

The Crisis of US Credibility in East Asia

Hitoshi Tanaka, *Senior Fellow, JCIE*

THE DECISION BY the US Congress to open an impeachment inquiry into President Donald Trump over his pressuring of Ukraine to investigate former Vice President Joe Biden has brought renewed attention to the foreign policy of the Trump presidency. This drama is playing out in parallel to the ramping up of the 2020 US presidential campaign. It is thus an opportune moment to reflect on the Trump administration's impact on East Asia and the urgent need to revitalize regional multilateral cooperation—irrespective of whether the US public elects Mr. Trump to a second term or goes in another direction.

President Trump's so-called "America First" approach is characterized by unilateralism, protectionism, and transactional deal making. This has served to undermine the liberal international order that the United States worked so diligently to build in the postwar era and to diminish the country's global leadership. As such, US allies and partners have been losing confidence in the United States.

This growing crisis of credibility presents a serious challenge to East Asian regional stability. The America First approach hinders the ability of the

United States to manage and resolve key security issues in East Asia. The most critical of these issues—denuclearization negotiations with North Korea, contingency planning in case of an emergency scenario on the Korean Peninsula, and the management of regional relations with China—can only be effectively addressed through intensive multilateral cooperation between the United States and its regional partners. For the sake of East Asia's future shared security and prosperity, there is an urgent need for US allies and partners to coordinate and deliver a consistent message to the United States to encourage it to return to multilateralism and to begin the task of rebuilding US credibility.

The Credibility Crisis

There are five key aspects of the Trump administration's foreign policy that have precipitated the decline in American leadership on the world stage: a decay in US moral leadership, a retreat from multilateralism, an embrace of unilateralism, an undermining of the rules-based liberal international order, and a weakening of alliance relationships. Taken together, this represents a crisis for US leadership in East Asia.

US Moral Leadership

Throughout the postwar era, the United States has unquestionably been the frontrunner among the world's economically advanced democracies. This US position has been underpinned not just by its overwhelming hard military power but also by the soft power of its moral leadership. This soft power bolsters cooperation with US allies and partners and their willingness to actively promote US leadership in areas of shared interest. However, under President Trump, the United States is no longer seen by friends and allies, or by rivals, as a champion of democracy, human rights, or free trade. This has served to embolden authoritarian regimes and to erode the liberal character of the international order. Concerted cooperation is urgently needed among the economically advanced democracies around Asia Pacific and the world to preserve the liberal international order.

Retreat from Multilateralism

The United States under President Trump has retreated from multilateralism. President Trump has skipped multilateral meetings—including the 2017 East Asia Summit (EAS) in the Philippines, the 2018 APEC summit in Papua New Guinea, and 2018 EAS in Singapore—raising doubts about the US commitment to the region. When he has attended multilateral summits, his presence has generally been more disruptive rather than constructive, and US leadership on shared concerns has been conspicuously absent.

At the 2019 G20 Summit in Osaka, the Trump administration was responsible for upending language surrounding free trade and climate change in the joint communiqué. The 2019 G7 Summit in Biarritz, France, avoided a communiqué entirely due to difficulties in forging a common positive message and instead settled for a one-page declaration. Traditionally, summit communiqués have been a mechanism to forge consensus, interpret rules, and show the direction of the international community in cooperating to address shared global challenges. This practice is now at risk. The failure to conclude communiqués of serious substance sends a message to the world that the United States and its allies are divided.

America First Unilateralism

Under the banner of America First, the Trump administration has embraced unilateralism. Without

consulting its allies, the Trump administration withdrew the United States from multilateral agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Paris Agreement on climate change, and the Iran nuclear deal. From the outside, these withdrawals often seem to be little more than a partisan rejection of the achievements of President Trump's predecessor, President Barack Obama, rather than decisions based on the contents of the agreements. This undermines trust in US participation in future agreements, undercuts the future leadership role of the United States in multilateral initiatives, and damages the US national interest and shared regional and global interests. Even more confounding is that, despite withdrawing from the TPP, the Trump administration has compelled Japan to negotiate a bilateral trade deal so that the United States could gain TPP-like treatment. Putting allies through such rigmarole simply to score domestic political points cannot help but to strain alliances.

