

Trump's mistreatment of Japan could backfire



By [TENZIN TOPDEN](#) APRIL 26, 2018 3:11 PM (UTC+8)

After US President Donald Trump suggested in mid-April that he would consider rejoining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), Japan immediately welcomed the announcement. But this bout of halfhearted interest was short-lived. Trump sent a tweet on April 17 [saying](#) that while South Korea and Japan wanted the US to re-enter the TPP, he did not like the deal, and that he preferred bilateral deals that are “more efficient, profitable, and better for [American] workers.”

In what seems to be Trump's obliviousness to the growing strains in the US-Japan relationship, at a press conference with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Mar-a-Lago resort, Trump repeatedly [praised](#) Chinese President Xi Jinping for “fighting for China,” and described Beijing's actions toward North Korea as “terrific.” His feelings toward Abe were much more muted.

This public humiliation of the Japanese prime minister follows a more surprising decision by the Trump administration in March not to exempt Japan from US metal import tariffs, a privilege it granted to other trading partners such as Australia and South Korea. As a nation that is described as a linchpin in US foreign policy in Asia, Japan deserves much better.

At a time when the US seems to be relinquishing its leadership role in Asia, Japan has been steadfastly working to maintain the robust yet fragile order in the region. From strengthening multilateral institutions to forging security

partnerships with new friends like India, Japan has become a leading advocate for a strong rules-based security and economic order in Asia.

Since 1945, Japan has played a secondary role to the US in stabilizing Asia's power dynamics. But with the change in American strategic posture coinciding with China's rise in the Pacific Rim, Japan finds itself at the forefront of defending the region's security and economic interests.

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In recent years, this upgraded role has been most clearly seen with Japan's growing strategic relationship with India. The newfound partnership has manifested itself in several recent policies such as the India-Japan civil nuclear agreement, Japan's [record](#) single-year development aid of US\$1.4 billion to India, and a possible \$1.3 billion military-aircraft [deal](#) between the two countries.

Though such policies have yet to be translated into a coherent and consistent strategy, Japan has committed to seeing them through. It has already taken the driver's seat to push forward the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and shape its institutionalization.

Most recently, Japan led the efforts to revive the TPP, now called the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). More ambitiously, in an effort to offer a cheaper alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, Japan is cooperating with India to create the

Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), a project aimed at propelling growth and investment in Africa and South and Southeast Asia.

Japan is also looking to build a presence in other parts of the world where the US has also threatened to retreat from. Abe visited six Baltic and Eastern European countries in January to garner support for the trade deal between his country and the European Union, making him the [first](#) sitting Japanese leader to visit these countries.

Therefore, as the US under President Trump has adopted a policy of disengagement and isolationism, Japan has remained steadfast in its strategies of engagement.

Despite embarking on such a global endeavor, Abe's inability to persuade Trump to take into account Japanese interests in US trade strategy and North Korea talks could not have come at a worse time for the prime minister, who is facing mounting pressure at home.

Abe facing challenges at home

Domestically, amid two political scandals that saw his approval ratings [plunge](#), the prime minister has been focusing heavily on lifting the economy out of a quarter-century of stagnation. But his mix of economic policies – known as Abenomics – aimed at spurring inflation and growth is being met with several structural challenges: an aging and shrinking workforce and an external demand-driven economic model that is highly susceptible to geopolitical changes.

Moreover, these challenges are coupled with factional infighting within the prime minister's own party, and he could very well lose his prime ministership ahead of the party leadership election in September.

And while no potential successor will break up the US-Japan alliance, Trump's mischaracterization of the two countries' relationship will make it increasingly difficult for Tokyo to resist questioning the viability of Washington's friendship.

Already, Japan is seeking to improve relations with America's strategic competitors. On April 16, China and Japan [resumed](#) their high-level economic dialogue after an eight-year hiatus. Abe is also [seeking](#) a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

To offset these challenges and shore up his domestic standing, Abe knows that he has to play a stronger foreign-policy hand. However, Trump's decision to meet with Kim without consulting the Japanese leadership and his failure to exempt Japan from the steel and aluminum tariffs have weakened instead of strengthening the prime minister's position, thus throwing his political future into further doubt.

Japan, by virtue of hosting US military troops and bases, continues to face varying degrees of military threat from both China and North Korea. Yet it has to worry about getting caught in the crossfire of US-China trade conflict on the one hand, and filling the vacuum left by the US on the other.

With North Korea now claiming to possess nuclear technology capable of striking the US mainland, and authoritarian governments and movements challenging the liberal world order, US-Japan cooperation is more important than ever. As the limits of American power become more apparent, the US

needs to bring like-minded countries such as Japan ever more closely together to pursue common goals and address common challenges, not drive them further away. President Trump must seriously value and respect Japan's friendship.



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