Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has made a considerable effort towards forging a personal relationship with President Donald Trump. Over the first term of the Trump Administration, Abe has held multiple high-profile summits with Trump and hosted him in Japan twice last year. Compared to other world leaders, Abe been able to use his personal relationship with Trump to advocate for Japanese interests on various issues such as North Korea and trade, though some question the extent to which the two leaders are aligned on these and other strategic challenges in the Indo-Pacific region.

In this twelfth issue of the Debating Japan newsletter series, the CSIS Japan Chair invited Ms. Ayumi Teraoka, doctoral candidate in security studies at Princeton University, and Ms. Shihoko Goto, deputy director for geoeconomics and senior associate for Northeast Asia at the Wilson Center, to share their perspectives on the Trump-Abe relationship and whether it has advanced Japanese interests.
No foreign leader has closer ties with President Donald Trump than Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Since the 2016 presidential election, the two leaders have met 20 times, played 5 rounds of golf, and had 32 phone calls, at times speaking twice a week. Abe’s efforts to develop a close relationship with Trump have advanced Japanese interests in four fundamental ways.

First, the close and direct line of communication between Abe and Trump has thus far prevented devastating surprises in the U.S.-Japan alliance akin to the “Nixon shock” in the 1970s, a term coined to describe Tokyo’s grievances over being uninformed about Nixon’s visit to China. This is particularly meaningful, given Trump’s unconventional leadership style. He came to Washington expressing disdain for the establishment, distrusting foreign policy “elites” and bureaucracies, and showing little hesitation to tear apart various multilateral agreements signed by previous U.S. administrations. After his inauguration, he left senior positions in the State and Defense departments vacant for an unprecedented period of time. Given the absence of regular bureaucratic processes, close communication with the president himself has helped Tokyo gauge this administration’s management style and policy direction, fostered mutual trust between the two governments, and, at the very least, kept Japanese officials informed of major U.S. policy changes.

Second, Abe’s initiative to foster friendship with Trump has had important symbolic implications, especially in the eyes of third parties. His bold decision to become the first foreign leader to meet then-president-elect Trump the week after the November 2016 election showcased to the rest of the world a new Japan—a Japan that is an active shaper of the U.S.-Japanese relationship rather than a passive player. Abe, who by then had been in office for a total of five years, welcomed Trump with confidence as a friend who awaited him on the world stage. Navigating this transition smoothly also signaled to potential adversaries such as China and North Korea the need for a stable and predictable relationship.

But is preserving the existing bilateral relationship enough? Or has focusing too heavily on appeasing the U.S. president come at a steep price, and actually hindered Japan from pursuing its own long-term interests? Scratching the surface of the Abe-Trump relationship, there are three key obstacles to claiming that Japan’s national interests have been served.

At the top of the list is the relationship is founded on fears and threats, whilst uncertainties continue to persist. The U.S.-Japan trade deal concluded last September has been ballyhooed as a win-win, giving Washington the same access to Japanese markets as the other members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and also averting tariffs against Japanese autos entering the United States. Yet tariffs against Japanese steel and aluminum still remain, while the possibility of punitive action against Japanese automakers is not completely off the table. Meanwhile, on the security front, Trump has downplayed the resumption of North Korea’s missile testing last year despite its direct threats to Japan. The White House has also continued to press for sizeable increases in Japanese spending to keep U.S. troops in the country, even as a clear U.S. regional security strategy against China’s ever-growing military threat.
resilience of the U.S.-Japan alliance. The unwavering capacity and determination in Tokyo and Washington to bolster the alliance, despite changes in leadership and domestic political climate, indicated the strength of the common values and interests that underpin the most important bilateral relationship in the world.

Third, Abe has managed to use his personal relationship with Trump to convince the United States to support his strategy in the Indo-Pacific, while drawing attention to issues of importance to Japan. The Trump administration has adopted the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy—the concept, originally an invention of Abe, that aims to strengthen the network of nations that value freedom, market economy, and the rule of law in the face of growing Chinese power and influence. In response to North Korea’s missile launch in February 2017, during their first summit meeting at Mar-a-Lago, Trump provided a credible reassurance, stating that “the United States of America is behind Japan, our great ally, 100 percent.” And on the issue of abductions, Trump has met twice with the families of Japanese kidnapped by North Korea in the 1970s and 1980s and addressed the issue at the United Nations in 2017. Even when Trump surprised the international community by agreeing to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, Abe secured a promise from Trump that he would push for the release of those 12 Japanese abductees during his meeting with Kim in Singapore.

