Tokyo and Seoul are indisputably Washington’s two most important allies in Asia. They are not only central to America’s security architecture for the region, they are also important economic partners and share common values such as democracy and a commitment to the rule of law. And yet the prospect of a deep and effective trilateral relationship among the three countries has proved elusive. Is there a path forward?

What’s Needed to Bring the US, Japan and South Korea Closer Together

Hard to Align

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A US Perspective on Japan and South Korea Grapple with Trump’s Foreign-Policy Uncertainty

By Daniel Bob

No relationships are more crucial to stability in Northeast Asia than those of the US with Japan and with South Korea. While the rise of China in recent decades and North Korea’s continuing development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities have complicated those bilateral relationships, nothing has created as much uncertainty lately in Northeast Asia than the presidency of Donald Trump, writes Daniel Bob.

THE ADVENT of US President Donald Trump’s administration has further polarized the United States, unsettled allies and raised questions about US positions on long-held commitments and policies. As of this writing, a little more than one month since the new president took office, protests have erupted across the US, while Trump’s approval ratings have sunk to historic lows for a new administration; his national security advisor, Michael Flynn, has resigned over misleading Vice President Mike Pence regarding discussions he had with Russia’s ambassador to the US. The president has months to go before fully assembling personnel for his administration — he has more than 4,000 political appointments to make, with more than 1,200 of those requiring Senate confirmation — and limited options in terms of experienced personnel for key foreign-policy appointments. The dearth of political appointees in senior foreign policy roles has contributed to the volatility in the positions that Trump has taken so far on important foreign-policy matters. However, to some degree, he may believe that volatility confers benefits in international relations.

In a major foreign-policy speech he gave as a candidate in April 2016, he said, “We must as a nation be more unpredictable. We are totally predictable. We tell everything. We’re sending troops, we tell them. We’re sending something else, we have a news conference. We have to be unpredictable. And we have to be unpredictable, starting now.”

He has already demonstrated that unpredictability, beginning with a phone call with Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen in early December 2016, the first such contact between leaders of the US and Taiwan in the 37 years since US recognition of the People’s Republic of China. The call led to concerns over the direction of US policy toward Taiwan, which were exacerbated by comments Trump made a week later: “I don’t know why we have to be bound by a ‘one China’ policy unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade.”

Trump then abruptly reversed himself on February 9 in a phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping, saying he “agreed, at the request of President Xi, to honor our ‘one China’ policy.”

It is a sobering situation. “The comments that he has made about foreign policy do not seem to be consistent or coherent,” commented former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Richard Lugar. “I’m not certain whether on some occasions he’s given a lot of thought to it and is hoping to get a reaction, or on other occasions, it’s simply from the top of the head, or anger or simple misunderstanding.”

CONCERNS IN SEOUL AND TOKYO

Predicting where the Trump administration will head in its foreign policy generally, or in its relations with Japan and South Korea specifically, is perilous. That said, Secretary of Defense James Mattis made his first overseas trip to South Korea and Japan in early February on what was characterized as an “Asian reassurance tour,” in part to allay concerns over comments that candidate Trump made about Tokyo and Seoul. While rhetorical statements made during campaigns are often abandoned once a candidate enters office, some of Trump’s assertions have caused unease for America’s two Northeast Asian allies. These include his vow to force allies such as Japan and South Korea to shoulder more of the costs of US bases on their territory — and in Japan’s case, significantly more of the operational burdens of the alliance in ways that could go well beyond Japan’s current constitutional constraints — or face an America “prepared to walk” away from its treaty commitments. And in a CNN town hall discussion, he declared, “the world would be better off” if South Korea and Japan had nuclear weapons.

On his trip, Mattis first visited Seoul, and spoke after meetings with the acting president, national security advisor and foreign minister. “The United States stands by its commitments and we stand with our ally, the South Korean people. Our alliance is a testament to mutual commitment and respect and it is a linchpin of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region,” he said. He then added: “America’s commitments to defending our allies and to upholding our extended deterrence guarantees remain ironclad. Any attack on the United States or on our allies will be defeated and any use of nuclear weapons would be met with the response that would be effective and overwhelming.”

