

China, Japan take tentative steps to revive relations

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Senior Chinese official Yang Jiechi visited Japan from May 29 to 31, meeting with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and others, marking a tentative step toward reviving Sino-Japanese relations, which have been strained for years. As one of only five state councillors of the People's Republic of China, Yang is China's top foreign affairs official, ranking ahead of the foreign minister.

Yang's visit was preceded by the equally significant decision by an initially reluctant Japanese government to send a high-level delegation, headed by the secretary general of Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Toshihiro Nikai, to China's Belt and Road Forum (BRF), held on May 14–15. The BRF is part of China's ambitious One Belt, One Road (OBOR) project, designed to further enhance its global economic standing by linking China with the rest of Asia and Europe via massive infrastructure spending on roads, railways, ports and communications.

Nikai reportedly took a personal letter from Abe, addressed to Chinese President Xi Jinping, seeking to work closely with China on forcing North Korea to denuclearise and offering to cooperate with Beijing on the OBOR plans.

Relations between China and Japan have been cold to openly hostile ever since Abe came to power in December 2012. Abe further ramped up tensions around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands by insisting that the rocky outcrops in the East China Sea were Japanese territory and there would be no negotiations with China on their status. His government has also taken steps to remilitarise Japan, and leaders have visited the notorious Yasukuni Shrine to Japan's war dead, provoking protests by China and South Korea.

Yang's visit included a five-hour meeting with Japan's national security advisor Shotaro Yachi as part of the fourth round of the annual China-Japan political dialogue. In line with other US allies, Yachi told Yang that "Japan

and China need to work together to strongly urge North Korea to avoid further provocative actions and obey things like United Nations resolutions." A North Korean missile landed within Japan's exclusive economic zone in the Sea of Japan that morning.

Yang also spoke with Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida and held a 50-minute discussion with Abe. Both Abe and Kishida called on China to put more pressure on North Korea. Amid US military threats, Yang restated China's insistence on "a political resolution through peaceful means" to the standoff with North Korea.

According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Yang sought confirmation that "sensitive issues that bear impact on the political foundation of China-Japan relations, including Taiwan and the historical issues" would be properly handled. The reference is to efforts by the Abe government to whitewash the crimes of Japanese imperialism in the 1930s and 1940s, and to the One China policy that recognises Beijing as the sole legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan.

Significantly, however, both sides downplayed contentious issues. Just days earlier, Japan had authored a G7 summit communiqué that included references to China's unilateral actions and alleged militarisation in the East and South China Seas. Public statements during Yang's visit contained no such provocative rhetoric.

Instead, the focus was on bilateral economic cooperation, with China welcoming Japanese involvement in the OBOR project. Yang met representatives from the Japan Business Federation and the Japan-China Friendship Group on May 30.

In a television interview after the Belt and Road Forum, Abe suggested that Japan could participate in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, set up by China and in which Beijing holds the largest voting share. The US had pressured its allies not to take part in the bank. On June 5, Abe declared his intention to cooperate with China in the

OBOR scheme.

These moves by Japan take place in the wake of US President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)—a blow to Abe's plans for Japan's economic revival. Abe had to overcome opposition inside his ruling LDP to ratify the TTP, which is now in limbo. Facing a lower house election by the end of next year, Abe is casting around for other means to boost the stagnant Japanese economy.

The Abe government has sought to broaden its economic arrangements. While seeking participation in China's OBOR, Tokyo has no intention of accommodating to Chinese dominance of the Asia Pacific. It has also formed a partnership with India in the multi-billion dollar development of a proposed Asia-Africa Growth Corridor that involves infrastructure projects, especially along Africa's east coast.

In addition, Japan, along with the other remaining TPP members, met in Vietnam on May 21 to discuss reviving the TPP without the US. In a significant speech in Sydney, US Senator John McCain was critical of Trump and suggested that TPP members proceed with the bloc, saying Washington could re-join at some future point—hinting at Trump's removal.

While tentative, Japan's moves to improve relations with China are part of a broader pattern fuelled by the global uncertainty generated by Trump's "America First" nationalism. In the wake of the recent G7 and NATO summits, German Chancellor Angela Merkel publicly declared that Germany and Europe needed to pursue their own independent role.

Unlike Merkel, the Japanese government has not been openly critical of the Trump administration. But the steps by Japan and China toward a thaw in relations are another sign of the shifts in geopolitical relations and rivalries accelerated by Trump's election. Abe is due to take another step toward improved ties with China when he meets Chinese President Xi at the G20 summit in early July.



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