

Brief Analysis

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Japan Without the United States?

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The world is confronting the shockwaves emanating from the Trump administration. Japan, one of the staunchest allies of the United States, is no exception. The bottom line for Japan is that, in light of the deteriorating security environment surrounding the country, not least involving China, it needs the United States more for its defence. The security treaty between Japan and the United States has constituted the very foundation of Japan's foreign, security, and defence policy for more than seven decades, and the importance of the alliance has been increasing over the past decade or two. This trend is likely to continue in the coming years and decades, irrespective of who sits in the White House. The Japanese and American militaries are in the process of enhancing operational integration. In short, very few political leaders or experts believe that Japan has a viable Plan B – something that could replace the current U.S.-Japan alliance as the core of Japan's defence. It is thus not surprising that there are currently no lively and serious policy debates taking place on Plan B in Japan, representing one of the most remarkable differences between Japan and Europe.

This short article examines the current state of, and challenges facing, the U.S.-Japan alliance under the second Trump administration, by analysing Japanese perceptions of Trump, emerging features of alliance politics under Trump, and finally the possibility of Plan B (or lack thereof) for Japan. The analysis here will be made not least in view of similarities and differences between the situation in Japan and that in Europe. As for Trump 2.0, this article covers the period until September 2025.

1 Japanese Perceptions of Trump – And Inconvenient Realities

While many Japanese are warily watching what the Trump administration is doing, particularly in its foreign and security policy, it still seems that Japanese perceptions of the

Trump administration in overall terms are more relaxed than those in many European countries, including Germany. There are three major reasons for this.

First, the relationship between Japan and the U.S. under the first Trump administration was generally good, at least partly thanks to the excellent personal relationship between Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.¹ Abe was the first foreign leader to visit Trump at Trump Tower in New York just nine days after Trump's surprising election victory in November 2016, which was greatly appreciated, as Trump was under heavy criticism and scepticism from American and international media. Abe managed to forge a warm personal relationship with Trump, which helped strengthen bilateral relations given Trump's highly personalised style of foreign policy. The memory of this remains fresh in the minds of many Japanese. One often hears stories in Japan that “Trump loves Japan” and “he treats Japan more favourably than others,” or simply “Japan is special.” These arguments now sound like wishful thinking rather than a cool-headed analysis of the Trump administration. After Abe was assassinated in July 2022 in Nara while campaigning during the Upper House elections, his admirers continued to argue that relations with the U.S. would have been much better had Abe still been alive or serving as Prime Minister. The fact that Akie Abe, the former Prime Minister's widow, visited Melania and Donald Trump at Mar-a-Lago in December 2024 reinforced the Abe admirers' belief.²

Second, there is a long-held belief in Japan that Republican administrations value alliances more than Democratic ones. From Dwight Eisenhower to Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, Tokyo managed to strengthen the alliance with the U.S. under successive Republican administrations, whereas Barack Obama, for example, was never popular in Japan. This constitutes one of the most striking differences between Japanese and (Western) European perceptions of the U.S. In Germany, France, or the United Kingdom, public approval ratings for Democratic presidents tend to be higher than for Republicans, most notably George W. Bush and

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1 On Japan's relations with the first Trump administration, see Tsuruoka 2018.

2 Jesse Johnson: Akie Abe, widow of slain prime minister, meets with Trump, *The Japan Times*, 16.12.2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/12/16/japan/politics/akie-abe-donald-trump/>.

Donald Trump. While George W. Bush's relations with many countries in Europe were tainted by the Iraq War, his administration managed to forge better relations with Japan and other countries in Asia.³ However, while assuming that the Japanese tendency to prefer the Republican Party remains strong, U.S. foreign policy under Trump 2.0 is certain to be significantly different from the tradition of Republican foreign policy, constituting a serious challenge to Tokyo.

Third, many Japanese believe that Japan is too important to be abandoned. They argue that as Washington shifts its strategic focus to Asia in response to China's increasing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region, the strategic value of Japan as America's biggest ally in the region increases. The National Security Strategy of the United States, released in October 2022 by the Biden administration, designated China as the "only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective" and argued that China was posing "the most consequential geopolitical challenge" to the United States.⁴ The Trump administration shares this basic understanding and seems to be taking an even tougher position toward the challenges posed by China. The Trump administration's "Asia first" rhetoric is widely welcomed in Japan.

Trump 2.0, however, does not seem to be actually implementing an "Asia first" policy. In the first eight months in office, the Trump administration was busy trying to end the war in Ukraine and dealing with the worsening situation in the Middle East, and it did not have much time to engage with the Indo-Pacific region. As of September 2025, Trump has visited Europe five times since his election victory in November 2024. This includes two visits to the UK within two months in mid-2025: a private trip to Scotland in July and a state visit in September at the invitation of King Charles III. Secretary of State Marco Rubio visited Europe six times during the first eight months in office. Neither of them has visited Japan as of July 2025.

