



**US-Japan Relations:
2016 Opens with a Bang**

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The early months of 2016 were relatively steady for the US-Japan relationship until the US presidential primaries began to stir things up. For the first time in decades, Japan became the focus of debate on the campaign trail. Republican frontrunner Donald Trump began to single out Japan on trade and on security cooperation. To be sure, Japan had company as Trump took aim at all US alliances, but his [suggestion](#) that the United States should simply let Japan and South Korea go nuclear shocked many, including Japan's Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio.

The United States and Japan continued to refine alliance coordination in the face of North Korea's renewed nuclear testing and missile launches. Tokyo and Washington also continued their maritime cooperation as Beijing's behavior in the South China Sea continued to roil regional waters. Japan suffered an unexpected [setback](#) in its cooperation with Australia, however, as its bid to provide Canberra with its next-generation conventional subs was outdone by the French offer. The Futenma base standoff with Gov. Onaga took an unexpected turn when Prime Minister Abe Shinzo announced suddenly that he and the governor had agreed to a compromise [settlement](#). Tokyo would halt construction and Naha would agree to merge the court cases and would fully comply with the court decision on how to proceed.

Politics now consume both countries as both Japan and the US face elections later this year. Anticipation that Abe would call a double election this summer ended after Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide declared that only the regularly scheduled Upper House [election](#) would be held so that the government could concentrate on recovery efforts in Kumamoto Kyushu, the site of a deadly earthquake. Economic growth continues to elude the Abe Cabinet, and the prime minister still confronts the prospect of an additional consumption tax hike in the spring of 2017. In the US, the primaries are winding down with Donald Trump the expected nominee for the Republican Party and Hillary Clinton in the lead for nomination by the Democratic Party. The US-Japan alliance seems already to be suffering from "Trump shocks" even before the election decides the next US president.

The North Koreans test again

On Jan. 6, the North Koreans conducted their fourth nuclear test, followed one month later with the launch of an intermediate range missile. Within several weeks, Pyongyang followed up with

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a series of rocket launches that were aimed at the Sea of Japan, and on April 24, reportedly conducted a submarine-launched ballistic missile test. While the rocket tests failed and the SLBM launch was widely viewed as suspect, they nonetheless demonstrated Kim Jong-un's intent to accelerate the acquisition of an arsenal capable of challenging the regional security order. Photos of Kim in front of the missile launch pad only added to the sense that he is intent on continued provocation.

Tokyo and Washington remained in close contact throughout, and trilateral cooperation with Seoul deepened. The conclusion of the bilateral Japan-ROK agreement on the so-called comfort women in the final days of 2015 allowed for a smoother diplomatic conversation between Seoul and Tokyo on how to respond to the North. At the United Nations, Japan's seat on the UN Security Council facilitated a quick diplomatic response, and the US and Japan proposed a new harsher round of sanctions. But Japan had no direct line to Beijing this round, a notable difference from the last time North Korea conducted a nuclear test. Washington and Beijing did not reach an agreement until April when Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited the United States.

The North Korean tests provided the first opportunity to use the newly created US-Japan Alliance Coordination Mechanism, allowing for real-time, close consultations between Washington and Tokyo. In March, Minister of Defense Nakatani Gen ordered *Aegis* ballistic-missile defense warships and land-based *Patriot PAC-3* rocket to intercept any missiles that showed signs of reaching Japanese territory. Japan's missile defense system remained on high alert until May, when the government canceled the order after concluding that there was no longer any immediate danger of incoming missiles.

US-Japan cooperation on the South China Sea continues

The United States and Japan continue to consult on how to respond to China's land reclamation in the South China Sea. Tokyo announced a [new agreement](#) with Manila to provide military equipment and conduct joint research and development on March 27, including five second-hand Beechcraft *TC-90 King Air* reconnaissance planes previously used by the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) for training. On April 3, two MSDF destroyers and a training submarine visited the Philippines to observe the annual US-Philippine *Balikatan* exercises, the first port call to include a submarine in 15 years. This year's exercises included a maritime defense component, and Japan will join as a formal member next year. Following their visit to Manila, the two destroyers then visited Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, the first Japanese military port call since the end of World War II. At a [press conference](#) in Tokyo, Minister of Defense Nakatani said that the Japanese government hoped to use the port call as an opportunity to further develop Japan-Vietnam relations and defense cooperation.

