

Japan and Australia strengthen ties ahead of Trump's inauguration

Peter Symonds
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Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull met with his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe on Saturday amid the uncertainty and tensions being generated throughout the region by the inauguration of Donald Trump as US president this week.

Both countries have been central to the Obama administration's aggressive "pivot to Asia" against China over the past five years. Trump and his incoming administration have already indicated their intention to step up the US confrontation with China—on the economic front through trade war measures and on the military front through an accelerated expansion of the US armed forces, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.

In doing so, however, Trump is cutting across the plans and interests of Washington's allies in Asia—Australia and Japan. Trump has already announced that on day one in office he will set in motion the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)—an economic bloc directed against China.

During their talks, Turnbull and Abe reaffirmed their support for the TPP, saying in a joint statement that it remained an indispensable priority because of the "significant economic and strategic benefits that it offers." Turnbull told the media: "We've confirmed our commitment to the rule of law, free trade, open markets in our region, the foundation on which our prosperity and that of billions of other people in the region depends."

The TPP was never about "free trade." It was fashioned by the Obama administration, with the backing of Japan and Australia, as the means for countering China's growing economic influence in Asia and globally. As Obama declared, it was to ensure that the US, not China, "writes the rules of the road for

trade in the 21st century."

In abandoning the TPP and pursuing aggressive "America First" trade measures, Trump threatens the economic interests not only of China but also of close allies such as Australia and Japan, both of which are heavily dependent on trade with China.

The stand by Turnbull and Abe in support of the TPP is a last ditch attempt to pressure Trump and salvage the agreement. Abe, who has already pushed the treaty's ratification through the Japanese parliament, previously declared that without the US, the TPP would be meaningless. After speaking to Abe, Turnbull has called for quick ratification of the agreement by the Australian parliament.

Both leaders reaffirmed their commitment to their respective military alliances with the United States, which "remain as relevant and important today as they have been for over six decades." Turnbull told their joint press conference: "We will work closely together with the coming administration, as we have been, to advance the region's interests and our shared goals."

Even before Trump assumes office, however, the two US allies are at cross-purposes with Washington over the TPP and other key issues. During his election campaign, Trump publicly suggested that he would withdraw from the US alliance with Japan unless Tokyo paid more toward the costs of American military bases.

Trump and his appointees have also signalled their intention to ramp up pressure on China across a range of issues, including Taiwan and the South China Sea. Turnbull has already publicly reaffirmed Australia's support for the One China policy, which Trump has declared he will retain only if China makes major concessions in other areas.

The One China policy—the recognition of Beijing as

the only legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan—has been central to diplomatic relations with China for all countries. Its abrogation by the US, particularly if it involved greater ties with Taiwan, would rapidly escalate tensions throughout the region.

Trump’s nominee as secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, last week provocatively suggested that the US could block China’s access to islets under Beijing’s control in the South China Sea—military actions that would constitute an act of war. He also suggested that the United States would look to its allies in the region for “back up.”

Canberra and Tokyo have both been reluctant to challenge China’s claims in the South China Sea by following the US navy in sending warships on so-called freedom of navigation operations close to Chinese-controlled islets. While neither government has commented on Tillerson’s remarks, their joint statement urging “all parties to exercise self-restraint and to avoid actions that would escalate tensions” could be read as directed not only at China, but also the incoming Trump administration.

The strengthening of strategic ties between Japan and Australia announced by the two prime ministers is no doubt regarded as a possible means for lessening their overwhelming dependence on the US as Trump threatens to destabilise the region. Turnbull declared Japan and Australia are “all weather friends,” saying the meeting had reinforced what was “truly a very special strategic partnership.”

Turnbull and Abe signed a revised pact to boost logistical cooperation between the Japanese and Australian militaries and signalled their intention to sign an agreement by the end of 2017 to allow enhanced joint training and operations. The revised Japan-Australia acquisition and cross-servicing agreement allows for the supply of arms and ammunition to each other’s military—a provision that was previously excluded.

The revision was made possible by legislation that Abe rammed through the Japanese parliament, in the face of huge protests, to allow for “collective self-defence”—that is, for Japan to participate in wars with strategic partners such as the US and Australia. The move was part of Abe’s ambition to weaken and end constitutional restrictions on the Japanese armed forces and remilitarise Japan.

Abe’s visit to Australia was part of a trip to South East Asia. Before arriving in Sydney, he visited the Philippines where he met with President Rodrigo Duterte, who during his six months in office has re-oriented Philippine foreign policy away from the US and toward China and Russia. Abe sought to use the opportunity to strengthen Japan’s ties with the Philippines, pledging to provide \$8.7 billion in business opportunities and investment, as well as \$5 million in boats and equipment for the Philippine coast guard.

After leaving Australia, Abe headed for Indonesia, then Vietnam, where he offered each country assistance and held discussions on “maritime security.” Both Indonesia and Vietnam have come into conflict with China over territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Since coming to power in 2012, Abe has travelled extensively, not only in Asia but internationally. While acting under the umbrella of the US-Japan alliance, he has sought to strengthen Japan’s own ties as a means of advancing its own economic and strategic interests.



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