

# Obama and Japan: An endangered legacy

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## Introduction

This chapter will discuss the legacy of the Obama administration of 2009–17 for US–Japan relations. It will highlight elements of change and continuity that characterised the Obama years in the realms of security and economic policy, as well as the significance of historical memory and the processes of reconciliation between the two countries. It will also discuss policy shifts promoted by the administration of President Donald Trump at around the halfway mark of his 2017–21 presidential term in office. The Trump presidency, it is argued, has injected a high degree of uncertainty into the bilateral relationship, causing perceptions of declining American influence in the region, especially in the economic realm.

Obama's relations with Japan can be divided into several phases. During the period from January 2009 to March 2011, and particularly the tenure of former Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama (September 2009–June 2010), the Obama administration had a difficult relationship with the government led by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). Hatoyama's intention of promoting political equidistance between the United States and China, and to achieve a higher degree of autonomy from Washington, appeared to be a threat to the stability of the US-led regional security architecture.

The crisis generated by the earthquake and tsunami of 11 March 2011 and resultant incident at the Fukushima nuclear power plant, as well as increasing Chinese assertiveness over the maritime and territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas, contributed to what the United States considered a return to normality in its relations with Japan, with a strong emphasis on the centrality of the alliance and a more adversarial relationship with China. Operation Tomodachi, by which Washington provided assistance to Tokyo in the aftermath of the disaster, helped recover and strengthen the foundations of the US–Japan alliance.

The most significant elements of discontinuity and change during the Obama era occurred in the period following the announcement of Obama's Pivot to Asia, not least after the return of Shinzo Abe to power in December 2012. With Abe, Obama found a partner who was particularly eager to embrace the role the Pivot had designed for Japan: that of democratic security provider and main supporter of the US-led regional order. By early 2019, however, some of these progresses appear endangered by the policies promoted by the Trump administration. As we will see, Japan has reacted to Trump's unpredictability and the perceived decline of US influence by upgrading its cooperation with other Asian democracies in the economic and security realms, and promoting a more accommodating policy towards Beijing.

## Obama and the Democratic Party of Japan: From Futenma to Tomodachi

Following the 2008 US presidential elections, Washington's relations with Tokyo were not among the most pressing priorities in Obama's foreign policy agenda. Early American policies towards Japan reflected a substantial continuity with the Bush era; in the first months of the presidency, bilateral relations were expected to continue on the established trajectory of incremental progresses towards a closer military and diplomatic partnership.<sup>1</sup> The Japanese general elections, held in September 2009, completely changed this situation. The Obama administration perceived Hatoyama's victory as the beginning of an upheaval of the domestic foundations underlying the security arrangement with Japan, if not the entire US position in East Asia.<sup>2</sup>

### Obama vs. Hatoyama

The relations between the Obama administration and Japan suffered a downturn after the 2009 Japanese elections, when the centre-left DPJ achieved an historic success, momentarily ending the five decades-long political hegemony of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The DPJ promoted both a distinctive interpretation of Japanese identity and a different strategic vision of the country's interests. The first rested on fundamental assumptions of Japan's Asian identity. As Hatoyama stated in 2009, 'the Japan-US relationship is an important pillar of our diplomacy. However, at the same time, we must not forget our identity as a nation located in Asia ... [T]he East Asian region ... must be recognized as Japan's basic sphere of being.'<sup>3</sup> Hatoyama considered the main objectives of his government to be 'restraining US political and economic excesses,' as well as 'maintain [Japan's] political and economic independence, and protect its national interest when caught between the United States ... and China.'<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Hatoyama tried to significantly upgrade Tokyo's bilateral relations with Beijing.

The key initiative from this point of view was the creation of the East Asia Community which brought mechanisms for financial and monetary cooperation and a security framework aimed at solving territorial disputes. China and Japan agreed upon negotiations aimed at approving rules for dispute resolution in the East China Sea, and proposed defence dialogues and exchanges, affirming that the Sino-Japanese relationship would advance mutually beneficial economic and strategic ties. These policies, along with Hatoyama's statements on the necessity to 'further enhance the mutually beneficial relationship with China based on common strategic interests',<sup>5</sup> were considered in Washington to be potentially destabilising to the security order based on US hegemony and the centrality of the US-led system of bilateral alliances.

