

4 From Trade Laggard to Trade Leader

Japan's Role in Countering the Backlash against Globalization

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4.1 Introduction

In recent years, the world has witnessed a significant backlash against globalization. This phenomenon has manifested domestically within specific countries in the form of populism and protectionism, and it has also manifested globally in the form of attacks against the institutions, rules, and norms of the liberal international economic order. Anti-globalization actors have gained influence in a number of countries, negatively framing issues such as trade and mobilizing opposition to pro-globalization policies (Walter 2021). Two notable signs of this backlash materialized in 2016 with the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump. As a result of these developments, the UK and the US ended up leading anti-globalization attacks on elements of the liberal international economic order, despite the fact that these countries had previously been essential to the establishment and maintenance of its institutions, norms, and rules.

However, Japan is a puzzling outlier: while it shares many characteristics with countries now experiencing waves of populism and protectionism, it has not followed the trajectory of the US and the UK. Indeed, although it was often criticized during the post-World War II period for its slow trade liberalization, Japan has made a striking transition from a laggard to a leader on trade issues in recent years. Why has Japan attempted to counter anti-globalization forces in the international system, and how has it sought to do so? This chapter addresses these questions through an examination of Japanese politics and foreign policy, with particular attention to the period after the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 until the end of the Trump administration in January 2021. It argues that due to a combination of external and internal factors, Japanese policymakers have recognized the importance of the liberal international economic order for their national interests, and importantly, Japanese leaders have had the flexibility to defend this order because their country has not experienced widespread domestic protectionism or anti-global populism. Consequently, Japan has attempted to bolster trade institutions, rules, and norms through a mix of five strategies: (1) direct persuasion; (2) signaling commitment; (3) acting as a US surrogate; (4) negotiating new trade agreements; and (5) supporting existing institutions.

The first part of this chapter briefly reviews the factors that led Japan to value the liberal economic order and enabled it to avoid a widespread domestic backlash against globalization. Externally, Japan has come to see its national welfare as strongly intertwined with the fate of the liberal international economic order, and the importance of regional and international institutions has increased over time due to the maturation of the Japanese domestic political economy and the rise of China. Internally, Japan's controlled trade liberalization process and strict immigration policies limited the number of losers from globalization, and political reforms also weakened the influence of domestic protectionist actors such as agricultural cooperatives. At the same time, other reforms strengthened the power of actors, such as the prime minister, who could take the lead on trade liberalization. Collectively, these external and internal factors have had an effect of increasing Japanese leaders' desire to pursue free trade agreements and creating a favorable domestic political environment for such action.

The second part of this chapter analyzes the strategies through which Japan has attempted to counter the backlash against globalization. Japanese leaders set these strategies into motion after the election of Donald Trump in November 2016, which threatened to disrupt the international trade environment. First, Japan attempted to employ direct persuasion to convince the Trump administration to rejoin the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Second, Japan ratified TPP to signal its commitment to the agreement, despite the low likelihood of US ratification. Third, Japan acted as a surrogate for the US in orchestrating the transformation of the original TPP into the new Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), helping to ensure that key clauses were kept on hold if the US decided to return to the agreement in the future. Fourth, Japan negotiated new bilateral and regional trade agreements to maintain momentum for trade liberalization. Fifth, Japan demonstrated its support for the norms and rules embodied in the WTO. Together, these elements constituted a multi-pronged Japanese effort to support and stabilize the liberal international economic order to counter the backlash against globalization. These actions reflect Japan's desire to protect the economic and political benefits it receives from this system.

This research sheds light on the ways that the globalization impacts domestic politics and how domestic politics, in turn, come to shape the policies of individual states toward the international system. In a dynamic system of domestic-global policy interaction, these factors are constantly evolving. The events of recent years have proven that support for international trade cannot be taken for granted, even from those states that shaped this system and have generally been considered to be status quo powers. Moreover, the backlash against globalization is not limited to the policies of specific leaders. After the end of Trump's time in office, for example, US trade policy changed relatively little under Biden, despite the latter's decision to abandon the rhetoric of "America first" in favor of a more collaborative approach that engages US allies and partners. This suggests that anti-globalization sentiment will continue to play an important role in shaping trade policy despite leadership transitions. Greater

attention must be paid to the ways that domestic and global processes interact to understand the complexities of policymaking and to design more robust trade policies in the future.

In addition, this research sheds insights on the potential for leadership by “middle powers” like Japan in the international system, as well as the limitations of this leadership. While the definition of middle powers has been much debated, in practice they are often discussed as states weaker than the great powers in the system but among the top 20–30 most powerful countries in the world, as measured by indicators such as position (e.g., size of GDP, population, or military budget), behavior, identity, and systemic impact (Carr 2014; Walton and Wilkins 2019). These states benefit from institutions, rules, and norms that create predictable patterns of behavior in international politics and that help constrain the actions of great powers. Thus, middle powers have an incentive to bolster such institutions when they are threatened, and unlike smaller states, middle powers have a significant capacity to respond to and potentially reshape their strategic environment. Particularly when great powers are unable or unwilling to take a leadership role, middle powers may have the ability to shift the regional or global order in one direction or another (Ikenberry 2016). At the same time, however, middle powers are typically constrained to specific types of strategies; they tend to pursue multilateral solutions to international problems, embrace compromise positions in international disputes, and use notions of good citizenship to guide their diplomacy (Cooper et al. 1993).

The analysis in this chapter demonstrates these behavioral characteristics in Japan’s response to the backlash against globalization and illustrates the opportunities and challenges for Japan’s middle power diplomacy. Japan could not reverse the backlash against globalization, and despite its efforts, Japan was unable to convince the US to return to the original TPP agreement. However, Japan made use of multilateral tools and compromise solutions in its strategies, building coalitions of like-minded countries, and crafting a revised CPTPP agreement that reflected a compromise between the original content of TPP and the new realities of US foreign policy. Japan’s actions during this period successfully signaled its commitment to free trade to other countries, which enabled it to garner support to bolster the international trade system. Therefore, in the absence of great power leadership on trade, Japan was able to play an outsized role in the maintenance of existing institutions and the protection of free trade norms.

