



**US-Japan Relations:  
History and Other Alliance Constraints\***

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In the wake of a highly successful visit by Prime Minister Abe Shinzo to Washington in late April, the US-Japan relationship seemed poised for a celebration of success in revamping the alliance. Two focal points of alliance policymakers were the Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). But over the summer, both of these initiatives came under political scrutiny. The Abe Cabinet's new security legislation drew increasingly vocal protests, first from constitutional scholars and then from an ever-broadening coalition of demonstrators who gathered in the tens of thousands outside the Japanese Diet. TPP, on the other hand, struggled within Washington, especially as the Congress and the White House went head to head over the battle for trade promotion authority, which was finally granted. By late summer, however, it was clear that problems among the US, Japan, and other Asia-Pacific partners threatened to stall the negotiations, and make it more and more likely that TPP would not be an Obama administration legacy.

Beyond bilateral alliance priorities, the US and Japan faced additional dilemmas, both related to dealing with a more assertive and sensitive China. Artificial island building in the Spratlys and a cyber attack on the US Office of Personnel Management rattled US-China relations, which brought the US and Japan into closer dialogue over regional maritime cooperation. Senior Japanese military leaders began to speak publicly about the possibility of a larger Japanese role in the South China Sea.

At the end of the summer, the much-anticipated commemorations of the end of World War II in Japan and China brought heightened sensitivity to the region. The Aug. 14 Abe Statement and Xi Jinping's speech at the national military parade on Sept. 3, the day of Japanese surrender in China, demonstrated the distance between the two neighbors. Each revealed a new revisionist gaze on their war legacy, and it was hard to ignore the undertones of contemporary bilateral tensions in both leaders' remarks. Abe chose not to travel to China, although he did not announce his decision until just days before.

**The Abe Cabinet's new security legislation**

The Abe Cabinet's decision to reinterpret the right of collective self-defense (CSD) last year required implementing legislation, and these new security laws were presented to the Lower

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House of the Diet in mid-May. With a two-thirds majority in the Lower House and a simple majority in the Upper House, Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Komeito were well positioned to pass the laws. But a combination of political slip-ups by the ruling coalition and a widening sense of skepticism among the public of the prime minister's intentions deepened concerns and prompted a standoff with the opposition parties in the Diet, an increasingly outspoken legal and intellectual critique of the Abe Cabinet's ambitions, and growing numbers of demonstrators protesting on the streets around the Diet.

Opposition party critique of the legislation was unanimous, despite some early predictions that the Japan Innovation Party (JIP) might assist the LDP. Prime Minister Abe's speech to the US Congress, in which he assured legislators that he would pass these new bills in order to ensure close cooperation between the two allies, drew immediate fire from an incensed opposition, which felt he had made promises to Washington before even showing them the legislation. But the biggest blow came in the committee deliberations over the bills. Constitutional scholars were invited to comment on the constitutionality of the new laws on June 4. Those invited by the opposition parties were expected to disagree with the government, but when the expert scholar selected by the LDP, Hasabe Yasuo of Waseda University, strongly condemned the 2014 Abe Cabinet decision to reinterpret the right of collective self-defense as unconstitutional, it kindled a more viral movement of opposition across the country. Constitutional scholars, artists, and other public intellectuals initiated petitions, regional legal associations convened town hall meetings, local assemblies passed resolutions in protest, and protestors took to the streets in ever-larger numbers.

In July, when the JIP offered an alternative bill, and initially Prime Minister Abe seemed to want to find a compromise solution. But JIP President Matsuno Yoriyoshi presented his version, compiled with the assistance of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), it was clear that there would be no amalgam bill. The JIP took a far different stance on two provisions that were central to Abe's reform. First, the JIP argued that the constitution did not need to be reinterpreted, and that the existing right of self-defense was sufficient for Self-Defense Force (SDF) operations needed for the defense of Japan. Second, the alternative bill refused to allow any SDF activity in the vicinity of a conflict, thereby refusing to allow any logistical or other support for US or other forces engaged in war. Realizing there was little there to build a compromise around, the prime minister's party pushed to end committee deliberations and put the bills to a floor vote. On July 16, the Lower House voted to pass the new security legislation, and sent it to the Upper House. Abe's extension of the Diet session to Sept. 27 provided for the 60-day deliberations needed by the Upper House, and for a return to the Lower House if the bills are not approved. If a vote is not taken or the bills are rejected, the Lower House will be able to pass them into law.