The other crucial problem regarded US military bases in Japan. The Bush administration and the Japanese government had reached an agreement on a revision of the US presence in Japan in 2006, as part of a comprehensive posture review started in 2004.<sup>6</sup> The agreement foresaw the relocation of the Futenma Air Station to Henoko Bay, a less populated area of the Okinawa Prefecture. During his 2009 election campaign, Hatoyama promised the complete relocation of Futenma 'outside of Okinawa Prefecture at the very least'.<sup>7</sup> The Obama administration considered this a major violation of the agreement and a danger for the entire process of the posture review. However, the DPJ made another move that signalled its will to contest established relations and practices in the alliance. In 2009, the Japanese cabinet discussed the idea of calling the US to renounce the policy of first use of nuclear weapons in the event of conflict. This exposed a major disagreement on the centrality of the US nuclear umbrella in East Asia and beyond.<sup>8</sup>

All these policies received a negative response from Washington. Almost for the first since the 1950s, the United States faced a political leadership different from the LDP, which secured a strong majority in the Japanese Diet that appeared willing to reorient the nation's foreign policy. The Obama administration and wider US foreign policy community perceived DPJ policies not as a legitimate reorientation of an allied country priority, but rather as a threat to the foundations of the alliance and consequently to the entire US strategic position in East Asia.<sup>9</sup> The Obama administration's response was to nudge, and if necessary coerce, Japan into adopting a foreign policy aligned with Washington's interests.<sup>10</sup>

Hatoyama resigned in June 2010, nine months after his election. Resistance from the United States over his attempts to reorient Japanese foreign policy was by no means the only cause of his resignation. Disagreements with coalition partners, opposition from the Japanese establishment and the powerful state bureaucracy, and a corruption scandal, all played important roles. However, the Obama administration had demonstrated its disdain for Japan's new course, assuming an uncompromising stance on all the main issues under bilateral negotiation, starting with the relocation of bases in Okinawa. Thus, what McCormack defined

as a new 'Battle for Okinawa' played a crucial part in the demise of the Hatoyama government.<sup>11</sup>

Hatoyama's resignation made several realities of US–Japan relations more evident. First, the Obama administration, in continuity with the bipartisan consensus that has characterised US East Asia policy in the post-war period, openly favoured conservative over progressive forces, to the point of questioning their foreign policy credentials and legitimacy. Second, the Obama administration considered Japan's attempt to rebalance its foreign policy towards Asia and China, and to achieve a degree of diplomatic autonomy from Washington, a serious threat to regional American interests. Finally, Obama reminded Japan that, as theorised by Paul Schroeder, alliances are 'tools of management', namely instruments of influence on allies' foreign policy.<sup>12</sup> On this occasion, the United States demonstrated its capacity and will to derail Japanese attempts to promote significant changes in the country's foreign policy orientation.

### **Tomodachi and the “return to normal”**

Hatoyama's resignation and the election of Naoto Kan at Kantei led to an improvement in the alliance. Reignited territorial disputes with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands led Tokyo to accelerate the return to an alliance-centred foreign policy. A clear sign of this change was the publication of the 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines, a strategic document that introduced the concept of 'dynamic deterrence' which significantly expanded the role of the Japanese armed forces beyond the traditional 'defensive defense'.<sup>13</sup> The document also stressed the strategic value of Japan's anti-submarine warfare capabilities, and the joint US–Japanese Ballistic defence system.<sup>14</sup>

Japan was already returning to an alliance-centred defence policy when it was hit by the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis of 11 March 2011 (3–11 crisis). Aside from the massive human and social damage this triple disaster caused, it had notable political consequences. First, it continued to undermine public confidence in the DPJ government. Second, it contributed to improve the image both of the Japanese Self Defense Forces (JSDF) and US forces in Japan; Operation Tomodachi oversaw unprecedented logistical coordination and integration between American and Japanese forces to help victims, demonstrating to the Japanese public the utility of military cooperation with American forces in the country. US forces in Japan, along with the broader alliance, enjoyed unprecedented approval among the Japanese public.<sup>15</sup> As importantly, members of the JSDF were celebrated as heroes by the Japanese media, arguably for the first time in the entire post-war period. This opened a window of opportunity. For instance, one of the effects of the response to the 3–11 crisis was public acceptance of the dispatch of the JSDF abroad in peacekeeping missions, and the approval of measures aimed at improving interoperability and coordination with US forces.