These port visits to Manila and Cam Ranh Bay came as Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague is expected to issue a ruling in the coming weeks concerning an arbitration case lodged by the Philippines concerning China's maritime claims in the South China Sea. [China has continued to boycott the proceedings](#), and has said it will not abide by the ruling. In the lead-up to the G7 Summit meeting in Hiroshima in April, the Chinese Foreign Ministry repeatedly called on Prime Minister Abe and the Japanese government not to comment on the South China Sea. On Jan. 17, Abe said in an interview with the *Financial Times* that Japan "[harbours very strong concern](#)"

about China's territorial claims, though he balanced this statement with praise for Beijing's economic policies. On Feb. 29, Assistant Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou voiced strong discontent with Tokyo's open [criticism](#) of Beijing during a meeting with Japan's Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Shinsuke Sugiyama. At the G7 meeting in Hiroshima on April 11, foreign ministers from Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the US issued a [joint statement](#) on maritime security, expressing strong opposition to "any intimidating coercive or provocative unilateral actions that could alter the status quo and increase tensions."

Futenma relocation, 20 years and counting?

Yet another twist in the standoff between the Abe Cabinet and Gov. Onaga Takeshi of Okinawa Prefecture created a stir in March. With several court cases – variously initiated by the prefecture and the central government – over the relocation plan for the US Marine airfield at Henoko, the prospects for constructing the new base seemed difficult to predict.

On March 4, however, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga announced that the Abe Cabinet had concluded an [out-of-court settlement](#) with Gov. Onaga. The settlement consolidated the separate court cases and committed both sides to an expeditious implementation of whatever the court decided. This move took many in Tokyo, Naha, and Washington by surprise, but seemed clearly influenced by a political calculation over the upcoming summer election. Construction was halted, and the courts will deliberate. Expectations are high in the Japanese government that a conclusion will be reached by the end of 2016, and that ultimately the central government will prevail. If so, Onaga will be expected to end his opposition to his predecessor's approval of the landfill permit, and allow the project to move forward. If, however, the Okinawa Prefectural Government wins the legal battle, Tokyo will have to abandon its Henoko plan, thus opening up again a conversation between the US and Japanese governments on how to move the US Marines out of Futenma.

While there seems little progress in gaining a consensus in Okinawa in support of the Henoko option, the region has changed considerably since the mid-1990s. Today, Okinawa is the site of new attention by Japan's Self-Defense Force as its new Southwestern strategy is implemented. The mission of island defense is now a high priority, with maritime, air, and ground force deployments to Okinawa's many islands increasing. The Ministry of Defense announced that its new radar facility in Yonaguni Island (93 miles southeast of the Senkakus) was operational March 28, with both Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) and Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) units deployed there. The ASDF is moving a second *F-15* squadron to Naha, and the MSDF has increased its tempo of operations in the East China Sea, moving submarines and surface ships through Katsuren far more frequently than two decades ago. In addition, the development of a new amphibious landing unit in the GSDF brings more exercises and training closer to Okinawa's islands and waters. Twenty years after the US and Japan agreed to close the Futenma Marine Air Station, it is Japan's own military that seeks greater access to bases in Okinawa.

TPP prospects

After more than five years of negotiations, ministers from the US, Japan, and 10 other Pacific nations officially reached an agreement on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in October 2015.

Prime Minister Abe said at the time that his government would do all it could to secure parliamentary approval of the TPP. In his opening policy [speech](#) to the Diet on Jan. 22, Abe reiterated the importance of TPP for Japan's economy, calling it "truly a grand plan for the long-term future of our nation." The 12 member nations officially signed the [TPP agreement](#) on Feb. 4 in Wellington, New Zealand. On March 8, Abe's Cabinet approved a set of bills to ratify the TPP agreement and submitted them to the Diet for approval.