4.2 Avoiding the Backlash

This chapter argues that a combination of external and internal factors has led Japan to possess both the motivation and the flexibility to take action to stabilize the international status quo and counter the backlash against globalization. The conditions enabling Japan to take these actions can be understood more formally by conceptualizing its trade policy as the result of a two-level game, where national leaders engage in simultaneous strategic interactions

within the domestic arena and in inter-state politics, and they must find policies that are mutually acceptable to both their domestic constituencies and their international counterparts (Putnam 1988). Within this two-level game, a “win-set” is the set of possible outcomes that are likely to be accepted by domestic interest groups whose approval is necessary for an international agreement to go forward. All things being equal, larger win-sets make agreements more likely. Essentially, at a time when many other countries’ win-sets have shrunk due to domestic anti-trade sentiment, Japanese policymakers’ win-set with respect to international trade policy has remained relatively large, granting them more agency to lead on these issues. Externally, the country has come to be deeply invested in the international order and wishes to maintain the benefits from its institutions, rules, and norms. Consequently, Japan has had both the motivation and the flexibility to attempt to stabilize and bolster the international trade regime.

4.2.1 External Motivations

In the outward-facing portion of a two-level game, national leaders engaging in inter-state politics develop their own preferences for action based on an assessment of the external strategic environment. This section discusses how Japanese policymakers’ decision to counter the backlash against globalization during the 2016–2021 period was shaped by the view that the stability of the liberal international economic order is essential to Japan’s economic well-being and, therefore, the foundation of its overall national security. This view has its roots in the early days of the post–World War II period, when Japan attempted to rehabilitate its reputation and reintegrate itself into the international community by seeking admission to institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). These institutions held important symbolic value for Japan and yielded concrete economic benefits (Govella 2021). In addition to the development assistance that Japan received from the World Bank, the GATT enabled Japan to gain the market access necessary to propel its export-led economic miracle, with its exports rapidly expanding to countries where Japan was granted full Most Favored Nation status (Davis and Wilf 2017; Noland 2000). With successive rounds of GATT negotiations, Japan’s benefits from tariff reductions continued to grow over decades.

Over time, Japanese leaders also came to see international trade institutions as a strategic tool with which they could push back against unwanted foreign and domestic pressure. While Japan reaped economic benefits from the market-opening measures taken by other countries and rose to become one of the world’s largest economies, other countries grew frustrated with their own lack of access to the Japanese domestic market and demanded that Japan accelerate its market liberalization. After the WTO was created in 1995, Japanese leaders actively embraced the institution as a way to deflect bilateral trade pressure, particularly from the US (Govella 2022). For example, in May 1995,

the US threatened to impose a 100% tariff worth nearly \$6 billion on imports of Japanese luxury cars if Japan did not voluntarily expand its imports of US autos and auto parts. In response, Japan filed a complaint against the US at the WTO, which eventually resulted in a settlement in Japan's favor. In this way, the creation of the WTO provided Japan – and other middle and smaller states – a way to push back against US pressure from a position of relative strength since they could refuse to negotiate with the US bilaterally. These countries were also able to use this international forum to marshal support from other sympathetic countries in a way that would have been impossible in a bilateral context (Pekkanen 2005). The broad-based multilateral negotiating framework also enabled countries to make tradeoffs between different sectors, which sometimes gave Japanese trade negotiators much-needed leverage against their own domestic protectionist interests (Davis 2003).

In addition, Japanese policymakers have come to see regional and international trade institutions as tools to help ensure the welfare of Japanese companies abroad at a time when their traditional domestic policy levers have become less effective. After World War II, the Japanese government was well known for its attempts to use industrial policy and administrative guidance to promote the success of strategic industries and shape the behavior of domestic firms (Johnson 1982). Though these attempts were often unsuccessful, industrial policy was considered by the government to be an important policy tool. Over time, however, once-strong links between the Japanese government and Japanese companies weakened, making it increasingly difficult for Japanese policymakers to use domestic policies and incentives to promote economic growth. Instead, the Japanese government has increasingly sought to shape regional trade rules and institutions in ways that are favorable to its own companies (Katada 2020). International trade also became more important to the Japanese economy during this time, with the country's trade-to-GDP ratio increasing from an average of 18.0% in the 1990s to an average of 33.5% in the 2010s (The World Bank 2022). These changes have further accentuated the belief of Japanese policymakers that the international and regional economic order is essential to their country's economic prosperity.

Over the last two decades, economic institutions have also become a way for Japan to respond to the rise of China. Japan and China have competed to set the rules and standards of trade in the region and to establish institutions that will help to shape its economic future (Solis 2020). Amid mounting concerns about unfair Chinese trade practices and the use of economic coercion by the Chinese government, Japanese policymakers have also emphasized economic security in new domestic economic policies while also attempting to build external coalitions among like-minded countries. For example, through bilateral agreements and minilateral arrangements such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), Japan has attempted to shape digital trade standards, to address security concerns related to critical and emerging technologies, and to strengthen supply chain resilience. Sino-Japanese economic competition is also complicated by concerns related to China's military buildup and increasing

assertiveness, which further motivates Japanese leaders to strengthen international rules and norms and to take steps to ensure that their country can maintain a prominent economic position in Asia and the world.

4.2.2 Internal Factors

The previous sub-section addressed how Japan came to be invested in the benefits provided by the liberal international economic order, but to understand why its leaders were able to act in order to preserve this order, it is necessary to examine the domestic portion of Japan's two-level game and relative absence of domestic anti-globalization sentiment. Domestic attitudes determine the size of a country's "win-set," the set of possible outcomes that are likely to be accepted by interest groups whose approval is necessary for an international agreement to go forward. All things being equal, larger win-sets make agreements more likely, while narrow win-sets can make agreements impossible to conclude (Putnam 1988). In countries such as the US and the UK, populism and protectionism narrowed leaders' win-sets dramatically to the extent that the US withdrew from TPP and the UK withdrew from the EU. These arrangements became politically non-viable due to domestic sentiment. In contrast, Japan's elites were comparatively free to pursue trade initiatives because Japan lacked an anti-global form of populism, widespread protectionist sentiment, or sufficiently powerful protectionist constituencies to block government action. These conditions resulted in a relatively large win-set that gave the Japanese government a wide range of possible negotiating outcomes to work with, thereby enabling the country to take a leadership role on international trade. This section discusses how Japanese leaders gained this maneuverability due to a combination of economic, political, and social factors that either weakened the opponents of globalization or undermined their emergence in the first place.