The prime ministership of Yoshihiko Noda, who succeeded Naoto Kan in September 2011, led to several areas of progress for the US–Japan relationship, such as the decision by Tokyo to purchase the American F-35 fighter jet and to enter discussions for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).<sup>16</sup> Over the longer period, the legacy of 3–11 and Tomodachi has been palpable, paving the way for a return to power of Shinzo Abe who promoted a narrative of recovery from crisis and national rebirth, together with a return to a foreign policy centred on the US alliance and “special relationship” with Washington.

## Obama, Abe and the Pivot to Asia

### **Abe and the alliance**

The election of Shinzo Abe as Japanese Prime Minister in December 2012 instigated a fundamental change in the relationship between the Obama administration and Japan. Abe’s vision of national recovery largely coincided with the agenda and the strategic priorities of the Pivot, both in the security and economic realms.

The authors of the Pivot envisaged an expansion of the Japanese security role and a further strengthening of the alliance. On this point, the Pivot did not entail fundamental departures from previous strategies, since the United States had been pressuring Tokyo to “do more” since the early 1950s. The difference was found in the speed and extent of the changes. Abe actively embraced the role of democratic security provider which the Pivot envisaged for Japan, promoting reforms that would enable such an outcome as well as fundamental progresses for the alliance. Indeed, Abe presided over five particular reforms towards the expansion of Japanese security involvement: the creation of a National Security Council, modelled on the American example; the approval of a state secrecy law which allowed enhanced intelligence-sharing with the United States and other friendly countries; the reform of arms export principles that allowed Japan to jointly develop weapon systems with the United States and allies; and the release of the first ever National Security Strategy for Japan.

The most consequential step for the alliance, however, was the re-interpretation of Article 9 of the Constitution which allows Japan to perform “collective self-defence”. This interpretation allows Japan to use force not only to defend its territory, but also ‘when an armed attack against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan occurs and as a result threatens Japan’s survival’.<sup>17</sup> This allows Japan, for example, to protect US forces deployed in East Asia, to intercept missiles directed at the United States, and to expand its role in exercising deterrence autonomously and jointly with the United States towards both China and North Korea.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the new interpretation allows Japan to jointly exercise

deterrence in so-called “grey zone scenarios”, namely, situations in which adversaries promote coercion and changes to the status quo, without reaching the threshold of an open conflict.<sup>19</sup>

Overall, these reforms paved the way for the approval of the 2015 Guidelines for the Alliance, which define the division of roles and duties in the bilateral relationship.<sup>20</sup> Previously, they have been modified only twice, in 1978 and 1997. The new guidelines clearly demonstrate both a renewed convergence of strategic interests and the will to reach higher levels of interoperability, intelligence-sharing and coordination. The most important concept they articulate is the idea of “seamless cooperation”; while traditionally the alliance was supposed to work only in case of attack against Japan, the new document announces cooperation in peacetime as well as in “grey zone contingencies” such as in the East and South China Seas where China aims to disrupt the status quo with coercive and hybrid measures short of outright conflict. To deal more effectively with this new type of challenge, the guidelines introduce new coordination mechanisms in the realms of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; missile defence; joint maritime patrolling; outer space and cyberspace; and joint training.<sup>21</sup>

