



PRESIDENT TRUMP: IN TALKS WITH KIM, DON'T ABANDON JAPAN

BY BATES GILL

Bates Gill (r.bates.gill@gmail.com) is professor of Asia-Pacific security studies at Macquarie University in Sydney and associate fellow with Chatham House, London.

In the run-up to his Hanoi summit this week with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, President Trump risks alienating the United States' most important strategic partner in the region, Japan.

A week's worth of high-level consultations in Tokyo confirms that while Japanese officials put on a brave public face, a pervasive angst percolates just beneath the surface about the outcomes of the second Trump-Kim confab.

Of immediate concern is that the Hanoi talks – like those in Singapore last year – will not substantively advance the denuclearization of North Korea but rather will further legitimize and solidify its de facto status as a nuclear-armed state. Moreover, Tokyo fears the Trump administration will accept merely a suspension of Pyongyang's nuclear and long-range ballistic missile testing in return for loosening sanctions on North Korea and pledges of further reductions in US military readiness on the Korean Peninsula.

Not enforcing the dismantlement of Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs –including its short- and medium-range missiles that can reach Japan – while weakening US security commitments in the region would leave Japan indefinitely exposed to future North Korean threats. This is all the more worrisome given the US president's well-known wobbles when it comes to defending US allies.

Japanese counterparts are also hopeful – but not particularly optimistic – that Trump will press Kim on the status of Japanese citizens who were kidnapped and held captive by the North Korean regime since the late-1970s. The “abductee issue” is one of high political sensitivity in Japan, and one that Prime Minister Abe has pledged to resolve, hence his repeated entreaties to President Trump to secure progress on the problem in his talks with Kim in Singapore and now in Hanoi – but so far to no avail. A repeated failure to advance this issue next week would be another slap in the face to Japan.

Interlocutors in Tokyo argue that if such key security and political interests of Japan go by the wayside in pursuit of an “America first” deal, it could provoke a two-part backlash. The first would be against Prime Minister Abe, who has staked substantial political capital on his relationship with Donald Trump. Such a backlash is all the more likely in light of recent revelations that Abe – in an apparent obsequious outburst at the behest of the White House – formally nominated Trump for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Weakening Abe will undermine his ability to work with the US to pursue US-Japan interests, including his ambition to bolster Japan's leadership role in promoting security, free-trade, and a liberal, rules-based order in Asia and beyond.

Second, such negative outcomes will only further exacerbate the souring mood in Japan toward the Trump administration. As recent polling by the Pew organization demonstrates, confidence in the US president among the Japanese population to “do the right thing in world affairs” has plummeted and now stands at only 30 percent, down from 78 percent in 2016. At the same time, according to Pew, two-thirds of Japanese think US power and influence is a “major threat” to their country, a 17 percent jump since 2013. Depending on how the Trump-Kim meeting addresses Japanese concerns, such numbers could get much worse.

Given these considerations, US interests vis-à-vis North Korea – and regarding the Indo-Pacific as a whole – will be best served by a strategy that clearly demonstrates alliance solidarity and does not undermine confidence in US commitments to its most

important security partners. Giving short shrift to Japan's interests in Hanoi next week will only weaken America's hand with North Korea and further erode US credibility and security interests in the region.

As such, the Trump team must come away from this summit with a credible path forward to stabilize and bring peace to the Korean Peninsula while also further diminishing North Korea's nuclear and missile threats – not only to the United States but to the region. The summit should also facilitate opening a serious Japan-North Korea dialogue that aims to put the abductee issue to rest. Unlike his pronouncements coming out of the Singapore summit, President Trump needs to be clear that the deal he strikes with Kim does not come at the cost of US alliance solidarity, which is precisely what North Korea (and China) would like to see.

Japan is the United States' most important ally in the Western Pacific. This is certainly true militarily, as the alliance is structured to allow the United States to project and sustain its power along and beyond the Asian littoral. But it is also true given Japan's economic might and commitment to regional stability, prosperity, development, democratic governance, and the rule of law. Abandoning such a strategically important partner in the interests of a near-term deal would be an enormous mistake.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Click [here](#) to request a PacNet subscription.