



ALLIANCE POLICY COORDINATION BRIEF

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Managing Risks and Opportunities for the U.S.-Japan Alliance Through Coordinated China Policy

Shin Kawashima, Mataka Kamiya, and James L. Schoff

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China Risk and China Opportunity for the U.S.-Japan Alliance

How should the risks and opportunities presented by a continually rising, increasingly self-assertive China be addressed? This is a pressing issue for the international community, particularly for the United States and Japan, whose alliance has proactively helped form and maintain the liberal, rules-based international order for the past several decades.

To enhance mutual understanding and encourage effective policymaking, the Japan Forum on International Relations (JFIR) and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace have convened a small group of U.S. and Japanese scholars to examine the risks and opportunities accompanying China's ascendance. This group includes China specialists, alliance experts, and authorities on trade and security issues in the Asia Pacific.

Led by Mataka Kamiya and James L. Schoff, the group has conducted research and facilitated dialogue since April 2017 through private roundtables and public symposia that seek to further U.S.-Japan cooperation and coordination on China policy. The project examines different perspectives between the alliance members and discusses ways in which Washington and Tokyo can effectively respond to China's rise. An accompanying series of policy briefs explores various China-related risks and opportunities for the U.S.-Japan alliance in the areas of regional and international order, trade and technology, security, and foreign relations. To learn more about the project, [click here](#).

JFIR, together with the project's U.S. team members, wish to thank the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership respectively for their generous support, without which this project would not have been possible.

—Mataka Kamiya and James L. Schoff, Project Leaders and Co-editors

Policy Brief Series:

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The United States and Japan share common perceptions toward China and East Asia, similar goals, and common approaches to addressing regional issues. However, the geopolitical contexts of their respective relationships with China are different, and perception or policy gaps sometimes crop up. Both countries need to recognize this possibility and protect against the potential negative impacts.

Perceptions of China

Japanese perceptions have become so negative that more than **80 percent** of the Japanese public does not feel any affinity toward China. At the same time, more than 80 percent of them still view the Japan-China relationship and its future development as important. Behind this dichotomy lies the two countries' proximity as neighbors and deep economic interdependence. Many Japanese people seem to believe that, although China represents a potential threat to their country's security, Tokyo should maintain a certain level of good relations with Beijing in light of its own national interests. Public opinion generally supports Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's ongoing efforts to improve the country's relations with China.

On the other hand, U.S. views of China have deteriorated drastically over the last few years. This trend was most clearly symbolized by the **speech** delivered by U.S. Vice President Mike Pence at the Hudson Institute in October 2018, in which he defined the U.S.-China rivalry not only in military and economic terms but also in terms of values and ideology. He also emphasized the administration's firm determination to prevail in that competition.

With the confrontation between the United States and China intensifying, Washington and Tokyo both are fully determined to resist China's increasing military assertiveness, including its encroachment in others' maritime space. However, many Japanese observers have a sizable objection to adopting a purely confrontational posture toward China on matters of economics and nontraditional security. In particular, there are strong concerns in Japan that the U.S.-China confrontation in the high-tech sector could have negative effects on supply chains between Japan and China. Meanwhile there is some skepticism in the United States over the Abe administration's recent efforts to improve relations with China. Unless Washington takes a milder approach that

eschews zero-sum competition in favor of a form of broader coexistence with Beijing in the areas of economics and nontraditional security, there could be discordance between the United States and Japan when it comes to addressing China-related issues.

Competing or Compatible Visions?

While the United States and Japan seem to share similar views of China's push to invest in infrastructure across Eurasia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the two countries' views on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) differ in subtle ways. FOIP refers to the allies' regional foreign policy vision for Asia that seeks to maximize information sharing and all countries' access to regional benefits based on rules equally applied to all parties. (This entails an open, rules-based system rather than a more restrictive order dominated by a few powerful countries.) Whereas U.S. policymakers tend to discuss FOIP in terms of checking China with an emphasis on security issues, the Japanese government has been balancing this military angle with the possibility of coordination between FOIP and the BRI in terms of economics and nontraditional security. While the FOIP concept is open to a wide range of interpretations and forms of implementation going forward, the United States and Japan should avoid giving the impression to China and other countries concerned that there are large discrepancies in their interpretations of FOIP. The two allies need to continue aligning their perceptions and coordinating their policies on this front.

