



**US-Japan Relations:  
Official Cooperation, Domestic Challenges**

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Washington and Tokyo made significant progress on two new initiatives this fall – Japan’s implementation of legislation for the exercise of collective self-defense and the conclusion of negotiations with other participants in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). US presidential politics also began to heat up this fall, with foreign policy taking a more prominent place in Republican primary debates. While it is too early to know if the 2016 presidential race will focus much attention on the US-Japan alliance, it is clear that trade and military strategy will be contentious topics in the general election. 2016 politics were already on the minds of many in Tokyo also, as the Upper House election next summer invited speculation about just how much support the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)-Komeito coalition has for implementing security cooperation with the United States.

Two challenges to Washington and Tokyo will continue into the new year. The first is how to respond to Chinese land reclamation in the South China Sea. Military leaders from Japan and the US discussed China’s accelerated building in the Spratly Islands, and the Japanese role in a regional response was on the agenda when Prime Minister Abe and President Obama met on the sidelines of the APEC meeting in Manila. The *USS Lassen’s* freedom of navigation operation near Subi Reef on Oct. 27 was welcomed by Tokyo, but there is no suggestion yet that Japan is willing to conduct similar operations in the South China Sea.

The second challenge is far from new, but local opposition to Tokyo’s plans for building a new airfield to replace the Futenma facility operated by the US Marines has risen again. The central government filed a legal suit directed at Okinawa in November, and then Gov. Onaga Takeshi filed his own civil suit against the central government in December. This battle in the courts over new base construction in Oura Bay is the second legal showdown between the prefecture and Tokyo over who has the authority to control decision making on base consolidation in Okinawa.

**Japanese Parliament passes new security legislation**

The Abe Cabinet presented a package of bills designed to implement its decision to reinterpret the right of collective self-defense to the Japanese Diet this summer, and after deliberations in the Lower House and Upper House, the bills passed into law on Sept. 19. Inside the Diet, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and Defense Minister Nakatani Gen repeatedly were called upon to explain

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under what circumstances they would deploy Japan's military, the Self-Defense Force (SDF), abroad with others, and in particular, when they thought the collective use of force by the SDF would be justified.

During the Lower House deliberations, opposition parties argued against the collective self-defense right, with the Japan Innovation Party (JIP) aligning itself at times with the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and drafting an alternative bill. But in the Upper House deliberations, the DPJ found common cause with the Japan Communist Party (JCP) in rejecting outright the Abe Cabinet's bills as "unconstitutional."

Outside on the streets of Nagatacho, thousands of Japanese citizens gathered to demonstrate their opposition to "Abe's war bills," echoing the sentiment that these new laws violated Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, the no-war clause. New and younger demonstrators, largely mobilized under the banner of SEALDs (Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy), registered an awakening of political consciousness not seen since the 1970s in Japan. Public figures, including scholars, artists, and actors, also joined in the criticism of the new laws as a threat to Japanese democracy. Although this activism has receded since the security legislation passed, the social movement seems to have taken on a life of its own as more and more younger Japanese continue to seek participation in SEALDs-sponsored – or inspired – gatherings in Tokyo and other cities across Japan.

Opinion polling on the new laws also revealed broad fissures across Japanese society. Leading newspapers, representing both conservative and liberal positions, all reported similar results. In a [survey by the \*Nikkei Shimbun\*](#), Abe's approval rating dropped six points from August to 40 percent, while his disapproval rating rose seven points to 47 percent. A [similar poll by the \*Asahi Shimbun\*](#) reported Abe's support had fallen to 35 percent, the lowest since the prime minister's return to office. Opinion divided on whether sending the SDF to fight alongside others would help or hinder Japan's security, but a large number of respondents did not know what to think about Abe's latest defense reform. Critics cited fears that this new legislation would compel the SDF to fight "America's wars"; those who supported the new laws registered some concern about the political process for determining when Japan's security warranted the exercise of the right of collective self-defense. A majority of Japanese thought that their government had not explained the new laws sufficiently. In the *Nikkei* poll, for example, among those who identified themselves as supporters of the Abe Cabinet, 61 percent of supporters and 93 percent of non-supporters of the Abe Cabinet felt the government's explanations were "insufficient."