The renewal of the alliance and progresses in the security sphere, however, were unable to prevent disagreement between the Obama administration and the Japanese foreign policy establishment, not least regarding US policy towards China and North Korea. A key moment came in 2013 when senior White House officials, including former National Security Advisors Tom Donilon and Susan Rice, endorsed the Chinese concept of “new type of great power relations”, implying the recognition of China’s core interests.<sup>22</sup> From a Japanese standpoint that concept entailed the possibility that the United States could sacrifice Tokyo’s security interests to achieve a long-term security bargain with Beijing. The Obama administration later dropped all references to the idea, but Donilon and in particular Rice gained the nickname of “Kissingerians”, which carries negative connotations in Japan.<sup>23</sup>

The second significant point of disagreement came with Washington’s “strategic patience” towards North Korea. This has been judged as weak and ineffective in the Japanese foreign policy community, since it proved ineffective in forcing Pyongyang to stop or even limit its nuclear programme. As with the Obama administration’s policies towards China, Susan Rice – who admitted that both Washington and Tokyo need to ‘learn to live with a nuclear North Korea’<sup>24</sup> – attracted the focus of Japanese criticism.

## **TPP and the economics of Obama’s Pivot to Asia**

The economic dimension of the Pivot, including the promotion of the TPP, represents a key element of discontinuity with previous US strategies towards Japan and East Asia, together with the comprehensive engagement of East Asian multilateral institutions. Such promoters of the Pivot as Assistant Secretary of State for East

Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell, his successor Daniel Russell, and Director for Asian Affairs in the National Security Council Evan Medeiros, understood that Washington faced a major strategic problem in Asia, namely, the increasing divergence between US security and economic relations in Asia.<sup>25</sup> In the security realm, the United States remained the “indispensable nation” in East Asia. Yet the rise of China had revolutionised the economic realities of the region, with all of Washington’s main regional allies increasingly dependent on China for trade and investment. Moreover, since the arrival of Chinese President Xi Jinping, Beijing has promoted a comprehensive blueprint of economic governance in Asia, based on Chinese leadership, values and rules. The most evident manifestations of this Chinese attempt to build alternative forms of economic governance have been the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

Overall, at least since the beginning of Obama’s second term, it appeared clear that the Asian region was facing a competition between two models of economic governance: a Sino-centric model, rooted in Beijing’s leadership and hospitable to state capitalist practices, and a trans-Pacific model based on renewed leadership by Washington and advanced via free market capitalism.<sup>26</sup> Here, the fundamental differences are in respective norms and principles. China promotes a state capitalist form of economic integration in which its state-owned enterprises play a key role. The TPP promoted a so-called “gold standard” level of regulation which set a high bar of economic practice, and severely limited the influence of these enterprises (and of the Chinese government) from participating member states. The Abe government, in deciding to participate in the TPP, made a clear strategic choice to re-align Japan’s security interests with its economic policies; Japan needed to side with the United States to promote the trans-Pacific model of regional governance, and oppose the rise of a Sino-centric economic order. This in turn revealed two strategic assumptions. First, Japan considered the United States able and willing to continue to shape the regional order in East Asia in the foreseeable future. Second, Japan’s best interests were understood to be in resisting, rather than participating in, Chinese initiatives such as the AIIB and BRI.

The fact that these assumptions were considered relatively uncontroversial in Japan, at least up to the 2016 elections, makes the legacy of the Pivot and Obama–Abe cooperation evident. The Pivot prescribed for Japan an active role both as security partner and active promoter of a trans-Pacific, free market-oriented, form of regional economic order. Abe embraced this twin role, considering it essential both to the Japanese economic revival and achievement of the status of “first tier nation” in Asia and beyond.<sup>27</sup>

## **Hiroshima, Pearl Harbor and the “end of the post war”**

The final months of the Obama administration were defined by the president’s will to leave a meaningful legacy in the realm of historical reconciliation with Japan,

embodied by his visits to Hiroshima and by Abe's visit to Pearl Harbor in 2016. Both leaders considered these visits instrumental to the consolidation of their legacies, albeit in very different ways. For Obama, the Hiroshima visit represented an ideal end point to a path mapped out in the Prague speech of 2009, where Obama envisioned a world characterised by successes in nuclear non-proliferation and international arms control; the creation of the global Nuclear Security Summit; the Iran nuclear deal; and the START ("Strategic Arms Reduction") Treaty with Russia. Moreover, Obama used his speech in Hiroshima to articulate a vision of American exceptionalism. Inspired by the concept of "Christian realism", Obama reasserted the moral and ethical value of US global leadership as well as the need to oppose, even by force, authoritarianism and tyranny in the promotion of peace and freedom.<sup>28</sup>

