Japanese PM visits China in bid to improve relations

Peter Symonds
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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe late last week made his first visit to China since taking office in December 2012. The trip, aimed at further thawing the frosty relations between the two countries, took place as both China and Japan are being affected by the Trump administration's trade war measures.

Abe took the first steps toward ending the standoff with China by suggesting, in June 2017, that Japan could provide conditional support for Chinese President Xi Jinping's massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aimed at linking East Asia with Europe and Africa.

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Japan in May, after years of bitter exchanges, particularly over the disputed rocky outcrops in the East China Sea known as the Senkakus in Japan and the Diaoyu islands in China. Li, however, barely referred to these divisive issues and stressed instead the value of economic cooperation between two countries.

Following Li's visit, Abe declared that he wanted "to lift the Japan-China relationship to a new stage" and described Li's trip as "an important first step toward a dramatic improvement." Abe reiterated that theme when he met Li and Xi in Beijing last week, saying: "From competition to coexistence, Japanese and Chinese bilateral relations have entered a new phase… With President Xi Jinping, I would like to carve out a new era for China and Japan."

Responding in kind, Xi said the two countries should move in a "new historic direction" and work together at a time of growing global "instability and uncertainties." Abe was welcomed with all the pomp of a state visit, including a 19-gun salute, an honour guard, the playing of the two national anthems, and a ceremony in the Great Hall of the People.

China faces aggressive moves by the Trump administration on all fronts—trade war measures, accusations of Chinese interference in American politics and US military provocations in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait.

Japan has been hit by US trade threats, both directly and indirectly through its exports to China, which is Japan's largest trading partner. Last financial year, Japan exported $137 billion worth of goods into Chinese markets—much of it semiconductors and other components that are incorporated into items sold in the US.

For China, hi-tech imports from Japan are vital as the US seeks to choke off access to such goods on the grounds of "national security." In the name of halting the alleged theft of American technical secrets, the Trump administration is seeking to undermine China's efforts to become a global leader in advanced technology. Abe and Li agreed to start talks about cooperation in state-of-the-art technology, while protecting intellectual property rights—a move that Washington will not welcome.

Abe brought 500 corporate executives as part of his entourage. According to Li, Chinese and Japanese companies signed deals worth $18 billion during the visit. At the same time, the two central banks signed a three-year credit swap agreement allowing them to exchange $30 billion worth of each others' currencies and helping to facilitate trade.

Abe and Xi announced 50 joint infrastructure projects, although these are not formally part of China's BRI. This is another move that will displease the US. Washington regards the BRI as undermining its efforts to isolate China and has been pressuring countries not to participate.

Other deals concluded during Abe's visit included cooperation between stock exchanges and a pledge by Japan to promote the Regional Comprehensive

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Economic Partnership led by China.

This warming of relations, however, remains tentative. While both sides played down long-festering disputes during Abe's visit, the potential for a sudden deterioration of relations remains. "Without stability in the East China Sea, there can be no true improvement in bilateral relations," Abe reportedly told his hosts. He sought assurances that China would stop sending vessels into waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, regarded by Japan as its territory.

Nevertheless, the first tentative steps were taken to defuse the dispute. Tokyo and Beijing signed an agreement to cooperate in maritime search and rescue operations. They also agreed to open a hotline to avoid accidental clashes at sea and in the air, and resume talks on the joint development of gas fields in the East China Sea.

Japan remains dependent on the US-Japan Security Treaty and is not about to take steps that would endanger it. As such, Tokyo is vulnerable to pressure from the Trump administration to distance itself from Beijing. President Donald Trump last year publicly suggested that Japan and South Korea had to pay more of the costs of US military bases, and could press the issue again.

While resting on the US military alliance, Abe has been remilitarising Japan—boosting the defence budget and removing legal restraints on the use of the military overseas. He also has pushed for a revision of the country's post-war constitution, under which Japan nominally renounces war and pledges never to maintain "war potential."

Beijing is deeply suspicious of Abe, a right-wing militarist who defends the war crimes of the Japanese military during the 1930s and 1940s in China and elsewhere in Asia. Abe's visit in 2013 to the notorious Yasukuni Shrine, a symbol of Japanese militarism that inters the remains of class A war criminals, marked a low point in relations with Beijing. China branded the visit "absolutely unacceptable.

During his trip to Japan in May, Premier Li pointedly pushed these fractious issues to one side and used the formula favoured in Tokyo that the two countries should "look to the future"—that is, not dwell on the past. Nonetheless, the bitter experiences of Japan's brutal invasion of China in the 1930s continues to colour relations between the two countries and form a core component of the Chinese nationalism that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) exploits to buttress its rule.

Moreover, like the US, Japan is deeply concerned that Chinese economic expansion is undermining its own ambitions to become the dominant power in Asia. The Japanese ruling class was shaken in 2010 when China overtook Japan as the world's second largest economy and has never reconciled itself to being eclipsed. Japan's remilitarisation is above all to ensure the ability of Japanese imperialism to aggressively prosecute its economic and strategic interests in Asia and internationally.

These underlying tensions continue to simmer and could rapidly erupt, ending the present moves toward economic cooperation.

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