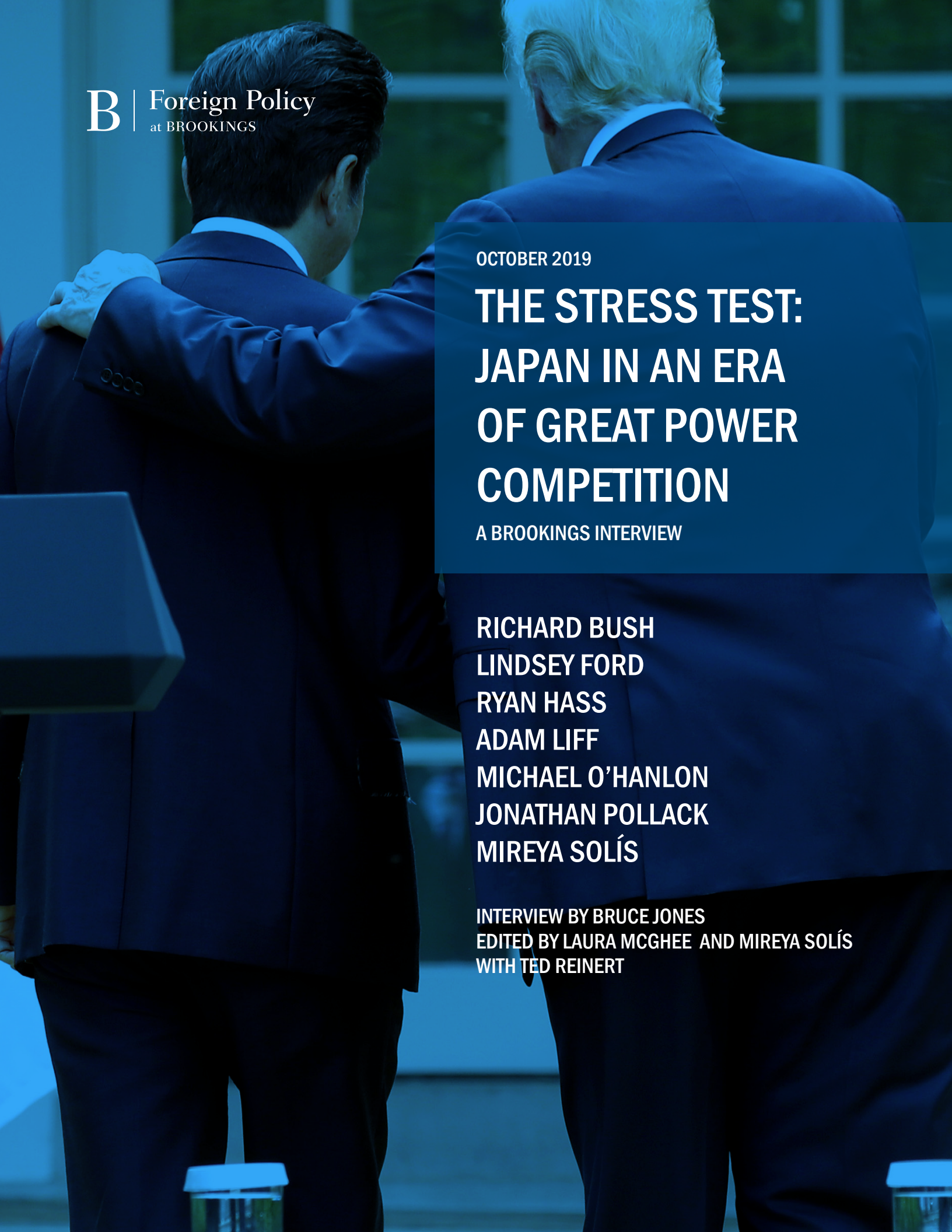

Foreign Policy at BROOKINGS

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THE STRESS TEST: JAPAN IN AN ERA OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION

A BROOKINGS INTERVIEW

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THE STRESS TEST: JAPAN IN AN ERA OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION

DIRECTOR'S SUMMARY

With a dramatic power shift in the Indo-Pacific, the intensification of U.S.-China strategic rivalry, and uncertainty about the United States' international role, Japan confronts a major stress test. How will Tokyo cope with an increasingly assertive China, an increasingly transactional approach to alliances in Washington, and a growing nuclear and missile capability in North Korea? Will it double down on the alliance with the United States to confront China's provocations? Will it aim for greater independence in its foreign policy and expand military capabilities accordingly? Or will it seek some form of accommodation with China?

In September 2019, Brookings Vice President and Director of Foreign Policy Bruce Jones convened seven Brookings scholars and affiliates — ***Richard Bush, Lindsey Ford, Ryan Hass, Adam Liff, Michael O'Hanlon, Jonathan Pollack, and Mireya Solís*** *— to discuss Japan's present and future path in this era of great power competition. The edited transcript below reflects their assessment of the current state of Japanese strategic choices.*

The highlights:

- *American decision-makers need to remember that the Japan alliance is an indispensable feature of America's wider international strategy. The American forward presence in Japan supports U.S. national interests across the entire region and will be critical in addressing potential contingencies in the Korean Peninsula or the East or South China Seas, and perhaps even in the Middle East.*
- *The United States and Japan are closely aligned in opposing China's ambitions in the East and South China Seas, but effectively confronting China's "gray zone" tactics continues to be a challenge for the allies.*
- *The United States and Japan are not on the same page when it comes to a zero-sum approach to economic competition with China. Tokyo does not see decoupling from China as a sensible strategy and is wary of the costs imposed on Japanese companies from the tariff war and export controls that could force these firms to choose between American and Chinese markets. The recently announced mini-trade deal between the*

United States and Japan defused the immediate threat of auto tariffs and consolidated a shared approach on digital economy rules; but it did not achieve a balanced outcome in market opening with the exclusion of the auto sector.

- *A Chinese takeover of the Senkaku islands constitutes a low-probability but high-impact contingency as it would test the political will of the American leadership to risk a military confrontation with China. For that reason, renewed efforts and novel approaches to deterrence are warranted.*
- *The Korean Peninsula presents immediate and formidable challenges for Japan: the continued advancement of North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities, the possibility that President Trump and perhaps future U.S. presidents would only object to ICBM capabilities or decide to withdraw American troops from South Korea, and the Moon administration's prioritization of inter-Korea ties over nuclear proliferation concerns. Narrowing U.S.-Japan gaps on North Korea should be a top priority.*
- *Japan and South Korea are placing diminishing value in sustaining an already fraught relationship. The latest downturn has sharply eroded trust in economic ties and compromised a crucial intelligence sharing agreement. The will and ability of Washington to step in to prevent a free fall between its two key allies in East Asia is in question.*
- *Tokyo's difficult relationships with its closest neighbors contrast with more successful engagement in the wider region. However, there are significant differences, in concept and implementation, between the Japanese and American "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategies. The Japanese construct is geographically broader, rests on a well-resourced infrastructure finance push, has laid the foundations for a regional trade architecture, and aims to engage China in a race to the top on infrastructure standards. In contrast, the American strategy rests on a zero-sum view of competition with China, has an underwhelming offer on infrastructure finance, and has retreated to a bilateral trade strategy with more frequent resort to tariffs. Unless the U.S. ups its game, the strategy will underperform.*
- *Domestic policymaking reforms have enabled more purposeful action from Tokyo in a context of geopolitical flux. Changes in Japan's security profile will be gradual as illustrated by the ongoing debate on constitutional reform. Japan's penchant is to become a networked middle power with investments in the U.S. alliance, stabilization of relations with China, diversification of security partnerships, and all-out economic statecraft under the mantra of connectivity. If U.S.-China ties continue to deteriorate, this approach will be further stressed as Washington looks to its allies to make clear-cut choices in support of American strategy.*

I. NAVIGATING GREAT POWER COMPETITION

Challenges to the U.S.-Japan alliance

BRUCE JONES: The intensification of U.S.-China rivalry, and Washington's expectation for a clear-cut choice from its allies, is of critical importance to Japan. Tokyo's response to this stress test will be largely informed by the current state of U.S.-Japan relations. Mireya, what do you think is the fundamental challenge to the U.S.-Japan alliance in this new context of geopolitical competition?