Obama's aims were also practical. Promoting historical reconciliation with Tokyo meant laying the groundwork for further consolidation of the US–Japan alliance, as well as providing an example for other Asian states such as South Korea and the Philippines. Such partners still limit their cooperation with Japan from disagreements over their warring past and perceptions that Japan has failed to adequately apologise for crimes committed during the Second World War. From the American perspective therefore, historical reconciliation is aimed at promoting the multilateralisation of the San Francisco system, complementing bilateral alliances with new forms of cooperation, and connecting different Asian allies of the United States.<sup>29</sup>

From Abe's perspective, the visits to Hiroshima and Pearl Harbor spoke to another long-standing symbolic objective: the end of "the post war" as the period in which Japan needed to apologise for its wartime behaviour, accept legal constraints such as Article 9 of its Constitution, and limit its role in the regional security order.<sup>30</sup> In practical terms, this would allow Japan to finally and legitimately embrace a role of active regional security provider and even assert its status as "first tier nation" in Asia.<sup>31</sup>

Ultimately, and in stark contrast to their predecessors, as well as to the Trump administration from 2017, Obama and Abe conceived the development of the US–Japan relationship within a comprehensive strategic vision, including the use of different instruments of economic, political and security statecraft to shape the contours of the rise of China and uphold the regional order. The election of Donald Trump, and Washington's decision to leave the TPP in 2017, put Japan into a difficult position by throwing into question its ability to rely upon an American-led rules-based international order.

## Japan and Trump: The age of uncertainty

The election to president of Donald Trump in November 2016 introduced uncertainties over the future direction and progress of results achieved by the Obama



administration with Japan, as well as over the broader aims of the overarching Pivot to Asia. It is however important to differentiate between the security realm (and the bilateral alliance in particular), and other dimensions of US–Japan relations.

Trump's rhetoric during his election campaign greatly alarmed the Japanese leadership. In April 2016 Trump stated that Tokyo needed to defend itself against North Korea, even suggesting that it should acquire nuclear weapons.<sup>32</sup> Prime Minister Abe, sensing the risks the Trump administration could comport, quickly sought to establish a productive personal relationship with the new president. Abe was the first foreign leader to visit Trump Tower following the late 2016 elections, and the meeting of the two leaders at the Mar-a-Lago resort in February 2017 was one of the first high-profile summits hosted by the new administration. On both occasions, Trump and Abe restated the centrality of the alliance for peace and stability in East Asia. Trump's state visit to Japan in November 2017, together with high-profile visits by Vice President Mike Pence (April 2017, February 2018), Secretary of Defense James Mattis (February 2017) and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson (March 2018), helped reaffirm the US commitment to the region and reassure Japan of the strength of the relationship.

Three other factors momentarily diminished fears of early strategic abandonment by Washington during the first twelve months of the Trump administration. First, many in the Japanese foreign and security policy community appreciated an uncompromising US position on North Korea in the 'fire and fury' period in 2017.<sup>33</sup> This position was often compared with Obama-era statements by Susan Rice on the impossibility of stopping Pyongyang's nuclear programme. Second, Trump's public endorsement of Tokyo's position on Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea was interpreted as another positive signal in this direction.<sup>34</sup> Third, despite Trump's volatile crisis management tactics, most Japanese officials seemed to trust the so-called "adults in the room", particularly such senior cabinet officials as National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and Secretary of Defense James Mattis. During the first twelve months of the Trump presidency, a number of scholars were ready to characterise US–Japan relations as returning to "normality" after an initially difficult period.<sup>35</sup> Subsequent events testified how those analyses were, arguably, overly optimistic.

