

When Bilateralism Trumps Multilateralism: Japan-US Relations at the G7 Summit

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Executive Summary

This policy brief explores an often overlooked aspect of G7 summitry, namely the bilateral meetings that take place before, during and after the core business of multilateral meetings. In particular, it places the focus on the US-Japan relationship, once dubbed ‘the most important bilateral relationship in the world, bar none’, in light of the newly established relationship between US President Donald J. Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. It argues that the G7 Taormina Summit represents another incremental but important step in bolstering the relationship but amplifies a contradiction at the heart of Abe’s evolving foreign policy doctrine.

Background

Bilateralism has historically been a key consideration in the thinking of Japanese foreign policymakers. From the Anglo-Japanese Alliance (1902 to 1923), via the Tripartite Pact with Germany and to a lesser extent Italy (1940 to 1945), and the US-Japan Security Treaty (1952 to the present day), a hard-nosed realist policy of repeated alignment and bandwagoning with the most powerful state in the international system has characterised Japan’s interaction with the outside world. In this light, since the 1980s, when it was dubbed ‘[the most important bilateral relationship in the world, bar none](#)’ by former US Ambassador to Japan Mike Mansfield, and despite the end of the Cold War and predictions of its demise, the US-Japan

bilateral relationship has gone through a reiterative process of reinforcement.

At the same time, since its inception in 1975, G7 summitry has provided the leaders of this select grouping not only a chance to meet in a multilateral setting but also multiple opportunities to conduct bilateral meetings with key partners on the periphery of the summit. For example, at the 2004 G8 Sea Island Summit forty bilateral meetings took place during the three-day summit outside of the main business of the multilateral meetings, with the US holding eight and Japan conducting six. These meetings often grab our attention. On the one hand, the closeness of the US-UK relationship personified by George W. Bush and Tony Blair was captured in the salutation [‘Yo, Blair!’](#) and unfortunately recorded by a rogue live microphone at the 2006 St Petersburg G8 Summit in 2006. Equally symbolic and telling was a very public [head-to-head bilateral meeting](#) between

Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin on Syria at the Antalya G20 Summit in 2015.

For Japan, regular bilaterals with fellow G7 representatives from Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the UK, and Russia while it was a member of an expanded G8, have proved an opportunity to address specific issues and diversify a predominantly US-centred foreign policy. Yet these meetings have at the same time been significant in managing the central bilateral relationship with the [United States](#). Japanese policymakers have instrumentalised the bilaterals that orbit the G7 as an opportunity to foster cooperative interpersonal relations between individual leaders; educate and enlighten the US in order to promote Japan’s national interests at various levels; bandwagon with its ally when necessary; balance and act as an intermediary between the US and other summit members; and take pre-emptive action to avert criticism by its closest ally at the summit. In fact, these bilateral

meetings have become so institutionalised at the G7 that when their scheduling has been tampered with the Japanese government has voiced strong opposition, as was the case at the 1995 Halifax Summit.

Within this context, it should be emphasised that individuals matter in G7 summitry and particularly strong relationships have been established between Japan and the US when the Japanese prime minister has been in power for long enough to attend more than the average two G7 summits that a Japanese prime minister has traditionally been present at. The [Nakasone-Reagan](#) and [Koizumi-Bush](#) relationships stand out as examples of more sustained and intimate interpersonal relationships between Japanese and US leaders.

Examples of the issues covered within these bilaterals over summit history range widely. At one extreme sits the

seemingly trivial such as US President Gerald Ford supporting Japan's ultimately unsuccessful attempt at the 1976 San Juan Summit to secure the role of host of the 1977 G7 summit. At the other extreme lie controversial security issues such as the declaration of the indivisibility of the security of the Western summit nations (including Japan) at the 1983 Williamsburg Summit, and the highly divisive trade issues of the 1980s, with the 1988 Toronto Summit acting as a deadline to reach agreement on the terms of Japanese imports of US beef and citrus fruits.

There have certainly been [blips](#) in the successful management of relations in general and through these summit bilaterals, as seen during the Democratic Party of Japan's brief time in power from 2009 to 2012. However, for the most part, these bilaterals have contributed to the positive reinforcement of the relationship. However, with the election of Donald J. Trump in November 2016,

many of the assumptions and previous certainties in the relationship were called into question.

The Abe-Trump ‘Special Relationship’

Abe Shinzo has thus far responded to these uncertainties in a proactive manner that characterises his re-energised approach to foreign relations since returning to the position of prime minister in December 2012 after a disastrous and short-lived first-term as prime minister from 2006 to 2007.