MIREYA SOLÍS: Because the U.S.-Japan alliance has been the anchor of Japanese security policy, the unpredictability of Washington is a very serious concern. There is greater uncertainty on what kind of role the United States will play in the region, and how domestic politics will determine the U.S.'s path going forward. Tokyo is watching very closely the outcome of the presidential election next year in order to assess whether

this is indeed the new normal or if there could be a reversion to a more traditional American leadership role. Moreover, within this year and next, key parameters of the relationship are to be negotiated: the bilateral trade talks and the negotiation over host nation support.

BRUCE JONES: Has Tokyo coped effectively with these new uncertainties?

MIREYA SOLÍS: Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has carved, of all foreign leaders, perhaps the best functional relationship with U.S. President Donald Trump. He has avoided the turbulence that you could have expected given Trump's long-held views on alliances and trade deficits. But that personal friendship has not given Japan special benefits, certainly not when it comes to trade. Japan has been the target of tariffs on steel and encountered great difficulties in the bilateral trade talks.

For Abe, it's going to be difficult to justify the outcome of these talks as a symmetrical win-win because the United States is basically operating with the notion that the import of cars by foreign companies in the United States is a national security threat. The United States is not going to make any concession on autos, whereas Japan is going to give the U.S. Trans-Pacific Partnership (TTP)-level agricultural access.

Moreover, the United States is handling the negotiations with Japan as an executive agreement — the administration will not take the deal to Congress — and we know that executive agreements can be easily discarded. Japan is giving all these concessions in exchange for a guarantee that the national security tariff on autos will not materialize, but they seem to have received only a weak reassurance.

BRUCE JONES: Richard, from your perspective what's the toughest challenge?

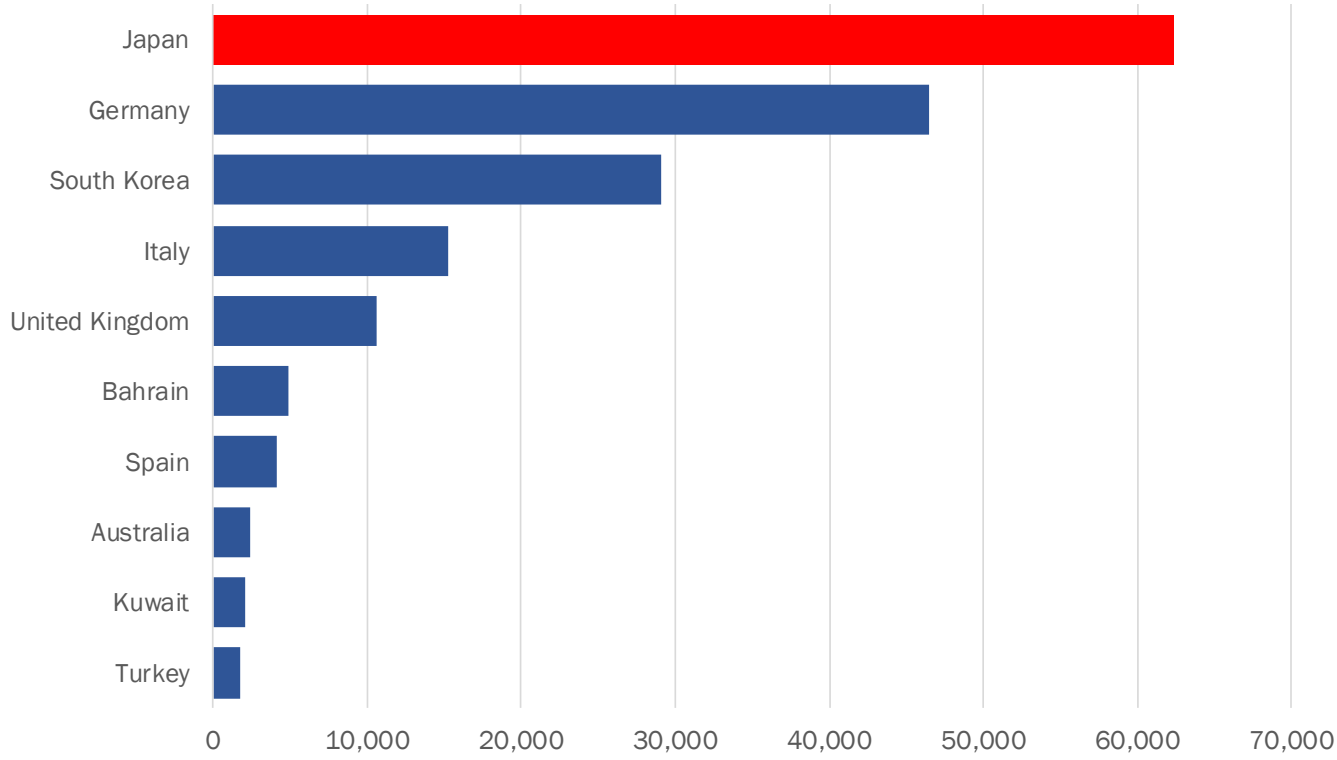
RICHARD BUSH: Let me start with a couple points of context, and both have to do with geography. Japan is an island nation with limited natural resources, so it must be a trading nation if it is going to be prosperous. For that, it needs open and secure sea lines of communication, and it needs an international economic order whose rules benefit Japan. Japan has had that — it was fortunate that after World War II it was able to contract out defense to the United States so that it could go about the business of being a trading nation.

The second important aspect of geography is that Japan is a major link in the first island chain in the western Pacific, and it's very important for Japan that the other links in this chain are friendly countries. If, for example, China were to take Taiwan, Japan is effectively outflanked.

The biggest challenge to the stability that East Asia has enjoyed over the last 40 years is China and China's desire to be able to project power out to the first island chain. It is developing the capabilities to do that, and that inevitably will create frictions with the United States and Japan. The challenges that China has made to Japan's control over the Senkaku islands over the last decade is a leading indicator of where we may be going.

And then there's the factor of President Trump. He has an animosity toward alliances and forward troop deployments, and that runs counter to the purpose and success of our alliance.

FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF ACTIVE-DUTY U.S. MILITARY AND CIVILIAN PERSONNEL, 2019 (TOP 10 FOREIGN COUNTRIES, COMBAT ZONES EXCLUDED)



Note: Due to ongoing operations, numbers for Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria are not included.
Source: Defense Manpower Data Center, Office of the Secretary of Defense, https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp#.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: Regarding the basic structure of the alliance, I see assets and I see vulnerabilities at this key moment with Abe and Trump personifying the alliance.