Prime Minister Abe's ruling coalition has the voting strength to pass the legislation despite this growing opposition, but the summer debate and spiraling protests have taken their toll on his popularity, with his support rating dropped each week in July, until it sunk below his disapproval rating – the first time in his time as prime minister. Unlike prior dips in popular approval, this trend line showed a significant discomfort in Japan with his approach and in particular with the lack of clarity in his government's explanation of why the reinterpretation of Japan's Constitution was necessary. After the Lower House voted on the bills, the prime minister

openly acknowledged that he had not sufficiently explained to the Japanese public what this reform meant for Japan. By the end of the summer, although his approval ratings began to come back up, a majority of Japanese still felt he had not fully explained, and many were deeply unsure whether this policy reform violated the Constitution.

### **TPP talks falter**

During their summit meeting in Washington in April, President Obama and Prime Minister Abe restated their joint commitment to reaching a successful conclusion of their bilateral trade talks and the broader Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal, which includes the United States, Japan, and 10 other nations. Negotiations on a US-Japan trade deal have been ongoing for years and while there are still concerns over politically sensitive issues such as agriculture and automobiles, officials in both countries continue to express optimism that a deal can be reached this year. Appearing before a joint session of the US Congress on April 29, Abe stressed that Japan is committed to “[bringing great reforms](#) toward the agriculture policy that’s been in place for decades.”

On the US side, the granting of Trade Promotion Authority (TPA) to President Obama was considered a critical milestone, though its passage through Congress was stalled by opponents of free trade in both parties. TPA grants President Obama the ability to bring any agreement before the Congress through an [expedited “fast-track” process](#) that allows for a straight up-or-down vote without any amendments, which makes it easier for the Obama administration to convince other TPP members that it is negotiating “in good faith” and will bring any deal before the full Congress without making alterations. The Senate approved a trade package including TPA with bipartisan support on May 22 (62-37), but the bill ran into difficulties as it moved through the House. Members of the House elected to divide the trade package into two components – TPA and Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA), a program meant to help US workers who lose their jobs as a result of trade deals – and vote under a procedure that requires approval of both components for the package to pass. On June 12, the House narrowly voted in favor of TPA (219-211), but House Democrats joined Republicans in voting against TAA (126-302), defeating the overall package despite a personal outreach by President Obama and Labor Secretary Thomas Perez just hours before the vote.

Initially, the vote cast doubts on whether President Obama would be able to secure TPA, and that failure to do so might endanger negotiations on TPP. However, the move proved to only stall TPA’s eventual passage. Speaker of the House John Boehner reintroduced just the TPA portion of the original trade package as an independent bill, and it was passed by the House on June 18 (218-206) and then the Senate on June 24 (60-38). The Senate also passed a separate bill on June 24 concerning TAA, which was approved by the House on June 25 (286-183) given the fact that voting it down could no longer delay the passage of TPA. [President Obama signed both TPA and TAA into law](#) on June 29.

The approval of TPA created a sense of optimism among officials on both sides of the Pacific that an agreement might be reached on the US-Japan bilateral deal and the larger TPP deal during ministerial talks at the end of July in Maui. However, a final deal remained elusive. While it seemed that the US and Japan might be close to reaching an agreement on their greatest

bilateral sticking points (agriculture and automobiles), issues affecting other member nations delayed passage of the larger TPP deal. For example, Canada wanted to protect its politically sensitive dairy market ahead of elections in October, while New Zealand demanded that other nations greatly increase their imports of dairy products. Many of the parties to the negotiations also wanted shorter patent periods and fewer protections for pharmaceutical firms, which the United States opposed.

TPP ministers did issue a joint statement saying that they were close to a deal, and many members are hoping that a deal can be [concluded before the 2016 US presidential race starts to heat up this fall](#). Given the US political calendar, some members are worried that a deal might not reach Congress until next year, or that passage could even be delayed until after the 2016 election, raising doubts about the ultimate fate of any agreement.