Finally, Abe’s friendship with Trump deserves credit for having quelled—to a significant degree—candidate Trump’s harsh rhetoric against Japan. Given Trump’s persistently acrimonious attitudes toward America’s European allies, it is easy to forget how much the way Trump speaks about Japan in public has improved. On the campaign trail, Trump regularly criticized Japan, along with Mexico and China, for their unfair trade practices, including currency manipulation, and for free riding on their military alliance with the United States. At times, Trump still laments the U.S.-Japan trade imbalance and asymmetries in the alliance, but he now rarely criticizes Japan’s currency manipulation or the level of burden-sharing, as Japan covers more than 74 percent of U.S. basing costs. And despite Tokyo’s concerns, the first-ever U.S.-Japan bilateral trade deal neither touched on automobile tariffs nor involved a better-than-TPP level of access to the Japanese agricultural market.

Second, even though Japan has stepped up its own commitment to multilateralism and the rule of law, it is still perceived as more of a caretaker, rather than a leader of the international order, that is simply holding the door until Washington is ready to reclaim its position to lead like-minded nations. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Tokyo’s success in ensuring the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement didn’t fall through despite Washington pulling out from the deal. As recently as earlier this month, Defense Minister Taro Kono stated in a CSIS speech that the TPP had been as much a means to strengthen relations amongst allies, adding that the deal needed the United States to rejoin. It is wishful thinking, though, to expect Washington to sign onto the CPTPP any time soon. Even with a leadership change in the United States, wariness about the benefits of free markets cannot be dismissed, and Japan may well be holding the door for naught.

The final drawback of the Abe-Trump relationship is Japan losing the window of opportunity to punch above its weight in the international arena. Tokyo’s real value in a world facing greater anxiety about growing inequalities is its model of resilience. Since the burst of the bubble economy in the early 1990s after nearly four decades of dizzying growth, Japan has been able to keep mass-scale unemployment and homelessness at bay. At the same time, education, health care, and social welfare levels have remained relatively high post-bubble. To be sure, Japanese underemployment and the growing income divide remain significant issues. The sustainability of welfare in the face of a super-graying demography are undeniable realities too. However, Tokyo’s answer has not been to seek immediate cuts to social spending or to slash investments in human capital. In short, Japan’s narrative of being a cautionary tale of economic collapse and steady decline is beginning to change. Rather, the country is emerging as a democracy that is balancing free markets and progressive social spending.

Persisting tensions between Washington and Beijing have made it all too tempting to view the world order through the prism of great power competition, with the two biggest global economies competing to advocate for two disparate models for growth. While Japan remains fully committed to the rules of international engagement led by the United States, it has diverged from the U.S. model by focusing more on investing in human capital and providing a social safety net. Indeed, while progressives in the United States
To be sure, Abe’s friendship with Trump does not mean that he can restrain all of Trump’s penchant for bilateralism or soften all of his bitterness towards U.S. alliance commitments abroad. Trump’s America—like the America of past administrations—will continue to pursue its own national interests. What Abe’s investment has done, however, is to secure a line of communication to shape Trump’s perceptions, enhancing his understanding that a strong relationship with Japan is, in fact, in U.S. interests.

Let’s conclude my side of the argument by asking counterfactual questions: had Abe not invested as much in his personal relationship with Trump as he has over the last three years, would Japan likely have faced a more volatile alliance relationship with the United States? Would such a weakened U.S.-Japan alliance have likely undermined Japanese interests in the face of severe security challenges Japan faces in its neighborhood? If one believes the answers are yes, then the natural response to the original proposition should also be affirmative.

regularly look to Scandinavian countries as models of stable growth, Japan’s ability to remain an anchor of stability despite its economic upheavals may well prove to be a better example to look toward.

The benefits of the personal relationship between Abe and Trump are likely to be short-lived. As he looks to consolidate his legacy as Japan’s longest-serving prime minister, Abe must focus more on securing Japan’s global standing as a country that is resilient to the challenges of the twenty-first century.
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