President Trump could be disappointed in the fact that Japan is only spending 1 percent of its GDP on its military. But everybody in the security community is thrilled by that fact. People talk about a military buildup under Abe, but they are still at 1 percent of GDP. That's a lot of capability with a big economy like Japan's, but it's also not too much. With Abe's personality and his views about history, sometimes he's seen as militaristic even at that level of spending. But President Trump probably gets resentful.

Building on what Richard said before, Japan is an island nation which tells you certain things about its economy, it also tells you certain things about its value to us. It is a very high-value ally because of its real estate. All the things we want to do in that part of the world are made easier, or in some cases even made possible, because of the alliance and our military bases in Japan.

If you were going to pick an ally whose geography is most important to the United States military, Japan might be number one on the list. I can't even think of another country that compares for dealing with Korea contingencies, China contingencies…

LINDSEY FORD: If I can add one thing on this point about the strategic value of Japan's location. Yes, U.S. forces are there to help defend Japan, but we do a lot of other things with these forces, such as responding to natural disasters, or even to crises in the Middle East. We have a forward presence in Japan because it

serves U.S. interests. We can't think too simplistically about how much money we are spending to have forces in Japan, because having that presence forward honestly saves money in the long run. It's hard to quantify, but having our forces forward, where they're much closer to global threats and can respond more rapidly to a crisis, versus having all those forces at home and having to potentially try to surge them if needed, is a tremendous advantage for the United States. It's really hard to put a price tag on the value we get from that.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: It's probably in the tens of billions of dollars a year.

Coping with China

BRUCE JONES: There are scenarios of accidental escalation in the East China Sea. There are "gray zone" scenarios, such as a "Senkakus plus" scenario. And, there are more deliberate scenarios, such as if China decides to go for Taiwan. Chinese ambitions in the Philippine Sea are a source of massive exposure for Japan. Do we have the structures and the shared understandings in place to handle a joint Japanese-American response to an accidental or purposeful escalation in the East China Sea?

FIGURE 2: JAPAN AND CHINA'S DISPUTED ISLANDS

Source: Reuters
Staff, 07/02/2017 REUTERS

LINDSEY FORD: There's definitely a recognition of the need to improve alliance coordination. When you look at the 2015 update of the Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation,[1] one important change was to think about operational coordination across the full spectrum from peacetime to contingencies. I think this reflects a recognition of the challenge the alliance faces from gray zone operations in places like the East China Sea. The challenge isn't just large-scale, high-end contingencies anymore.

I'm less concerned about China intentionally provoking a situation in the East China Sea because it has a more capable adversary in Japan, and the United States has a much more clearly stated position in the East China Sea than we do in the South China Sea. There is far more room for adventurism in the South China Sea than the East China Sea.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: That's all very well said. I would, however, underscore that the fact that we have done operational planning or exercising doesn't necessarily answer the question of what political leadership would agree to do in a given situation. For example, the Senkakus are seized by China — just how lethal and how forceful do we want to be in the first instance?

Military planning at the operational level can't get at that issue. The question then would be: What are Prime Minister Abe and President Trump going to think about it?

RICHARD BUSH: My understanding of the situation in the Senkakus now is that Chinese operations have become regularized; Japan can predict on which day Chinese coast guard vessels are going to penetrate territorial waters. The chances of something happening by accident has gone down in recent years.

But I worry about the possibility of President Trump offering to President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Abe that he would mediate this dispute.

And I really worry about if there were a military conflict, President Trump would ask his national security team: How big are these islands? Are there any people on them? You want me to defend those islands on behalf of Japan?

BRUCE JONES: I have the same concern. President Barack Obama probably would not have asked those questions in the same way, but even during his administration there would have been a whole lot of questions of that type from the foreign policy community at large, let alone from the U.S. public.

RYAN HASS: President Obama was the first president in American history to declare[2] that the Senkakus fall under Article V of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty,[3] so I would quibble a little bit with that observation.

ADAM LIFF: That's an important point. I think it's also worth noting that President Obama's statement largely reflected longstanding U.S. policy on the matter. As Lindsey noted, there were several very important developments in the Obama years that bolstered deterrence — such as the Guidelines update and the creation of the Alliance Coordination Mechanism. But it also seems fair to note that it took the Obama administration quite a while to get to the point of making a presidential-level statement about Article V's applicability to the Senkakus. More than a year-and-a-half passed between China's decision to significantly ratchet up operational pressure in the islands' contiguous zone and territorial seas (September 2012) and when President Obama made his April 2014 statement. And it was in that earlier, more volatile period that commentators in all three countries (and beyond) expressed serious concerns about escalation to a conflict. A lot happened before Obama made his statement, including a change of the de facto operational status quo in the waters around the islands, and the period before Obama's statement at least temporarily seemed to raise questions from serious people about U.S. commitments — especially in Tokyo and Beijing. All that might have happened anyway, to be sure, but given the apparent stabilizing effect of the April 2014 statement after it was made, one wonders what might have happened if it had been made earlier.

BRUCE JONES: It's not a President Obama or President Trump issue. This will be portrayed as: what does it mean politically for any president of the United States to decide to go to war with China over uninhabited rocks? If I were the president's political advisor, I would be aware that a lot of people would be asking questions about that.

ADAM LIFF: When the crisis was at its peak — in terms of potential for escalation in late 2012 and 2013 — I remember a lot of folks were asking that same question. But as Richard may have been suggesting earlier, I think what China is doing in the East China Sea is about much more than some "uninhabited rocks" and, especially if Beijing succeeds — *especially* if it succeeds *through coercion* — the potential implications transcend these particular islands and touch on bigger picture issues of immense significance for both Japan *and* the United States. This should matter to the U.S. for a lot of reasons, I'd argue, but let me just note a couple: First, the leaders and public of Japan — the U.S.'s most important ally in what two successive administrations identify as the most important region for America's future — widely see this dispute as a direct threat to Japan's *territory*. Despite that, in my view, Japan has shown remarkable self-restraint. What are the second- and third-

order consequences for the alliance and region if the U.S. appears ambivalent? Second, it's a clear indicator of how China's leaders are flexing China's growing muscles when its neighbors' interests are out of sync with their own. If Beijing achieves such a conspicuous change of the status quo unilaterally and with relative impunity — against *Japan* — the implications for China's neighbors, many of whom are also U.S. security allies or partners, could be profound — to say nothing of the U.S.-Japan alliance itself. Finally, and perhaps a bit more abstractedly, China's activities in the East and South China Seas are already having a corrosive effect on the legal and security order. Just look at the response of the region and world to the July 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling[4] on China's South China Sea claims. So, I don't exactly agree that the competition unfolding in the East China Sea is just "over uninhabited rocks." I think it's much bigger than that.

LINDSEY FORD: This is why in the alliance context, conversations about deterrence have become so much louder in recent years. Yes, we have said that absolutely the Senkakus fall under the treaty. But, no, nobody wants to go to war over the Senkakus, or in the South China Sea. Your better bet is to figure out how you deter the aggression and the conflict on the front end.