A series of policy choices made by Trump created serious anxieties in Tokyo. In 2018, the Trump administration reversed its previous approach towards North Korea, abandoning the policy of maximum pressure to promote a new period of dialogue, culminating with the summits of Singapore in June 2018 and Hanoi in February 2019. Japan sought to maximise policy coordination on North Korea, and it officially expressed its support for the negotiations. Nevertheless, a number of developments seriously concerned Tokyo. Trump's stated intention of 'ending the wargames with South Korea',<sup>36</sup> as well as his failure to mention the issue of Japanese abductees during the Singapore summit, created doubts over Trump's long-term commitment to US alliances in East Asia. Trump's failure, up to early

2019, to achieve any progress towards the denuclearisation of North Korea, and the subsequent failure of the Hanoi summit, also generated fears in Tokyo of a new cycle of provocation by Kim Jong-un's regime. Moreover, two years after Trump's inauguration, the "adults in the room" had either resigned or were dismissed by the president. The most significant departure in this sense was that of Secretary of Defense Mattis, considered a key guardian of the US security strategy in East Asia.<sup>37</sup>

Overall, the Japanese government remains wary of the Trump administration, not merely in terms of its management of the alliance, but also its willingness and capacity to uphold the current international order and its key pillars, from nuclear non-proliferation to free trade and beyond. These fears were confirmed by the withdrawal from several significant agreements in different policy realms, such as the Paris agreement on climate change, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran, the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and the TPP. The Trump administration also issued tariffs against China and threatened trade restrictions against Japan, South Korea and others. A good indicator of the Japanese mood at around the halfway point of the 2017–21 Trump presidency is found in the document, 'Towards a Greater Alliance', promoted by a non-partisan commission of policy experts and scholars. The document defines Trump's approach to foreign policy as 'the injection of the highest level of uncertainty to be seen in the world order since the end of the Cold War'.<sup>38</sup>

Across the first two years of the Trump administration, the Abe government reacted to the uncertainty it has generated, and the perceived decline of regional US influence, by advancing three main policy strategies. First, in the security realm, Tokyo promoted the idea of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific', which entailed the expansion of security cooperation between major democracies including India and Australia.<sup>39</sup> This proposal envisages both an American presence and the development of a network of security relations aimed at balancing the rise of China. Further, it underlined the fundamental political and ideological fault lines dividing China from the United States and its allies and partners.<sup>40</sup> This idea gained considerable traction in Washington. Trump, as well as senior members of the administration, quickly began referring to the Indo-Pacific with increasing frequency.<sup>41</sup> From a Japanese perspective this represented a significant success, testifying that Tokyo can effectively exercise the role of thought leader in a moment of US retreat.

Second, something similar happened with the negotiations among the eleven remaining signatories to the TPP. Japan led the negotiations aimed at approving the new version of the agreement, now renamed the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership.<sup>42</sup> The Japanese initiative was motivated by the will to uphold high standards in trade as a key component of the current international order, while shaping the contours of China's rise and limiting its economic and normative influence in the region.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately,

however, the Japanese government also assumes that the current protectionist trend in Washington will not endure in the longer term, and that the policies of the Trump administration on trade are likely to be reversed by the administration which follows.<sup>44</sup>

The third line of action regards the bilateral relationship with China. The perceived decline of American influence in the region, the possible escalation of trade wars generated by Trump's protectionist policies, and, above all, the intensification of geopolitical competition between Washington and Beijing, have considerably affected Sino-Japanese relations. As Funabashi and Dempsey recently put it, 'Tokyo has begun serious contemplation of a clean-slate foreign policy absent US primacy. In the case of a recalibration like this, no relationship would be more important to stabilise than that with China.'<sup>45</sup> As a consequence, Abe sought to diminish the tension with Beijing. After June 2017, Abe became open to a Japanese cooperation within the framework of the BRI. In October 2018, on the fortieth anniversary of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship with China, Abe visited Beijing for a summit meeting. Abe's accommodating stance reflected the need to stabilise the relationship with China and the necessity to defuse tensions in the realm of security and uphold the basic foundations of the regional economic order, to reduce the consequences of the instability generated by Trump's policies.<sup>46</sup>

