

Former Japanese prime minister meets with Trump in New York

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Former US President Donald Trump recently met with the vice president of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Taro Aso in New York. The pair discussed the influence a new Trump administration would have on Japan should he win reelection as president this November. The meeting reflects concerns within the Japanese ruling class that Trump's unpredictable nature will, above all, negatively impact the war drive against China that Washington and Tokyo are currently conducting.

The pair met for approximately an hour on April 23 at Trump Tower in Manhattan. According to Trump's camp, the two discussed the "enduring importance of the US-Japan alliance to both countries' physical and economic security." This included potential future cooperation over China and North Korea as well as the overall situation in the Indo-Pacific region where Washington has been building a system of alliances in preparation for conflict with Beijing.

The meeting was part of the ongoing shadow diplomacy Trump has been conducting in recent weeks, given the unpopularity of the Biden administration and the potential for Trump to win reelection. Trump has also held discussions with officials from other countries, including United Kingdom Foreign Secretary David Cameron, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and Polish President Andrzej Duda.

Prior to their talks, Trump praised Aso, saying it was "a great honor to have him" while also hailing his own relationship with former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, whom he called "our dear friend." Abe, who was assassinated in July 2022, played a leading role in remilitarizing Japan while also being a far right-wing nationalist and anti-China hawk.

Trump reportedly asked Aso how current Prime Minister Fumio Kishida differs from Abe, to which Aso

explained that Kishida had increased military spending from what it had been under Abe as well as sped up the procurement of military weaponry, which met with Trump's approval. Under Kishida, Tokyo announced in December 2022 that it would carry out a de facto doubling of military spending over a five-year period.

Various figures within the Japanese government, including Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa, claimed that Aso's meeting with Trump was little more than "a personal activity" carried out by a member of the National Diet without Tokyo's involvement. Such statements cannot be taken at face value.

Aso is a significant figure in Japanese politics and no run-of-the-mill lawmaker. In addition to being the current vice president of the LDP, he is a former prime minister. He has also served in several cabinets, including as deputy prime minister and finance minister under Abe, with whom he shared his anti-China and far-right perspective.

Aso has carried out a number of provocative trips in the Indo-Pacific region as well. Last August, he met with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen in Taipei in a challenge to the One China policy, which states Taiwan is a part of China. Tokyo, which formally recognizes this policy by having no formal diplomatic relations with Taipei, has been at the forefront of US-led efforts to goad Beijing into a war over the island.

In addition, Aso gave a speech in Australia in November calling on Japan to be allowed into the anti-China AUKUS alliance, something which is now being realized following Kishida's trip to Washington earlier in April. Japan is set to join Pillar II of the alliance, which deals with military technology development.

The Japanese government is now seeking to gain an understanding of where Trump stands, given his tendency to eschew traditional alliances during his first

term in office. This includes talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in a bid to prise the country away from its alliance with China. The talks only took place after Trump threatened to militarily annihilate North Korea. Tokyo felt sidelined and is therefore concerned that Trump's return to the White House could upend the last few years of carefully prepared plans for war against China.

In an indication of how far advanced these are, during Kishida's recent summit with Biden in Washington, the two agreed to the most significant revision of the US-Japan military alliance since 1960. Japan and the US have also formed what are de facto trilateral military alliances with South Korea and the Philippines respectively.

The Japanese ruling class has also used the war drive and manufactured claims of Chinese "aggression" to justify remilitarization and the tearing up of Article 9 of Japan's constitution, which prohibits Japan from fielding a military. This has been done under the umbrella of the US alliance in the name of so-called "collective self-defense."

Kishida has sought to reassure the Japanese ruling class that nothing would change should Trump win reelection, stating recently, "There is a shared understanding among Democrats and Republicans alike of the importance of the Japan-US alliance, and the outcome of the election will not affect bilateral relations."

However, it is clear that Japan does not want to be left in the lurch. Wanting to ensure that its own imperialist ambitions in the region are met, separate from Washington's, Kishida has in recent months held out the possibility of a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Tokyo did not initially inform Washington of the behind-the-scenes talks with Pyongyang earlier this year.

Tokyo is also concerned that Trump could impose protectionist measures on Japan that would harm its already struggling economy. Shortly before his meeting with Aso, Trump railed against Biden for supposedly allowing the US dollar's value to grow at the expense of exports to countries like Japan. The value of Japan's yen is currently at a 34-year low against the US currency, or more than 155 yen to the dollar.

Trump wrote on his Truth Social account, "When I was President, I spent a good deal of time telling Japan

and China, in particular, you can't do that." He claimed that he had "put limits on both...and if they violated those limits, there was hell to pay." He added that this "is a disaster for our manufacturers and others" and that US businesses would be "unable to compete and will be forced to either lose lots of business" or move overseas.

Trump's return to the White House therefore would only exacerbate the current tensions and instability in the Indo-Pacific region, including among allies like Japan, which are no doubt making contingency plans behind the scenes.



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