What this shows in broader terms is that when the U.S. is busy addressing burning crises in other parts of the world, such as Ukraine or the Middle East involving its ally Israel, Washington cannot allocate much political attention and military resources to the Indo-Pacific.⁵ The fact that the U.S. posture in the Indo-Pacific region is affected by what it needs to do in other parts of the world is not new. Yet,

as American resource constraints become more severe, this sort of regional trade-off becomes more acute. Trump's anticipated shift to the Indo-Pacific will continue to be affected by what takes place in Europe or the Middle East. Tokyo needs to take into account the fact that the U.S. has fifty allies in the world – 31 NATO allies and 19 countries designated as Major Non-NATO Allies (MNNA).⁶ The U.S. may not always be available as an ally ready to help defend Japan.

2 Schadenfreude or Changing Fortunes?

One of the remarkable elements in Japanese perceptions of Trump 2.0 is that there exists a significant gap between those held within the government and those outside. Government officials seem generally more concerned about what could come in the coming years under the second Trump administration, because they have first-hand experience of dealing with Trump 1.0 and what was actually happening back then. While the overall U.S.-Japan relationship was good, a perception reinforced by the excellent personal relations between Trump and Abe as discussed above, things were messier behind closed doors. Abe himself did not have any illusions about Trump and had to explain basic things about the U.S.-Japan alliance from scratch again every time the two met.

During Trump 1.0 and at the start of Trump 2.0, there seems to have been an element of *Schadenfreude* in some quarters in Japan regarding the state of NATO and the transatlantic relationship in general, including U.S.-German relations. Some Japanese officials and experts were saying that German Chancellor Angela Merkel did not know how to deal with Trump and that Abe was doing better. Yet, it seems that many European leaders – most notably NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, Finnish President Alexander Stubb, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz – are adopting what might be called "Abe's approach" to Trump: hugging him close and not leaving him alone. During the first administration and in the first few months of the second administration, President Trump and his team heavily criticised Europe for not shouldering a sufficient security burden. Trump, during the first administration, even called Germany "delinquent," one of the most undiplomatic words ever heard between close allies.⁷ Despite the fact that Japan's defence spending as a

³ Green 2008.

⁴ White House 2022, 8, 11.

⁵ Adam Taylor: Rubio heads to Asia on trip overshadowed by tariffs, Middle East, *The Washington Post*, 08.07.2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/07/08/rubio-asia-trade-war-summit/>.

⁶ U.S. Department of State: *Major Non-NATO Ally Status. Fact Sheet*, 20.01.2025, <https://www.state.gov/major-non-nato-ally-status/>.

⁷ For example, see White House: *Remarks by President Trump Before Marine One Departure*, 29.07.2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives>.



A selfie of Shinzo Abe and Donald Trump, 26 May 2019

percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was lower than that of Germany at that time, Trump did not exert a similar amount of pressure on Japan to spend more on defence. While it is still not clear why Trump treated Germany and Japan differently, some Japanese believe that it was thanks to Abe's successful way of dealing with the U.S. President.

Yet, in a striking turn of fortunes, the Trump administration suddenly started praising Europeans' efforts in increasing their defence spending in mid-2025. Speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, an annual high-level event organised by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth called for Asian allies to follow Europe: "And it's hard to believe, a little bit, after some trips to Europe that I'm saying this – but thanks to President Trump Asian allies should look to *countries in Europe as a new-found example*. NATO members are pledging to spend 5 % of their GDP on defense, *even Germany*. So it doesn't make sense for countries in Europe to do that while key allies in Asia spend less on defense in the face of an even more formidable threat, not to mention North Korea."⁸

Europe has suddenly become an example to be followed. NATO countries' defence spending commitments were later agreed at the alliance's summit in The Hague in June 2025. NATO allies are now committed to spend 3.5 %

of GDP on core defence requirements (traditional defence spending) plus 1.5 % of GDP on defence- and security-related expenditure, including cybersecurity and infrastructure needed for military mobility and other related areas – thus a total of 5 % of GDP.⁹ Hegseth already "conveyed" to Australia's Defence Minister Richard Marles at the Shangri-La Dialogue that the country should increase its defence spending to 3.5 % of GDP "as soon as possible".¹⁰ There have also been some press reports saying that the U.S. is pushing Japan to spend 3.5 % (or 5.0 %) of GDP on defence, while the Japanese government has so far denied that there is such an official request from the U.S. government.¹¹

Given the fact that both the U.S. and Japanese leaders have been arguing that China is a bigger concern or challenge than Russia, and that the security situation in the Indo-Pacific is worse than that in the Euro-Atlantic, one cannot make any plausible argument why Germany needs

gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-marine-one-departure-072920/.

