

The Trump Administration's Foreign Policy – Impacts of Changes in the United States



President Donald Trump speaks at a campaign rally, Oct. 2019, Minneapolis. (Photo AP/AFLO)

Since its inauguration in January 2017, the Trump administration's America First policy, which seems unhesitant about confronting other parts of the world while paying little attention to the free and open international order it had been leading, has had significant impacts on the international community. The policies of the United States, Japan's sole ally, have played a central role in building and maintaining the free and open international order in the Indo-Pacific region, which has a direct impact on the security environment and stable economic development of Japan. It is hence critical to understand whether or not the Trump administration will

fundamentally change America's role in the international arena, what domestic changes have brought the Trump administration to power in the United States, and how these changes have been and will be manifested in the Trump administration's foreign policy.

Firstly, the foreign and security policies of the Trump administration that are of such vital importance to Japan were devised at the initiative of Secretary of State Pompeo, former National Security Advisor Bolton, and former Secretary of Defense Mattis, with the National Security Strategy (NSS2017) released in December 2017 formulated with

significant involvement from former National Security Advisor McMaster. The direction set by all these foreign and security policy experts was not the “populist nationalism” led mainly by former Chief Strategist Bannon, who supported President Trump in the last presidential campaign, but rather the traditional hardline conservatism of the Republican Party, which is now widely understood as “principled realism” or realism based on principles. This direction of principled realism should be welcomed as it is conducive to maintaining an international order based on the rule of law, as shown in the concerted policies of Japan and the United States, for example, regarding the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiatives.

At the same time, however, this principled realism shows a strong emphasis on a competitive and dualistic worldview putting America’s interests first in all cases, which has led some to point out that power politics have now been revived. Where the current approach decisively differs from the great power rivalry between the United States and the USSR in the Cold War era, however, is that foreign policy is determined not by ideological values but by the Trump

administration’s ad hoc interpretation of what could benefit its national interests. The Trump administration’s basic stance on foreign policy, in other words, is to restructure its foreign relations to put American interests at the very center at all times. Competition here is not based on ideology but rather on means involving power and pressure to secure the stronger position needed for the United States to realize its own national interests.

Attention should be paid to its China policy in this regard. The Trump administration has drastically changed US foreign policy toward China. NSS2017 clearly defined China as a revisionist country that challenges American power, influence and interests, and undermines American security and prosperity. A speech by Vice President Pence in October 2018 at a think tank in Washington, DC symbolized the Trump administration’s hardline policy toward China, harshly criticizing Chinese behavior in the international arena. In addition, the US Congress passed the Taiwan Travel Act in March 2018 to facilitate mutual visits by high-ranking officials of the United States and Taiwan, thereby strengthening its involvement in Taiwan. Congress has also intensified

its criticism of China over the Tibet and Uighur issues. Furthermore, as seen in the passage of the August 2018 National Defense Authorization Act, which bans US government purchases of products from five Chinese companies, including Huawei Technologies (Huawei) and Zhongxun(ZTE), and the December 2018 Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, which promotes the sale of defense equipment to Taiwan, Congress is going along with the administration in a bipartisan manner, taking a whole-of-government approach to impose stern measures on China on various fronts. While passage of the bill requires the approval of the Senate and the signature of President Trump, the House in October 2019 passed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, which requires the United States to verify every year whether China is observing the “one country, two systems” formula that guarantees a high degree of autonomy to Hong Kong. Again, however, the Trump administration’s hardline policies toward China that are not based on ideology or values are susceptible to pressure from President Trump’s insistence in reducing the bilateral trade deficit and could be used as a bargaining chip in trade negotiations with China at any time. In other words, the hardline

policies of the Trump administration toward China do not give any answers to major post-Cold War questions of how the United States will incorporate China into the international community, and what form the international community should take. It makes prediction of future trends in the international situation even more difficult.



The trade negotiations at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, Feb. 2019, Beijing. (Photo Reuters/AFLO)

Secondly, the unpredictability of the Trump administration’s foreign policy persists. The administration has, for instance, abruptly accepted summit meetings with North Korea while abandoning its nuclear agreement with Iran. In addition to its policy toward China, the basic principles of its foreign and security policies are elusive and their predictability remains low. In particular, America’s policy toward North Korea’s denuclearization is not yet clear, even after the US-North Korea summit talks held in Hanoi in June 2018 and Singapore

in February 2019. Even worse, President Trump's de facto acceptance of North Korea's launches of short-range ballistic missiles after the two summit meetings raises serious concerns for its regional ally Japan. Behind this elusiveness and unpredictability of the Trump administration's foreign policy, there lies the conflict between populism and elitism in the administration. President Trump won the 2016 presidential election from a populist stance that differed from so-called foreign policy experts, even denying the value of NATO in America's foreign policy. After taking office at the White House, however, he was viewed to have compromised with, or been incorporated into, "the establishment" to some extent by appointing James Mattis, a foreign and security policy expert, as Secretary of Defense. As mentioned earlier, although his position regarding the Japan-US alliance, including the policy on a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), is close to that of the conventional diplomatic and security establishments, he still undeniably has populist tendencies, as evidenced by his dismissal of Mattis as Secretary of Defense and his sudden announcement of the withdrawal of US forces from Syria, although the latter was subsequently revised partially.