Undermining the Rules

The Trump administration regularly violates the basic principles of the liberal international order. Having declared himself a "tariff man," President Trump is using tariffs as a means of pressuring other countries to grant the US concessions. This US abuse of the WTO's national security exemption has spiraled into a trade war with China. So far, the Trump administration has imposed tariffs on over US\$360 billion worth of Chinese goods while China has retaliated with over US\$110 billion of tariffs on US goods. Trump's tariffs have also been aimed at allies, including steel and aluminum tariffs against Canada, Japan, Mexico, and the European Union. The threat of tariffs against the Japanese automobile industry cast a shadow over negotiations for the recently concluded US-Japan trade deal.

The undermining of the World Trade Organization (WTO) by the Trump administration also weakens the rules-based trading system. Most notably, by using its veto power to prevent new judges being appointed to the WTO Appellate Body, the United States risks paralyzing the entire WTO trade dispute settlement and enforcement mechanism. As such, it also risks ceding any ability to lead reforms of the WTO to update its rules for the 21st century.

Weakening Alliances

The hub-and-spokes system of US military alliances with countries such as Australia, Japan, the

Philippines, and South Korea has been based on the credibility of the United States and its willingness to forward deploy US troops and underwrite regional security. This has enabled the United States to maintain its power projection capability and protect its vital interests in this economically dynamic region. Since the end of the Cold War, US allies have begun assuming greater roles in the name of burden sharing. In addition to its host-nation support, which covers the lion's share of US basing costs, Japan has revised the US-Japan Defense Cooperation Guidelines in 1997 and 2015 to codify the roles of the Japan Self-Defense Forces in the event of a regional crisis.

The Trump administration's demands of allies, however, go beyond burden sharing. His call for allies to pay the full cost of hosting US bases is rooted in the false understanding that bases are only for the benefit of host nations and fails to recognize the substantial benefits for the United States and the region of maintaining US forward deployment. Moreover, US alliance relationships have been further weakened by the lack of prior consultation on key policy decisions that affect allies. While requesting like-minded countries patrol the Strait of Hormuz to protect commercial vessels, President Trump risks destabilizing the Middle East by demonizing Iran. Trump's decision to abandon America's Kurdish allies in Syria will also not go unnoticed by other allies around the world. Ultimately, the inability of the Trump administration to articulate a mutual interest to defend the East Asian region undercuts US allies' confidence to cooperate with the United States.

Risking Instability in East Asia

The credibility crisis outlined above presents a serious challenge to stability in East Asia. The key security challenges facing the region, namely denuclearizing North Korea, US-Japan-ROK trilateral contingency planning vis-à-vis North Korea, and managing relations with China, all require intensive multilateral cooperation. But as it sticks to unilateral and bilateral approaches to diplomacy, the Trump administration lacks a coherent Asia policy with the strategic capacity to guide multilateral initiatives. It is critical that US allies forge a coordinated message on the damages wrought by the America First foreign policy as well as the unpredictable nature of the

Trump administration's policy direction and urge the United States to return to the path of exercising its leadership through multilateralism.

Denuclearizing North Korea

Critics of President Trump have admonished him for meeting with and legitimizing North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and worry that he will make a bad deal that allows North Korea to keep its nuclear weapons in some form. However, given the severe lack of trust between North Korea and the United States, initiating negotiations with Kim was a necessary and positive step forward as part of a longer journey to denuclearize North Korea. Criticism of President Trump's North Korea policy would be better focused on the damage caused by his unilateral approach.

While North Korea has stopped testing nuclear weapons and long- and medium-range ballistic missiles, it has continued to test short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) and a suspected submarine-launched ballistic missile. Despite the fact that these tests violate UN Security Council resolutions and serve to develop North Korea's capabilities to avoid regional missile defense systems, President Trump has shrugged them off as unimportant. This negatively impacts regional defense, leaving Japan and South Korea particularly vulnerable. But there is no indication that the security impact on key US allies factors into President Trump's decision-making process at all. This is despite the fact that these allies will be critical to the success of any successful negotiations with Pyongyang.