In Washington, the Obama administration welcomed Japan's new security laws. Vice President Joe Biden called Prime Minister Abe on Sept. 29 to thank him for his continued efforts at strengthening the bilateral alliance. This new legislation also opens the way for furthering Japanese cooperation with other partners in the Asia-Pacific, including new initiatives such as the US-India-Japan Trilateral Dialogue and the continuing strategic cooperation between the US, Australia, and Japan. Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) joined US and Indian naval forces in the [annual \*Malabar training exercises\*](#) from Oct. 14–19 off the coast of Chennai, India, marking its new status as a permanent member of the trilateral maritime cooperation.

## **Agreement Reached on TPP**

Ministers from the United States, Japan, and 10 other Pacific nations announced on Oct. 5 that they had reached an agreement on the TPP trade deal after more than five years of negotiations. President Obama praised the conclusion of a final agreement, saying that the “partnership [levels the playing field](#) for [US] farmers, ranchers, and manufacturers by eliminating more than 18,000 taxes that various countries put on [US] products.” Prime Minister Abe celebrated the agreement as a “[grand plan for the long-term future](#) of [the Japanese] nation,” and highlighted his government’s ability to ensure that tariffs on certain Japanese products – rice, sugar, beef, pork, and dairy –were not completely eliminated (though they will be reduced over time).

The Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) released the [full text of the TPP deal](#) on Nov. 5, the same day that President Obama announced his intent to sign the agreement. Sticking points at the end of negotiations included automobiles, dairy, pharmaceuticals, and intellectual property rights. Important for US and Japanese markets, the agreement will eliminate tariffs on tobacco and automobiles over various phase-out periods, though there are provisions to account for import surges. An official signing ceremony is currently planned for February 2016.

The legislatures of the 12 partner nations must now [ratify the TPP agreement](#). In Japan, Prime Minister Abe has said that his government will make every effort to obtain immediate parliamentary approval. Opposition is expected in the Diet from the DPJ and other smaller opposition parties, but Abe’s LDP currently has control of both houses. Nevertheless, it is unclear whether there will be sufficient time for deliberation so that TPP can be approved before the Upper House election in July 2016.

TPP will likely face tougher opposition as it moves through the US Congress. Last summer, President Obama won a hard-fought legislative battle to gain Trade Promotion Authority (TPA) from the Congress. TPA allows the TPP agreement to be brought before the Congress through an expedited “fast-track” process without the possibility of amendments or filibuster. Despite TPA’s eventual passage, congressional opposition to the TPP remains strong, including from members within the Democratic Party. Parts of the TPP agreement related to pharmaceuticals and the tobacco industry may also make it harder to obtain the necessary Republican votes.

TPP’s future is made even murkier by the US presidential race, as the first primaries are set to begin in February 2016. Both of the main candidates for the Democratic Party, Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, have voiced opposition to the deal. Clinton’s opposition in particular surprised many given that she advocated on behalf of the TPP as secretary of state in the Obama administration. On the Republican side, Donald Trump has called the TPP a “horrible deal,” while Ben Carson, Marco Rubio, and Jeb Bush have all said that they support it. It remains to be seen whether the Congress will take up the legislation before next year’s election.

