. Yet the US-Japan alliance is critical for the Trump administration's policy towards East Asia.

Commentary

MANY QUESTIONS will be asked on what Donald J. Trump's policy towards Asia will be, now that he has successfully powered his way into the White House. With his election as the President of the United States on 9 November 2016, a focus will be on the US-Japan alliance that received a special mention in his election campaign.

Trump criticised the US-Japan alliance on several fronts, namely the imbalance in the alliance where Japan will 'watch Sony television' rather than come to defend the US when America is attacked, and Japan's insufficient financial contribution in maintaining the US military presence in Japan. The US-Japan alliance serves not only the US and Japanese interests, but it is also widely perceived as a critical source of stability by most, if not all, states in East Asia. In light of Trump's comments, it is timely to assess what place the US-Japan alliance will have in Trump's strategy towards East Asia.

Centrality of US-Japan Alliance

In light of the contemporary regional and global strategic challenges, the current multi-functional US-Japan alliance continues to serve regional stability. This has

been the case in the past 65 years and will continue to be the case during the Trump administration.

Strategically, the US-Japan alliance will remain critical to the Trump administration's policy towards East Asia. This is based on three factors:

First, the US-Japan alliance, which entails the largest US military deployment in East Asia, has anchored US vital interests in Asia and beyond. It has ensured US political and economic presence in East Asia, its rapid response capacity to crises such as natural disaster, and US power projection capabilities in the world. Japan and other regional states have also long benefitted from the stable strategic balance and enjoyed economic prosperity.

Second, the development of the US-Japan alliance since the 1951 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the two countries and the 1960 revised treaty sharpening a division of labour in its core mission - defence of Japan and the security of East Asia.

In addition to Japan's "host-nation-support" that incurs approximately 75 percent of the expenses for US forces in Japan, this process has enhanced the bilateral military interoperability, facilitated defence diplomacy in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and increased role of the Japanese Self-Defence Forces in assisting the US military in times of peace and conflicts, even in collective self-defence missions.

Third, apart from strengthening US-Japan defence cooperation, the scope of the alliance has evolved to address the challenges of the changing strategic landscape. In its present form, the mission of the alliance aims to address non-traditional security issues, including counter-terrorism, climate change, and piracy, and promotion of rules-based order in the world.

Transcending US and Japanese individual interests has become possible because the alliance framework has nurtured and consolidated shared values and interests through comprehensive interactions between two countries.

Imminent Challenges for Tokyo

There are certain issues that Tokyo would keep a close watch on. The first is the future of the US rebalancing strategy towards Asia that was pushed by the Obama administration. Japan has been a strong supporter of this strategy that has seen increased engagement and anchoring of the US presence in East Asia. For Japan, this strategy is unquestionably crucial in light of China's increasing assertiveness in the maritime domain and North Korea's continuous nuclear and ballistic missile tests.

A question over US commitment, however, re-emerges. Trump argues that the US would strengthen counterterrorism operations, including intensification of air campaign and dispatch of ground troops to defeat ISIS, which increase US commitment to the Middle East, possibly at the expense of rebalancing in Asia.

Additionally, Trump's demand for US allies to increase "financial contribution" would

also increase concerns for not only Japan but also other allies. The worst case scenario is serious disengagement of the US from East Asia, and a reversal of the “US rebalance”.

The second issue is the Trump administration’s approach toward China, which will inevitably have an impact on Japan. Trump’s China policy is still unclear given his predominant focus on economic aspects, particularly trade imbalance and currency manipulation. Despite his strong words against China during the campaign, Trump’s background as a businessman might steer him to strengthen US-China relations to boost the US economy – strategic overture that might result in Japan’s weakened position in the US strategy in East Asia.

The third issue is Trump’s opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that was signed in February 2016 by 11 countries. Abe expended much political capital to not only participate in the TPP process but also to successfully ratify the TPP in the National Diet. For Abe, the TPP was going to be an important boost for the Japanese economy, which has not recovered as quickly as expected under his leadership.

The final issue is Trump’s words that Japan will be ‘better off’ by acquiring nuclear weapons. Admittedly, whether this endorsement of Japan’s nuclearisation to address North Korea’s nuclear threat is a strategic bluff or not, this could be an impetus for China to seriously address the issue of North Korea’s nuclear development. Nevertheless, nuclearisation in Japan remains a controversial issue that goes against the strong anti-nuclear sentiments within Japanese society and its long-held commitment to the international non-proliferation regime.

Preparing for a Trump Administration

The US-Japan alliance will nevertheless remain the core of America’s strategy towards Asia under the Trump administration. Trump himself admitted that it is not necessary for the US to walk away from the alliance.

However, it is important that Tokyo and the Trump team meet as soon as possible to discuss and reaffirm the mutual interests between the two countries and maintain the bilateral cooperation that has been a positive force in maintaining regional stability for more than six decades.

In light of this, Abe’s quick arrangement of a stopover in New York on his way to the APEC Summit in Peru 19-20 November 2016 to meet Trump, along with the despatch of his special adviser on security issues, Katsuyuki Kawai, to meet Trump’s aides are excellent moves on the part of Japan to reaffirm the Abe-Trump partnership for the next four years.

Campaign promises in the US are often reversed after real policy issues and actions are decided. Trump’s foreign policy team has yet to be announced, and his real policy emphasis, domestic or international, is hard to predict. This is why many feel uneasy about the future of the global and regional strategic balance under a Trump administration.

However, this is also an opportune time for US allies and partners, such as Japan, to

begin a dialogue, so as remind each other of the shared interests in maintaining a regional order that is favourable to both Japanese and American geopolitical and geoeconomic interests.

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