

Trump victory triggers uncertainty in Tokyo

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Within hours of Donald Trump's victory in the US, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reportedly became the fourth world leader to hold a teleconference with the president-elect. The pair agreed to meet on November 17 in New York.

The 20-minute phone call and hastily-arranged meeting provide some indication of the nervousness in Japanese ruling circles over the implications of the Trump presidency. In an editorial on Thursday, *Asahi Shimbun*, one of Japan's major daily newspapers, stated: "Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election amounts to a huge political earthquake that will shake the postwar world order to its core."

During the election campaign, Trump branded Japan a trade rival and "currency manipulator," threatened to withdraw US troops from Japan unless the country paid more for their presence, and suggested that Japan and South Korea should acquire nuclear weapons.

"Our allies are not paying their fair share," Trump said in a campaign speech in April. In the words of a *Japan Times* columnist, he accused both countries of "freeloading under nuclear umbrella provided by the US."

Trump also denounced the Obama administration's Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) pact, which is now dead in the water, thwarting Abe's plans to exploit the trade and investment bloc to boost Japan's stagnant economy.

In a statement, Abe spoke of Japan and the United States as "unshakeable allies." During their teleconference, he said he was convinced that "America will be made even greater" under Trump's leadership. In response, Trump praised Abe's economic policy achievements and said he wanted to work with Abe to "further strengthen the great partnership" between the two countries.

These initial conciliatory remarks cannot hide the heightened tensions between the two imperialist

powers, which fought each other for control of the Asia Pacific during World War II.

Abe may be anxious to avoid an abrupt breakdown of the military and geo-strategic alliance with the US, on which the Japanese elite has relied since the war. But Trump's aggressive "America first" policy is likely to intensify calls in Tokyo for the further re-militarisation of Japan, a process already instigated by Abe.

Abe's government had appeared to bank on a win by Hillary Clinton, with whom Abe maintained close ties. He last met her in New York during September while he was attending the United Nations General Assembly. Just before the US election, the government leaked to the media a report that Abe would meet Clinton, as president, in Washington during February.

By contrast, Abe's administration had little contact with the Trump camp. The only aide of Trump who visited Japan recently was ex-general Michael Flynn, who serves as Trump's military adviser.

Just before the US election, two Trump advisers gave some idea of the bellicose military posture that his government will pursue in Asia, particularly against China, despite suggestions that the billionaire will pursue an "isolationist" foreign policy.

In a November 7 *Foreign Policy* article they criticised President Barack Obama's "pivot" to Asia as "talking loudly but carrying a small stick." They said Trump would beef up the US Navy, and re-asserted it was "only fair" that Japan and South Korea pay more for US military protection.

"There is no question of Trump's commitment to America's Asian alliances as bedrocks of stability in the region," wrote University of California professor, Peter Navarro, and Alexander Gray, a former adviser to US politician Randy Forbes.

The article indicted the Obama administration for failing to halt China's maritime activities in the East and South China Seas, where Beijing has longstanding

territorial disputes with neighbouring countries, including Japan. It declared: “The mere initiation of the Trump naval program will reassure our allies that the United States remains committed in the long term to its traditional role as guarantor of the liberal order in Asia.”

The *Asahi Shimbun* reported that some Japanese politicians welcomed Trump’s proposition that Japan should arm itself with nuclear weapons. “Japan has long been steeped in lukewarm water provided by the United States,” a member of Abe’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) told the newspaper. “This is a good opportunity for Japan to shift to a path to defend itself (without relying on the United States).”

Since taking office in 2012, Abe’s right-wing LDP government has already boosted military spending, concentrated war powers in a US-style National Security Council and refashioned military planning to focus on conflict with China. Abe used the Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia, directed at combating China’s rising influence, as a means of pursuing this re-militarisation, which was also encouraged by Washington.

Japan’s new military legislation, which came into force in March, allows the country’s armed forces, under the guise of “collective self-defence,” to fully participate in wars abroad for the first time since the end of World War II. Abe’s government pushed the laws through parliament during 2015 despite some of the largest anti-war protests in Japanese history. This followed the reinterpretation of the postwar constitution by Abe’s cabinet in July 2014 to allow such joint military action.

In December 2015, the Japanese government also agreed to pay 946.5 billion yen (\$US9.19 billion) to fund US bases over the fiscal 2016-20 period. That figure was 13.3 billion yen more than the sum paid in the previous five-year period. A US Defense Department report in 2004 showed that Tokyo’s share in the overall expenses for US forces in Japan was 74.5 percent in 2002, compared to 32.6 percent for Germany and 40 percent for South Korea.

At present, the US bases in Japan, which house almost 50,000 military personnel, are closely integrated into Washington’s preparations for conflict with China. Together with Australia in the south, Japan is a critical linchpin in America’s military and geo-strategic

encirclement of China.

However, if that alignment were to be breached, including by Trump’s threats to pull out the military forces, then ultra-nationalist elements within Japan’s own establishment could raise their heads. This is a double-edged sword for Washington. As one *Asia Times* commentator stated: “In fact, the Abe administration is likely to welcome (quietly) an opportunity to shore up national defence in response to demands from the Trump administration.”

Economically, Trump’s protectionist policies—such as his threats of retaliatory tariffs against China and possibly other countries—are likely to hurt Japanese corporations. According to Finance Ministry statistics, Japan’s total exports to the US—its largest export market—stood at 15 trillion yen in fiscal 2015. These could all be endangered by protectionism, notably in the auto industry.

Trump’s killing off of the TPP is a particular blow to Japan. *Bloomberg* noted: “Trump’s win all but doomed the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, which could have boosted Japanese manufacturers. Abe was counting on the pact as a catalyst for long-promised structural reforms in protected sectors of the economy.”

The demise of the TPP also strikes at Washington’s authority in Japan and throughout the region, opening the door to China’s alternative proposal for an East Asian trade bloc, effectively under China’s sway. Ryo Sahashi, associate professor of international politics at Kanagawa University, warned: “If TPP does not happen, the US will lose credibility among its allies and partners in Asia.”



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