

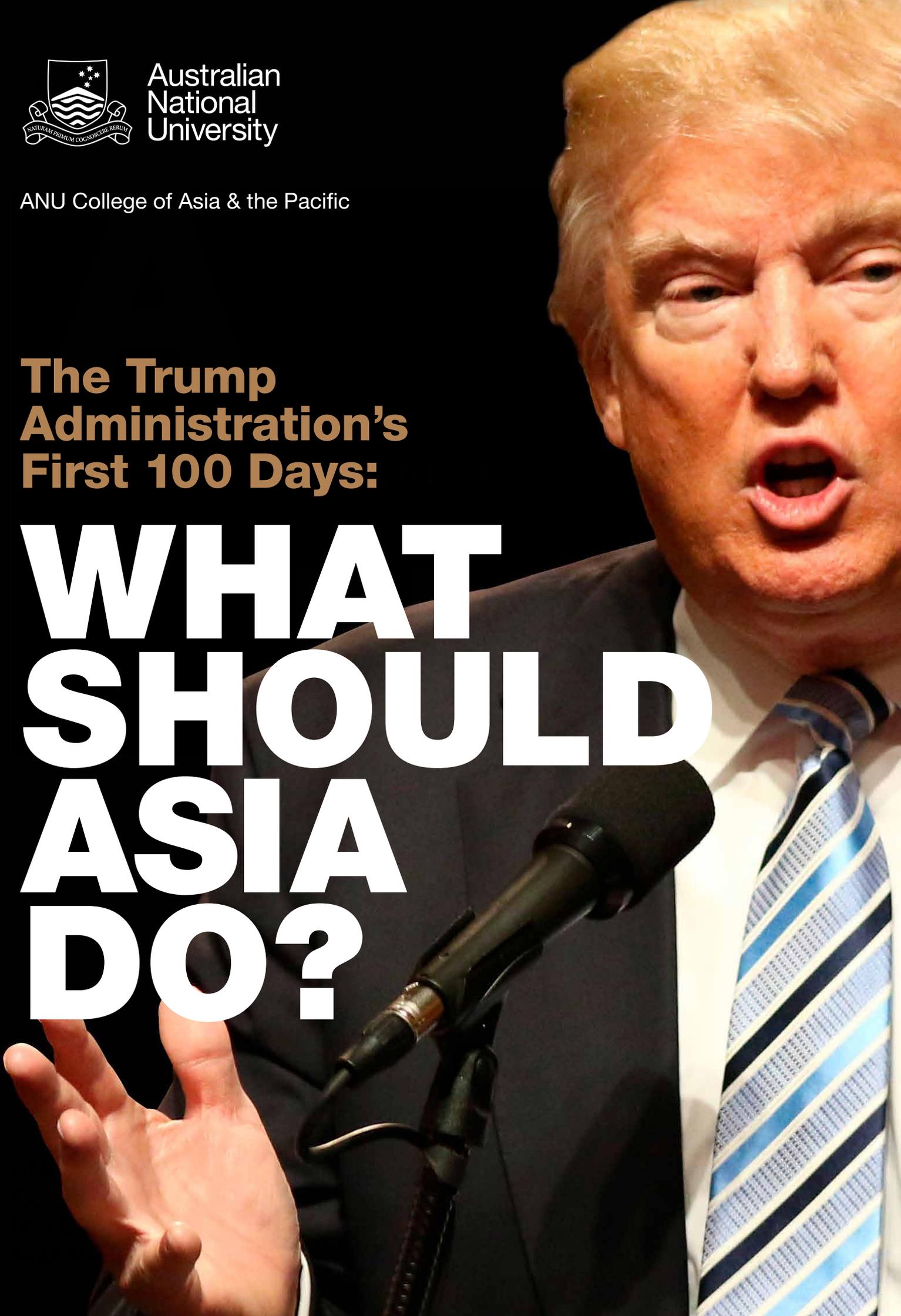


Australian  
National  
University

ANU College of Asia & the Pacific

**The Trump  
Administration's  
First 100 Days:**

# **WHAT SHOULD ASIA DO?**





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## Can Japan's golden golf diplomacy win over Donald Trump?



Dr H. D. P. (David) Envall

When Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited then US President-elect Donald Trump in November 2016, he presented Trump with a Honmas Beres S-05 golf driver embellished with gold and intended, apparently, 'for players seeking a higher trajectory and slice correction.' The clubs were well received (even if, as it turned out, they were made in China). So when the two leaders met again in February 2017, they played golf together and spent five hours discussing United States-Japan relations.

Abe has therefore received strong marks for his Trump diplomacy, with subsequent opinion polling suggesting that 70 per cent of Japanese were satisfied with the results of the Trump-Abe meeting. For Abe, such statecraft recreates the successful golf diplomacy pursued by his grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, as Japanese Prime Minister. Kishi golfed with US President Dwight D. Eisenhower during alliance negotiations in the 1950s. So does Abe's golden golf gift represent a new diplomatic triumph for Japan? In answering this, it is important to ask two further questions. How do Trump's foreign policies affect Japan's interests? And what can Abe do through diplomacy to address these effects?