The pace and form of Japan's trade liberalization played a role in shaping its domestic attitudes toward free trade. For decades, Japan was constrained in its trade policies by its desire to shield sensitive sectors, and its win-set in trade negotiations was relatively small compared to that of other countries. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was able to pursue a combination of "pork and productivity" in its policies, simultaneously acting to promote its export-oriented industries through industrial policies while protecting important voting constituencies in agriculture and small business (Pempel 2010). This combination effectively meant that Japan's competitive, export-oriented sectors benefited from the opening of foreign markets, while less economically competitive portions of the Japanese population were shielded from the harshest effects of economic openness, such as displacement and unemployment (Lind 2018). There were opportunity costs to this approach, since Japan was not able to pursue trade agreements as aggressively as other countries and often incurred criticism for its slow and uneven liberalization. For example, Japan was famously unable to take the lead on regional trade liberalization through APEC in the late 1990s due to its reluctance to open

its sensitive agriculture and fisheries sectors, and Japan was slow to negotiate bilateral trade agreements in the 2000s.

Given this history, many observers were surprised when Japan officially joined the TPP negotiations in 2013, and the issue ignited serious debates within Japan. During the second Shinzo Abe administration (2012–2020), joining the TPP agreement became a core part of the “third arrow” of his administration’s flagship “Abenomics” policy. The government saw TPP as an opportunity for Japan to help write the rules of free trade in favorable ways, as well as to secure additional market access for its companies. Predictably, the decision to pursue TPP was supported by big businesses in Japan who expected to gain from the agreement, and it was opposed by sectors such as agriculture who expected to lose (George Mulgan 2015). The Central Union of Agriculture Cooperatives (JA-Zenchu) took the lead in trying to build an anti-TPP coalition by targeting groups of “uncertain losers” who felt that they might be negatively affected by the broad range of provisions included in the TPP (Naoi and Urata 2013). However, JA’s influence has waned over the decades as the agricultural sector has shrunk due to demographic change, and reforms have further weakened the power of JA (George Mulgan 2016; Solis 2017). Although JA cooperated on anti-TPP efforts with the Japan Medical Association, labor unions, consumers unions, and others, these groups were unable to form a large, unified protest movement that gained widespread support (Jamitzky 2015). Importantly, the general public in Japan was not strongly opposed to the TPP. Multiple opinion polls conducted in 2015 showed that just over half of respondents viewed the agreement to be a positive for Japan, with similar numbers reporting support for the final agreement (Harris 2015; Poushter 2015). These changes resulted in an expansion of Japanese policymakers’ win-set, which meant that the government had more latitude to negotiate in TPP and, once the agreement was signed in 2016, to defend TPP against subsequent international threats, as discussed in the next section of this chapter.

However, engagement in trade agreements has not led to the rise of anti-globalization populist sentiment within Japan. At the most basic level, populism can be understood as a political style that maximizes mobilization for electoral purposes in ways that extol the virtues of “the people” versus corrupt elites. In the US and Europe, populism has had an anti-globalization tone that is bundled with negative attitudes toward free trade and liberal immigration policies. In contrast, Japanese populism has taken on a very different form and has been characterized as “left populism” or “neoliberal populism” to distinguish it from its Western counterparts (Fahey et al. 2021; Klein 2020; Otake 2003; Yoshida 2020). Notable populist politicians in Japan such as Junichiro Koizumi, Toru Hashimoto, Yuriko Koike, and Yasuo Tanaka have promoted neoliberal reforms such as market deregulation, administrative reform, and limiting trade union autonomy, for example. This has been done to mobilize the votes of residents of Japan’s densely populated cities, who have been relatively neglected by long decades of rule by the LDP, which has often cultivated rural votes. Thus, in terms of trade or economic policy, Japanese populism has been relatively more

pro-globalization in nature, and it has not constrained the ability of the government to play a leadership role in trade policy.

Anti-immigration sentiment has also been relatively limited in Japan, which has granted Japan a relatively large win-set relative to other countries like the UK and the US where immigration has become controversial. The Japanese government has maintained much stricter limitations on immigration than many other developed countries, and expansions in policy have been pragmatically formulated to address labor shortages while limiting the ability of immigrants to stay in Japan permanently (Strausz 2019). Only about 2% of Japan's population today is non-Japanese. The Japanese population is wary about increasing immigration, but this wariness has not translated to widespread anti-immigrant hostility, nor is it common for politicians to turn to anti-immigrant platforms to gain votes. For example, a 2018 poll showed that 58% of Japanese respondents felt that their country should maintain about the same number of immigrants, with 23% favoring an increase and 13% favoring a decrease (Stokes and Devlin 2018). Many Japanese people recognize the necessity of immigration to deal with labor shortages caused by their country's aging society and express neutral or positive attitudes toward short-term foreign labor, but long-term immigration prompts more concerns (Davison and Peng 2021). Despite these reservations and the existence of periodic small-scale anti-immigration protests, however, widespread political mobilization around anti-immigration sentiment of the type seen in Europe and the US has not emerged as a major force that constrains the trade policy options of the Japanese government.

In addition to the relative lack of opposition to trade due to domestic protectionism or anti-immigration anxiety, the long-term stability of Japanese leadership under Abe from December 2012 to September 2020 also strengthened the government's ability to take strong action on the international stage. As Japan's longest-serving prime minister, Abe heavily emphasized the importance of trade to Japan's future and the potential for the TPP to reinvigorate the Japanese economy. Abe also benefited from a host of domestic institutional reforms that strengthened the power of the Japanese prime minister vis-à-vis bureaucrats, including the creation of a Cabinet Office (Takenaka 2019). These reforms further enabled him to exercise leadership on trade initiatives, as will be discussed in the next section of the chapter.