Deliberations on the TPP bills began on April 7 in a special committee set up in the House of Representatives, chaired by former Farm Minister Nishikawa Koya. However, the bills immediately ran into strong opposition from the [Democratic Party \(DP\)](#) (formerly Democratic Party of Japan) and other smaller parties. Members of the DP had obtained a copy of a forthcoming book from Nishikawa entitled *The Truth about TPP*, in which Nishikawa allegedly gave inside details on the TPP negotiations. The DP objected in particular to a part of the book in which Nishikawa said that US negotiators had offered a series of concessions ahead of President Obama's visit to Japan in April 2014. The DP said it was unaware of these concessions, and pressured Economic Revitalization Minister Ishihara Nobuteru for more details. Ishihara, who replaced Amari Akira as TPP minister, said that he could not comment on the closed-door negotiations. In protest, DP lawmakers walked out of the committee on April 8, saying that Nishikawa should be removed.

The special committee resumed deliberations 10 days later on April 18. However, by this time, the government had mostly turned its attention to responding to the devastating earthquakes in Kumamoto Prefecture on April 14 and 16. On April 19, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) executives, including Secretary-General Tanigaki Sadakazu and Diet Affairs Chief Sato Tsutomu, announced that it would be difficult to approve the TPP bills during the current session (set to end June 1) because of the Diet's tight schedule and the Kumamoto earthquakes. If negotiations are not concluded during the current session, they will resume in an extraordinary session of the Diet, which will be convened after the House of Councillors election in July.

On the US side, there has not been much progress since the official signing of the TPP agreement in February. Leading presidential candidates from both the Republican and Democratic parties, including Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, Hillary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders, have all [criticized the TPP](#) as harmful for US jobs. The Obama administration nevertheless maintains that it will do all it can to seek ratification of the TPP. Last summer, President Obama won a hard-fought battle in Congress to gain Trade Promotion Authority (TPA). TPA means that the TPP agreement can be brought before the Congress through an expedited "fast-track" process, where it will receive a straight up-or-down-vote without the possibility of amendments or filibuster. However, at the moment, it remains doubtful whether a vote will happen before the November presidential election.

Earthquake disaster in Kumamoto

In April, the alliance yet again faced a natural disaster in Japan when two devastating earthquakes struck Kumamoto in the southern island of Kyushu. The first earthquake struck on April 14 at a magnitude of 6.2 and was centered close to the surface near the inland town of Ueki; a second larger quake at magnitude 7.0 struck two days later, while many residents were

seeking shelter in evacuation centers across the region. Over 44,000 people were displaced, and at 49 people lost their lives. The [US and Japanese militaries coordinate their response](#), and within three days, two *MV-22B Ospreys* from the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit had delivered relief supplies to Hakusui Sport Park on the island of Kyushu in support of GSDF relief efforts.

2016 elections and the “Trump shocks”

The first months of 2016 have introduced new politics into discussions of the alliance as two elections loom. Japan faces an Upper House election in the summer, and the United States faces its presidential election in November.

In Tokyo, the Upper House election expected in July will shape Abe’s options for the next few years. A double election is no longer an option, but many wonder aloud if Abe will need to call a Lower House election in the fall to address some of his critical policy challenges. First and foremost will be the Diet deliberations on TPP, but there is also the question of postponing the expected hike in Japan’s consumption tax. At present, the Abe Cabinet is required to raise the consumption tax from 8 to 10 percent in the spring of 2017, but given the economic doldrums of late, few of his economic advisors encourage this. Even Joseph Stiglitz was brought in to argue against it. To postpone the tax yet again, however, would raise serious questions about Japan’s fiscal health, and would require yet another poll to ensure the electorate is supportive. Second, there is widespread hope within the LDP that it can gain a simple majority in the Upper House. This could position the party better should Abe decide to build a coalition with other parties around one of his goals, the amendment of Japan’s Constitution. Under Article 96 of the Constitution, a two-thirds majority of both Houses is necessary to begin consideration of a national referendum.