## **US-Japan cooperation in the South China Sea?**

Beyond the effort to improve bilateral cooperation, Tokyo and Washington also consulted on the emerging tensions in the South China Sea as US-PRC relations grew increasingly strained. Along with cyber and other security challenges, China’s acceleration of land reclamation and

building on disputed islands in the South China Sea highlighted the concerns of the United States and its allies in Asia about Beijing's long-term intentions. President Xi Jinping's visit to Washington in September did little to ameliorate the growing strain over maritime dispute management in Asia. Anticipation of a US freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) in the South China Sea also animated debate in Tokyo over the Obama administration's willingness to stand up to China. For months, US officials openly discussed the Chinese activities as being counter to international law, but there was no FONOP. Public statements by US naval commanders, including the Pacific Command Commander Adm. Harry Harris in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Sept. 17 [described](#) Chinese activities as counter to regional stability, and Adm. Scott Swift, who had taken to the air to see the island-building for himself from a USN *Poseidon* surveillance aircraft in July, made no mistake about the [US military reaction](#) to China's accelerated build-up in the South China Sea. On Capitol Hill, the Senate and the House Armed Services Committees held special sessions to discuss China's maritime advances and in letters to the White House urged President Obama to act more forcefully in response. In response to a request from the Senate for more information about US FONOPs, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter wrote [a letter](#) on Dec. 21 to Sen. John McCain detailing the *USS Lassen*'s transit near Subi Bay.

U.S. and Japanese military leaders had close consultations on China's island-building. Joint Staff Commander Adm. Kawano Katsutoshi visited the US in July at the invitation of Gen. Martin Dempsey, and prior to his visit, Kawano, in [an interview](#) in the *Wall Street Journal*, noted that the rise of Chinese military activities in the Spratly's have created "very serious potential concerns" for Japan. Kawano said that Japan would consider increasing its surveillance of the activities if they proved harmful to Japanese security. The broader implications of the Chinese building in the South China Sea, however, motivated Japan's security planners. In briefing materials made public by Japan's Ministry of Defense, China's broader strategic ambitions in challenging the territorial waters of other Asian states and the sea-lanes that carried the region's energy and trade were clearly worrisome to Tokyo.

Prime Minister Abe, in his APEC meeting with President Obama, publicly stated that Japan would consider joining the US and possibly other allies in patrols in the South China Sea, but a day later, after significant backlash in Tokyo, the prime minister stated that he would "consider [SDF activity in the South China Sea] while focusing on what effect the situation has on Japan's security." Japan to date has made no [public commitment](#) to military activities in the South China Sea. The new security legislation had not discussed the possibility of a maritime coalition that would challenge China, nor had the Abe Cabinet made the case to the Japanese public that Chinese island building would directly endanger Japanese security.

Nonetheless, expanding security cooperation with other Asian nations, including the United States, remained a top priority for the Abe Cabinet. General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Tong met Abe on Sept. 15 during his visit to Tokyo, and Abe also met with Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung on Nov. 20 on the sidelines of the ASEAN meeting where they reportedly [agreed to consult](#) on the South China Sea. In a [joint statement](#) released during Abe's visit to India in mid-December, the two nations called upon "all states to avoid unilateral tensions that could lead to tensions in the region."

## Tokyo and Okinawa battle in the courts

By the end of 2015, Tokyo and Naha governments had ended their discussions on how to proceed with constructing a new replacement facility for the US Marines at Henoko in northern Okinawa. Since his election as governor in December 2014, Onaga Takeshi had openly challenged the national government plan to construct a new airfield as the path to closing Futenma Marine Air Station in Ginowan City. The Abe Cabinet has stood firm on the goal of building the new runway, despite agreeing to a summer pause in construction while talks with Onaga proceeded. Construction resumed on Oct. 29 and the Oura Bay site offshore Camp Schwab continued to draw protestors. The Japanese Coast Guard intercepted those who approached in kayaks from the sea, and local newspapers chronicled the scuffles that resulted.

In the fall, it became clear that no compromise would be forthcoming. The governor's complaint revolved largely around the way Tokyo managed construction. Legally, Gov. Onaga cited violations to the environmental assessment plan presented to his predecessor, Nakaima Hirokazu, who had approved the land reclamation project. On its part, the Abe Cabinet prepared legal action against the governor for failing to comply with the national construction plan. Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism Ishii Keiichi filed suit in November in the Naha branch of the Fukuoka High Court, followed by a countersuit filed by the governor on Dec. 25 in Naha District Court claiming the national government had reneged on the terms of the approved plan. Meanwhile, construction continues. After Onaga's lawsuit was filed, Kobayakawa Mitsuo, chairman of the Dispute Settlement Panel of the Internal Affairs Ministry, [rejected Onaga's request](#) that construction be halted until deliberations are complete, calling it "unlawful."