Besides, Japan strongly hopes for continued U.S. engagement in Asia. Tokyo is focused on the prospects of U.S. involvement in regional international frameworks such as the East Asia Summit and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. But given that U.S. President Donald Trump did not attend the East Asia Summit or the APEC forum in November 2018, the prospects of U.S. engagement in Asia are becoming increasingly uncertain. This state of affairs may lead to discrepancies between the allies' respective attitudes toward China.

The Korean Peninsula

There also have been concerns in Japan about a possible perception gap between Washington and Tokyo on North Korea. For example, many Japanese observers worry that the United States, which

has made particularly strong objections to North Korea's long-range ballistic missiles, does not perceive Pyongyang's short-range and medium-range missiles to be as threatening as Tokyo does. Japan's concerns grew in June 2019 as mainstream U.S. media outlets [reported](#), in the wake of the third—abruptly held—U.S.–North Korea meeting at Panmunjom, that the Trump administration might consider settling for negotiating a nuclear freeze, which would stop further production of more nuclear weapons but leaves North Korea's current nuclear arsenal intact.

The United States and Japan, as well as other concerned countries, need to align their perceptions of North Korea, so they can handle matters in accordance with United Nations Security Council resolutions and other relevant international agreements. Policy coordination between Tokyo and Washington is also essential for keeping Beijing committed to North Korean denuclearization. Yet while U.S. experts on East Asian security understand Japan's concerns, it is unclear to what extent the Trump administration recognizes them and factors them into its decisionmaking.

A Vision of Networked Regional Security

During the Cold War, the United States and its allies in the Western Pacific established a so-called hub-and-spokes security architecture. Unlike North Atlantic Treaty Organization members, U.S. allies in Asia are not united by their own alliances with other U.S. partners. This situation remains unchanged. Washington and Tokyo can only build a multilateral network of security relationships covering both the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean under the FOIP banner by involving the existing bilateral hub-and-spokes system. To do so, the United States and Japan need to communicate well and coordinate policy on a broad range of regional issues.

For example, in developing a FOIP vision, the United States has sought to strengthen its commitment to Taiwan including in the military domain. However, this approach does not automatically strengthen Japan's security involvement in Taiwan. What matters is to what extent the United States and Japan can agree on where Taiwan should be placed in the security aspect of the FOIP framework and how it should be linked to the U.S.-Japan alliance.

The same is true of trilateral security relations between Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul. The cooperative framework among the United States, Japan, and South Korea is basically composed of two bilateral alliances—the one between Washington and Tokyo and the one between Washington and Seoul—with the United States as a hub. Japan and South Korea are not allies, although they engage in a certain level of security cooperation. So where to position South Korea in the security aspect of the FOIP concept is also an open question.

Because U.S. allies in Asia are not united by their own security partnerships, when the United States and Japan cooperate with other U.S. allies in the region to address China-related issues, the onus falls on the United States to encourage coordination. Yet U.S. policy coordination with Japan is vital for successful implementation and cannot be effective if the United States makes unilateral decisions such as using its military to pressure China vis-à-vis Taiwan.

At present, it is particularly indispensable that the United States play such a role, if Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul are willing to enhance security cooperation, including in response to China's resurgence. At the same time, a crucial hurdle to overcome is the poor Japan–South Korea relationship, which is in its worst shape since the two sides concluded a treaty back in 1965. In the meanwhile, the mark of success will continue to be how closely the United States, Japan, and other regional partners can align their views and harmonize their policies in response to China's resurgence.

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