

Japanese prime minister meets President-elect Trump

Nick Beams**18 November 2016**

The election of Donald Trump as US president has produced something of a panic reaction in Japanese ruling circles, with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe organising a meeting with the president-elect in New York yesterday.

The meeting, held at Trump Tower in Manhattan, lasted 90 minutes, with virtually no details emerging because Abe said the talks were unofficial. He said the discussion was “candid” and was held in a “warm atmosphere,” describing Trump as a trustworthy leader, and stated that the two had agreed to meet again to hold “wider and deeper” discussions.

The tone of his remarks belied the deep concerns of the Abe government over the Trump victory. The haste with which the meeting was convened, on the initiative of Abe with a phone call to Trump the day after the election, was exemplified by the fact that one day before it was due to take place, basic logistics such as the time, place and who would be present, were described as being “up in the air.”

The major concern of the Japanese prime minister and the political establishment as a whole is that, in the words of the *Asahi Shimbun*, one of the country’s major daily newspapers, Trump’s victory “amounts to a huge political earthquake that will shake the post-war order to its core.”

The issues involve economic relations, the future of the Japan-US security pact, the cost of stationing US troops in Japan and whether the US will continue to back Japan in its conflicts with China over disputed territories in the East China Sea as well as ensuring that China is pushed back in the South China Sea.

Abe’s visit to New York was organised as part of his trip to the meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit meeting to be held in Lima, Peru, over the weekend where the scuttling of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) will be one of the key items on the agenda.

The TPP, which excluded China, was the economic

cornerstone of the Obama administration’s anti-China “pivot to Asia.” It is now dead in the water. Trump has said he will not go ahead with it after his inauguration on January 20 and Obama has scrapped earlier commitments to try to push it through a “lame duck” session of Congress before Trump takes power, leaving Japan and other TPP partners that signed on in the lurch.

At the urging of the Obama administration, Abe made a considerable commitment to the TPP, securing support for it this week in the lower house of the Japanese parliament against some internal opposition. But the strategy of his government has been ripped apart, creating opportunities for its chief regional rival, China.

Speaking to an Upper House committee on TPP ratification on Tuesday, Abe said attention could now shift to a China-backed free trade agreement that excludes the United States.

“There’s no doubt that there would be a pivot to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) if the TPP doesn’t go forward,” he said. “RCEP doesn’t include the United States, leaving China the economy with the largest gross domestic product.”

Japan is concerned that the failure of the TPP will lead other countries throughout the region to consider strengthening their economic ties with China. The number two Malaysian trade minister, Ong Ka Chuan, said the country would be looking to complete the RCEP after Trump’s election.

“Now with the situation of the TPP, the focus will be on RCEP. We hope RCEP’s conclusion will offset a lot of the negative impact of the TPP,” Ong said, expressing the hope that the deal could be rapidly concluded.

In the negotiations on the TPP, the Singapore government made several warnings that failure to secure the trade deal’s passage in the US would force the island trading nation to seek other options.

The Australian government, which together with Japan

forms the base of US alliances in the Asia-Pacific region, has indicated that with the failure of the TPP, it could also be looking elsewhere.

In an interview with the *Financial Times* this week, trade minister Steve Ciobo said Australia would support pushing ahead with a proposal for a Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) because any move that increased trade and economic growth was a “step in the right direction.”

The FTAAP, which has been under discussion within APEC since 2010, formally includes the US. However, given the opposition of the Trump administration to trade agreements, it is highly unlikely that the US would sign up. This means that China would play a leading role. In a comment published in the *Australian Financial Review*, Ciobo said Australia would work cooperatively with its partners on the RCEP.

Trade and economic relations are only part of the overall concerns of the Abe government and the Japanese ruling class. As part of the post-war settlement, Japan pursued its regional and global economic and strategic interests within the framework of the US alliance. In the recent period, the Abe government has been more assertively promoting Japan’s global and regional role, in particular in response to the economic and military rise of China, which it regards as the greatest threat to its interests.

But the whole framework, based on the US-Japan alliance, within which the Japanese ruling elite has conducted its economic and foreign policy, has been called into question by the Trump presidency.

During the election campaign, Trump at various times denounced Japan as a trade rival and demanded that Tokyo pay the entire cost of stationing US troops in the country—estimated to be more than \$5.7 billion per annum—on top of the expenses it already incurs of about \$6.6 billion. Trump said the bilateral security treaty was lopsided and warned that Japan should “pay us” or consider providing its own defences.

Much more than dollars are involved. In words that would have sparked concern in Japanese ruling circles, Trump told a rally in Des Moines in August: “You know we have a treaty with Japan, where if Japan is attacked, we have to use the full force and might of the United States? If we’re attacked, Japan doesn’t have to do anything. They can sit home and watch Sony television, OK?” he declared, insisting that the alliances had to be a “two-way street.”

The Abe administration, along with other governments

around the world, did not seriously entertain the prospect of a Trump victory. During a September visit to the US, Abe met with Clinton, the key promoter of the “pivot to Asia” as secretary of the state in the Obama administration, and not with Trump. This miscalculation prompted the frantic push for yesterday’s meeting.

Speaking to reporters as he was about to depart Tokyo, Abe said the US-Japan alliance was “the cornerstone of Japan’s diplomacy and security” and that “only when there is trust does an alliance come alive,” adding that he wanted to build that trust with Trump.

While the immediate issues in the US-Japan relationship differ in their particulars, there are resonances with the situation in the 1920s.

At the conclusion of World War I, Japan, which had aligned itself with Britain and the US against Germany, sought to advance its growing economic and strategic interests within a post-war framework increasingly marked by the rise of the US to economic and military pre-eminence. But this strategy broke apart with the Wall Street collapse of 1929, the turn of the US towards economic nationalism and protectionism and the collapse of world trade.

After a bitter struggle within the ruling political and military elites, Japan moved to advance its interests through military means, starting with the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and then the full-scale invasion of China in 1937 that led to the outbreak of war with the US in 1941.

Today, all the contradictions that led in an earlier period to heightened geo-political tensions and eventually war are re-emerging as Japan faces the prospect of a rift in its key strategic alliance, the rise of economic nationalism and the growth of a rival in the form of China.



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