The opposition party in Japan remains weak, although the DPJ and the Tokyo-based Japan Innovation Party merged on March 27 to form a new, larger reform based party, now called simply the Democratic Party (DP). It is not clear yet whether this new party can formulate a strong party platform since the two parties disagree on a variety of critical issues. Nonetheless, their electoral cooperation raises the prospect of greater options for Japan’s voters, and perhaps some leverage with which to temper the Abe Cabinet’s ambitions, especially on the new security laws and on Constitutional revision.

In the US, Donald Trump’s increasing support makes him now the likely Republican Party nominee for president. In the final months of the primaries, the anti-Trump candidates, Ted Cruz and John Kasich, combined their efforts to try to attract voters away from Trump, but to no avail. Trump’s foreign policy remains a problem for many, as does his strong antagonism towards trade agreements, including the TPP. In two separate interviews, one with the [Washington Post](#) and another with the [New York Times](#), candidate Trump argued for downgrading US alliances, and specifically in Asia, to allowing Japan and South Korea to defend themselves against North Korea. While his major complaint seems to be that the US is getting a bad deal out of its alliance with Japan, Trump seems to be advocating for a far broader retrenchment of the US military in his “America first” foreign policy vision.

Needless to say, these “Trump shocks” have created deep concern in Tokyo. In meeting after meeting on the US-Japan alliance, senior Japanese policymakers have noted their concern over the future of the alliance should candidate Trump become president. In a major symposium in Washington over Golden Week, former Japanese Defense Minister Morimoto Satoshi suggested that a weakening of the alliance would be the greatest threat to Japan’s security.

For the remaining months of the Obama administration, the US and Japan will continue to focus on their regional cooperation on maritime issues. The president’s visit to Japan May 26-27 for the G7 Summit in Ise-shima will provide the opportunity for the much anticipated presidential visit to Hiroshima. The president himself has also become a strong domestic advocate of the need for TPP, [writing an op-ed in the *Washington Post*](#) on May 2 that clearly argues for strong U.S. economic engagement in Asia, saying, “The world has changed. The rules are changing with it. The United States, not countries like China, should write them.” But the politics in both countries this summer will amplify domestic debate over trade and the alliance. If the early months of 2016 provide any sense of what is ahead, stay tuned for more “Trump shocks.”

Chronology of US-Japan relations January – April 2016

Jan. 6, 2016: North Korea conducts its fourth nuclear test.

Jan. 6, 2016: Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio and US Ambassador to Japan Caroline Kennedy meet to jointly condemn North Korea’s nuclear test.

Jan. 14-15, 2016: G7 Global Partnership against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction holds its first meeting under Japan’s chairmanship in Tokyo.

Jan. 16, 2016: US Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Saiki Akitaka, and Korean Vice Minister Lim Sung-nam meet in Tokyo to discuss the recent North Korean nuclear test, regional issues, and cooperation on health security and development.

Jan. 22, 2016: FM Kishida and Ambassador Kennedy sign a new Special Measures Agreement, which outlines the costs that Japan will bear over the next five years under the Status of Forces Agreement for US armed forces in Japan.

Jan. 24, 2016: Ginowan Mayor Sakima Atsushi in Okinawa is reelected with the backing of the Abe government.

Jan. 30, 2016: *USS Curtis Wilbur*, a US guided-missile destroyer, conducts a freedom of navigation (FON) operation within 12nm of the Chinese-administered Triton Island in the Paracel Island chain in the South China Sea.

Jan. 31, 2016: Japanese Ministry of Defense announces that it will double the number of *F-15* fighter jets in Naha, bringing the total to about 40.

Feb. 1, 2016: Okinawa Prefectural Government files a new lawsuit against central government over the planned Futenma relocation.

Feb. 4, 2016: Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement is signed by the twelve member nations, including the US on Japan, in Wellington, New Zealand.

Feb. 18, 2016: US and Japan announce that daytime flights between the US and Tokyo International Airport (Haneda) are expected to begin in fall 2016 for the first time since 1978.

Feb. 21, 2016: 28,000 protestors surround the National Diet to protest the plan to relocate Futenma within the Okinawa Prefecture.

March 2, 2016: Adm. Harry Harris, commander of US Pacific Command, tells a security conference in New Delhi that the US, Japan, and India will hold naval exercises in waters off the northern Philippine Sea sometime this year.

