

Canadian prime minister endorses Japanese position on South China Sea ahead of G7 summit

By Roger Jordan
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Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau travelled to Japan earlier this week for a bilateral meeting with his counterpart Shinzo Abe ahead of the G7 summit.

The main issue in Trudeau's meeting with Abe Tuesday was the reaffirmation of both countries' agreement on an anti-Chinese position in the conflicts in the South and East China seas. They also discussed improving trade relations, a major part of which is the implementation of the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement. The TPP is the economic arm of Washington's anti-China "pivot" to Asia, which is aimed at economically and militarily isolating and encircling Beijing.

At a joint press conference with Trudeau after their meeting, Abe stated, "As for the South China Sea, we share serious concerns over unilateral actions that raise tensions, such as large-scale reclamation, the building of facilities and militarization." He went on to declare that it was "significant" the two countries had "agreed to cooperate to secure rule-based, free, safe seas."

There could be no mistaking the fact that Abe's statements were explicitly aimed at China, which has been the target of a series of US-led provocations over recent months challenging its territorial claims in the South China Sea. Washington has flown nuclear-capable bombers through the region, making clear that it is fully prepared to wage war against China to defend its dominance in the Asia-Pacific.

Canada is fully integrated into this US strategy, which has included support for Japan's remilitarization. In 2013, the Conservative government signed a secret cooperation agreement with the US military for operations in the Asia-Pacific region. Canada is pushing for advanced bases to be established in South Korea and Singapore, which could be activated in a crisis.

The Trudeau government indicated its increased focus on the Asia-Pacific region by choosing the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit last November as the

occasion for the first meeting between President Obama and Trudeau. The Liberal government is determined to deepen its strategic partnership with Washington as part of its drive to project Canadian imperialist interests more aggressively around the globe.

Tokyo is a close US ally in the anti-Chinese drive. While it does not have territorial claims in the South China Sea, it has been involved in a long-running dispute with Beijing over the ownership of islets in the East China Sea. Moreover, Japan is increasingly concerned about the impact on large amounts of its seaborne trade that passes through the South China Sea.

The Liberal government is determined to develop its relations with Japan. A senior Canadian foreign ministry official described recent developments as a "new age in Japan-Canada relations," and noted that Abe and Trudeau have met three times since the Liberals came to power seven months ago.

The Canadian government firmly endorses the increasingly aggressive military role Japan is preparing to play in the region. At a meeting in Ottawa in February, foreign minister Stephane Dion issued a joint statement with his Japanese counterpart Fumio Kishida in which he declared that he "welcomed (Japan) playing a more proactive role in support of global peace, stability and prosperity...including legislation for peace and security."

The reference was to legislation forced through the Japanese parliament last year amid widespread public protest to enable the country's military to fight in military interventions abroad for the first time since World War II. Kishida was even more explicit at a joint press conference with Dion, stating that Japan "will be playing more of a proactive role based upon the enacted legislation. That is something welcomed by Canada."

Less than two months later, on April 9, Dion was in Japan for a G7 foreign ministers' meeting and met with Kishida on the sidelines to agree to establish a "two-plus-two"

conference between the Canadian and Japanese vice foreign ministers and defence ministers with a view to strengthening security cooperation. The first meeting reportedly took place in Tokyo April 19.

The Canadian media made much of Trudeau's avoidance of the South China Sea issue in his remarks Tuesday. Instead, the Liberal Prime Minister concentrated his comments on expanding trade relations between Canada and Japan. He pointed to the presence of international trade minister Chrystia Freeland and her discussions with Japanese business leaders.

Canada's desire to strengthen its economic position in the region, like that of the United States, is inseparable from the military build-up against China. A section of big business is keen to take advantage of Japan's need for reliable energy imports, particularly as the sea-lanes running through the South China Sea become less secure. At their meeting earlier this year, Dion and Kishida pledged to move forward on energy cooperation, with the main goal being the completion of a major liquefied natural gas facility in British Columbia which has been repeatedly held up due to regulatory procedures and opposition from First Nations. Japan is the world's largest importer of LNG, second largest importer of coal and third largest consumer of oil.

A dominant faction of Canada's ruling elite views the TPP as essential to maintaining the United States' hegemonic position, upon which Canadian imperialism has relied to realize its global interests since World War II. In an article published in March, *National Post* columnist Michael Den Tandt urged the Liberal government to be more explicit about its support for the TPP, writing, "At immediate issue is the furtherance of commerce between North America and the countries girdling the Pacific. The iceberg below the waterline is the survival of the post-war Pax Americana itself, on which global security and prosperity have rested for the past 70 years."

Den Tandt proceeded to draw the connection between the TPP and the American "pivot," which aimed to "check the rise of China and the resurgence of a territorially aggressive Russia."

However, with the emergence of Republican Donald Trump in the US presidential campaign and his embrace of nationalist and protectionist positions, together with Democrat Hillary Clinton's attempt to distance herself from the TPP, Den Tandt penned a piece entitled "Rise of Trumpism one reason why Japan should aim for bilateral trade pact with Canada" to coincide with Trudeau's Japan trip. "The Japanese are, for quite valid reasons, badly rattled at the moment," Den Tandt argued. "They're deeply worried about China's territorial ambitions and encroachments in the South and East China seas. And

they're petrified of renegade isolationist, xenophobe and presidential aspirant Donald Trump."

This also has serious implications for Canada. "How comfortable can we be with 75 per cent of exports U.S.-bound, as Trump surges, or of resting most hopes of future growth on Europe? Not very, I would argue," he wrote in his comment in March.

Den Tandt's latest piece cites the remarks of Derek Burney, a retired senior diplomat who served in Japan and as Progressive Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's Chief of Staff, who told a meeting of the Japan-Canada Chambers Council in March, "Now that the prospect of TPP ratification by the US Congress is shaky at best, I think it would be timely for Canada and Japan to re-ignite bilateral negotiations in order to salvage what has already been agreed between us. Just think, if Donald Trump, or even Hillary Clinton, becomes president in November, Japan may welcome a more certain foothold in Canada."

David Mulroney, who served in several high-profile diplomatic positions in Asia, including Canadian ambassador to China, also urged Ottawa to take a more prominent role in the region and made clear this would be bound up with a military presence. Noting the previous government's inconsistency, he called on Canada to intervene in the South China Sea conflict.

Employing the usual humanitarian rhetoric in which Canadian imperialism cloaks its interests, Mulroney advocated sending Royal Canadian Navy ships to the Western Pacific more frequently, "not for war-mongering or as part of an anti-China coalition but to wave the flag, provide humanitarian assistance and do some training."

On the other hand, the Canadian ruling elite does not want to antagonize China too openly. Although the United States accounts for over 70 percent of Canadian exports, China is its second largest trading partner. Strong voices have been raised within ruling circles about the desirability of a free trade deal with China, in particular to boost Chinese investment in Canada's tar sands companies. This was largely the reason behind Trudeau's reluctance to publicly state his government's position on the South China Sea Tuesday.

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