In summary, a strong, stable leadership combined with a relative lack of anti-trade sentiment stemming from job loss or anti-immigrant sentiment meant that Japanese policymakers were less constrained by public opinion. A relatively large domestic win-set gave Japanese leaders the ability to take actions to preserve the liberal international economic order when it was threatened in the mid-2010s. In the future, it is possible that Japan may experience a shrinking of its win-set due to increased domestic backlash against globalization, or due to weaker prime ministerial leadership, but in the window of time examined in this study from 2016 to 2021, the conditions were favorable for Japan to take an international leadership role on trade.

4.3 Countering the Backlash

As a result of the external and internal factors, discussed in the previous section, Japan had both the motivation and the flexibility to attempt to stabilize the international economic order when the institutions, rules, and norms of free trade were threatened by populism and protectionism. From Japan's perspective, the first major sign of the international backlash against globalization came in the form of the June 2016 Brexit referendum. News of the UK's decision to leave the EU alarmed Japanese companies and policymakers alike. Companies such as Toyota Motor and Hitachi with operations in the UK were deeply concerned, and many other Japanese companies expressed worries about the growing backlash against the free trade policies that enabled their global operations (Nikkei Asia 2016b). A June 2016 poll of presidents and chairmen of 123 major Japanese corporations found that nearly 88% of respondents thought that Brexit would harm their operations, with respondents citing concerns such as possible changes in regulations and tariffs, a worsened UK or European economy, and a stronger yen (Nikkei Asia 2016a). The decision also created a great deal of uncertainty about the future of trade negotiations between the UK and Japan.

Although many in Japan were already alarmed by Brexit, the election of Donald Trump brought an even greater sense of urgency to the anti-globalization phenomenon due to Japan's close relationship with the US and Trump's well-known opposition to multilateral trade agreements in general and to the TPP in particular. The TPP was heavily politicized during the 2016 US presidential campaign, making it impossible for the Obama administration to ratify the agreement. Trump's threat to withdraw from this agreement was particularly distressing to Japanese leaders who had expended a great deal of domestic political capital to negotiate and sign the agreement. The TPP represented an important opportunity for the US and Japan to write the rules of free trade in such a way as to institutionalize high standards of trade liberalization, including rules to cover behind-the-border issues such as intellectual property. It was also framed as a way for the US and Japan to counter rising Chinese influence; for example, former US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter claimed that TPP was as important to him as an aircraft carrier in terms of its impact on US policy in Asia (Carter 2015). Consequently, Trump's stated intention to withdraw from the agreement provoked deep concerns within Japan, which was further compounded by Trump's comments that Japan should shoulder a greater financial burden for its security alliance with the US. Given the importance of these matters, observers in Japan watched his presidential campaign closely, as well as the reactions of other American politicians and citizens to Trump's statements.

In response to these developments and subsequent actions taken after Trump's inauguration, Japan acted to stabilize the liberal international economic order through a mix of five strategies. First, Japanese leaders attempted to directly persuade the US to return to the TPP. Second, the Japanese government signaled its commitment to TPP by ratifying the agreement, despite knowing that the

agreement had little chance of moving forward without the US. Third, Japan acted as a surrogate for the US in CPTPP negotiations, revising the original TPP agreement in ways that would enable the return of the US at a later date. Fourth, the Japanese government set about negotiating other trade agreements, explicitly framing these agreements as part of an overarching strategy to bolster the international trade regime and counter anti-globalization backlash. Fifth, Japanese leaders demonstrated support for the WTO through public statements and by trying to build coalitions of countries to work on select issues of WTO reform. This section discusses each of these strategies in turn, and Table 4.1 provides a timeline of some of the relevant events.

Table 4.1 Selected Events in International Trade and US–Japan Relations (2016–2022)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
2016	Feb 4 The TPP agreement is signed
	June 23 The UK votes in a referendum to leave the EU
	Nov 8 Donald Trump is elected president of the US
	Nov 10 Japan's Lower House agrees to ratify the TPP
	Nov 17 Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visits president-elect Trump in New York
	Nov 19 Japan, Australia, and five other countries agree at the APEC to push the TPP forward without the US
	Nov 21 Trump releases a video outlining his plans, including withdrawing from the TPP
	Dec 9 Japan's Upper House agrees to ratify the TPP
2017	Jan 20 Trump succeeds Barack Obama as the US president
	Jan 23 Japan notifies New Zealand that it has completed domestic procedures for TPP ratification
	Jan 23 Trump signs a presidential memorandum to withdraw the US from the TPP
	Feb 10 Abe and Trump hold a bilateral summit meeting at the White House
	May 21 Remaining eleven countries agree to pursue the TPP without the US
	May 22 Japan and the WTO release a joint statement
	May 26 Abe and Trump hold a bilateral summit meeting in Italy
	July 6 Abe, Trump, and President Moon Jae-in hold a trilateral summit meeting in Germany
	Sept 21 Abe, Trump, and Moon hold a trilateral summit meeting in the US
	Nov 6 Abe and Trump hold a bilateral summit meeting in Japan
2018	Mar 8 The CPTPP agreement is signed
	Apr 17–18 Abe and Trump hold three bilateral summit meetings at Mar-a-Lago
	June 7 Abe and Trump meet at the White House
	July 6 Japan ratifies the CPTPP
	July 17 The Japan–EU Economic Partnership Agreement is signed
	Sept 26 Abe and Trump hold a bilateral summit meeting in the US
	Sept 28 Japan, the US, and the EU publish a joint statement on WTO reform