ADAM LIFF: This is precisely the challenge, right? China's gray zone assertion of its sovereignty claims using ostensibly civilian coast guard vessels is designed to short-circuit more traditional deterrence by staying below the level of an "armed attack."

JONATHAN POLLACK: On the East China Sea, I would very much agree with Richard that there is a new normal there. I don't see under prevailing circumstances, any incentives that Xi Jinping, for one, has any particular interest in making this situation go from bad to worse. Quite the contrary. There has been a quasi-normalization in the relationship between Abe and Xi. Abe made his first state visit to China last fall, and they have reasons for keeping things on a somewhat even keel here. At the end of the day, both of them have a common problem, and that is a profoundly unpredictable president of the United States.

But this doesn't make everything warm and fuzzy between China and Japan. Even as we acknowledge Japan as an island nation with its obvious concerns about undiminished sea lines of communication, China is now, whether we like it or not, increasingly also a seagoing nation. It's on that basis that China and Japan, over the longer run, will need to be better positioned to answer these questions as they both see it, rather than waiting for signals from United States on how to proceed.

BRUCE JONES: I, too, increasingly think the East China Sea and the South China Sea are just fundamentally different kinds of problems. Just look at the strengthening of China's position in the South China Sea.

Frankly, though, I also think that we are exaggerating the challenge that China's presence poses to us. The challenge, theoretically, is the Chinese capacity to choke off the sea lines of communication. But, I have a hard time understanding under what scenario it could possibly be in China's interest to choke off the sea lines of communication because all that trade goes to China. It's 50 percent of their oil supply, and it's a huge part of their economy. What are they going to close it off for? We need to reassess the challenge in the South China Sea — which to my mind is much more about economic resources and regional political pressure.

LINDSEY FORD: The real problem of the South China Sea is the impact that it has on the alliance and partnership relationships that we have on land, in the Philippines and in Southeast Asia. If China convinces those partners that basically, the game is up, we can squeeze you by the neck whenever we want, then maybe they decide they might as well just give in now. That's the power of the South China Sea.

Implications of U.S.-China strategic rivalry

BRUCE JONES: What are the implications for Japan of the shift toward strategic competition between the United States and China? To what degree are the Trump administration and Abe government aligned in their assessment of geostrategic competition with China?

RICHARD BUSH: At this point, I think Japan and the United States are very much on the same page when it comes to opposing China's strategic ambitions in the East and South China Seas. However, Tokyo and Washington are having difficulties in responding to and resisting China's gray zone tactics. China is very skillful at coercion without violence.

I think that the United States and Japan are not on the same page when it comes to trade and economics, and I would highlight the potential of a major disagreement on the transfer of technology to China, whether it should be zero-sum, or careful, and something else.

If the United States continues to pursue a zero-sum approach, that will force Japanese companies who have partners in both China and the United States to choose, which is not a good position to put them in.

MIREYA SOLÍS: Japan and the U.S. do not agree on the tactics to deal with Chinese mercantilism. Japanese companies have been collateral damage to the tit-for-tat tariff war between the United States and Japan. These firms are also very concerned about the tightening of the export control regime here in the United States with its very expansive definition of foundational technologies covered. China is Japan's largest trading partner, so for Tokyo decoupling is not a sensible strategy. Japan agrees with the United States that China's market distorting policies must be curbed, but it has offered instead a multilateral approach with new rules.

LINDSEY FORD: On the other hand, if a U.S. administration comes in that prefers a far more restrained approach to foreign policy overall, we would see a lot of nervousness out of Tokyo. There would be a lot of questions about whether the United States is going to sustain the military presence that Japan depends on — its whole security strategy is based on this presence.

BRUCE JONES: If there's a change in administration to one that is more negative about China, but less willing to stand up to it, this is potentially a worse-case scenario for the Japanese.

II. THE DUAL CHALLENGE OF KOREA

The threat from North Korea

BRUCE JONES: The most acute issue that Japan is dealing with in the short term is on the Korean Peninsula. How do you see the Korean Peninsula in the context of Japan and the U.S.-Japan alliance?

JONATHAN POLLACK: Japan is the only outside power of relevance here with whom North Korea refuses to deal. Maybe it's because North Korea likes to have an enemy in reserve if needed.

There has been absolutely zero evidence at this point of North Korea foregoing continued development of either its nuclear or missile capabilities. Indeed, the most recent missile tests are ones that are explicitly designed to better evade ballistic missile defenses and more effectively target both South Korea and Japan. If there's any issue, other than the slapping of auto tariffs on Japan, that Abe worries about, it is that he's alone out there with respect to attitudes and policies toward North Korea.

Kim Jong Un has a trump card named "Trump." This personal relationship that President Trump would like to claim that he has with Kim has fundamentally turned the world, as Japan would see it, upside down. Repeatedly, Trump has indicated that ICBM tests and nuclear tests are the only things that the U.S. really cares about, begging the issue of what this implies for our allies in the region. It's almost an explicit degradation of extended deterrence commitments.

Add to this, rumors are mounting that Trump's fourth meeting with Kim may even take place in Pyongyang.

U.S. President Donald Trump shakes hands with North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un before their meeting in Singapore in this picture released on June 12, 2018 by North Korea's Korean Central News Agency. / REUTERS

Despite the president saying that he had solved the nuclear issue when he returned from his meeting with Kim in Singapore — he clearly did not — we can see an open-ended, almost unconditional effort by Trump to keep the doors open to Kim. Kim may feel he's now sitting in a much better place. Notwithstanding all of North Korea's economic vulnerabilities, there exists all the market signals of diminished pressure on North Korea. Others are responding accordingly, both in China and in Russia, and of course in South Korea, itself being a very special case.

I see this as a very disheartening context.

We have touched upon the value of different alliances. From Trump's words, his repeated references to how much the "war games" cost, he's making it quite clear that he intends to find ways to significantly draw down U.S. military activities on the Korean Peninsula, and maybe even our presence.

All of this then, paradoxically, reinforces America's dependence on its bases in Japan to an unnatural extent that I don't think Prime Minister Abe sits easy with in terms of his relationship with President Trump. Despite all of Abe's efforts to flatter Trump, despite nominating him for a Nobel Prize, despite bringing him a golden golf club, Trump is a man who is capable of turning on a dime. And Abe knows it.

It's a very troubled time with North Korea.

BRUCE JONES: If the United States pulls its troops out of South Korea, then we'd live in a completely different world.

RICHARD BUSH: And China wins.

BRUCE JONES: The Japanese, of course, understand this very well. The worst possible thing that could happen to Japan is the United States pulling its troops out of Korea, or weakening the alliance with Korea.

ADAM LIFF: If I could jump in here, I'd just like to second Jonathan's important points about geography — that Japan and other U.S. allies (and bases) in the region are well within range of North Korean capabilities not subject to the Trump-Kim "agreement" on ICBMs — and that North Korea is continuing to rapidly advance those capabilities qualitatively. And these recent missile tests, incidentally, are in violation of UN Security Council resolutions. Just this past summer Pyongyang tested multiple missiles, including new types specifically designed to evade missile defenses. For me, these realities explode the myth that the current policy is working. All these developments affect Japan and the United States.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: In his excellent book, *No Exit*, Jonathan lowered my baseline for expectations of anything we could ever do with North Korea. I'm therefore not as distraught as he is. From the latest data that I've seen from the South Korean central bank, I actually think the sanctions are working better than he may.

