

Mr. Abe's opportunity by Brad Glosserman

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Japan is nervous about the Trump presidency. The economic, foreign, and national security policies that the new president has said he will pursue challenge and threaten to upend verities that have guided Tokyo's thinking in these areas for years. Still, the Trump presidency should be seen as an opportunity for Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, rather than a threat. Abe can use the Trump agenda to advance many of his own priorities and in so doing burnish his image as a regional and world leader, along with that of his country, and protect the international order that has served Japan, the US, and other countries so well.

Japanese have many reasons to worry about Trump's policies. He has demanded more from allies in the way of burden sharing, saying that their failure to contribute more to costs the US incurs in defending them could lead to a rupture. His decision to withdraw the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal wipes out substantial political capital that Abe invested in the agreement, as well as eliminates a source of pressure that Abe was counting on to overcome obstacles to domestic economic reform. Trump's call for balanced trade accounts with major partners and the threat to impose significant tariffs on imports from them not only undermines basic principles of the postwar trade order that have allowed Japan to thrive, but sounds ominously like the anti-Japan rhetoric of the 1980s. Finally, Trump's demand to renegotiate NAFTA could damage Japanese companies that set up operations in Mexico to utilize that agreement to serve the US market.

Of course, many of those pronouncements could have been campaign rhetoric and the new administration's policies may hew closely to those that have prevailed over the past half century. News that Defense Secretary James Mattis' first overseas trip will be to Tokyo and Seoul to allay anxieties about US security commitments suggests that policy will change less than many fear.

Either way, Abe should see the new administration for what it is – an opportunity rather than a threat – and act accordingly. Abe is positioned to build a good relationship with Trump. Even though Britain's Theresa May will have the first official meeting between the new president and a foreign leader, Abe was the first world leader to meet the president elect, going out of his way to do so, a move that showed initiative and respect for Trump. Trump likes strong leaders and Abe well fits the bill. He is a resilient and successful politician with an impressive series of electoral wins that have built an ever expanding majority in the Diet. He is one of the region's longest tenured leaders, and should be in office for some time to come.

Abe styles himself a bold and visionary leader who has promoted Japan's national interests as he sees them, even if that vision clashes with public sentiment. Trump likes that and sees himself in a similar light. Abe's policies converge in important ways with those of Trump as well. He wants a stronger Japan that can do more in its own defense and can contribute more to regional security. He shares Trump's wariness of China, and would like the US to be more vocal about its concerns, welcomes closer ties with Taiwan, and is ready to do business with Russia's Vladimir Putin.

Even where Trump's policies appear to undermine Japanese interests, Abe can use those divergences to his advantage. If Trump is set on demanding more from Japan as an ally, Abe can use that to press his own defense agenda; *gaiatsu* continues. Alternatively, Abe can use the prospect of a diminished US presence in the region to buttress his calls for a heightened Japanese profile and more aggressive attempts to build security relationships with regional partners such as Australia, the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam and India. Abe is already working with these governments. He has invigorated relations with Canberra and reached out to Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte as relations between Manila and Washington have been strained.

Even Trump's readiness to rip up TPP offers Abe valuable choices. In one scenario, Abe steps up as a champion of free trade and doubles down on making TPP a reality with or without the US, leading negotiations to remake the deal. In another scenario, he pushes for a US-Japan free trade agreement that borrows from TPP negotiations – a tactic that makes many in Tokyo unhappy, but would appeal to Trump's preference for bilateral deals and could expand into a multilateral TPP-type agreement over time. In a third scenario, Abe presses to join talks to rework NAFTA, a once-whispered option that has been routinely dismissed. In each case, Abe casts himself and Japan as key players in the effort to sustain and secure a free, fair, and open trading order and works to lock the US into Asia.

Of course, these futures are not consistent and some options contradict others. But that is not a problem for Abe. As a shrewd, pragmatic, and opportunistic leader, he should be able to pick and choose among alternatives to advance policies that accommodate his personal preferences, advance Japan's national interests, and support the regional and global order as well.

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