Table 4.1 Cont.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
	Nov 30 Abe and Trump hold a bilateral summit in Argentina
	Dec 30 The CPTPP enters into force
2019	Feb 19 The Japan–EU Economic Partnership Agreement enters into force
	Apr 15 Japan and the US begin bilateral trade negotiations
	Apr 22 Japan and Australia release a joint proposal for WTO appellate body reform
	Apr 26 Abe and Trump meet at the White House
	May 27 Abe and Trump hold a bilateral summit meeting in Japan
	Aug 25 Abe and Trump hold a bilateral summit meeting in France
	Sept 25 Abe and Trump hold a bilateral summit meeting in the US
	Oct 7 The US–Japan Trade Agreement and the Digital Trade Agreement are signed
	Dec 5 Japan’s Diet approves the US–Japan Trade Agreement and the Digital Trade Agreement
2020	Jan 1 The US–Japan Trade Agreement and the US–Japan Digital Trade Agreement enter into force
	Sept 16 Yoshihide Suga succeeds Abe as Japanese prime minister
	Oct 23 The Japan–UK Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement is signed
	Nov 15 Japan and fourteen other countries sign the RCEP
2021	Jan 1 The Japan–UK Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement enters into force
	Jan 20 Joseph Biden succeeds Trump as US president
	June 25 Japan ratifies the RCEP
	Sept 16 China formally applies to join the CPTPP
	Sept 29 Fumio Kishida succeeds Suga as Japanese prime minister
	Nov 17 US–Japan Partnership on Trade is launched
2022	Jan 1 The RCEP enters into force

Source: Compiled by the author from various news sources.

4.3.1 Attempts at Direct Persuasion

After Trump won the US presidential election, Japanese leaders immediately put their first strategy into motion: using direct persuasion to convince the Trump administration to return to the TPP. This strategy often played out through personal diplomacy between Abe and Trump. This began immediately after the election when Abe called Trump on November 10, 2016, to congratulate him on his victory and to arrange for an in-person meeting. Abe publicly discussed his plans to urge the US to move forward with the TPP, saying “I will seize every opportunity to urge the United States and other countries to complete domestic procedures promptly” (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2016b). On November 17, Abe traveled to New York, becoming the first foreign leader to visit then-president-elect Trump. They exchanged gifts, and Abe praised Trump for being an “attentive listener” (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2016a). Despite this positive

initial encounter with Abe, however, Trump released a video on November 21 outlining the actions he would take on his first day in office, including withdrawing from the TPP.

During the period after Trump's election and the early part of his presidency, the Japanese government believed that it had an opportunity to change the US position on TPP in time to prevent a collapse of the deal. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga referred to this idea in an interview, saying, "A TPP without the US would be incredibly difficult, but we do have a window until 2018, when the treaty needs to be ratified. We believe we still have an opportunity to convince the US about the importance of free trade" (Fujita 2017). In the immediate aftermath of the American election, Abe tried to make the case that US participation was essential to the future of the agreement, stating that TPP would be "meaningless without the US" and that there had been no discussions among TPP leaders about moving forward without the US (Takenaka 2016). Suga echoed Abe's remarks, saying that "the fundamental balance of advantages would collapse and renegotiating it the same way would be impossible" (Agencia EFE 2016). Even after Trump signed the executive order officially withdrawing from the TPP, Japanese government officials reiterated this idea that the TPP was meaningless without the US due to the benefits that would be lost. Tokyo continued to insist that it would try to persuade the Trump administration of the agreement's advantages. For example, on January 24, 2017, government spokesperson Koichi Hagiuda said, "Mr. Trump is aware of the importance of free and fair trade. We want to help him understand the strategic and economic merits of the TPP" (Agencia EFE 2017).

Throughout 2017 and 2018, Abe continually tried to persuade Trump to return to the TPP in many different meetings and phone calls. However, Trump repeatedly expressed displeasure at the trade deficit between the US and Japan, emphasizing sectors such as automobiles and agriculture, in his conversations with Abe (*Mainichi Shimbun* 2018). Trump pushed for the negotiation of a US–Japan bilateral trade agreement to resolve these issues; however, bilateral negotiations were considered by Abe and others to put Japan at a disadvantage. They were concerned that Japan would be forced to sign an unfavorable agreement due to intense US pressure; the situation had the potential to resemble negotiating conditions during the US–Japan trade war of the 1980s and early 1990s, prior to the creation of the WTO. Consequently, government officials pushed back by repeatedly emphasizing that Japan would not concede more than it had in the original TPP agreement in bilateral negotiations while simultaneously urging the US to return to the TPP fold.

The Abe administration was able to delay the onset of bilateral US–Japan trade negotiations for some time, again by making use of personal diplomacy. For example, amid these negotiations, Trump was invited for a four-day visit to Japan, becoming the first foreign leader to meet with its new emperor and partaking in a sumo tournament and golf, as well as being served double cheeseburgers made specially with American beef. Trump appeared to take Abe's viewpoint on the bilateral trade agreement into consideration, declaring that

the agreement would take place after the July 2019 Upper House election in Japan because this would allow Abe to avoid making controversial concessions that might harm his party's electoral prospects (Govella 2019). Negotiations between the US and Japan eventually concluded, and a bilateral agreement was signed despite Abe's attempts to forestall it, but this example illustrates how Japanese policymakers sought to persuade the US to return to the TPP not only to support desirable trade liberalization abroad but also to avoid an unfavorable bilateral negotiations format that would lead to unwanted domestic liberalization at home.

After the TPP was revised into the newly signed CPTPP in March 2018 (discussed further in Section 4.3.3), Abe's efforts turned to encouraging Trump to join the CPTPP and return to an approach of trade multilateralism. In May 2018, Abe expressed hope that the US would join the CPTPP, saying that Trump's stance had "changed a lot over the past year" and that Trump's "understanding [had] probably deepened" (*Nikkei Asia* 2018). Abe continued to try this strategy of direct persuasion with Trump during the remainder of his time in office. By June 2019, Trump and Abe had exchanged thirty-two direct phone calls with each other, the most between any world leader and Trump during this period (Aikawa 2019). However, while Abe's efforts may have averted harsher US bilateral trade pressure on Japan, he did not achieve the goal of changing the Trump administration's position on the agreement.

