

Trump's Lavish Welcome for Japan's Prime Minister. US-Japan Security Treaty Directed against China

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US President Trump has gone out of his way to provide a gushing welcome to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who began a two-day state visit to the US yesterday with discussions between the two men and a joint press conference. While both leaders were effusive about the relationship between Japan and the US, the tensions and uncertainties remain.

Abe—the first world leader to meet Trump in November after his election win—was seeking reassurances over Japan's longstanding military alliance with the United States, as well over economic ties between the two countries. In the course of his election campaign, Trump questioned the US alliances with Japan and South Korea and accused both of unfair trade practices.

Yesterday, however, Trump hugged Abe, saying later that was “because we have a very, very good bond. Very, very good chemistry. I'll let you know if it changes but I don't think it will.” During Abe's visit, the two men are due to dine with each other four times, fly together on Air Force One and play a round of golf at the president's resort in South Florida.

At their press conference, Trump declared:

“The bonds between our two nations and the friendship between our two peoples is very, very deep. This administration is committed to bringing these ties even closer.”

A joint statement reaffirmed the US-Japan Security Treaty, including its coverage of the disputed Senkaku islets, known as Diaoyu in China, in the East China Sea. It declared that the two countries “oppose any unilateral action that seeks to undermine Japan's administration of these islands.” It added that the US was “fully committed to defending its homeland, forces, and allies, through the full range of U.S. military capabilities”—in other words, including nuclear weapons.

US Defence Secretary James Mattis visited South Korea and Japan last week to offer similar reassurances and to strengthen military ties with the two Asian countries.

The lavish praise for the Japanese prime minister and his sumptuous treatment will fool no-one, however, least of all Abe. Given that Trump has elevated “unpredictability” to a principle of foreign policy, a question mark remains over the US-Japan alliance and the threat continues of punitive US trade measures against Japan.

Trump has already dealt a significant blow to Japan by withdrawing from the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). This was also a blow to Abe personally. He had expressed great hopes that the TPP would revive the Japanese economy and pushed its ratification through the Japanese Diet.

Speaking in Washington, Abe defended that TPP and also took a shot at Trump's "America First" demagoguery about "unfair trade" and loss of American jobs. He told US business leaders that "a whopping majority" of the Japanese cars running on American roads were manufactured in the US. That included 70 percent of Toyotas, a company that Trump had singled out for criticism in the past. Abe said Japanese corporations provided more than 800,000 jobs in the United States.

Trump, however, has targeted Japan because of its huge trade surplus with the United States, second only to China last year. Having accused both Japan and China of currency manipulation, he declared yesterday that the currencies of all three countries would soon be on a level playing field. "That's the only way it's fair. That's the only way you can fairly compete in trade and other things," he said.

If Trump has pushed economic disputes with Japan into the background and reaffirmed the US-Japan Security Treaty, it is a tactical move aimed at strengthening Washington as it prepares to confront Beijing.

Just prior to Abe's arrival in Washington, Trump held a lengthy phone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping, which, according to the official White House readout, was "extremely cordial, and both leaders extended best wishes to the people of each other's countries."

In particular, Trump told Xi that he would "honour" the "One China" policy, which forms the bedrock of US-China relations and under which Washington recognises Beijing as the sole legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan.

Much has been made in media commentary of Trump's "concession" to China, but without a formal acknowledgement at least of the One China policy, the already strained relations between the two countries would have deteriorated rapidly.

Trump had already provoked an angry reaction from Beijing by taking a phone call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen following his election victory—the first between leaders of the two countries since 1979.

Speaking to Fox News in December, Trump openly declared: "I don't know why we have to be bound by a 'One China policy' unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade." Trump went on to identify areas where he expected China to make major concessions.

"I mean, look," he said, "we're being hurt very badly by China with devaluation; with taxing us heavy at the borders when we don't tax them; with building a massive fortress in the middle of the South China Sea, which they shouldn't be doing; and frankly, with not helping at all with North Korea."

Trump has not altered his attitude toward the One China policy, any more than he has changed his mind about demanding that Japan pay more for its military alliance with the

United States. As far as Trump is concerned, the One China policy, like the threat of trade war measures, is just a bargaining chip for extracting major concessions from the Beijing regime.

During his press conference with Abe, Trump absurdly declared: "I believe that will all work out very well for everybody, China, Japan, the United States and everybody in the region." In reality, the US president has set course for a confrontation with China, unless it makes one concession after another, all down the line.

Tensions between China and the US are already sharp as demonstrated by a close encounter on Wednesday between a US P-3C Orion military reconnaissance plane and a Chinese early-warning aircraft in the South China Sea. The Pentagon blamed China for what it branded the "unsafe" encounter.

Whether by accident or design, such incidents can become the trigger for a military clash and conflict. Trump's aggressive stance toward China, following on from the Obama administration's confrontational "pivot to Asia" and military build-up throughout the region, only heightens that danger.

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