Stated another way, President Trump, who is seeking reelection in the 2020 presidential election, could swing back to a populist position, and Japan needs to carefully watch whether the administration's foreign policy might fall victim to populism. In particular with regard to economic and trade policies that directly affect the interests of the American voters, extra attention should be paid not only to the tariffs on steel and aluminum already imposed on imports from Japan but also to the possible imposition of tariffs on automobile imports despite the agreement reached in September 2019 between the two countries, as President Trump has been more persistent in materializing his populist election pledges than anyone had expected. Japan must therefore continue to appropriately remind the Trump administration of the value of the alliance and the importance of maintaining a free and fair trade/economic system.

It is also important to note that the dismissal of Bolton from the post of National Security Advisor has given growing impetus to the noninterventionists in US foreign and security policy circles who claim that the diplomatic and security

establishments' support for the use of military power has been forcing the United States to fight endless wars. This noninterventionist tendency was already evident in the Obama administration, and it is reasonable to assume that noninterventionism is now an idea widely shared by the American electorate left or right. Even think tanks with policy experts are beginning to see a movement to unite both left and right noninterventionist movements. The Quincy Institute, a noninterventionist think tank, was founded after the Trump administration's inauguration and funded both by left-leaning and right-leaning billionaires, including the liberal George Soros and the conservative Koch brothers. With these facts in mind, close attention should be paid to how the conflict between America First and US internationalism plays out in forming the United States' foreign policy.

On the domestic policy front, the Trump administration succeeded in appointing conservative judges not only to the Supreme Court but also in the federal judiciary, including appellate and district courts. It also enacted a tax cut that it deems its greatest achievement. These, along with a strong economy, have

given President Trump a solid support base. While the results of the 2018 midterm elections followed a historical pattern, the come-from-behind victory in the House of Representatives that gave the Democratic Party a majority was a major blow to the scandal-ridden Trump administration. This was tempered, however, by the fact that the Republicans did not suffer a crushing defeat in the Senate and maintained their majority. Although numerous clashes with Democrats are expected in Congress, especially in the House, it may be said that the conclusions of Special Counsel Mueller's March 2019 report on "Russia-Gate" concerning Russian intervention in the 2016 US presidential election were not the worst outcome for the president. In the run-up to the 2020 presidential election, there have also been allegations raised since the summer of 2019 that he made requests to Ukraine for intervention in the coming presidential election, and the possibility of his dismissal based on a conviction at an impeachment trial, which has dogged President Trump since his inauguration, has not disappeared. If crucial evidence emerges during the impeachment proceedings, the president could expect to lose a number of his supporters although, considering

the balance of Congress, the possibility of impeachment is not yet that great at this point. To the contrary, the Democratic Party could face difficulties, in battleground states critical for the 2020 elections if the party leans too progressive in its political agenda in the midst of serious political polarization. In all, the nomination of the Democratic candidate and the outcome of the 2020 presidential election are still very much up in the air.

Finally, the relationship between Japan and the United States has developed fairly smoothly despite initial concerns following the inauguration of President Trump. At the summit meeting held in February 2017, for example, the leaders of the two countries confirmed that the Japan-US alliance is the cornerstone of peace, prosperity and freedom in the region. At the same time, they also confirmed that the United States would defend Japan with its nuclear and conventional forces, and that Article 5 of the Japan-US Security Treaty, which stipulates the United States' obligation to defend Japan, applies to the Senkaku Islands. In addition, at a joint press conference, President Trump expressed his gratitude to Japan for hosting US forces. These statements represent a

complete retraction of remarks he made during the 2016 presidential campaign. There have since been repeated summit meetings and telephone conversations between the two leaders that have maintained good relations, as seen, for example, in President Trump's May 2019 visit to Japan as its first state guest in the Reiwa era. Prime Minister Abe has built a particularly close personal relationship with President Trump that has itself become a valuable asset for Japan. While there are some instances in which Japanese and American policies part ways, as seen in the US' withdrawal from TPP negotiations and its imposition of tariffs on steel and aluminum, Japan must continue its efforts to maintain a strong relationship with the United States, supporting a win-win policy for both countries and the free and open international order, by taking into account the overall trends in the United States in both the public and private sectors, while leveraging the close relationship established by Prime Minister Abe with President Trump. ■