Renewed dissonance between the governor of Okinawa and the prime minister will have two implications for the US-Japan alliance. The first is that construction continues to be delayed, and thus any projection of when the runway might be completed, and when the Marines can be relocated, remains subject to difficult politics between Tokyo and Naha.

The second is the courts will have to decide on the different interpretations offered by the central government and the governor on their authority under Japanese law. Local autonomy has long been associated with postwar Japanese democratic practice and included in the Constitution as a means of weakening central power. More is at stake in these deliberations than the Futenma base relocation, and in the current climate of political tension over the Constitution in Japan; Okinawa could yet again be framed as a test case in the Japan's debate over its governance institutions. Many today, including some in the LDP as well as in the new Japan Innovation Party, advocate for greater latitude for local governments in economic decision-making. For those more inclined to focus on security goals, including some in the Abe Cabinet, there is far greater appetite for strengthening central government powers to improve crisis management. By electing Onaga, the people of Okinawa have presented Tokyo with a paradox: a conservative governor who supports the US-Japan alliance but does not support building a new runway on his island. For now, however, in the absence of a judicial order to stop construction, it seems the Abe Cabinet has the upper hand.

## **Chronology of US-Japan relations September – December 2015**

**Sept. 7, 2015:** Prime Minister Abe Shinzo meets Okinawa Gov. Onaga Takeshi in Tokyo to discuss the relocation of the US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma.

**Sept. 17, 2015:** Japan and the US hold the second Energy Strategic Dialogue in Tokyo. Japanese delegation is led by Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General for Economic Affairs Bureau Saiki Naoko and the US delegation is led by Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State of the Bureau of Energy Resources Mary Bruce Warlick.

**Sept. 17, 2015:** Special Committee on Security-Related Legislation in the Upper House of the Diet of Japan approves security bills that expand the overseas role of the Self-Defense Forces and allow Japan to exercise the right to collective-self-defense.

**Sept. 19, 2015:** Japan's Upper House votes to pass security bills. The Lower House had passed the bills on July 16.

**Sept. 26-29, 2015:** Prime Minister Abe visits the US to attend the UN General Assembly Meeting in New York. Abe also meets members of the US business community and attends the Invest Japan Seminar as well as the Visit Japan Tourism Seminar hosted by the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO).

**Sept. 27, 2015:** Special Seminar of the United States-Japan Conference on Cultural and Educational Interchange (CULCON) is held in Washington.

**Sept. 27, 2015:** Prime Minister Abe publishes an article on *CNN* entitled "Lessons Learned for a Better World." The article discusses Japan's contributions to human security, assistance for developing nations, and emphasis on sustainable growth.

**Sept. 29, 2015:** Secretary of State John Kerry hosts the inaugural US-India-Japan Trilateral Ministerial Dialogue with Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

**Sept. 29, 2015:** US-Japan-ROK Trilateral Foreign Ministers Meeting is held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. Secretary Kerry, ROK Minister of Foreign Affairs Yun Byung-se, and Foreign Minister Kishida discuss North Korea and cooperation on regional affairs.

**Sept. 29, 2015:** Vice President Joe Biden calls Prime Minister Abe after the passage of the security legislation to thank him for his continued efforts at strengthening the US-Japan alliance.

**Oct. 1, 2015:** US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier *USS Ronald Reagan* arrives in Yokosuka.

**Oct. 5, 2015:** Ministers of the 12 Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) countries, including the US and Japan, announce the conclusion of an agreement after more than five years of negotiations.

**Oct. 6, 2015:** Thirteenth US-Japan Joint High-Level Committee meeting on science and technology is held in Tokyo.

**Oct. 6, 2015:** Third Japan-United States Open Forum is held following the Joint High-Level Committee meeting. Government officials and scientists from both countries discuss future cooperation, particularly in areas such as medical and data sciences.