⁸ Italics added. U.S. Department of Defense: *Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore (As Delivered)*, 31.05.2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/article/4202494/remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-the-2025-shangri-la-dialogue-in/>.

⁹ NATO: *The Hague Summit Declaration issued by the NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in The Hague 25 June 2025*, 25.06.2025, para. 3, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Defense: *Readout of Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's Bilateral Meeting With Australia*, 01.06.2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/4202734/readout-of-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseths-bilateral-meeting-with-australia/>.

¹¹ Demetri Sevastopulo/Leo Lewis/Henry Foy: Japan scraps US meeting after Washington demands more defence spending, *Financial Times*, 21.06.2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/53f646e7-b4e7-4bf4-8d5d-7142b4460080>; Jesse Johnson: Japan denies U.S. directly asked it to hike defense spending to 5 % of GDP, *The Japan Times*, 23.06.2025, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/06/23/japan/politics/japan-denies-us-demand-over-defense-spending/>.



In support of *Operation Enduring Freedom*, USS *Seattle* receives fuel from the Japanese fleet support ship *Tokiwa*, 11 May 2002

to spend 3.5 % of GDP on defence but 2.0 % is enough for Japan. That NATO agreed on the 3.5+1.5 % defence pledge will be a potent tool for the Trump administration to push Japan, Australia, and other U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific to aim to reach it.

3 Emerging Features of Alliance Politics Under Trump 2.0

The first eight months of Trump 2.0 have highlighted two features of alliance politics: anti-globalism and disregard for common values. Both are seen as part of the “culture war” in the U.S. domestic context; therefore, the stakes are unusually high compared to normal foreign policy issues.

First, the anti-global position of the Trump administration is based on its fundamental and philosophical opposition to the idea of globalisation. Yet, the fact that U.S. interests – in economic, political and security terms – are by nature global remains intact, forcing Washington to be involved in the war in Ukraine and the conflicts in the Middle East, as discussed above.

In more practical terms of foreign and security policy, the Trump administration seems to possess a general as-

sumption that countries should be focused on the regions in which they are situated – America on the Americas, Europe on Europe, and Japan on Asia. The Trump administration often makes clear that the most immediate security threat facing the U.S. comes from the south; thus, protecting the border with Mexico is the top priority in terms of national security.¹² In a similar vein, Washington is highly sceptical about Europe’s engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, representing a clear departure from the Biden administration’s strong encouragement of Europe’s enhanced security role there.¹³ They believe it makes more sense for Europe to focus on its own continent, so that the U.S. can decrease its burden in this theatre and allocate more resources to the Indo-Pacific, where it faces a bigger challenge from China.

This is evident in the context of the U.S.-Japan alliance as well. The “U.S.-Japan Joint Leaders’ Statement” issued follow-

¹² White House: Declaring a National Emergency at the Southern Border of the United States, 20.01.2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/declaring-a-national-emergency-at-the-southern-border-of-the-united-states>.

¹³ See, for example, Demetri Sevastopulo/Lucy Fisher: US wants UK military to focus more on Europe and away from Asia, *The Financial Times*, 08.05.2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/21df-faa9-e73b-44f0-be3b-acb6d0d35ced>.

ing the meeting between Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba on 7 February 2025 did not mention Russia, Ukraine, or the Middle East.¹⁴ The document was exclusively about the Indo-Pacific region and marked the end of the globalisation of the U.S.-Japan alliance that started decades ago and continued under both Republican and Democratic administrations. It had always been the U.S. that pushed Japan to expand the geographical horizon of its political and security engagement beyond its own immediate neighbourhood. It was in this context that Tokyo conducted a refuelling operation in the Indian Ocean in close coordination with Operation Enduring Freedom in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and sent troops to Iraq after the major combat operations in 2003. Japan was always reluctant and cautious, yet successive Japanese leaders thought it was in the country's national interest for the purpose of strengthening the alliance with the U.S. This decades-long process seems to have suddenly ended under Trump 2.0. Yet, as long as Tokyo spontaneously recognises the importance of its global engagement for its national interest, Japan's engagement in Ukraine, the Middle East, or any other parts of the world will continue irrespective of the Trump administration's position. Nevertheless, the momentum behind Japan's global engagement is likely to be lost.

The second major characteristic of alliance politics and Trump's approach to international relations as a whole is his lack of interest in values. Trump does not talk about just freedom or human rights, but also the rules-based international order, something Japan and Europe have been championing for a long time. This is no coincidence. For major military powers like the U.S., China, and Russia that are prepared to use force when they believe it necessary, international rules, norms, etc., are seen as constraining their actions. Nonetheless, for Europe, Japan, and other "normal" countries, international rules and norms are of central importance in terms of defending their national interest. This division cannot be bridged easily.