In Tokyo, after meetings with the prime minister and defense minister, Mattis said: “the United States remains committed to the defense of Japan under the Treaty of Mutual Security, and we stand ready to enhance our alliance to the benefit of regional peace, prosperity and freedom.” He went on to reaffirm that the US “will continue to recognize Japanese administration of the [Senkaku] islands, and as such article five of the US-Japan Security Treaty applies.” Article 5 of the treaty commits the United States to defend aggression against territories under Japanese administration. During his visit, Mattis thus walked back some of candidate Trump’s more extreme statements regarding South Korea and Japan.

1 www.gallup.com/poll/201617/gallup-daily-trump-job-approval.aspx
2 Trump was denounced by many in the Republican foreign-policy establishment. In March 2016, 121 Republican foreign-policy experts signed a letter pleading to work against his candidacy. In August 2016, 50 former senior officials who had served in Republican administrations signed a letter stating they would not vote for him. On August 15, a smaller group of Republican Asia-policy experts said they would work for Hillary Clinton’s election.
4 www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-china-idUSKBN1400TY
8 30 former senior officials who had served in Republican administrations signed a letter pleading to work against his candidacy. In August 2016, 50 former senior officials who had served in Republican administrations signed a letter stating they would not vote for him. On August 15, a smaller group of Republican Asia-policy experts said they would work for Hillary Clinton’s election.
ABE COMES TO CALL

Less than a week after Mattis’s trip, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe traveled to Washington, DC for a summit with Trump. After the Washington summit, Trump and Abe held a press conference and issued a joint statement reaffirming US-Japan security ties and announcing a new economic dialogue. The statement called the US-Japan Alliance “unshakeable,” reiterated America’s policy of extended nuclear deterrence, restated that the Senkaku Islands are covered by the US-Japan Security Treaty, and opposed the militarization of disputed outposts in the South China Sea.

In terms of economic ties, the statement implicitly endorsed Abenomics with a call for both countries to use a “three-pronged approach of mutually-reinforcing fiscal, monetary and structural policies to strengthen domestic and global economic demand,” announced the launch of an economic dialogue to explore “co-operation across sectors that promote mutual economic benefits,” and — in a nod to the aims of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement, from which the US has withdrawn — endorsed “continued efforts in promoting trade, economic growth and high standards throughout the Asia-Pacific region.”

At Abe’s suggestion, the dialogue will be led by Vice President Mike Pence and Japanese Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Taro Asō. Pence, a former governor of Indiana — in which Toyota, Honda Motor, Subaru and many other Japanese companies have plants and operations — will make a visit to Japan as early as April 2017 to initiate the dialogue.

Trump’s January 23 executive order to withdraw the US from the TPP was a major blow to Abe, who used a fair amount of political capital to have Japan join the negotiations, which he views as a driver of domestic economic reform, a means of setting the trade rules in Asia and a stepping stone to a broader Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP) that would ultimately include China. Trump, however, has opposed multilateral trade agreements such as the TPP and, instead, has insisted on bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs), since he claims he can get a better deal for the US in one-on-one negotiations. Indeed, he appears to be seeking a bilateral agreement with Japan.

Abe, however, appears to believe he might nudge the US back into the TPP rather than launch bilateral negotiations, which he appears to view negatively.10 On February 15, speaking in the Diet, Abe said that although Trump has not asked to start a bilateral negotiation, “We are not afraid of bilateral FTAs. Whether it is bilateral or multilateral, we will firmly protect Japan’s national interest.” Meanwhile, at the end of February, Japan hosted the latest round of negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), an Asian trade agreement that does not include the US. That will be followed in March by a meeting, hosted by Chile, in which the 11 remaining members of the TPP have been invited for ministerial-level talks along with broader trade discussions that will include delegations from South Korea and China.