Trilateral Security Cooperation

Against the backdrop of a disengaged United States, Japan-South Korea tensions have been allowed to escalate to the extent that they are undermining US-Japan-ROK trilateral security cooperation. The tensions revolve around history and territory issues, the cancellation of the 2015 comfort women agreement, the ROK Supreme Court decisions on forced laborers during World War II, Japan's export restrictions on chemicals used in semiconductors and smartphone displays, the downgrading of each other's trade status, and South Korea's decision not to renew the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). Trilateral cooperation is imperative for contingency planning vis-à-vis North Korea in case

of an emergency situation on the Korean Peninsula. This is especially necessary in terms of the role of US military troops based in Japan and the rear-area and logistics support role to be played by the Japan Self-Defense Forces. For this reason, the termination of GSOMIA is especially damaging.

In the past, the United States was sensitive to the state of Japan-ROK relations insofar as tensions impacted trilateral security cooperation. Yet now that Japan-South Korea relations appear to have hit their lowest point since the two countries normalized relations in 1965, the Trump administration has not shown any enduring interest in mitigating the tensions. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of Japan and South Korea to resolve their bilateral issues. Yet the lack of US concern or encouragement of trilateral cooperation is worrying.

Managing Relations with China

Managing regional relations with a rising China will be a critical issue over the coming decades. In addition to the need to end the US-China trade war and the damage it is inflicting on the global economy, careful, multilateral coordination is needed on a range of issues, including China's aggressive moves in the East and South China Seas, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the competition for technological supremacy. Yet US allies and partners do not see the world purely through the lens of US-China relations and are anxious about the risks that US-China economic decoupling could entail.

Given Japan's declining population, expanding economic relations with China has been important for Japanese growth. For instance, Japan's tourism boom has been fueled by Chinese tourists whose numbers grew from 1.3 million in 2013 to 8.3 million in 2018. Moreover, Japanese and Chinese businesses signed 52 memoranda of understanding for joint development of infrastructure in third countries during Prime Minister Abe's visit to Beijing in October 2018. The general trend in Japan continues to be toward increased interdependence with China, while being mindful of the strategic implications and the need to diversify its economic and strategic ties with countries such as Australia, India, and Southeast Asian nations.

There is a critical need for US allies and partners around the region to engage in discussions about managing relations with China. The United States

should be leading this conversation, but in order to reliably do so, it must move away from any notion of unilateral measures aimed at economic decoupling. A so-called G2 approach would also be a mistake given that it would risk dividing the world into China-supporting and US-supporting blocs. What is needed is intensive consultations about how to best manage the strategic risks of interdependence with China in a way that preserves the liberal international order.

Under the current circumstances, Japan must pursue a dual engagement policy toward both China and the United States. The nature of this engagement will necessarily be different for each. With regard to China, the policy objective is not to confront or contain it but to influence the process of its economic and political evolution. As such, engagement with China should take a functional approach across various areas including trade, investment, the environment, energy, and technological innovation. With an eye on future US relations, Japan must continue to rigorously expand regional free trade arrangements in the hope that the United States will realize the disadvantages of its non-participation. In order for Japan to continue to facilitate the US military presence in the region, it is essential that Japan continue to incrementally expand its security role and develop the roles and missions of the Self-Defense Forces under the 2015 security legislation. A Northeast Asian confidence-building mechanism must also be pursued, modelled on the Six-Party Talks.



The staggering decline in US leadership under the America First approach to foreign policy has precipitated a crisis of credibility in US leadership. This has had a destabilizing effect on East Asia as the avenues for US allies and partners to engage the United States in multilateral cooperation have narrowed considerably.

There is an urgent need to rebuild US credibility—for the sake both of the United States and of broader regional stability—so that US allies and partners may effectively work together once again to address the shared critical challenges facing the region. This will require stronger and more effective arguments from the intellectual community in the United States. It will also require US allies to be frank with President

Trump. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is perhaps best positioned among US allies to undertake this impossible task given his cultivation of strong personal ties with President Trump and deliver a frank wake-up call on behalf of the international community. The path to rebuilding strong and credible US leadership in East Asia and globally is through

multilateral cooperation and the preservation of the liberal international order.

Hitoshi Tanaka is a senior fellow at JCIE and chairman of the Institute for International Strategy at the Japan Research Institute, Ltd. He previously served as Japan's deputy minister for foreign affairs.