### **Military risk reduction efforts and Chinese activities in the South China Sea**

China loomed large over the summer. Japanese and US policymakers both had to contend with Chinese behavior in the South China Sea. The artificial island building and suspected militarization of contested islands in the Spratlys raised hackles around the region, and prompted even further efforts by Tokyo to enhance and improve cooperation with other maritime states in Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam and the Philippines. The navies of the US and Japan separately conducted island defense exercises in Palawan with Philippine forces; Vietnam's communist party leaders visited Tokyo and Washington to discuss their concerns. Diplomats from both countries worked hard to build a concerted regional position that would halt any further land reclamation on these contested islands as well as agree not to militarize them.

US and Japanese military leaders also consulted extensively on the options for a collective response should Chinese ambitions in the South China Sea begin to threaten freedom of navigation (FON) or other maritime norms. In an interview in the June 25 *Wall Street Journal*, Japan's Chief of the Joint Staff Adm. Kawano Katsutoshi noted that if China's activities continued to challenge regional maritime interests, he would consider conducting reconnaissance and surveillance activities in the South China Sea. Adm. Kawano toured the United States at the invitation of the US Joint Chief of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey, in mid-July, which allowed for a fuller discussion of US and Japanese perceptions of the shifting military balance in the region.

Both Washington and Tokyo have ongoing talks with Beijing over military risk reduction measures. Following the approval of a Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) by the Western Pacific Naval Symposium held in Qingdao in April 2014, President Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping announced a bilateral agreement on maritime interactions. Likewise, Japan and the PRC began their discussion of military risk reduction measures after Abe and Xi met at APEC, and many expected progress on these over the summer. With concern over the South China Sea, however, the prospects of meaningful military confidence building measures that would assure the US and Japan of China's commitment to maritime stability seem less promising.

## WWII history month and Japan-China relations

Finally, the summer concluded with perhaps the most anticipated event of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of World War II, Prime Minister Abe's August 15<sup>th</sup> Statement. Abe had foreshadowed his thinking early in the year and again in his address to the US Congress. But the regional spotlight intensified on the prime minister as he prepared to draft his own statement on the wartime legacies of Japan's relationship with its neighbors.

For many, the words Abe chose mattered most. Referencing the language used in the 1995 Murayama Statement, and again in the Koizumi Statement of 2005, specific markers of contrition were identified. Four phrases in particular were seen as significant: "aggression" (*shinryaku*), "colonial domination" (*shokuminchi shihai*), "deep remorse" (*tsusetsu na handsei*) and "apology" (*owabi*). Many in Japan, including some in his own party, openly opposed reiterating Japan's apology for the war. Abe chose to use all four of these sensitive terms in his text, albeit with some degree of ambiguity about his own feelings.

The Abe Statement addressed the civilian suffering inflicted by Japan in Asia, listing the devastation in China, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands. Twice in the statement, he mentioned the suffering of women on the battlefield, noting that the "honor and dignity" of those women was severely injured. But he did not address directly the continuing lack of diplomatic resolution between Tokyo and Seoul for the Korean women that were forcibly recruited to serve in military brothels. Perhaps the most novel part of his statement spoke to the need to ensure that future generations of Japanese would not be "predestined to apologize" for WWII. Abe noted that 80 percent of Japanese today had no direct experience of the war, having only experience the postwar peace. He called on his contemporaries to "face history squarely," but did not articulate how his government planned to do that.

The White House quickly issued a statement of support, suggesting that the US endorsed Abe's effort to meet the expectations of Japan's neighbors. A week earlier, the Obama administration had sent its representatives to the ceremonies at Hiroshima and Nagasaki commemorating the dropping of the atomic bombs. US Ambassador to Japan Caroline Kennedy was accompanied by Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Rose Gottemoeller, demonstrating the link in US war memory to the promise of nonproliferation and global nuclear arms reeducations.

At summer's end, the US and Japan also watched warily as China commemorated the end of World War II, a commemoration accompanied by a display of its newfound military might. President Xi Jinping, due in Washington in September, called for peace, but the display of missiles whose sole aim is to target US forces in the region, including those on Japanese soil, left few wondering about Xi's real message. Japanese and US military analysts also noted that as the parade was taking place in Beijing, five Chinese naval vessels were offshore Alaska as President Obama visited Anchorage.

## Conclusion

The summer of 2015 demonstrated the domestic challenge in both the US and Japan to altering and expanding mechanisms for alliance reform. Policymakers found political opposition in

legislatures in Washington and Tokyo; and, while public approval of the alliance and trust in each other is at all-time highs, the complex effort to adjust the relationship will take time.