March 3-4, 2016: Third senior-level US-Japan Development Dialogue is held in Washington to discuss issues including the Sustainable Development Goals and Japan's G7 leadership.

March 4, 2016: Prime Minister Abe Shinzo agrees to an out-of-court settlement for three lawsuits filed over the Futenma relocation.

March 7, 2016: Land Minister Ishii Keiichi orders Okinawa Gov. Onaga Takeshi to "correct" his cancellation of an approval for the landfill work at the Futenma replacement site. Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga says the move is in line with the March 4 settlement.

March 7, 2016: Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare requires food processors and exporters to obtain HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) to further showcase food safety in Japan ahead of the ratification of the TPP agreement.

March 8, 2016: Cabinet approves a bill seeking the ratification of the TPP agreement and eleven TPP-related measures, submitting them to the Diet for deliberation.

March 11, 2016: Fifth anniversary of Great East Japan earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disasters.

March 21, 2016: In an [interview with the *Washington Post*](#), Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump says that he does not believe the US gains anything by having bases in Japan and South Korea, and that both should pay more for their own defense.

March 23, 2016: Okinawa and central government officials begin talks over the Futenma relocation, the first since the court-mediated agreement on March 4.

March 26, 2016: In an [interview with the *New York Times*](#), Donald Trump suggests that he would support Seoul and Tokyo acquiring nuclear weapons capabilities.

March 27, 2016: Democratic Party of Japan officially merges with the Japan Innovation Party to create a new opposition party, the Democratic Party (DP).

March 28, 2016: Tokyo brings its new radar station on Yonaguni Island in Okinawa online.

March 30-April 2, 2016: PM Abe attends the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington.

March 31, 2016: PM Abe [responds to comments](#) made by Trump saying “whoever will become the next president of the United States, the Japan-US alliance is the cornerstone of Japan’s diplomacy.” FM Kishida says “it is impossible that Japan will arm itself with nuclear weapons.”

April 3, 2016: Two Maritime Self-Defense Force destroyers and a training submarine arrive in the Philippines for a port call, the first to include a Japanese submarine in fifteen years.

April 4-16, 2016: Japan participates as an observer in the *Balikatan* military exercises between the US and the Philippines.

April 8, 2016: Debate on TPP is suspended in the Diet after opposition party lawmakers walk out in protest of what they claim to be insufficient responses from Economic and Fiscal Policy Minister Ishihara Nobuteru and Nishikawa Koya, chairman of the special committee.

April 10-11, 2016: Secretary of State John Kerry visits Hiroshima for the G7 Foreign Ministers Meeting, becoming first secretary of state to visit Hiroshima since the end of World War II.

April 11, 2016: Foreign ministers at the G7 meeting in Hiroshima issue a joint statement on maritime security.

April 12, 2016: Two MSDF destroyers that earlier visited Manila arrive in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, for a port visit, the first of its kind since the end of World War II.

April 13, 2016: Diet Affairs Chief Sato Tsutomu tells reporters that the LDP may give up trying to get the TPP ratified during the current session if resistance from opposition parties means that it is delayed beyond April. The current Diet sessions runs until June 1.

April 14, 2016: Okinawa and central government officials begin working-level talks under the court-mediated settlement deal.

April 14, 2016: Powerful 6.2 magnitude earthquake hits city of Kumamoto in Kyushu, Japan.

April 16, 2016: A second, even more powerful 7.0 magnitude earthquake hits Kumamoto Prefecture. As of the end of April, 48 people have died, and 47,000 evacuees are staying in temporary shelters.

April 17-19, 2016: Deputy Secretary of State Blinken travels to Tokyo to meet FM Kishida and other senior officials ahead of the third round of the US-Japan-Republic of Korea deputy-level trilateral consultations in Seoul, April 19-20.

April 18, 2016: Japan's House of Representatives special committee resumes deliberations on TPP. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and other ministers attend the debates.

April 23, 2016: PM Abe flies to Kumamoto to meet with quake victims.

April 25, 2016: Cabinet gives areas in Kumamoto the "extreme severity" designation, allowing the central government to subsidize up to 90 percent of the costs of restoring facilities.