But I'm worried now that we're losing the moment. Trump had positioned himself for a meaningful deal, an interim deal, the kind of deal that I favor, but not everybody at Brookings favors. This would be an elimination of North Korean nuclear production capability in exchange for a partial lifting of UN sanctions. But I don't know that the Trump administration has that or anything else in mind. It feels like they're floundering.

However, I like the sweet-and-sour approach of having a personal relationship at a closer level than we've ever had by far with a North Korean leader, and yet squeeze like hell on the sanctions. I believe that they were having the conversations on the right terms, with Trump having forced Kim to this moment in Hanoi at the summit last winter when Kim said, "Hey, lift the sanctions," and Trump said, "No, you've got to offer me a lot better deal than that on dismantling nuclear production infrastructure." But it was a question of driving it to the next level and getting a better offer where I think the administration may be losing the moment.

The downward spiral of Japan-South Korea relations

BRUCE JONES: The North Korean issue is more acute, the China challenge is more acute, there is uncertainty in the United States… You would think, logically, the two countries most isolated by those dynamics would find ways to work more closely together, but we are seeing the exact opposite. We are seeing a substantial deterioration in Japan-South Korea relations.

What's driving this? Should the U.S. be handling the situation differently?

MIREYA SOLÍS: It's a complex mix of unresolved historical issues, domestic politics, and different threat perceptions amidst growing geopolitical constraints. The wounds of Japan's colonization of Korea have never fully healed, but it's also true that the level of tension in the bilateral relationship has fluctuated over time, so history is not the only cause. It's also the decisions by these countries to turn up or not the heat in the bilateral relationship, and democratization in South Korea has also changed the dynamics.

What is different this time is that the economic relationship is at stake. The trigger to the downward spiral was a decision last November by the Korean Supreme Court to award compensation for individual cases of forced wartime labor by Japanese companies. Because the position of the Japanese government is that all compensation claims were settled in the 1965 treaty that normalized post-war relations between Japan and South Korea, the Japanese companies refused to abide by the ruling and their assets were confiscated.

Japan's move to tighten export controls (first on three dual-use chemicals critical to semiconductor manufacture and later the decision to delist South Korea from its "whitelist" of preferred trading partners) ratcheted up bilateral tensions. The Japanese decision in fact encourages South Korea to source these materials from China and will bring one more difficult case on national security grounds to the World Trade Organization; but a higher level of supervision on these dual-use goods is not equivalent to a supply ban. In fact, Japan has already approved some licenses to resume export of these goods.

JONATHAN POLLACK: Both Japan and South Korea seem to be placing diminished value on the sustainment of what is at best a very difficult relationship. Japan has often complained about Korea fatigue, and we now have a left-of-center government in Seoul that is trying to move the goal posts yet again with reviewing the terms of the 1965 treaty. Both of them seem to be behaving in a way as if it is politically cost-free to their respective interests. In domestic politics in Seoul right now, President Moon Jae-in is preparing for the National Assembly elections in April, and when all else fails in Korea, beat up on Japan. It's a kind of funny symmetry between North and South.

But at the same time, I detect a kind of a weariness in Japan — they're just tired of this. Maybe they're tired of the efforts to come to a long-term set of understandings with South Korea. I don't want to say that they're trying to disentangle the relationship in total, because that's not the case. But there is that palpable sense of the diminished value based on what has always been a real problem.

Add to this South Korea not renewing the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA),[5] which was one of the few areas where Japan and South Korea could find a basis for meaningful collaboration on critical intelligence issues.

RYAN HASS: In 2014, we encountered a somewhat analogous situation where territorial disputes and historical grievances were inflaming tensions. Abe and South Korean President Park Geun-hye refused to meet each other. President Obama interceded and pulled them together on the margins of the Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague to put a floor underneath the free fall, and to set a shared agenda for the way forward.

The shared agenda revolved around the common threat from North Korea. At the time, there was a belief that we all could work in common cause to confront a common challenge. The challenge now is that President Trump is not playing a personal role in bringing Abe and Moon together.

Add to that, North Korea no longer provides the same impetus for overcoming divisions, given the divergence of views between the three sides on the nature of the threat and the most effective response to it.

BRUCE JONES: If you look at the current government in Seoul's moves vis-à-vis Pyongyang from the Japanese perspective, that would feel existential. South Korea is willing to take steps with North Korea that would be at the very least deeply unpalatable, and at the worst extraordinarily dangerous as seen from the Tokyo perspective.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: Do you mean de facto letting North Korea keep its nuclear weapons and then move back to business as usual?

BRUCE JONES: Yes, a state of escalated North Korean capability.

MIREYA SOLÍS: Going back to the role of the United States — when two allies of the U.S. are at odds with each other in this way, it affects American interests in the region. But lately there are questions as to whether the U.S. has influence in bringing these countries to a better place.

It has been mesmerizing to see the speed with which the Moon administration did away with two agreements that the Obama administration was instrumental in bringing together — the 2015 "comfort women" agreement and GSOMIA.

The Trump administration came in very late to this. Even though there has been a sharp deterioration of relations since fall 2018, not much was done until things got out of hand. But it goes beyond a slow reaction. When you beat up your allies over trade and host-nation support, they're not going to pay as much attention to you. A very serious precedent has been set. The Trump administration signaled that it did not want South Korea to undo GSOMIA, and it did not want the Japanese to go forward with the removal of South Korea from its "whitelist," but the U.S. was ignored.

LINDSEY FORD: I agree with all this. I think that the Trump administration was dealt a harder hand in trying to bring these two countries together. There are such misaligned threat perceptions right now on China and North Korea, which are the two big issues that could potentially bring people together. Japan and South Korea are just not in the same place on these issues. But the Trump administration has taken that poor hand and played it even more poorly.

If you look at trilateral cooperation that Japan has going on with other countries like Australia and India, it's been increasing pretty rapidly for the last several years. When you think of this idea of a principled security network, you see all of these webs of relationships are coming together across Asia, and the Japan-South Korea relationship stands out as an exception. The fact that we haven't seen more of a sense of urgency from the White House about high-level engagement to bring these two countries together really surprises me.

III. A FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC

BRUCE JONES: Let's pivot to the Indo-Pacific. Lindsey, what is a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy? What does that mean?

LINDSEY FORD: I think Abe gets the award for successful political branding, in that he basically took an idea that he'd been kicking around in various iterations for a decade and got the U.S. to adopt it as its own, and now everybody is seizing this concept.

What does the Free and Open Indo-Pacific mean? Broadly speaking, it's about principles. This is about the ideas and principles that you want to continue to see countries in the region embrace — open and free trade, adherence to the rule of law, resolving disputes without conflict — principles that the United States believes have allowed Asia to flourish for the last several decades.

Underneath all of that, certainly for Japan and for the United States, is the geostrategic element of the rise of China. The Trump administration has certainly been far blunter in saying this. When you look at the National Defense Strategy and the National Security Strategy, they state pretty directly that China is a strategic competitor and it is undermining the order the United States wants to see in the region.

I think there's a lot of alignment between the U.S. and Japan on the need to shore up partnerships, rules, and principles to push back against Chinese revisionism in the region.

