

Japanese and Chinese leaders hold first meeting in Beijing

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping met for the first time on Monday on the sidelines of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Beijing. Xi had previously refused to meet with Abe since the two came to power in November and December 2012 respectively.

The meeting was a cold affair at the Great Hall of the People, lasting less than 30 minutes. The two exchanged a stiff handshake for the cameras before sitting down for talks. “I believe that not only our Asian neighbors but many other countries have long hoped that Japan and China hold talks,” Abe said after the meeting. “We finally lived up to their expectations and made a first step to improve our ties.”

Abe said he and Xi discussed setting up a hotline, supposedly to prevent clashes in the East China Sea over a cluster of five islands known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan and the Diaoyu Islands in China. Xi, in response, placed responsibility for the chilly relations squarely on Tokyo, calling on Japan to do more to “enhance mutual trust.”

A comment by China’s state-owned Xinhua news agency on Monday night was more explicit. “The onus is primarily on Abe,” it said. “It is Tokyo that cast the ice spell on China-Japan relations; it is also Tokyo that called for the Xi-Abe meeting. Now that Abe has talked the talk, he now needs to walk the walk.”

Earlier, it seemed that China had rejected the possibility of a summit between Abe and Xi. A Xinhua commentary on November 3 stated that while Xi would receive Abe, “that does not necessarily mean Abe’s long-sought formal talks with Xi during APEC would come true, which demands Abe extend good faith and take real action to create the proper atmosphere.”

China had demanded that Abe cease visiting the

notorious Yasukuni war shrine—seen as a glorification of Japan’s militarist past—and admit that a territorial dispute exists over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, something the Japanese government has refused to do. Abe has not publically indicated any change in his policies.

In the months leading up to the APEC meeting, Abe seemed to take a more conciliatory stance toward China. He avoided visits to Yasukuni, although ministers in his government went to the shrine in August and October. In December 2013, Abe became the first sitting prime minister to visit the shrine since Junichiro Koizumi in 2006. The shrine symbolically inters soldiers who died in Japanese wars, including 14 convicted, class-A war criminals from World War II.

The Chinese and South Korean governments have used the visits to the shrine to whip up anti-Japanese nationalism at home. In both countries many people still have first-hand memories of the crimes committed by Japanese imperialism during the 1930s and 1940s.

Abe’s meeting with Xi should in no way be interpreted as a sign of an easing of Tokyo’s agenda of reviving Japanese militarism. Behind the scenes, the Obama administration pushed for Abe to meet Xi because it feared that his confrontational stance toward Beijing was beginning to cut across Washington’s own interests in the region.

Tensions between China and Japan have flared over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands since November 2012, when Japan nationalized three of the islands. Aircraft and vessels from the two countries regularly confront each other in the area, risking the danger of conflict. According to the Japanese government, 110 Chinese ships entered waters around the islands in September, to which the Japanese coast guard has responded.

US Secretary of State John Kerry stated on Saturday,

before the APEC meeting: “Any steps that the two countries can take to improve the relationship and reduce tensions is helpful, not just to the two countries, but helpful to the region.”

The US in fact inflamed tensions by promising to defend Japan in any military conflict with China over the islands. Washington has strengthened military ties with other countries, including Japan, the Philippines and Australia, as part of its “pivot” to Asia, a strategy aimed at asserting US hegemony in the region and encircling and preparing for war against China.

At the same time, however, the Obama administration does not want to be drawn into a war with China on behalf of Japanese imperialism, in which the agenda would be set by Tokyo. While the Senkakus have been the touchstone in Tokyo for whipping up Japanese nationalism, the small, uninhabited, rocky outcrops in the East China Sea have no political or strategic significance for US imperialism.

Washington hoped that a conciliatory move by Abe in Beijing might also create a better environment in which the Japanese and South Korean governments can patch up their relationship in line with US interests. One point of friction is the disputed islands known as Dokdo in South Korea and Takeshima in Japan.

In a November 7 article, Ralph Cossa of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think-tank with close links to the US defence establishment, called on Abe to acknowledge that a dispute exists over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Cossa wrote: “As an added benefit, such a statement would provide additional reassurance that Japan will not use force against Dokdo. One would hope that Seoul would focus on the positive parts of this message and not the repeated sovereignty claim.”

Abe has signaled his readiness for a summit with South Korea’s Park Geun-hye, who has so far refused to meet him. Relations between the two key US allies in the region took a turn for the worse in 2012 when Lee Myung-bak became the first sitting South Korean president to visit the disputed Dokdo islets.

The animosity between Tokyo and Seoul is a concern for Washington, as it has prevented them from developing closer military ties in support of the US “pivot.” In 2012, the two governments were on the verge of signing a military intelligence sharing agreement at Washington’s encouragement. The deal

was derailed minutes before it was to be signed after opposition erupted to the Lee government’s attempt to push it through without informing the National Assembly, South Korea’s main legislative body.

After Park came to power in February 2013, she would not meet with Abe one-on-one. Obama was forced to hold a trilateral summit in March to bring the two leaders together. Obama’s selection of Mark Lippert as the new ambassador to South Korea is viewed as a means to pressure Seoul to align itself more closely with US military plans. Lippert is well connected to the Pentagon and was Obama’s chief strategist for East Asian affairs.



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