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Tokyo prepares for uncertainty as Trump takes office

Key takeaways

- As Donald Trump returns to the presidency, the Ishiba government is working to discern how his administration will impact Japan.
- The difficulty for Tokyo is that while the administration will include prominent China hawks – who would be expected to look to deepen cooperation with Japan – Trump himself has hinted that he could be open to dealmaking with China as part of a world divided into spheres of influence.
- In the near term, Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru is seeking to meet with the new president to build a partnership – and navigate potential obstacles to cooperation – but the bigger challenge will be determining how Trump's broader foreign policies affect the world order.

Donald Trump will take the oath of office on Monday, 20 January, and the Japanese government finds itself in an awkward situation. On the one hand, they see an administration that will be staffed at the highest levels with China hawks who believe that strategic competition with China should be the organizing principle of US foreign policy and recognize the value of the US-Japan alliance and other regional partnerships. On the other hand, they see an incoming president who has few commitments to internationalist norms and principles; who has threatened China with massive tariffs but also has expressed his admiration for Chinese President Xi Jinping; who intervened to rescue TikTok after previously pushing for its ban; and may already be preparing to visit China early in his administration. In his threats to raise tariffs on all trading partners – a critical threat to a rules-based trading system – and his saber-rattling against Greenland, Canada, and Panama – a threat to post-1945 norms against the use of force to change the territorial status quo – Tokyo sees a president that could undermine international institutions that, as Japan's national security strategy recognizes, have guaranteed its security and prosperity.

Given the range of potential outcomes, the Japanese government is preparing to take a more patient approach to the new US administration, a tacit recognition that its options for managing the second Trump administration are limited. For example, in contrast to some other US trading partners, Tokyo is unlikely to levy retaliatory tariffs in response to any tariffs announced in the early days of the new administration. Instead, the government will likely seek to avoid attracting attention from the president and will seek to leverage its relationships with friendly members of the administration and Congress to advance Japan's interests.

To this end, Foreign Minister Iwaya Takeshi will attend the inauguration ceremony and is also preparing to meet with Secretary of State-designate Marco Rubio, who is expected to be confirmed on Monday. He is also planning to join as Quad foreign ministers' meeting with Rubio and his Australian and Indian counterparts, who are also in the United States for the inauguration. Whether Iwaya will also meet with National Security Adviser Mike Waltz remains to be seen but contact with the White House will be particularly important for Iwaya as the Japanese government seeks to find an opportunity for Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru to visit the United States to meet with Trump. After failing to secure a meeting during the transition, Ishiba is seeking a meeting at the earliest possible opportunity after inauguration, but navigating Japan's political calendar – international travel for the prime minister can be difficult when the Diet is deliberating on the budget, though two public holidays in February (on 11 and 23 February) could be advantageous -- and the new president's schedule, particularly around the State of the Union address, has proven difficult.

The Ishiba government, beyond hoping that Ishiba and Trump can strike a rapport, will look to an early meeting as an opportunity to receive assurances from the president that he will uphold Article V of the US-Japan Security Treaty, including its applicability to the Japan-administered Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea; sound out his intentions on tariffs, trade balances, exchange rates, host-nation support, and other bilateral issues; and highlight opportunities for continuing Japanese engagement on energy, defense procurement, and foreign direct investment in the United States, the Ishiba government's consternation with outgoing President Joe Biden's decision on Nippon Steel's bid for US Steel notwithstanding. In the near term, the Ishiba government knows that there is no alternative to working with the United States.

The reports that Trump wants to visit China early in his administration, however, will put additional pressure on the Ishiba government, as the prime minister will want to be sure to meet Trump before he meets Xi, and will also spark discussion of whether Trump would stop in Japan before or after a visit to China, a failure to stop in Japan being taken as a sign that "Japan passing" – a reference to President Bill Clinton's skipping Japan when he visited China in 1998 – is back. What this suggests is that what will matter for Japan may be less the Trump administration's Japan policies than its broader foreign policies, which will influence the international order in which Tokyo has to operate. The upshot is that while the Ishiba government will work with the president and his team to safeguard Japan's interests, they are preparing to navigate a more fluid

international environment, which will lead to greater [outreach](#) to China, closer coordination with other G7 countries, and deeper ties with Australia, India, and Southeast Asian countries.

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