4.3.2 Signaling Commitment to the TPP

In addition to the continued use of direct persuasion, the Japanese government tried to signal its own steadfast commitment to the original TPP agreement by ratifying it domestically. Signaling has been discussed extensively in the scholarly literature on foreign policy; it can be defined as the intentional revealing of information to alter strategic interactions between actors (Gartzke et al. 2017). In the case of TPP, the agreement was set up in such a way that it would only take effect when it was ratified by at least six members that in combination accounted for at least 85% of the GDP of all signatories, which would mean that both Japan and the US had to ratify the deal for it to move forward. Consequently, if Japan ratified the agreement, its leaders knew that this action would serve as an important signal of its resolve – one that they hoped would influence the US to return to the TPP.

On November 10, 2016 – two days after the US election – the Lower House of the Japanese Diet approved a proposal to ratify the TPP. The Upper House started deliberations to ratify the TPP on November 11. Some Japanese politicians questioned why they were going forward with procedures despite the fact that it looked likely to fail due to US abandonment, but Abe pushed for the move, claiming that "Japan's approval of the TPP would contribute to blocking the spread of protectionism" (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2016b). Deliberations continued even after Trump's announcement that he planned to withdraw from the agreement on November 21, and on December 9, the Upper House

resolved to ratify the agreement. At the time, Abe told the Diet that it was important for Japan to “send a message about TPP’s strategic and economic significance of creating a fair economic grouping,” despite the doubts about its future implementation (*Japan Times* 2016). Abe also emphasized in public statements that it was time for Japan to take the place of the US in leading the drive toward free trade (*Asahi Shimbun* 2016).

On January 20, 2017, Japan notified New Zealand, the depositary of the agreement, that it had completed all domestic procedures for ratification. In its official statement, Japan noted that it was the first of the original signatories to ratify the agreement, stating that “this was another opportunity to demonstrate Japan’s resolve to achieve the entry into force of the TPP Agreement” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2017). New Zealand also ratified the agreement on May 11, 2017. However, the actions of Japan and New Zealand remained purely symbolic since they were unable to reach the 85% GDP threshold without ratification of the agreement by the US.

4.3.3 Acting as a US Surrogate in CPTPP Negotiations

As time went on, Japan’s initial position that the TPP was meaningless without the US began to shift to a stance that Japan would push the agreement forward even without US participation. During the course of this effort, Japan employed its third strategy: acting as a surrogate for the US in negotiations to ensure the survival of the agreement and to enable the return of the US at a later date. Despite their insistence that US participation in the TPP was essential, Japanese leaders started to lay the groundwork for this contingency immediately after Trump’s election. This chapter refers to Japan as a “surrogate” because its actions were aligned with those of many policymakers in the US who wished the TPP to succeed, but Japan was not acting at the request of the US as might be more typical of a “proxy” (Hughes and Tripodi 2009).

In November 2016, Japan, Australia, and five other TPP countries met on the sidelines of the APEC meeting in Peru and agreed that they would continue discussions on the TPP even if the US decided to withdraw. On the eve of US withdrawal in January 2017, it was announced that Abe would visit the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Australia and seek a leading role in securing their continued cooperation on the TPP (*Mainichi Shimbun* 2017b). Japan began to second calls from Australia and New Zealand to continue with the agreement. As it became clear that the US was unlikely to change its stance, Japan increasingly took on a leadership role in pushing the agreement forward and ensuring that it would be relatively easy for the US to return to the agreement if it chose to do so.

In May 2017, the eleven remaining TPP nations agreed to proceed without the US and to bring the deal into force expeditiously. At the time, Abe said,

Japan must now take a leadership role and move the discussions forward ... Since the US understands the importance of having free and fair

trade rules, ... by all means our strong wish is that the US will return to TPP.

(Chandran and Fujita 2017)

Japan, Australia, and New Zealand cooperated to try to accelerate the pace of TPP-11 discussions, and Japan helped to counter proposals by some countries – particularly Malaysia and Vietnam – to reopen discussions on specific parts of the agreement, which would threaten its forward momentum (*Mainichi Shimbun* 2017a). Japan also tried to prevent the other remaining TPP members from following the US example in demanding bilateral agreements, rejecting Canadian overtures about a Japan–Canada pact (*Nikkei Sokuho* 2017).

Importantly, Japan and Australia advocated for the “suspension” of twenty specific controversial clauses of the original agreement that had initially been pushed by the US and were no longer appealing without the lure of the US market. A number of these provisions were related to intellectual property rights, including matters dealing with patents and copyright term extension. The remaining eleven members might have just deleted these items entirely; however, the choice to suspend them was important to Japan because these clauses could be unsuspended if the US decided to return, without necessitating the renegotiation of the entire agreement. In this way, Japan helped push forward the agreement in the spirit originally intended by the US, even though the US was no longer willing or able to do so itself, with the explicit intention of enabling the US to return to the agreement in the future (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun* 2017). The eleven CPTPP countries agreed unanimously to suspend these provisions, with the understanding that the provisions can be unsuspended if all eleven countries decide to do so by consensus (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia 2019).

In addition to the suspension of these clauses, there was limited renegotiation of some items. Brunei’s concerns about coal production and Malaysia’s concerns about state-owned enterprise commitments were resolved through suspension of two additional clauses. Vietnam reached agreement on dispute resolution mechanisms related to labor commitments via side letters, and Canada also dealt with its concerns about cultural products, automotive standards, and rules of origin with side letters. With these changes in hand, the eleven countries reached an agreement on the revised CPTPP in January 2018. Japan initiated its domestic approval processes, with the Lower House concluding deliberations in May 2018 and the Upper House concluding in June 2018. On July 6, 2018, Japan officially became the second country after Mexico to ratify the CPTPP. The agreement entered into force on December 30, 2018.