There are two differences, potentially, between their respective Indo-Pacific concepts — one substantive, one less so. There's been discussion about the fact that Japan and the U.S. don't necessarily have the same

geographic construct when they talk about the Indo-Pacific. This is probably true. Japan defines the Indo-Pacific as stretching all the way across to the east coast of Africa, as you can see from things like the Japan and India's Asia-Africa Growth Corridor. This is certainly a much broader concept of the Indo-Pacific region than the U.S. has, because the U.S. version is basically the same as INDOPACOM's area of responsibility, which ends at India.

The more substantive difference is that the Abe government's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy really prioritizes free trade. Free trade is lifeblood for Japan. The Trump administration talks about free trade, but they've altered their rhetoric to focus on "free and fair trade." The emphasis right now is much more on "fair" than "free," and this idea of reciprocity in economic relations. Basically, they're saying that what's been happening thus far isn't fair for the United States. I think you're going to see growing tensions in this area, because the U.S. and Japan are not aligned in their vision for trade in the region.

BRUCE JONES: Do you see mechanisms like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue[6] — were it to be fully formed — as subsidiary to an Indo-Pacific strategy or complementary to it?

LINDSEY FORD: It has to be subsidiary to it. When the Indo-Pacific concept first got rolled out, it was a concept, but it was touted as a strategy. For about the first year, the administration was really playing catch up, trying to figure out what the strategy was that went underneath their new shiny bumper sticker that they had rolled out.

The "Quad," however, got a whole lot of attention and press because it plays into this idea of pushing back against China. Also, there hadn't been a Quad for a decade, so I think it got overhyped as a new element of U.S. strategy. The best thing we could do for the Quad is stop talking about it, and just let the bureaucrats go about finding practical areas of cooperation for the four countries.

With the Quad getting all the hype at the beginning, it also created a lot of tensions with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and with countries like South Korea, who felt left out of the equation.

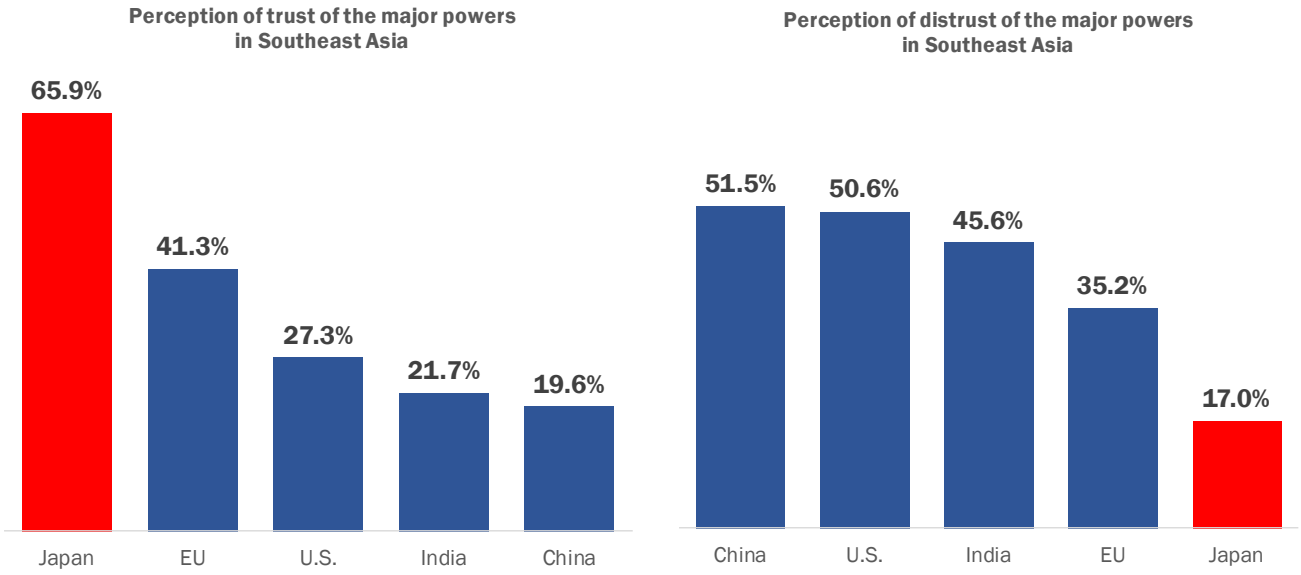
JONATHAN POLLACK: Is the Free and Open Indo-Pacific really a strategy? If so, what is it? There's all this tut-tutting about China and all its evil intentions. If we are so troubled by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), I would like to see what money, real money, the United States government is prepared to put on the table to counter it. But I don't see it, and I don't think people in the region see it. Ironically, the Chinese don't seem troubled by the Free and Open Indo-Pacific. They see it as greatly under-resourced and kind of ill-conceived, and that there are few takers in Asia for it. So, it's the kind of thing that everyone could nod knowingly about when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo or somebody else gives a speech, and then go about business as usual. They're not looking for a test of wills on this.

Since there is this extraordinary need for infrastructure across Asia, into Africa and Latin America, and connecting to Europe, if we are not going to put up the dough but China wants to put up some of the dough, where does that put us?

RICHARD BUSH: If truth be told, Japan is putting up money to support infrastructure. And it is doing it on terms and conditions that are better than BRI.

RYAN HASS: In Southeast Asia, Japan appears to be doing quite well. The ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's "The State of Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report" highlights that Japan enjoys more trust in Southeast Asia than any other country by a large margin.[7]

FIGURE 3: JAPAN ENJOYS MORE TRUST IN SOUTHEAST ASIA THAN ANY OTHER COUNTRY



Source: The State of Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report (Singapore: ASEAN Studies Center, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, January 2019), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/TheStateofSEASurveyReport_2019.pdf.

JONATHAN POLLACK: Ryan, you're right. The Japanese have a wealth of experience in high-quality projects in Southeast Asia that go back over a long period of time.

LINDSEY FORD: If you think about the issue of how to compete in an effective way, Japan's approach has been really smart. Look at places in South and Southeast Asia where the U.S. has big concerns about what China is doing with BRI, such as Cambodia, where there are concerns about a potential Chinese military base. Japan is doing all kinds of infrastructure investment there. They're helping to build the port in Sihanoukville, which is also where the Chinese have been pouring in investment. The U.S. has major concerns about the Chinese in Sri Lanka, but Japan is there helping to build the port in Colombo. There are concerns about the Chinese in Bangladesh, but Japan is helping build ports there too. So, the Japanese are actually in the game in all these places, and I think it would be wise to take a page from their playbook.

JONATHAN POLLACK: Do you think that the Japanese conceive of this as a zero-sum game with China?

MIREYA SOLÍS: No.

BRUCE JONES: Which Japanese? There is a difference: economic actors, no; security actors, yes.

MIREYA SOLÍS: But even among security actors there's been some readjustment because they encountered pushback in the region. When Japan launched the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, they called it a "strategy." Many countries in Southeast Asia felt uncomfortable because this implied, in their view, a more exclusive design, whereby China would be sidelined, and they had no appetite for that. So, the Japanese decided to toss that and call it an "initiative," and they began to emphasize inclusivity as one of the guiding principles of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

BRUCE JONES: Including inclusivity of China.

MIREYA SOLÍS: Exactly. They found that their economic diplomacy has more traction because they're not ruffling feathers as they would if perceived as buying into a Cold War, a zero-sum competition.