During the summit with Abe, Trump went out of his way to demonstrate that he had already developed a close personal relationship with the Japanese prime minister, the only foreign leader to meet Trump both after his election and before his inauguration. At the joint press conference on February 10, Trump noted, “We developed a great friendship when we met in New York City, at Trump Tower. We spoke for a long, long period of time. And when I greeted him today

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At the car, I was saying — I shook hands, but I grabbed him and hugged him because that’s the way we feel. We have a very, very good bond — very, very good chemistry.” Japan’s leaders have long sought close personal relationships with American presidents as tangible evidence of the tight bonds between the two countries. Trump, moreover, may have a penchant for basing US relationships with other countries on personal links.16 His “friendship” with Abe may work to quell some of the sentiments that Trump expressed about Japan on trade and economic policy during the campaign.

SOUTH KOREA LEADERLESS

With South Korean President Park Geun-hye out of office following a political scandal, South Korea has no counterpart with whom to forge such a personal relationship. Trump’s admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin suggests that his bonds with South Korea’s next leader may have more to do with “chemistry” than policy alignment between the two countries, so if Park’s replacement later this year is someone who seeks a new approach toward North Korea that is not in line with the US, the impact on US-South Korea relations might be contained.

US policy toward North Korea under Trump has yet to be determined. During the campaign, Trump indicated his willingness to negotiate directly with Kim Jong Un. Though he has not repeated that offer since becoming president, his response to North Korea’s missile launch while he and Abe were having dinner at Mar-a-Lago on February 11 was reserved. After Abe called the launch “absolutely intolerable,” Trump simply said that “the United States of America stands behind Japan, it’s great ally, 100 percent,” failing to mention South Korea. According to one report, however, Trump had a prepared statement that mentioned South Korea, but he dis-
pensed with it and chose to make his own brief comment instead, which some have speculated was meant to leave the door open to US talks with Pyongyang for the first time in 16 years. Meanwhile, Trump’s interest in improved ties with Russia has spilled over into his views on Japan. After the bilateral summit, Abe said on a Japanese television program, “President Trump understands Japan’s [policy] to promote dialogue with Russian President Vladimir Putin to resolve the territorial issue.” Indeed, Trump has consistently spoken about building closer ties to Russia despite Moscow’s efforts to disrupt the US elections — which the American intelligence community has concluded was authorized by Putin to help Trump’s election chances “by discrediting Secretary Clinton and publicly contrasting her unfavorably to him”. Fired national security advisor Michael Flynn’s contact with the Russians further muddied the waters. The FBI is reportedly conducting multiple investigations into contacts Trump’s advisers and associates had with Russia during and after his presidential campaign. Depending on what those investigations reveal, they may have an important influence on the future of Trump’s administration.

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

Trump’s approval ratings are already the lowest ever recorded for a president one month into his tenure, and large-scale protests have erupted across the country. His behavior has led to questions about his fitness for office among Democrats and Republicans alike. His failure to divest himself of his businesses has prompted a lawsuit by a group of legal scholars and experts on presidential ethics, alleging that he is violating the constitution’s emoluments clause. Moreover, the country is already evenly split over whether the president should be impeached, with 46 percent in support and 46 percent opposed. Despite the “reassurance tour” by Mattis and the president’s professed fondness for Abe, Trump’s impulsiveness, grandiosity and uneven relationship with facts do not instill confidence in Japanese or South Koreans. Indeed, the very need for such a reassurance tour demonstrates the degree of apprehension felt by Japan and South Korea over Trump’s commitment to maintaining America’s critical relationships with both countries. Uncertainty in South Korea over its country’s own future leadership and the very real possibility that North Korea will have nuclear-tipped ICBMs and SLBMs in the near future adds another dimension of ambiguity to US relations with both Seoul and Tokyo.

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