The longstanding Japanese reluctance to changing the role of their Self-Defense Forces abroad remains a serious constraint on the alliance. In the US, economic leadership remains difficult as new fissures in the constellation of support for globalization threaten to undermine the once-powerful Republican Party consensus on trade and global investment. These domestic challenges on both sides have slowed the realization of alliance goals. But, as the events of this summer demonstrate, there is an increasingly felt need to adjust to a rising China that will demand adjustment in US-Japan relationship. Collective action with other partners in the Asia Pacific will prompt greater diplomatic opportunity for Tokyo and Washington to expand their alliance agenda. The fall will bring more regional leaders to Washington, most notably China's president and South Korea's president to Washington. Wrapping up this sensitive 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a destructive war with greater diplomatic breakthroughs would bring a welcome close to the year for Abe and Obama. Yet, the complex new relations between Tokyo, Beijing, and Seoul make it difficult to predict how 2015 will end for the US and Japan. The postwar settlement in Asia seems to be giving way to a new regional balance of power, but one that seems distant in the domestic debates of Tokyo and Washington.

### **Chronology of US-Japan relations May – August 2015**

**May 1, 2015:** Prime Minister Abe Shinzo travels to Los Angeles to attend the Japan-US Economic Forum and lays a wreath at the “Go for Broke” monument, which commemorates Japanese-American World War II soldiers.

**May 8, 2015:** House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi visits Tokyo to accept the Grand Cordon of the Order of the Rising Sun and meets with Prime Minister Abe.

**May 14, 2015:** Abe Cabinet approves two security bills meant to expand the overseas role of the Self-Defense Forces in international security efforts and the US-Japan alliance.

**May 15, 2015:** Abe Cabinet submits the two security bills to the Lower House for deliberation.

**May 19, 2015:** The Special Committee on Security-Related Legislation is created in the Lower House to discuss the Abe government's proposed security bills.

**May 22, 2015:** US Senate approves a trade package (62-37) including Trade Promotion Authority (TPA).

**May 26, 2015:** Lower House deliberations begin on the security legislation.

**May 26, 2015:** US Strategic Forces Subcommittee Chairman Mike Rogers leads a delegation of House members to Tokyo, where they meet with Prime Minister Abe and discuss missile defense and the broader US rebalance efforts in Asia.

**June 3, 2015:** Okinawa Gov. Takeshi Onaga visits Washington and meets Office of Japanese Affairs Director Joe Young, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Cara Abercrombie, and Sen. John McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, to discuss the relocation of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma.

**June 4, 2015:** Three constitutional law professors – Hasebe Yasuo (Waseda University), Kobayashi Setsu (Keio University), and Sasada Eiji (Waseda University) – appear before the Lower House Commission on the Constitution. All agree that the package of security bills before the Lower House is unconstitutional.

**June 4, 2015:** Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan visits Japan and meets Prime Minister Abe and expresses interest in bringing Japan’s new high-speed maglev train technology to Maryland.

**June 12, 2015:** Adm. Harry Harris, newly appointed commander of US Pacific Command, visits Tokyo and meets Prime Minister Abe.

**June 12, 2015:** US House of Representatives votes in favor of TPA (219-211), but votes against Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA), which defeats the trade package passed by the Senate.

**June 16, 2015:** Hawaii Gov. David Ige visits Tokyo and meets Prime Minister Abe to promote expanded travel between Japan and Hawaii.

**June 12, 2015:** House approves the Bipartisan Congressional Trade Priorities and Accountability Act of 2015, but TAA is voted down 126-302.

**June 18, 2015:** House votes 218-208 (with 28 Democrats joining all but 50 Republicans) to narrowly pass legislation to give TPA to President Obama.

**June 22, 2015:** Prime Minister Abe announces that the current Diet session will be extended to Sept. 27 to ensure passage of the new security legislation.

**June 24, 2015:** Senate votes 60-13 (with 13 Democrats joining all but five Republicans) to give TPA to President Obama, allowing him to keep on track with negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal.

