



Former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe, one of the few world leaders who maintained a good personal relationship with US President Donald Trump.

Reconstructing Japan's diplomatic strategy

HITOSHI TANAKA

THE intensifying US–China rivalry is forcing Japan to reconsider its strategy to secure peace and prosperity in the region. This offers Japan an opportunity to use its diplomatic, economic and security advantages, working with the United States and other partners, to foster China's transformation into a constructive regional stakeholder.

The United States is bound to question Chinese Communist Party

(CCP) intentions as China's economic and military capabilities grow, demonstrated by its assertive maritime activities, increasing influence through the Belt and Road Initiative and 'sharp power' intrusions through cyber and industrial espionage. The imposition of a national security law in Hong Kong has undermined the 'one country, two systems' model. There is a risk that events will boil over in flashpoints like Hong Kong, Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Yet the confrontation should not

be characterised as a new Cold War. Economic decoupling is taking place to a limited extent in high-tech trade and investment as the United States worries that China's state capitalism, which is effective at developing high-tech industries, will bolster its military capabilities. But unlike during the Cold War, the deep economic interdependence between the United States and China in a globalised world cannot be destroyed without fatally undermining the sustainability of both countries' economies.

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So the question is how best to manage US–China rivalry to prevent fatal instability in the region.

Japan has been expanding its security role in the region since the end of the Cold War. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US–Japan alliance was reaffirmed through the 1996 US–Japan Joint Security Declaration. To support US regional engagement, Japan established new legal frameworks and expanded the roles and missions of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF). Japan has also expanded its security cooperation with US allies and partners like Australia, India and ASEAN nations.

Japan and the United States have deepened their cooperation in regional multilateral forums. For Japan, ASEAN+3 was insufficient to mitigate regional uncertainty as Japan and South Korea were the only economically advanced democracies in the grouping. Japan moved to expand participation to the ASEAN+6, and the current ASEAN+8 grouping that now forms the basis of the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, including Australia, New Zealand, India, and the United States and Russia as well as China, Japan and South Korea.

Yet in just over three years, US President Donald Trump has damaged 25 years of progress on regional cooperation. The Trump administration has retreated from multilateralism, undermining the credibility of the United States as a leader. It withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which the United States championed as a pillar of its rebalance to Asia and as a mechanism for building a rules-based order.

As well, the Trump administration has failed to articulate alternative strategies for regional cooperation. Trump has also undermined US

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alliance relationships due to his misunderstanding of US forward deployment strategy. He considers a US military presence to be a favour to host countries, whereas forward deployment enables the United States to maintain power-projection capabilities, protect its vital interests in an economically dynamic Asia and sustain its status as a Pacific power. Trump's narrow-minded demands that allies make exorbitant increases in host-nation support payments, and his implicit threats to abandon alliances, are hurting alliance relationships and the long-term influence of the United States in the Asia Pacific.

Transforming China into a constructive regional stakeholder appears ever more tricky. China has become increasingly aggressive since 2010 after its GDP overtook Japan's to become second-highest in the world. It uses government aid programs as a strategic tool, as with the Belt and Road Initiative and its 'mask diplomacy'.

Under President Xi Jinping, China seems to have abandoned Deng Xiaoping's precept for China to hide its capabilities and bide its time. Xi seems to calculate that economic growth—though without

political liberalisation—is essential to maintain the legitimacy of the CCP. He also seeks to prevent any domestic political dissent, both within the CCP and among the public, showing a willingness to use coercive measures as well as authoritarian surveillance technology and social control systems.

But with the right strategy, there is an opportunity to forge cooperation with China. When China realises that continued economic advancement is impossible without further cultivating interdependence with the world, it may feel compelled to soften its external posture. The CCP will need to think carefully about whether it can survive the entrenchment of US–China confrontation. Fostering China’s recognition of its need to cooperate with advanced democracies for the sake of its stable economic advancement may be the only strategic pathway to shift China’s attitude and realise regional peace and stability.

Japan needs a joint strategy with the United States to transform China into a constructive regional stakeholder. Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was one of the few world leaders who maintained a good personal relationship with Trump. After Abe’s sudden resignation in August 2020, Japan must leverage this partnership, foster US understanding that intensifying rivalry with China risks the sustainability of the US economy and stability in the Asia Pacific, and lay out a strategic map for joint cooperation. This map should include three key elements.

First, Japan and the United States must demand that China respect transparency and the rule of law in Hong Kong, which has existed based on British common law under the ‘one country, two systems’ model. The erosion of transparency and the rule of law risks destroying Hong Kong’s



Police fire tear gas at protesters in Hong Kong in July 2020. ‘Artificial’ application of security laws could deter foreign capital and dissuade international companies from using the city as a gateway to China.

free market system. If China applies the law in Hong Kong in artificial circumstances, international firms will be reluctant to keep foreign capital there and use it as a gateway to doing business on the mainland.

Second, Chinese military provocations must be deterred. US–Japan security cooperation must be maintained and strengthened so that the alliance continues to be the central pillar underwriting regional stability. Meanwhile, the United States and Japan should continue to deepen multilayered security cooperation with other partners, including Australia, India, ASEAN nations and South Korea.

Third, regular participation in regional dialogues by all is essential to return the United States to multilateralism and to engage positively with China. Regional forums are critical to maintain dialogue, prevent misunderstandings, bolster confidence-building and deepen cooperation in shared areas of interest. It also cultivates a rules-based order underpinned by a mutually beneficial commitment to shared regional peace and prosperity. The United States

and Japan should coordinate their dialogue with China on sensitive issues that multilateral forums might fail to adequately cover in more discreet bilateral and trilateral settings.

Debate in Japan over its approach on China is at a critical juncture. Discussion within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party about when to reschedule Xi’s state visit, postponed from April due to COVID-19, and arguments by some that it should be cancelled due to the situation in Hong Kong, misses the bigger strategic picture. Now is the time for Japan to develop a new joint strategy with the United States to navigate the deepening uncertainty surrounding a post-COVID-19 regional order that is focussed on ameliorating US–China confrontational postures and recommitting the region to shared peace and prosperity. **EAFO**

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