On the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, one element that we must put front and center is the connectivity agenda — an amped up, very important drive on connectivity, both in physical infrastructure and in the digital domain. It is well-resourced and Japan is building on decades of extensive overseas economic assistance. Then, on top of that, there are significant private investment flows, and therefore, countries respond positively because the projects are well-implemented.

In addition to this, the concept of maritime security is important for Japan in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific. In Southeast Asia, Japan is not only working on transportation corridors and digital initiatives, but also capacity building in terms of coast guards in Vietnam and other countries.

I would say that there's significant disconnect between what the Trump administration thinks and says about a Free and Open Indo-Pacific and what the Japanese are doing. There's comfort in saying that the United States and Japan are aligned in their overarching strategy towards the region, but in fact, there are significant differences in objectives and delivery. Another key difference is that Japan aims for a regional trade architecture, while the U.S. has abandoned that goal.

BRUCE JONES: This question of inclusivity comes out of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. I saw it in the infrastructure debates at the G-20, where instinctively our approach would be to tighten up with the Australians and the Japanese and a few others to offer some Western infrastructure package that can compete with the Chinese. But the Japanese said, no, let's set G-20-wide rules of engagement that the Chinese will follow. They won that fight. It seems to me it's highly questionable whether the Chinese will in any meaningful sense follow those rules, other than with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

IV. RISKS, CHOICES, AND DOMESTIC CONSTRAINTS

Alignment choices

BRUCE JONES: Let's assume for a moment, which I do assume, that U.S.-China relations continue to deteriorate, and we don't have some sort of benign upswing. What happens to the U.S.-Japan relationship in that context? Does it solidify as a kind of core strategic bulwark against China or does it erode faced with this stress test of a much deeper challenge?

JONATHAN POLLACK: I would begin with, what inherent value does the White House attach to our continuing relationships with core allies in Asia and the Pacific? Are we intent upon offloading responsibility, letting regional states deal with issues as they may, and the U.S. sustaining — presumably in a second Trump term, if there is a second Trump term — what looks more and more like an avowedly nationalist, protectionist strategy? That would structure Japan's response if it finds itself in a position where the United States does not look as attentive to its interests as it has historically been.

The outlook on U.S.-China relations is pretty grim these days, but it's really a question of where this leaves states in the region, and Japan is front and center in that. That's a very fair question to ask, and I don't know how that nets out. There is also the question of when Abe does step down, if he steps down, whether or not this context is sustained into the next government.

ADAM LIFF: I agree with Jonathan that the answer has to do significantly with Trump administration policy (or the next administration's policy) toward Japan, but I'd also add the state of Japan-China relations and the role of the U.S. Congress as variables here. Congress's effort so far in terms of reassuring allies — especially NATO allies — and pushing back against the administration in key instances has been significant. But it could be much more robust, especially in terms of funding for things in Asia like the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA), maritime security, etc.

BRUCE JONES: The unstated implication of that is that if we return to a more traditionalist posture around our allies, we don't see that deterioration in the relationship. But as I said, our posture could still be close ally support, but as tensions with China escalate, I still wonder about the stress test dynamics.

RYAN HASS: Japan really faces three options going forward, from a strategic standpoint. One is to remain a close ally and partner of the United States. The second is to develop its own military capabilities, so that it's able to protect its own interests irrespective of whether the U.S. is going to be there. The third is to find some type of accommodation with China.

As perceptions of China's rise intensify, and questions build about America's continuing commitment to the region, this is something we really need to pay attention to.

The point that I'm trying to make is that we mustn't take our alliance with Japan for granted. I hope that the next president puts Japan at the top of his or her agenda. One of the things that this discussion has illuminated is how critical Japan is to our overall strategy, not just in Asia but in the world. Our Asia strategy is built upon the foundation of a strong U.S.-Japan alliance. There is no alternative.

A lot of gaps have opened up in recent years between the U.S. and Japan, whether it's on Iran nuclear issues, the Paris climate agreement, TPP, North Korea, etc. That's a lot of stress for any alliance to absorb. When it's our most consequential alliance, we should make it a priority to narrow as many of those gaps as possible.

BRUCE JONES: If you compare allies and the degree to which they could pull themselves away from being entirely tied to us and still have room to maneuver, I think of Germany as being in quite a comfortable situation. China, Russia, and the U.S. all want to invest there. The Germans have a certain amount of leverage, and no one is going to be invading Berlin. But Japan is really on the other end of that spectrum. Where are they going to go? What does accommodating China mean for them?

RYAN HASS: I don't envision a scenario in which Japan swings from Washington to Beijing and it's suddenly aligned with China against us. I can imagine a scenario in which Japan becomes more equidistant between Washington and Beijing. Put another way, I can envision a future in which Japan becomes more selective in hearing the signals we are sending, and more discerning in choosing how to respond to the requests we make of them.

ADAM LIFF: I basically agree with Ryan's concern, but I don't see that as a likely outcome. Things would have to get really awful for that to happen, at least based on current trends in policy and elite and public opinion in Japan (and the U.S.) — which are both overwhelmingly pro-U.S. alliance in orientation. We saw a short-lived effort to move toward more "independent diplomacy" in 2009-2010 during the first year of Yukio Hatoyama's Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government. But, at least in part because of a flareup with China in the East China Sea, it didn't last long. So, I think it's important to note that Beijing has immense agency here. In the recent past, one of the major obstacles to improved China-Japan relations has been China's apparent lack of interest in improving ties,

even when Japan extends a hand. The most prominent example is perhaps Beijing's response to that DPJ outreach under Hatoyama — remember China's rare earth embargos as "punishment" for arresting the drunk fishing boat captain who rammed a Japan Coast Guard vessel? But after 2012, Abe has sought to engage, even in the extremely tense 2012-2014 period. It was Beijing that unilaterally imposed a high-level diplomatic freeze for two-plus years. If we find ourselves in a world where Xi Jinping sees a much greater interest in transforming ties with Japan, such as through a major overture in the East China Sea, things could change. I don't see that as likely, though. During my meetings in Tokyo this past summer, for example, colleagues made abundantly clear that the recent relative improvement in China-Japan ties has not led Beijing to show any interest in reducing operational pressure vis-à-vis the Senkakus. That will remain one of several major thorns in the bilateral relationship for the foreseeable future.

RICHARD BUSH: I think part of the task of the next administration is to restore high quality communication with Japan. Japan really does depend on its channels with us, and it depends on the knowledge that the channels are working in the U.S. government, so that the credibility of our commitments is high.

ADAM LIFF: In that regard, I think it's hugely important that Japanese leaders also prepare for a possible change in U.S. administration in 2021. The next administration may be quite different from both the Trump administration and previous Democratic administrations, with several unfamiliar faces. Proactive outreach early on will be a hugely significant factor in how the relationship evolves the next four years.

RICHARD BUSH: Let me put on the table one wild card. I think the Achilles heel of the U.S.-Japan relationship is Okinawa. If I were Chinese and wanted to disrupt the U.S.-Japan Alliance, I would use all the tools at my disposal to create fissures in the relationship between Okinawa and Tokyo, and Okinawa and the United States.

