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# Be a Positive Disruptor in the Indo-Pacific

President-elect Trump's unconventional approach to alliances can press U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific to forge a stronger coalition

By Yuki Tatsumi

## TOPLINE

The return of the Trump administration is already making U.S. allies and partners around the globe sit up and take notice – and the Indo-Pacific region is no exception. But the incoming Trump administration's unpredictability and "America First" approach to the alliances and partnerships, if applied wisely, can incentive U.S. allies and partners to forge closer coalition among themselves, which will be essential as the U.S. faces an increasingly inter-connected global strategic environment.

## THE PROBLEM

The last few years have witnessed increasing inter-connectivity among U.S. adversaries and strategic competitors. With Russia-China cooperation already having a destabilizing impact in the security environment in East Asia, a recent rapprochement between Russia and North Korea and its tangible consequences—North Korean soldiers mobilized to fight the war in Ukraine—was a stark reminder of a growing connectivity among different strategic theaters. This makes a global effort to uphold the fundamental principles of the existing international order—democracy, freedom, and non-tolerance with use of force and other coercive measures to change the status quo—more important than ever.

## ESSENTIAL CONTEXT

One of the major foreign policy accomplishments of the outgoing Biden administration was, undoubtedly, the revitalization of U.S. alliances and partnerships worldwide. Not only has the U.S. worked to reactive the existing ties, but it has also embarked on the efforts to build inter-regional connection among U.S. allies and partners across the globe. Through the efforts such as AUKUS and Quad as well as trilateral relationships including U.S.-Japan-Australia, U.S.-Japan-ROK, U.S.-Japan-U.K., U.S.-Japan-India, and, most recently, U.S.-Japan-the Philippines, Washington forged multiple layers of inter-regional connectivity among its allies and partners. In fact, many of these relationships also facilitated the deepening of the bilateral security partnership between these U.S. allies some of which, such as Australia—Japan security relations, have now been institutionalized to the level of quasi-alliance.

However, with the return of an “America First” approach by the incoming Trump administration, these allies and partners have begun to question how these partnerships will survive in a second Trump term. Some question whether the transactional approach of President Trump—which was on full display when he was in the office last time—would be conducive to sustaining the momentum in the cooperation inherent to these relationships. Others worry that the President-elect’s “deal making” mindset may expose partners and allies to unexpected (and unwelcome) surprises.

One might argue those concerns are overblown. After all, the Indo-Pacific region may have a much better chance of seeing greater level of policy continuity after the leadership transition in Washington. This is because a hardened approach against China is likely to be one of the core foreign policy principles in a second Trump administration. Indeed, throughout his 2024 presidential campaign, Trump talked about plans to slap 60% tariffs against Chinese imports upon his win. President-elect Trump, similar to Biden and Harris, has also argued that the U.S. will win the 21<sup>st</sup> century competition vis-à-vis China in advanced technologies.

Still, there will be challenges. U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific remain uncertain about how Trump’s transactional approach to alliance management might impact them. Japan, for example, has a lot to worry about. Tokyo can certainly expect much greater pressure from Washington to continue to – at a minimum – stay on its current path of bolstering its own defense capability and increase defense spending. The negotiation over the renewal of its Host Nation Support for U.S. forces in Japan will likely to be much more challenging this time around, given that the negotiation will likely need to take place right around the mid-term election in the U.S. With Trump’s “America First” approach in full swing, Tokyo can also anticipate a greater and more explicit pressure to bring more job-creating investments in the United States.

Furthermore, should the Trump administration move to “strategic decoupling” with Chinese economy and try to exert influence on U.S. allies and partners to follow suit, it will create a major problem for Tokyo which, despite its geostrategic concerns vis-à-vis China, still wants to maintain functional and stable relationship with Beijing. Japan faces all these prospects without a leader like Shinzo Abe—a strong, articulate and charismatic leader who could build a personal rapport with Trump.

Japan is hardly unique in these challenges. In fact, other countries in the Indo-Pacific – with a possible exception of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi who, like Abe, was able to develop a cordial rapport with Trump – all share similar concerns. This makes U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific question whether the positive momentum for region-wide and inter-region cooperation created during the Biden administration will be sustained during the next four years of “America First”.

In fact, this momentum can be sustained – even with a more transactional approach to alliances and partnerships coming from Washington. After all, as Japan’s then-prime minister Fumio Kishida said in his address to U.S. Congress during his state visit to the U.S. in April 2024, while U.S. leadership is critical, “the U.S. should not be expected to do it all”. Indeed, in order for the coalition among like-minded countries to be sustainable and resilient, all U.S. allies and partners are – and should be – expected to do their fair share. As General Jim Mattis said during his first trip to Europe as then-President Trump’s first Secretary of Defense, a country needs to help its own before it can help others. Paradoxically, an unapologetic “America First” approach by the incoming U.S. administration can give a sense of urgency that may be necessary for U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific to take ownership of a global effort for the defense fundamental principles that shaped the post-World War II international order.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Articulate why the U.S. considers more equitable alliances and partnership important.** It is critical for U.S. allies and partners to hear *why* the U.S. considers more equitable alliances and partnership to be important. The effort will require Washington articulate how an “America First” approach and robust alliances and partnerships are not mutually exclusive – and rather, that they are only possible with robust, proactive and regular engagement initiated by allies. In this context, while it is fair for the U.S. to expect a more equitable relationship with its allies and partners, it is also fair on the part of allies to expect greater responsibility-sharing in return for more proactive role they play.

**Encourage the deepening of partnership among U.S. allies and partners.** There is already a plethora of U.S. alliance-based multilaterals to build upon. Stronger relations among U.S. allies and partners independent of the U.S. can go a long way to strengthen

the existing minilateral cooperative frameworks that benefit all parties involved, including the U.S. For instance, a more enduring Japan-ROK bilateral partnership that is resilient to leadership transition in Seoul and Tokyo will bolster regional deterrence vis-à-vis North Korea and China. A robust cooperation between Japan and the Philippines can serve critical at a time when China's behavior in the South China Sea requires greater attention. By staying engaged in the minilaterals, the U.S. can encourage and facilitate the other parties in these frameworks to forge ties amongst themselves that can serve as the foundation for a more equitable regional cooperative security framework.

**Refrain from forcing the zero-sum choice.** One of the concerns shared by U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific is the possibility of them having to “choose a side” between the U.S. and China. This is much harder for the countries in the Indo-Pacific simply because they are geographically closer to China and cannot afford completely alienating China, particularly in their economic relations. While the U.S. should work with its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific to safeguard their collective supply chain for the technologies and products that have critical importance to national security, Washington should be extremely careful about forcing them “zero-sum” choice.