### Trump's challenge to Japanese interests

On the first question, it is clear that Trump's policies challenge Japan in both security and economic terms. Security-wise, Trump's presidency strikes at the heart of the strategic reorienting of Japan undertaken by Abe. Shinto Abe's policy

changes have been focused on increasing Japan's capacity to deter regional threats, whether posed by North Korea's nuclear program or China's growing assertiveness over the disputed Senkaku Islands (territory claimed by Japan but contested by China). Increased defence spending and a greater emphasis on 'grey zone' capabilities for the Self-Defense Forces have been important to this program. Japan has also sought to deepen its diplomatic engagement around the region, especially through building strategic partnerships with countries such as Australia and India.

Yet at the heart of Japan's more 'proactive contribution to peace' has been a strengthening of the US-Japan alliance and a strong backing of the US "pivot" or "rebalance" strategy towards Asia developed under the Obama administration. Abe's reinterpretation of the Japanese Constitution to allow for collective self-defence (that is, to come to the aid of an ally) should be viewed in this light. In some ways therefore, Japan under Abe has been more 'pro-pivot' than the United States.

However, President Trump, both during and since last year's election campaign, has raised major questions about America's Asian strategy that throw into serious doubt Japan's rationale for deepening its relationship with the United States. By arguing on the campaign trail that Japan free rides on the US and should consider developing its own nuclear weapons capability rather than relying on America's nuclear guarantee, Trump has reawakened fears

of abandonment in Tokyo. Such fears are compounded by Trump's transactionalism – his belief in being able to 'do diplomatic deals' – which raises the concern that Japan's security interests will be sidelined in the wake of a grand Sino-American strategic bargain.

Conversely, by appearing to countenance unilateral American intervention in the region's territorial disputes such as over the South China Sea, the Trump administration has also managed to revive the prospect that Tokyo might become dragged into a wider Sino-American conflict. Just as the Japanese government has loosened the domestic restrictions on the country's capacity to act internationally, it is now confronted by a United States president who eulogises the role of force in international affairs. Either way, America's reliability as an ally – notwithstanding a recent return to alliance orthodoxy in the form of Secretary of Defense James Mattis's confirmation that the Senkaku Islands are covered by the United States-Japan Security Treaty – is now in question.

Trump's pronouncements so far on economics and trade are even more problematic for Abe, since they risk undermining Abe's agenda both internationally and domestically. Concern in Japan about Trump's economic agenda relates not only to the demise of the TPP but also to Trump's wider attitude towards global trade, including America's likely future approach to the World Trade Organization, the North American Free Trade Agreement, trade relations with

China and other potential policies such as border adjustment taxes.

Internationally, the TPP was viewed in Tokyo as a key part of the United States rebalance to the Asia-Pacific because it helped link the United States to the region across multiple dimensions rather than just security. For Japan, the TPP was expected both to strengthen economic relations on a bilateral basis with the United States as well as support greater Japanese engagement with the wider region, particularly Southeast Asia.

Domestically, the TPP represented a key instrument through which Abe would reinvigorate the Japanese economy. In particular, it would help deliver structural reform, the so-called 'third arrow' of Abe's reform agenda known as 'Abenomics.' Abe's goal is to effect structural reforms to make uncompetitive sectors of the Japanese economy, such as agriculture, more dynamic. Now that this form of "external pressure" (*gaiatsu*) for such reform is gone, however, Abe may find such reforms that much harder to implement.

### What golden golf diplomacy can achieve

Abe's Trump diplomacy has been a shrewd mixture of flattery and pragmatism. Along with presenting golden clubs, Abe has sidestepped references to immigration or human rights issues. His aim instead has been to avoid any major confrontation on trade or financial issues such as exchange rates or monetary policy.

This tactic appears to have been reasonably successful. In addition to gaining the commitment of the Trump administration to Japanese security – which was aided by North Korea's missile tests during the February Trump-Abe summit – Japan has so far kept any discord over trade to a minimum. Abe has instead promoted a new United States-Japan economic dialogue to be led by Japanese Minister of Finance Taro Aso and United States Vice-President Mike Pence. This success perhaps explains why domestic criticism of Abe's diplomacy has been muted. The strongest criticism of Abe's approach has

come from former foreign minister, now opposition politician, Seiji Maehara, who characterised Abe as "a chicken meekly obeying a beast".

Yet such early success conceals Abe's weak hand and the broader limitations of such diplomacy, however skilful. Adroit diplomacy cannot block the deeper structural realignments set off by Trump. It cannot, for instance, address the rising doubts about the prospects for America's ongoing primacy in the Asia-Pacific. It cannot undo the damage Trump has done to America's reputation as a reliable ally. Nor can it stem the power shift towards China, now a product not merely of China's rise but also of erratic United States policy.

### Japan's deeper challenges

Trump therefore exposes the deeper strategic challenges facing Japan. More than most states in Asia, its strategic circumstances involving territorial disputes as well as regional rivalry are acute. Further, Japan cannot easily pivot from a US-based strategy: not only is its own influence in Asia based heavily on a robust US commitment to regional security, but it lacks any realistic substitute for American power.

Ideally, Japan would wish to roll back the worst foreign policy excesses of the Trump administration. But more realistically, it may seek merely to limit the damage that may be done to the regional order over the next four years. Japan is not unique in this respect; similar thinking can be found around the region. In Australia, for example, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop points to the fact that many states in the region find themselves in a "strategic holding pattern". In the end however, if adopting a wait-and-see strategy represents optimal policy, Abe's gift of golden clubs could in time be seen as less triumph of diplomacy than diplomacy in hope.

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