LINDSEY FORD: Picking up on something that Ryan was saying earlier. I think that this administration is making a mistake because it has a China-focused regional strategy, which can create the perception that U.S. alliances and partnerships are basically instrumentalist. It can appear that the importance of those relationships is just about how they impact what the U.S. is trying to do vis-à-vis Beijing. Our alliances, like the U.S.-Japan alliance, need to be the biggest focus of U.S. strategy right now.

When I think about possible friction points for the alliance in the future, there are two that come to mind. One, if the global economy really goes south, it's going to put a lot more strain on the U.S.-Japan relationship. In that scenario, I could see a lot more friction and fights over trade, as well as over defense spending.

Second, particularly under the Abe government, Japan is getting more confident in stepping out on its own when needed. It took more of a leadership role in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, for example. I personally think that's a good thing, but in the long run, it puts a premium on alliance coordination because Japan isn't just going to be the "yes man."

MICHAEL O'HANLON: I get two messages out of the Japanese. One, they're a very proud people, and they're not going to keep taking insults forever. The fact that they made amends and feel like moving past history makes them increasingly resentful that China and Korea won't let them do so.

Secondly, I don't believe that there is a latent Japanese militarism. A lot of people in the United States think there is, and they certainly think that in Korea and China. But I don't sense that. I don't think ultimately Japan would ever want to be on its own in security terms, because the only way they could somehow live in the same neighborhood with China and Korea without us is if they really went for it and acquired nuclear weapons, spent five percent of their GDP on their military, et cetera. They're a big country, but they're not big enough to really

want to be on their own in that dangerous area, so they have a powerful incentive to always come back to the U.S.-Japan alliance. So, unless we screw it up, I think the alliance will continue.

RYAN HASS: I'm not anticipating that Japan is going to abandon us or that it is going to rearm, but I think there is a lot of space short of those extreme poles wherein the United States could end up having less influence with Japan, and by extension, less capability to exercise leadership in the region.

MIREYA SOLÍS: Although Japan has sought to stabilize relations with China, this does not mean that Japan is trying to move away from the alliance with the United States and accommodate China. As one of Asia's consolidated democracies, Japan has deep concern over China's growing authoritarianism. Japan is clear-eyed about the military buildup and about the constant pressure on the Senkakus and the East China Sea. There is a sharp difference between a thaw and a hedge.

A nuclear option?

BRUCE JONES: Where do you think Japan is in feeling a need to develop its own nuclear capabilities?

MICHAEL O'HANLON: On Japan, I still think it's pretty early days for the Japanese to make any actual decision toward having a nuclear weapon. My sense is it's now less sacrilegious to talk about it in conferences and write about it, but we're a long way from seeing the Japanese pursue this. Of course, the minute the Japanese decide to do it, they can do it very fast. So, this may not be any great solace for those who worry about nuclear nonproliferation.

MIREYA SOLÍS: I think that's right. For Japan, the concern with abandonment has grown. The fear is that the Trump administration could accommodate Kim Jong Un and decide that it is OK for North Korea to keep its nukes and shorter-range missile capabilities, compromising Japan's crucial security interests. The debate on whether nuclear weapons should be an option to deal with that contingency has become more open. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Abe continues to insist there will be no change to the three non-nuclear principles (production, possession, transit). Moreover, I think for Tokyo the negatives still far outweigh the positives. Japan understands the sharp consequences that possessing nuclear weapons would have for an arms race in the region. Finally, Japanese public opinion is a big constraint. A large swath of the public is trying to get rid of all things nuclear, even civilian nuclear energy, and will not accept arming the country with nuclear weapons.

ADAM LIFF: I basically agree. Given how loaded with historical baggage the idea of Japan going nuclear is domestically, regardless of the strategic logic — which is heavily contested, by the way — I'm quite skeptical that, barring a major crisis that upsets the status quo, that this is a serious option for Japan's leaders. Abe's government has definitely pushed the envelope on certain security policies since 2012. Quite significantly in some cases. But evolutionary changes to Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) force structure or posture are one thing. My sense is that nuclear weapons fall into their own separate, and highly politically salient, category — especially in Japan. Just compare the public views on the nuclear option in South Korea vs. Japan — both countries facing down a nuclear-armed Pyongyang. It's quite extraordinary.

The pull of domestic politics

BRUCE JONES: What does the debate over constitutional reform tell us about Japan's future security profile? Do you think the trend toward "normalizing" Japan's security role will endure post-Abe? How will domestic political constraints shape Japan's grand strategy?

MIREYA SOLÍS: By November 2019, Abe will be the longest serving prime minister in Japan's history. Under his tenure, Japan has had a more proactive foreign policy, certainly when it comes to economic statecraft, but also with important developments in security policy, specifically, collective self-defense and the 2015 security laws. But it is important to note that it is not all about Abe. Loosening the tight strictures of security policy and playing a more proactive role on trade have been goals pursued by previous governments, including from the DPJ.

To some extent, the key difference has been not on the overall direction, but on the ability to execute the reforms. The rise of executive leadership predates Abe, but was also helped by institutional innovations of the Abe era, including: the establishment of the National Security Council and a TPP headquarters, and the ability of the prime minister's office to operate as a control tower especially as it gained control over appointments of top civil servants.

A key difference between Abe's first government (from September 2006 to September 2007) and his second government is the fragmentation of the opposition. His dominant presence in Japanese politics has allowed Abe to accomplish things that his predecessors couldn't. Still, some of his legacy-making initiatives at home and abroad are unlikely to come through: settling the territorial dispute with Russia and revising the constitution.

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (L), who is also leader of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), shakes hands with Natsuo Yamaguchi, leader of the LDP's coalition partner Komeito, atop of a campaign van in Tokyo's Shibuya district. September 28, 2017. REUTERS/Toru Hanai

This poses an interesting question. Why hasn't the longest serving prime minister from a party that for decades championed constitutional reform achieved his most-cherished goal? I would say it is because the politics still don't align. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)'s coalition partner, Komeito, has acted as a brake on security reforms and in the latest upper house election this summer the parties that favor constitutional reform fell

short of securing a two-thirds majority. Moreover, the Japanese public is deeply ambivalent. Aware of this, Abe has offered a modest reform proposal of making explicit the constitutionality of the JSDF (although no one is challenging that); that still would be difficult to pass in a national referendum.

ADAM LIFF: You mentioned the important role of Komeito, the LDP's junior coalition partner. I couldn't agree more. The LDP-Komeito dynamic in national elections and when it comes to security policy and Article 9 is really under-appreciated outside Japan and helps to explain part of that "puzzle" concerning why Abe hasn't achieved more in the security domain despite the LDP's strength in Diet seat totals. The LDP is remarkably dependent on Komeito support in elections, which gives the much smaller party — and its lay Buddhist, pacifist support base — disproportionate leverage over Abe and the LDP when it comes to things like Article 9. For example, they helped significantly water down the 2014 reinterpretation of Article 9 to enable "limited" collective self-defense by pressuring Abe to include three fairly significant conditions, and the revision proposal currently on the table basically came from Komeito, too. And so, for these reasons and others, I think the gradual evolution of Japan's security posture is likely to continue.

MIREYA SOLÍS: That is an important point—changes in Japan's security profile will only move gradually. Ultimately, I foresee Japan consolidating its place as a networked middle power with investments in the U.S. alliance, stabilization of relations with China, diversification of security partnerships, and all-out economic statecraft under the mantra of connectivity.

BRUCE JONES: Thank you all.

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