4.3.4 Negotiating Other Trade Agreements

While shepherding the transformation of the TPP into CPTPP, Japan also set about negotiating other trade agreements, explicitly framing these agreements as part of an overarching strategy to bolster the international trade regime

and counter the backlash against globalization. In some cases, talks had been ongoing with partners for years about these agreements, but ongoing anti-globalization developments imbued negotiations with new urgency. In addition to abandoning the TPP, the US had also abandoned the US–EU Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). Furthermore, it had imposed tariffs on both Europe and Japan on grounds of national security, so many European countries shared Japan’s concerns about the impact of US actions on the international trade regime. In July 2018, the EU and Japan signed an agreement after eighteen rounds of talks that had begun in 2013. The deal entered into force in February 2019. At the time, Abe said the EU–Japan agreement was “a result of our leadership to maintain and develop the global free trade regime against the global trends of protectionism” (*MT Newswires* 2019). With its withdrawal from the EU pending, the UK also entered into trade talks with Japan, which helped to assuage concerns about Brexit’s impacts on Japanese firms with UK operations, and the two countries officially signed an economic partnership agreement on October 23, 2020. This was the UK’s first major independent trade deal, and the agreement also included a strong commitment from Japan to support the UK subsequently joining the CPTPP.

Japan also became one of the fifteen countries to sign the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement on November 15, 2020, after eight years of negotiations. The RCEP includes Japan, China, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Since the trade liberalization facilitated by the RCEP was less extensive than by the CPTPP, Japan attempted to increase the level of liberalization provisions in the agreement. Japan joined Australia in pushing for lower tariffs in the RCEP, but they met with limited success due to the preferences of the other countries such as China for protecting their industries (Shintaku et al. 2020). Regardless, the agreement still offered significant gains for participants and helped to build a framework for further regional trade integration. While Japan already had pre-existing agreements with some RCEP countries, it was Japan’s first trade agreement with China and South Korea. Some Japanese officials expressed hope that the signing of RCEP would create momentum for free trade initiatives and encourage the US to return to multilateralism rather than be left out of regional agreements (Horiuchi 2020).

In addition, Japan concluded a bilateral trade agreement and a digital trade agreement with the US, as mentioned in Section 4.3.1. Formal negotiations began in April 2019. This bilateral agreement was strongly pushed by the Trump administration, which was under pressure to help restore the Japanese market share lost by US companies to their competitors in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada due to the US withdrawal from the TPP. Japan entered into this process with more trepidation than in the case of other trade agreements because the US was clearly aiming to achieve greater concessions than Japan had made in the original TPP agreement despite repeated insistence by Japan that it could go no further. The Abe administration was able to delay the onset of negotiations for some time, making use of personal diplomacy. However, the bilateral

negotiations eventually proceeded and were concluded in October 2019. The resulting agreement focused heavily on agricultural concessions from Japan, though some US agricultural products still received less access than they would have had under the original TPP. Japan and the US also reached a separate agreement on digital trade that went beyond the original provisions in the TPP. Although there were plans for a second phase of bilateral trade talks, these did not materialize during the Trump administration.

4.3.5 Supporting the WTO

In addition to attempting to maintain progress toward trade liberalization by pursuing additional bilateral and minilateral agreements, Japan also demonstrated support for the beleaguered WTO in various ways during this period. At the broadest level, this support took the form of statements reaffirming the importance and centrality of the WTO. For example, due to “the increasing concerns about the rise of protectionism and inward-looking sentiment around the globe,” Japan and the WTO released a rare joint statement in May 2017, stressing the importance of the WTO, stating that protectionism was not a solution to economic growth and job creation. Abe told the WTO director general Azevedo that Japan intended to “contribute to the fair and free trade system and to the development of growth as the flag bearer of free trade” as “the WTO’s role is especially important when free trade stands at the crossroads” (*Japan Economic Newswire* 2017). Japan also made similar statements in conjunction with countries such as Canada. For example, in June 2018, Abe and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau agreed to work to maintain the multilateral system based on WTO rules (*Japan Economic Newswire* 2018).

In addition, Japan repeatedly referenced the importance of WTO compliance for its own actions and the actions of other countries. For example, in March 2017, the Japanese government insisted that any border tax the US government imposed on imports should not break the WTO rules. An advisor to Prime Minister Abe told the media, “Our position is WTO rules and multilateralism are important and we want to lobby for that” (*Tendernews* 2017). In May 2018, the US Commerce Department said that it would initiate a Section 232 investigation into whether vehicle imports threaten national security, to which the Japanese government responded by saying that “any trade measure should be consistent with the WTO agreement” (*Jiji Press Ticker Service* 2018b). When confronted with the possibility of retaliating against the US for its tariff measures, Japan emphasized that any actions it took would be WTO-compliant. For example, in March 2018, the Japanese government said that it would consider “necessary measures in the framework of the World Trade Organization” to respond to President Trump’s decision to impose new import tariffs on steel and aluminum (*International Business Times News* 2018).

While supporting the WTO through these rhetorical statements, Japanese leaders also recognized the problems with the existing WTO framework that had led to complaints about its ineffectiveness. Tokyo tried to find ways to build

coalitions of countries to work for productive reforms to the WTO on issues of common interest. In selected areas such as strengthening industrial subsidy rules, addressing non-market-oriented practices, and managing e-commerce data trading, Japan also found common ground to work with the US. For example, Japan joined with the US and EU in calling for reform to the WTO to address non-market-oriented policies and other unfair practices, with China in mind. In September 2018, Japan, the US, and the EU published a joint statement expressing “a common view on the need for the reform of the WTO” (*Jiji Press Ticker Service* 2018a). Abe also continued his personal diplomacy approach with regard to these efforts; in January 2019, he urged Trump to work with Japan and the WTO to help “facilitate changes” to make the WTO “more relevant” to account for the data-driven economy (Jones 2019).

