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## Japan: The Indispensable Power in a Potential Second Trump Presidency

Harry Horsfield and Benjamin Ho

### SYNOPSIS

As the United States faces the possibility of a second Trump presidency, Japan's role in stabilising East Asia becomes increasingly crucial. Amid Trump's unpredictability, Japan's proven leadership and strategic initiatives position it as the key to maintaining regional order.

### COMMENTARY

With the US election quickly approaching this November and the spectre of a second Trump presidency looming, East Asia faces renewed uncertainty. During Donald Trump's first term, many of America's allies grappled with a transactional and unpredictable foreign policy that threatened the stability of the US-led regional order. Yet, amid this upheaval, Japan emerged as a key stabilising force in the region, able to mitigate the worst excesses of Trump's unilateral tendencies. Should Trump return to the White House this November, Japan will once again be indispensable to maintaining regional order.

Trump's first term was characterised by a series of actions that fundamentally [disrupted the status quo in East Asia](#). His abrupt withdrawal from the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement not only undermined a key regional pillar of free trade and integration but also created a void in regional economic leadership, which [China](#) eagerly moved to exploit. Moreover, his "America First" rhetoric, coupled with disengagement from traditional multilateral frameworks and frequent questioning of the value of America's long-standing commitments, created a climate of instability and uncertainty. This unpredictability eroded trust in US commitments and led to doubts among the United States' allies about the [reliability of American support](#).

## How Japan Weathered the Trump First Term

Japan's response to Trump's "America First" foreign policy offers valuable lessons for what lies ahead – and how the country can navigate future challenges. When Trump withdrew the United States from the TPP, Japan seized the initiative. Leading the 11 remaining members in negotiations, Tokyo resurrected the TPP as the [Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership \(CPTPP\)](#), effectively preserving the trade agreement's framework and demonstrating Tokyo's commitment to regional economic integration even in the absence of US participation.

Japan also took a leading role in the negotiations for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Tokyo aimed to elevate RCEP beyond mere market access by pushing for [higher-level rules](#), seeking to enhance a free and fair economic system. These actions underscore Japan's increasing ability to lead on economic diplomacy and advance a rules-based economic order, a crucial asset if Trump again abrogates US leadership.

Additionally, through careful diplomacy, Japan was able to stave off doubts about the US security commitment in the region. Notably, then prime minister Shinzo Abe convinced the Trump administration to adopt two of his signature initiatives – the concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and the revitalisation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) linking the United States, Japan, Australia and India – as central pillars of US strategy in the region. This strategic manoeuvring not only maintained US engagement in East Asia but also helped to stabilise the regional order by reinforcing a multilateral approach to countering China's influence.



Shinzo Abe with Donald Trump—if Trump wins the coming US presidential elections, can Shigeru Ishiba navigate the tumultuous conditions Japan is likely to face? *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

## Legacy of Shinzo Abe and the Future Japanese Leadership

Part of Japan's success in mitigating Trump's worst tendencies undoubtedly lay in the [personal relationship](#) that Abe was able to cultivate with Trump; in doing this, [Abe had several advantages](#) that made him particularly suited to such a role, not least of which were his robust base of political support and the conservative credentials required to gain Trump's trust and attention. It was Abe's political longevity and unique understanding of Trump's personal style of diplomacy that allowed Japan to avoid the high-profile [tensions that tormented US allies in Europe](#).

It remains to be seen whether future Japanese leaders will be able to construct a similar relationship. However, there is cause for optimism in this regard. With [Shigeru Ishiba, the new leader of the Liberal Democratic Party \(LDP\)](#), assuming the premiership this month, the party's image that had been tainted by [fundraising scandals](#) under Fumio Kishida has been somewhat redeemed. This clean slate, alongside Ishiba's reputation as an outsider, positions him well to rebuild public trust in the party in the 27 October snap election he has called for to shore up his political base. Winning a mandate at the polls will provide him with the political capital necessary for navigating the complexities of relations with Trump.

Having served previously as defence minister, Ishiba has consistently advocated for a more equal US-Japan security alliance, including establishing a [Japanese Self-Defence Forces base in Guam](#) – a proposal that could resonate well with Trump's emphasis on burden-sharing among allies. While his talk of an "Asian NATO" or a more assertive stance on Taiwan might raise concerns in Washington, his push for a stronger defence posture and his recognition of the US-Japan alliance as the backbone of Japan's postwar security could offer the common ground needed to foster a productive relationship with Trump.

Besides, Japan is arguably better positioned to handle the challenges of a Trump presidency than it was under Abe in 2016. Many of Trump's grievances regarding US security involvement in Northeast Asia – particularly concerns over the financial burden of maintaining US military bases – were [addressed by Abe](#), often at the cost of his own domestic popularity. Japan is also on track to spend [2% of its GDP on defence by 2027](#), making it the world's third-largest defence spender. These adjustments have no doubt been well received in Washington and will give Japan's future leader the leverage to mollify Trump's more transactional approach to diplomacy.

## Japan as an Entrepreneurial Power

Moreover, in the last four years Japan has taken a more entrepreneurial role, actively innovating its defence relations to sustain the regional order. Through its [Official Security Assistance \(OSA\)](#) scheme, Tokyo has sought to strengthen the "security capacities" of like-minded states including Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. Japan also has signed reciprocal access agreements (RAA) with both [Australia](#) and the [Philippines](#), in 2022 and earlier this year, respectively. These initiatives provide

the foundation for a more proactive Japanese defence posture and give regional states a hedge against American abandonment.

Indeed, in many ways Japan is uniquely suited to support the current regional order. Polls consistently show that Japan is the most [trusted country among Southeast Asian states](#), ranking higher than both the United States and China. This high level of trust enables Japan to act as a bridge in regional diplomacy and a more palatable partner than the United States. In a second Trump term, especially one in which Trump pursues a hawkish approach to China, this trust will be a crucial tool for Tokyo to ease regional anxieties.

Looking ahead, Japan's role in maintaining East Asia's stability in the event of a Trump re-election cannot be overstated. This is not to say that a second Trump presidency will not pose challenges –it certainly will. Trump's unpredictable policies and potential shift towards a more transactional or disengaged approach could augur significant uncertainties in the region. Nevertheless, Tokyo has already demonstrated its ability to navigate the unpredictability of Trump's foreign policy, and its increasing activism in regional diplomacy as well as defence posture provides a robust foundation for managing these challenges effectively.

On the other hand, should Kamala Harris assume the presidency, we can expect continuity in American foreign policy in Asia. A Harris administration is likely to emphasise multilateral cooperation, making use of established alliances and institutions like the Quad in pursuing competition with China. In such a scenario, Japan will still play an important and increasing role, but the partnership would require less delicate manoeuvring and would lean more towards shared values and collaboration rather than the extortionist and unilateral instincts that defined the Trump era.

Whoever takes the presidency in November, Japan's role will be crucial. Its bolstered military capabilities, leadership role in multilateral institutions and high level of trust among East Asian nations position it as a valuable ally to the United States. If a second Trump term does materialise, Japan will be all the more indispensable to navigating the unpredictability of Trump and maintaining the status quo in the regional order.

**Harry HORSFIELD** is an MSc (Strategic Studies) student at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). **Benjamin HO** is an Assistant Professor in the China Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), RSIS.