Specifically, Abe was the first world leader to meet face-to-face with President-elect Trump on 17 November 2016 just over a week after his electoral success. The 90-minute discussion at Trump Tower in New York gave Abe the opportunity to address statements made by Trump during the presidential campaign that had caused alarm in Tokyo, ranging from doubts surrounding the US security guarantee in Asia, to the future of the Trans-Pacific Partnership

and the spectre of a return to the protectionism of the 1980s in the economic relationship between the largest and third largest economies in the world. However, the meeting’s significance lay more in providing the opportunity for the two to begin the process of building a personal relationship. [Trump](#) stressed ‘a very, very good bond, very, very good chemistry’. [Abe](#) highlighted the ‘warm atmosphere’ and ‘great confidence’ he has in Trump.

After Trump’s inauguration, UK Prime Minister Theresa May secured the honour of being the first world leader to meet Trump towards the end of January. However, Abe met Trump for a second time only a couple of weeks later on 10 February 2017 and was more successful than May, it could be [argued](#), in forging a ‘special relationship’. Further progress was made at this meeting in terms of cementing the personal relationship through rounds of golf at Trump’s private Florida resort, reiterating the

common ground established three months previously and then finding ways forward on certain issues like Japanese investment in US infrastructure projects. A conveniently timed North Korean missile test consolidated this progress by prompting Trump to declare that the US [‘stands behind Japan, its great ally, 100%’](#).

So, we appear to have witnessed an unexpected blossoming of the [‘special relationship’](#). In line with the strategies outlined above, these two meetings have clearly provided first and foremost an opportunity for Abe and Trump to get to know each other but also a chance for Abe to educate and enlighten Trump on issues of immediate importance to Japan (such as North Korea) and even take pre-emptive action to avert recriminations on contentious economic issues.

The G7 Taormina Summit

Taormina provided the third opportunity in just over six months for Abe and Trump to meet face-to-face. In fact, this was in keeping with a promise undertaken earlier in the year after Abe met Trump for the second time that a bilateral would be organised every time that the two met at an [international meeting](#).

Their 55-minute bilateral (originally scheduled for 30 minutes) on 26 May, the first day of the summit, resulted in both leaders stressing their personal friendship, reconfirming the importance of the bilateral relationship, agreeing to bolster their joint defence mechanisms to address pressing issues, namely North Korea (to which half of the discussion was dedicated, see Joanna Weir’s policy brief), and choosing to ignore potentially divisive questions on trade. In a press conference, Trump summed up by saying, ‘Well, I want to say it is reconfirmed, it is a close partnership and

collaboration and friendship. We've developed a great friendship'.

After the public dressing down that Trump delivered to his NATO partners in Brussels immediately prior to Taormina, Abe is seemingly the one G7 leader that Trump publicly acknowledges as a close friend. As mentioned at the beginning of this brief, this resonates with the long-standing bilateral impulse in Japan's foreign relations.

Of course, it can be argued that *realpolitik* dictates that Abe personally and the Japanese government officially have little choice in the matter of establishing a close relationship with Trump and the US. However, in light of recent developments in Japan's evolving foreign policy stance, this strategy has the potential to result in serious contradictions.

Since his return to power, Abe has set about establishing a new and eponymous foreign policy doctrine to replace the Yoshida Doctrine, which traditionally dominated Japan's engagement with the outside world after the end of the Second World War. In place of a foreign policy doctrine that stresses a low-profile, low-risk engagement with the outside world that emphasises economism and delegates security considerations to the US, Abe is seeking to establish a new role for Japan. The '[Abe Doctrine](#)' is built on four tenets: 1) restoring Japan's great power status; 2) ending the post-war regime, as encapsulated in its Peace Constitution and Article 9, which is seen to have inhibited Japan in playing a proactive role in the world; 3) revisionism that rejects the perceived 'masochistic' view of Japan's twentieth century history and seeks to restore pride; and 4) an economically strong Japan, which is necessary to underpin the first two tenets and will be achieved through the application of 'Abenomics'.

The kind of intimate relationship that Abe is pursuing with the US does not sit easily with this evolving 'Abe Doctrine'. In order to reaffirm its great power status, overcome the perceived constraints of the postwar regime that the US was instrumental in creating, and establish an independent defence capacity, Japan is inevitably going to have to redefine its relationship with the US as well as the imbalance, dependency even, that has existed within it for some time. In addition, the kind of historical revisionism that Abe has promoted on issues such as the 'comfort women' and interpretations of Japan's wartime experience are not well received in the US. In short, the 'Abe Doctrine' behoves the Abe administration to become more independent of the US, not more reliant.

A final aspect that is becoming increasingly evident is that Japan is jettisoning one of its traditional foreign policy roles of acting as a balancing intermediary between the US and other summit members in favour of simply bandwagoning with the US within the G7. This diminishing contribution to global governance, especially in the forum of the G7, is something that will damage not only the international community but Japan itself.

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