

Trump and Abe meet amid war and domestic crisis

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18 April 2018

US President Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe are holding their two-day summit this week at the Mar-a-Lago Club in Florida in the aftermath of the US-led airstrikes on Syria and amid sharpening geopolitical tensions globally, including throughout Asia. While both men have touted their good personal rapport, cracks in the relationship have been emerging over key issues, especially trade and North Korea.

Abe and Trump head deeply unpopular, right-wing regimes that are seeking to overcome their mounting economic and political crises by whipping up nationalism and militarism. The two longstanding military allies are united in their determination to contain and confront China, but are increasingly at odds over the means for doing so.

Trump's escalating threats of trade war against Beijing pose economic dangers for Japan which relies heavily on China as its number one trading partner and cheap labour platform. Moreover, Trump is targeting not only China for trade war measures, but also Japan and other countries that have surpluses with the US.

Abe is certain to press Trump for exemption from the latest US aluminium and steel tariffs that shocked Japan and other allies, particularly as they were imposed on the grounds of "national security." Trump, however, was openly menacing towards Japan, declaring that Abe has "a little smile." "And the smile is, 'I can't believe we've been able to take advantage of the United States for so long.' So those days are over," he said.

Trump cut across Abe's economic agenda from day one of his administration by repudiating the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), in which the Japanese prime minister had invested a great deal of political capital. The White House no doubt expected the TPP to collapse, but instead Japan refashioned the agreement

into a bloc in which, it, as the world's third largest economy, would play the central role. Now Trump has upset Abe's plans again by announcing that the US could re-enter the TPP.

As the Trump administration has ratcheted up its confrontation with North Korea, Abe has been the staunchest of allies backing the president's bellicose threats to "totally destroy" the Pyongyang regime and echoing his declaration that talks were a waste of time. Abe has exploited the so-called "North Korean threat" to advance his own ambitions to remilitarise Japan and remove all legal and constitutional constraints on the use of the military to prosecute the strategic and economic interests of Japanese imperialism.

Now Trump has blindsided Abe once again, announcing out of the blue in March that he would hold a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. As Abe arrived in the US, the media reported that direct talks with North Korea were proceeding at "extremely high levels." Sharp differences have already emerged over the purpose of any negotiations, with Trump's nominee as the new US secretary of state, CIA chief Mike Pompeo, suggesting in confirmation hearings that the US might accept a nuclear-armed North Korea without long-range missiles. Such a deal would leave Japan vulnerable to North Korea's medium-range missiles.

The potential for sharp disagreements at the Abe-Trump summit is compounded by the fact that both leaders are battling for their political lives. Trump is embroiled in bitter feuding with sections of the US political establishment and military-intelligence apparatus for his supposed failure to take an aggressive stance towards Russia, especially through a more forceful military intervention in Syria. He is also facing a rising tide of opposition from workers and youth,

exemplified by spreading strikes by teachers.

Abe is no less under siege over two scandals involving, in the first instance, government favours to ultra-nationalist associates involved in establishing a kindergarten, and a veterinary medicine faculty in the second. Last Saturday, 30,000 to 40,000 people gathered in central Tokyo, with smaller protests in other cities, to demand Abe's resignation. Abe's poll ratings are plunging. Former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, regarded by Abe as his mentor, declared this week that "the situation is getting dangerous" and suggested that Abe would have to quit in late June.

Regardless of the immediate outcome of the Abe-Trump summit, the fissures in US-Japanese relations will continue to fester, with the potential to lead to confrontation and conflict. The aggressive nationalism of both leaders is not simply a product of these individuals, but rather an expression of the deepening crisis of global capitalism that is fuelling the drive towards world war.

Confronted with its historic decline, US imperialism, having failed to secure its global hegemony through a quarter-century of wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, is preparing for conflict with any rival power that stands in its way. The Trump administration's National Defence Strategy of January 2018 spelled out the strategic shift, declaring that "inter-state strategic competition," not the "war on terror," was now the primary concern. While specifically naming China and Russia as the main "strategic competitors," by implication longstanding allies such as Japan could also be targeted.

Japan is confronted with a similar historic dilemma. Having been a technological powerhouse and the world's second largest economy for decades, Japan was shoved into third place by China in 2010. Its diplomatic, economic and military standing has continued to slide, triggering intense discussion in ruling circles over how best to prevent Japan's further decline. Abe's aggressive remilitarisation is the response of the ultra-nationalist wing of the ruling class that never accepted the country's defeat in World War II or responsibility for its war crimes, and has resented playing second fiddle to Washington in Asia.

The main focus of both the US and Japan, which will undoubtedly be reflected in the outcome of the Abe-Trump summit, is to contain and eventually subordinate

China to their imperialist interests. However, today's allies could in the not so distant future become bitter enemies. It is not forgotten in either Tokyo or Washington that the two countries fought a brutal war in the Pacific between 1941 and 1945 that killed millions over which power was going to dominate Asia.



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