Public perceptions and US alliances in the Asia-Pacific by Craig Kafura

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Secretary of State George Shultz famously compared alliance management to gardening, with both requiring regular tending and care. Others compare it to a duck: smoothly gliding along thanks to frantic paddling underneath the water's surface. But today, the waters of the United States' Asia-Pacific alliances are hardly calm. Trump is a distinctly unpopular figure, both in the US and around the world. In nearly every country polled in the 2017 Pew Global Attitudes survey, confidence in the US president to do the right thing regarding world affairs fell – often dramatically – following Trump's election.

Most commentators have interpreted this as a sign that publics around the world are turning their backs on their alliances with the United States. But in the key Asia-Pacific allied nations of Japan, South Korea, and Australia, that's not the case. While Trump is deeply unpopular – and seen as unreliable, dangerous, and arrogant – the underlying support for those nations' alliances with the US remain largely stable. The diplomatic duck is upside-down: lots of splashing on the surface, but underneath alliance ties persist as before.

Japan

The Japanese public was deeply concerned following Trump's election, with poll respondents evenly divided on whether or not to trust the United States. Majorities predicted that the US-Japan relationship would change for the worse, with negative effects for Japan's economy and security. Polls showed that the public was not at all interested in increasing the already-considerable host-nation support paid to cover the costs of US bases, nor did Japanese agree with Trump's suggestion that Japan acquire its own nuclear arsenal. But the public hadn't turned its back on the alliance: in a January *Yomiuri Shimbun* poll, six in 10 Japanese said Japan should maintain its existing emphasis on the alliance relationship with the US.

Secretary of Defense James Mattis' February visit to Japan combined with a well-received summit between Prime Minister Abe and President Trump seemed to calm some of these public concerns. In an *Asahi Shimbun* poll conducted following the Mar-a-Lago summit, a majority of Japanese assessed the meeting favorably, and contemporaneous polling from *Mainichi Shimbun* found a rising confidence in the stability of the relationship.

At present, Japanese public attitudes on the alliance and on Trump are notably distinct. While Japanese are less likely to feel favorably toward the United States now than they did a year ago, and though majority of Japanese describe Trump as unqualified, dangerous, and arrogant, only a minority thinks the US-Japan relationship will get worse under a Trump administration (41 percent; 34 percent same, 17 percent improving).

South Korea

Like Japanese, South Koreans were also deeply concerned about the incoming Trump administration following his election. In Asan Institute polls following the November election, two-thirds of South Koreans said they expected relations to worsen. But in a dramatic swing, two-thirds now expect US-Korea relations to improve, putting public expectations back where they were during the Obama administration.

Trump's favorability ratings among South Koreans similarly improved following his election, and South Korean views of the US remain stable and positive. Nor are the two necessarily linked: as Asan researchers point out, only a quarter of South Koreans who view Trump unfavorably also report an unfavorable view of the US.

Additionally, Korean support for the ROK-US alliance remains strong. Two in three South Koreans (67 percent) name the US as their preferred partner for South Korea, while two in 10 (22 percent) prefer China. Moreover, this is an increase over the past year: in 2016, six in 10 chose the US and one-third chose China.

Australia

The Australian public seems to be reacting similarly. As is true elsewhere, Trump is deeply unpopular in Australia, and six in 10 say he causes them to have an unfavorable opinion of the United States. Their trust in the US to act responsibly in the world has also fallen sharply. According to the Lowy Institute's 2017 survey, only two in 10 Australians (20 percent) have a great deal of trust in the US to act responsibly in the world, down by half from 2011. Overall, six in 10 (61 percent) have at least some trust the US to act responsibly – behind the UK, Germany, Japan, and India, and only seven points above China.

Yet support for the US-Australia alliance is actually on the rise. More than three in four (77 percent) say the alliance relationship is important for Australia's security, up six points from 2016. And two in three (65 percent) say Australia should remain close to the US under President Trump – an increase of 14 percentage points from last year, when a Trump administration was only one of two possible outcomes.

Duck, Duck, Grey Duck

In summary, despite Trump's unpopularity around the world, that unpopularity has not yet damaged US alliances in Asia. Those relationships can coast, for some period of time, on the strength of established ties and longstanding public support. But before too long there will be pressing alliance issues to resolve, such as the upcoming negotiations over the latest US-ROK Special Measures Agreement. To return to our duck analogy, an upside-down duck is unlikely to make much forward progress.

For now, US allies should pursue three paths.

First, follow the Canadian lead on economic diplomacy and embrace the doughnut strategy: engage with policymakers at the state or city level and ignore an unresponsive or uncooperative federal branch. State and local leaders have a deep appreciation for foreign direct investment and its benefits and will welcome the chance to be seen winning investments in their communities.

Second, follow the public's lead and differentiate between Trump and the broader US alliance. Trump's inflammatory statements about US allies and his unpopularity abroad creates domestic political pressures to hit back – or at least poke fun at him as Australian PM Turnbull did in June. While US allies should take care to avoid sparking an unnecessary personal feud with the US president that could cause collateral alliance damage, critiques of the man in office are less damaging in the long run than attacks on the alliance itself.

And finally, keep on swimming. Much of the US alliance system is hard-baked into routine processes that go well beyond any one administration. The frequent meetings between current and former officials, numerous joint military exercises, and constant economic exchange all serve to buoy these relationships through rough waters.

But eventually, the duck will need to right itself again. Even a duck can drown.

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