**Oct. 13, 2015:** Okinawa Gov. Onaga revokes permission for construction work to begin on the proposed Futenma relocation site at Henoko. Onaga's predecessor, Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima Hirokazu, had given the central government permission for landfill work in December 2013.

**Oct. 14, 2015:** Nine former US prisoners of war (POWs) visit State Minister for Foreign Affairs Muto Yoji in Tokyo. Muto apologizes for the suffering inflicted by Japan.

**Oct. 14-19, 2015:** Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force joins the US and Indian navies in the annual *Malabar* training exercise in Chennai, India. Japan had taken part in these exercises as an invited guest in the past, but joined this year as a permanent member.

**Oct. 27, 2015:** Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism Ishii Keiichi suspends Okinawa governor's attempt to block the building of the Futenma replacement facility at Henoko, saying the validity of the request must be examined.

**Oct. 29, 2015:** Landfill work for the Futenma relocation facility at Henoko resumes.

**Nov. 4, 2015:** Prime Minister Abe meets US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford in Tokyo.

**Nov. 4, 2015:** Fourth Meeting of the Bilateral Commission on Civil Nuclear Cooperation between the US and Japan is held in Washington. The meeting is co-chaired by Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Shinsuke Sugiyama and Department of Energy Deputy Secretary Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall.

**Nov. 5, 2015:** Full text of the TPP deal is released to the public as President Obama indicates his intent to sign the agreement.

**Nov. 16-25, 2015:** More than thirty US and Japanese warships participate in *Annual Exercise 16 (AE16)* aimed at responding to the defense of Japan or a regional crisis in the Asia-Pacific.

**Nov. 17, 2015:** Land Minister Ishii files a lawsuit with the Naha branch of the Fukuoka High Court, demanding that Okinawa Gov. Onaga retract his decision to nullify government approval to begin landfill work for the new US military facility in Henoko.

**Nov. 17-19, 2015:** US and Japan hold bilateral Extended Deterrence Dialogue (EDD) at Vandenberg Air Force Base, California.

**Nov. 19, 2015:** President Obama and Prime Minister Abe meet on the sidelines of the APEC forum in Manila, where they discuss regional security and the TPP trade deal.

**Nov. 23, 2015:** Department of State approves the sale of three *RQ-4 Global Hawk* unmanned surveillance systems to Japan.

**Nov. 30, 2015:** US Special Representative for North Korea Policy Sung Kim hosts a trilateral meeting in Washington with ROK Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Hwang Joon-kook and Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Ishikane Kimihiro to exchange views on a wide range of issues related to North Korea.

**Dec. 2, 2015:** Trial begins at Fukuoka High Court's Naha branch for the lawsuit filed by the central government against Okinawa Gov. Onaga for halting the Futenma relocation.

**Dec. 8, 2015:** US and Japan conduct a second successful test of their jointly developed *Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) Block IIA* missile off the coast of Malibu, California.

**Dec. 9, 2015:** Ministry of Foreign Affairs awards the Foreign Minister's Commendations in honor of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II to 28 individuals and 14 groups for their outstanding contributions to the promotion of friendship between Japan and the US.

**Dec. 11, 2015:** Joint survey conducted by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* and Gallup finds that 58 percent of Japanese respondents say that they consider Japan-US relations to be "good" or "very good," up from 49 percent who felt this way in the previous poll in November 2014.

**Dec. 16, 2015:** US and Japan agree in principle to a new five-year package of host-nation support for US armed forces stationed in Japan. Under the agreement, Japan will spend about ¥189.9 billion (\$1.6 billion) annually. The agreement will take effect April 1, 2016.

**Dec. 21, 2015:** Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel visits Tokyo after stopping in Bangkok, Thailand and Vientiane, Laos.

**Dec. 25, 2015:** Okinawa Gov. Onaga files lawsuit at Naha District Court against the central government over its attempt to override the governor and move ahead with the Futenma relocation plan.