**June 25, 2015:** House votes 286-138 to pass TAA, sending the final trade-related bill to the president’s desk.

**June 25, 2015:** At a meeting of an LDP study group set up to discuss the Abe administration’s culture and art policies, several lawmakers deeply criticize the *Okinawa Times* and the *Ryukyu Shimpo*. Hyakuta Naoki, a former governor at NHK and close adviser of Prime Minister Abe, is quoted as saying the papers “must be closed down by any means,” while other lawmakers advocate punishing the papers by targeting their advertising sources.

**June 25, 2015:** Adm. Kawano Katsutoshi, Japan's chief of the Joint Staff of the Self-Defense Forces, acknowledges concerns about China's behavior in the South China Sea in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*. He suggests that Japan may consider conducting surveillance of the South China Sea.

**June 26, 2015:** US hosts the seventh trilateral dialogue with India and Japan in Honolulu.

**June 29, 2015:** President Obama signs both TPA and TAA into law.

**July 1-2, 2015:** US Special Advisor for Children's Issues Ambassador Susan Jacobs visits Tokyo to discuss continued cooperation consistent with the Abduction Convention and the resolution of pre-Hague Convention cases.

**July 2-3, 2015:** US Special Representative for North Korea Policy and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Korea and Japan Ambassador Sung Kim visits Tokyo to meet senior officials including Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Director General Junichi Ihara.

**July 4, 2015:** Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide and Okinawa Governor Onaga Takeshi hold talks in Tokyo, and Suga apologizes for the criticism by several LDP lawmakers of Okinawan newspapers in a meeting on June 25.

**July 8, 2015:** Japan Innovation Party (JIP) submits bills as a counterproposal to the LDP's proposed security legislation.

**July 12, 2015:** About 750 members of *Gambare Nippon!*, a conservative activist group in Japan, organize a protest to support the security legislation.

**July 14, 2015:** Approximately 20,000 protesters, including students, NPO groups, and older citizens, gather in Hibiya Park to demonstrate their opposition to the security bills.

**July 14, 2015:** Total of 9,766 Japanese scholars, artists, and other public intellectuals, including Nobel laureate Toshihide Masukawa, sign a petition opposing the new security legislation.

**July 14-16, 2015:** Assistant Secretary for Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance Frank Rose visits Tokyo to meet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, and Cabinet Office officials to discuss space security, missile defense, and arms control.

**July 15, 2015:** Japan's Lower House Special Committee on Security-Related Legislation approves security bills, paving the way for a vote by the full House.

**July 16, 2015:** Japan's Lower House votes to pass new security legislation, and the bills are sent to the Upper House. If the Upper House does not vote on the legislation within 60 days, then the bills will return to the Lower House and can be enacted by a two-thirds vote.

**July 22, 2015:** The third US-Japan Cyber Dialogue is held in Tokyo. Officials discuss bilateral cooperation on cyber issues such as infrastructure protection, capacity building, and cybercrime.



**July 22-24, 2015:** Special Representative for North Korea Policy Sung Kim travels to Tokyo to participate in alliance and other bilateral discussions.

**July 28-31, 2015:** US hosts a meeting of the TPP trade ministers in Maui, Hawaii.

**July 30, 2015:** US Special Envoy for the Six-Party Talks Sydney Seiler travels to Tokyo to meet senior officials, including Deputy Director General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Takizaki.

**Aug. 4, 2015:** Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga announces that Japan will temporarily halt construction on the base at Henoko for one month (from Aug. 10 to Sept. 9) to give time for the government to continue discussions with Okinawa Gov. Onaga.

**Aug. 5, 2015:** Vice President Joseph Biden calls Prime Minister Abe to apologize for “causing trouble” after WikiLeaks alleges NSA spied on Tokyo.

**Aug. 6, 2015:** US Secretary of State John Kerry and Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio meet on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Kuala Lumpur. They discuss the upcoming anniversary of World War II, coordination on China and North Korea, and the TPP.

**Aug. 6-10, 2015:** Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Rose Gottemoeller visits Hiroshima and Nagasaki to attend peace memorial ceremonies and then to Tokyo to lead US delegation to Japan-US Commission on Disarmament and Nonproliferation.

**Aug. 14, 2015:** Prime Minister Abe delivers a speech marking the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II.

**Aug. 26, 2015:** Prime Minister Abe meets members from a bipartisan congressional delegation of the US-Japan Caucus.

**Aug. 28, 2015:** Prime Minister Abe hosts the World Assembly for Women in Tokyo.