A larger sticking point was the issue of the WTO’s appellate body, which the US had crippled by refusing to appoint new judges. In April 2019, Japan and Australia proposed language clarifying how the WTO appellate body should function, including the scope of rulings, the ninety-day deadline for reports, and the precedential value of reports – areas which the US had expressed concerns – and they promised to address other US complaints at a later date (*Inside US Trade’s Daily Report* 2019). After the appellate body ceased to function in December 2019, Japan called for the restoration of full functionality to the WTO appellate body, saying that this dispute settlement mechanism was one of the central pillars supporting the multilateral trading system (*Reuters* 2019). However, Japan did not join the Multiparty Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA) agreed to by the EU and twenty other countries as a way to bring appeals and solve trade disputes during the paralysis of the appellate body. The US had accused the MPIA of legitimizing the appellate body’s problematic policies, and Japan appeared to be trying to take a middle position, recognizing the need for a stop-gap solution but refusing to participate on the grounds that the MPIA did not serve the ultimate goal of finding a solution to the WTO dispute settlement system’s underlying issues (*Inside US Trade’s Daily Report* 2020; Panels Established to Review Indian Tech Tariffs, Colombian Duties on Fries 2020). In this way, the Japanese government appeared to be trying to find a compromise between supporting the WTO and avoiding American ire on the issue of the WTO appellate body.

4.4 Conclusion

Moments of turmoil and potential transition in the international system provide opportunities to analyze the reactions of states and their relationship to the existing order. Why and how has Japan sought to counter anti-globalization forces in the international system? This chapter has argued that a combination of external and internal factors has led Japan to possess both the motivation and flexibility to take action to stabilize the international status quo. Externally, the Japanese government perceives benefits from the liberal international economic order that it wishes to maintain, and internally, the country has not been highly

constrained by domestic anti-globalization sentiments. The chapter has also demonstrated that Japan has employed a mix of strategies to counter the backlash against globalization internationally, including direct persuasion, signaling commitment, acting as a US surrogate, negotiating new trade agreements, and supporting existing agreements and institutions.

More broadly, this chapter supports a growing body of literature that demonstrates Japan's desire to bolster existing liberal international order against changes caused by the rise of China or the spread of populism and protectionism (Tiberghien et al. 2020). This approach is consistent with the literature on middle powers, which have been found to pursue multilateral solutions to international problems, embrace compromise positions in international disputes, and use notions of good citizenship to guide their diplomacy. Embracing formal rules and institutions is one way to support the status quo against undesired change, as it ties the hands of countries of all sizes, large to small. While much attention in international relations has been focused on external threats to the existing order from revisionist powers or crises, the rejection of formal rules and institutions by influential status quo powers, such as the US and the UK, has posed a significant internal challenge to the system. This has left other countries such as Japan in a position of having to decide whether to try to save the system or take advantage of its weakness. Japan has acted in favor of the status quo, employing typical middle-power strategies of coalition building and multilateralism to bolster the international trade system in this time of chaos. In some cases, reform to the existing system may be necessary, but Japan's vision for such reform is clearly an incremental one that will take place largely within the bounds of existing norms, rules, and institutions.

Japan's approach to countering the backlash against globalization also demonstrates the potential boundaries of the effectiveness of middle-power diplomacy. In the end, Japan could not convince the US to return to the TPP or to join the revised CPTPP, nor could Japan reverse the backlash against globalization. However, assessing Japan's actions against these ambitious goals is likely unreasonable. Evaluating Japan's success depends on the counterfactual of what would have happened in the absence of Japanese action, and without Japan's attempts to bolster the international economic order, an even greater degree of instability or global backlash seems plausible. Japan made use of multilateral tools and compromise solutions in its strategies, building coalitions of like-minded countries, and helping to craft a revised CPTPP agreement that reflected a compromise between the original content of the TPP and the new realities of US foreign policy. In the absence of great power leadership on trade, Japan was able to play an outsized role in the maintenance of existing institutions and the protection of free trade norms.

However, Japan's leadership during this period does not mean that the country is a perfect model of trade liberalization, nor does it mean that Japan will continue to play this role in the future. Japan still maintains tariff and non-tariff barriers intended to protect segments of its domestic economy, as all countries do. It should be kept in mind that the Japanese government has

chosen to defend the international economic order because it sees this order as vital to its economic interests. In some cases, protecting existing arrangements is a way for Japan to deflect other countries' demands for it to engage in trade liberalization that is even more extensive than the status quo. For example, Tokyo's advocacy for the US to return to the TPP was partially motivated by fears that Japan would have to make even greater concessions to the US in a bilateral agreement; in this way, the TPP served as a hedge against unwanted liberalization at home for Japan. However, this does not negate the importance of Japan's trade leadership during this period; rather, it demonstrates how states may become invested in existing institutions if they are seen as essential to their national interests, even if those institutions necessitate domestic sacrifices.

This research sheds light on the ways that globalization impacts domestic politics and how domestic politics, in turn, comes to shape the policies of individual states toward the international system. Japan's specific combination of internal and external conditions during this period influenced its foreign policy approach in distinct ways that might not have been possible if some of these factors had been missing. If these factors change in the future, through the rise of anti-globalization sentiment in Japan or lack of stable political leadership, the Japanese government will likely face challenges in continuing to take this type of action.

Though the strong rhetoric of "America first" departed with the Trump administration, the broader pressures that have weakened support for the international trading system within the US and other countries persist. The US has remained unwilling to join the CPTPP or to pursue other market-access agreements under Biden. His administration has put forward a host of other economic policies on issues such as supply chains, technology, and trade facilitation, and it has agreed to collaborate with Japan bilaterally on such matters through the US–Japan Partnership on Trade and through the Indo–Pacific Economic Framework. Nonetheless, the notable absence of market access in these discussions means that the vacuum of leadership in the international trade system remains. The lack of support from the US for this system is also compounded by pressures from China and from other countries that would like to see major changes to its institutions.

As China applies to join the CPTPP and the US remains aloof from trade arrangements, Japanese leaders will continue to encounter external challenges in bolstering the international economic order while also having to balance their own changing domestic needs. However, it is important to understand the behavior of countries like Japan that have thus far avoided such a backlash and worked to support existing institutions to better understand broad issues of change and stability in the international system. Particularly during periods of competition and power transition between great powers, the actions of such countries may play a pivotal role in stabilizing – or destabilizing – the international order.

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