The idea of free trade is also relevant here, as it is at the heart of the rules-based international order. During the first Trump administration in 2018, Japan and the EU managed to conclude an Economic Partnership Agreement, whose negotiations were not going well when Trump came to power in January 2017. Yet, Washington's hostility toward the idea of free trade and a seeming embrace of protectionism brought Brussels and Tokyo closer and stimulated impetus toward the conclusion of the negotiations.¹⁵ Prime Minister Shinzo Abe also took the initiative to salvage the Trans-Pacific

Partnership after Trump had withdrawn from it on day one of the new administration. It came to be known as TPP11 without the U.S., or as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

4 No Plan B for Japan?

Based on the discussion above, Tokyo's strategic dilemma is clear. While Japanese leaders stick to the status quo that they have taken for granted for so long, it is increasingly unclear whether that is really a possible or viable option in terms of defending Japan's national interests in the coming years under Trump 2.0 and beyond. It is easy to accuse them of being complacent. Yet, in Europe as well, particularly in the UK, Germany, or the Baltic states, while discussing Plan B is fashionable, there is still a high degree of reluctance to give up Plan A, still hoping that Plan B will prove to be unnecessary in the end. There are two main reasons why Tokyo does not regard Plan B as a realistic option.

First, China is simply too big. It is practically impossible for Japan to even think of defending itself without the United States, making it hard for many people to see Plan B as a realistic direction for the country's foreign and security policy. Europe is different because it is much bigger than Russia in many respects. The European Commissioner for Defence and Space, Andrius Kubilius, argued that: "As 450 million Europeans, we should not ask, we should not cry for 340 million Americans to defend us against 140 million Russians, who are not able to defeat 38 million Ukrainians."¹⁶ When or how Europe could defend itself without relying on the United States, by substituting the role played by the U.S., remains unclear. Yet, Europe is much bigger than Russia, in terms of not only economic size but also defence budget. Japan vis-à-vis China is not in such a fortunate position. This almost precludes the possibility of a viable alternative to the alliance with the U.S.

Second, there is no like-minded partner in the region who is strong and reliable enough to provide an alternative security solution to Japan. Tokyo has been strengthening defence ties with such countries in the region as Australia, the Philippines, India, and the Republic of Korea. While the strategic value of such partnerships is on the rise and should not be underestimated, none of them could be seen as a substitute for the alliance with the U.S. in the foreseeable future. Here again, a difference with the situation in Europe is clear.

¹⁴ White House: United States-Japan Joint Leaders' Statement, 07.02.2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/02/united-states-japan-joint-leaders-statement>.

¹⁵ Tsuruoka 2019.

¹⁶ European Commission: *Speech by Commissioner Kubilius during the discussion on the White Book on European Defence*, 21.03.2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_25_853.

If extended nuclear deterrence provided by the U.S. through NATO were to collapse, there is a possibility – at least theoretically – that the UK and France, as Europe’s nuclear powers, could provide a nuclear umbrella to other countries in Europe. In terms of capability, the role of the U.S. cannot easily be replaced by the UK or France. Still, Europe could consider such a possibility in the context of its debates about Plan B. Japan lacks such an option from the outset.

As a result, Tokyo’s default approach is something that could be called a “strategy of anchoring,” hoping to keep the U.S. engaged in Japan’s defence and broader issues of regional order in the Indo-Pacific and the rules-based international order as much as possible.¹⁷ It is also based on Tokyo’s belief that it is still too early to give up on the U.S. as its principal partner. Japan’s recent moves to strengthen defence ties with Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, and others, as well as its decision to increase its defence budget, can all be seen as efforts to keep anchoring the U.S., particularly by shouldering more of the security burden in the region. It is about creating a condition under which the cost of U.S. security engagement in the region could be decreased, thereby making it easier for the U.S. to remain engaged.

5 Conclusions

The extent to which Japan’s current approach to the U.S. under Trump 2.0 could succeed remains to be seen. No U.S. ally, whether in the Indo-Pacific or Euro-Atlantic regions,

has a clear winning strategy. All the U.S. allies are bracing for diverse strategic possibilities. Yet, when compared to Europe, the degree to which Japan is at the mercy of the U.S. is striking, while one could simultaneously argue that the level of U.S. commitment to Japan and the Indo-Pacific region as a whole is much higher than that to Europe, due to the fact that Washington now sees China as the biggest challenger. How this “Asia first” position of the U.S. plays out will affect Japan’s strategic fate. Policymakers in Tokyo hope that this will serve Japan’s national interests. Nonetheless, the set of interests that the U.S. pursues in the region cannot be identical to that of Japan, which constitutes arguably the biggest challenge to Tokyo.

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¹⁷ Teraoka 2025.