Ultimately, however, the Abe government had up to early 2019 been very aware of the indispensability of the United States. As a consequence, Abe himself appeared ready to ignore even very relevant disagreements, such as those on the TPP and trade policies, to help preserve the overall relationship. Moreover, during the first two years of the Trump presidency the Abe government further intensified its international role, being active both in terms of security relations and economic governance, to try to fill the vacuum generated by the perceived decline of US influence and leadership. Nevertheless, as evidenced by the more accommodating policies towards Beijing, the perceived unreliability of the United States undermined Tokyo's position vis-à-vis China, making any resistance to Beijing's attempts to contest the current rule-based order more difficult.

## Conclusion

Obama's legacy on US–Japan relations is a complex one. Many accounts of the relationship in the Obama period tend to overlook the fact that the administration navigated through one of the most severe bilateral crises of the post-war period, during the Hatoyama premiership. The Obama White House demonstrated the extent to which the United States can exercise strong political and diplomatic pressures to avoid unwanted foreign policy changes in Japan. The quick demise of Hatoyama, the aftermath of the 3–11 crisis, the return of the LDP as well as Abe's strong leadership, paved the way for a much more cooperative period.

Between 2012 and 2016 the relationship arguably reached a historical peak in terms of strategic coordination. Despite differences in values, for both leaders the relationship was part of a broader strategy encompassing security, economic and symbolic dimensions. Washington and Tokyo jointly worked to consolidate a trans-Pacific regional order, rooted in an enduring US power and will to provide stability and security as well as a renewed capacity to enforce rules and norms of economic governance. In this order, Japan represented the fundamental ally, both in the exercise of deterrence towards main security threats and in supporting such trans-Pacific forms of economic regionalism as the TPP.

Overall, the Obama era cannot be considered an exception in the history of post-war US–Japan relations. Like previous eras, it included moments of intense friction, especially during the first twelve months, as well as episodes of solidarity, not least after 11 March 2011. Only the period between 2013 and 2016 can be considered somehow exceptional. The two countries actively worked together to make progress in terms of security, economic governance, and around historical reconciliation. This level of comprehensive coordination appears rather rare in the history of a bilateral relationship that has been often affected by frictions either in the economic or in the security realm.

Two years on from Donald Trump's inauguration as president in 2017, the landscape of US–Japan relations had changed markedly. The bilateral relationship survived and adapted to a rapidly evolving East Asian security environment. Nevertheless, Japan remained deeply troubled by Trump's policies towards North Korea, by the trade disputes with China, and by mounting geopolitical competition in the region. Tokyo also remained concerned about his administration's will to uphold key pillars of the current international order, in particular over nuclear proliferation, multilateralism, and free trade. The Abe government, meanwhile, showed itself determined to endure even significant setbacks in the relationship, to preserve the alliance and the rules-based order in Asia. So too did it seek to compensate for a leadership vacuum quickly generated by Trump. With a longer-term view, Tokyo seemed aware that any the alternatives to US leadership would lead to an unwelcome rise of the Chinese influence.

In modern history, Trump's position up to early 2019 seemed unprecedented. Japan navigated its way through intense trade disputes during the Reagan (1981–89) and Bush (1989–93) administrations, as well as periods of strategic uncertainty during the Nixon (1969–74) and first Clinton (1993–97) administrations. What made the situation under Trump different is, first, the magnitude of the challenge posed by China. Unlike in previous eras, twenty-first-century China has ample resources to reshape Japan's surrounding political-economic-security environment in its favour. Second, no administration before Trump ever seriously questioned the basic tenets of American grand strategy in East Asia, or cast the strategic value of security alliances or Washington's commitment to uphold the regional order into doubt. Ultimately, the Trump administration has

to this point not just actively worked to tarnish some of the most significant accomplishments of Obama and the Pivot to Asia, it has also threatened the stability of the United States' long-standing hegemonic role throughout the Asia Pacific region.

### Notes

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