

Japanese PM weakened by Trump summit

By Peter Symonds
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Superficially, US President Donald Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had a warm and friendly exchange during their two-day summit at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida that ended on Thursday. However, nothing could disguise the underlying tensions that emerged on two key issues—North Korea and trade.

The importance of the talks, for Abe in particular, is underscored by the fact that both leaders are mired in political crisis at home. The Japanese prime minister arrived in the US as his poll ratings plunged and large protests in Tokyo and other cities called on him to resign. Trump is also under siege amid intense infighting in the US political establishment over the direction of foreign policy.

Publicly Trump and Abe expressed agreement on the US president's decision to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. However, Abe and his government were kept in the dark over the summit. Trump announced it out of the blue in March without consultation within his own administration, let alone with Tokyo. Trump effectively rubbed salt in the wound, choosing his meeting with Abe to reveal that CIA Director Mike Pompeo had made a secret trip to Pyongyang to meet Kim.

Amid acute geo-political tensions in Asia and globally, it is not possible to predict the outcome of a Trump-Kim summit, or even if it takes place. Trump senses the possibility that crippling sanctions and the threat of military strikes can be exploited to force North Korea not just to denuclearise, but to align itself more closely with Washington. If Kim refuses to bow to Trump's demands, the summit could be used to stage a provocation that becomes the pretext for war.

There are deep concerns in Tokyo that Japan is being sidelined by the United States and its interests will be ignored if a deal is struck with Pyongyang. Abe, who has been in power since 2012, has exploited the

supposed threat posed by North Korea to advance his agenda of remilitarisation, including his push to refashion the country's constitution to end its restrictions on the aggressive use of the Japanese military. A deal to denuclearise would undermine this campaign, which faces widespread opposition.

At the same time, Tokyo is worried that Trump might reach an agreement with Kim that stops short of complete denuclearisation—stopping the development of a nuclear missile that could reach the United States, but leaving North Korea with shorter-range missiles that could hit South Korea and Japan. In his congressional confirmation hearing last week, Pompeo hinted at such a possibility.

Trump made minor concessions to Abe, including offering to talk to Kim about returning Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea—a favourite issue of Abe's ultra-nationalist constituency. In a nod toward Japanese concerns, Trump, standing alongside Abe, also declared he would not attend the summit, "if I think that it's a meeting that is not going to be fruitful." Given Trump's unpredictability, such assurances mean little.

When it came to trade, Trump made clear that his threats of trade war were not just directed against China, but all economic rivals, including Japan. He refused to provide the exemption that Abe sought on hefty US tariffs on steel and aluminium. Instead, Trump called for a bilateral trade deal with Japan, and insisted that the US would return to the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) only if it were offered major concessions.

Abe told reporters: "I am aware that the US is interested in a bilateral deal. But we want to approach the discussions from the point of view that the TPP is best for both countries." Trump, however, flatly ruled out any return to the TPP unless Japan and other members offered "a deal we could not refuse."

The failure to gain any concessions from Trump is a significant, possibly fatal, political blow for Abe. He came to the US in the hope that the two-day meeting could revive his political standing in Japan and ward off challenges from his rivals. Having made close relations with Washington, especially Trump, central to his diplomacy, Abe is now facing further criticism in ruling circles.

An editorial in yesterday's *Asahi Shimbun* declared that the Abe-Trump summit "underscored the grim reality of diplomacy between the two countries... [as] Trump clearly remains willing to try to pressure even America's loyal friends into accepting his demands under his 'America First'." By focussing on Trump, the newspaper continued, Abe had failed to establish working relations with Chinese, South Korean and other regional leaders, and "undermined Japan's diplomatic clout in the region."

Just before Abe's departure for the US, former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, regarded by Abe as his mentor, suggested that Abe would have to resign in June and not seek re-election in September as leader of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Abe is already embroiled in two scandals over allegations that he provided government financial favours to close associates in setting up a veterinary faculty and an ultra-nationalist kindergarten.

Another scandal erupted this week with allegations of sexual harassment emerging against a senior finance ministry official—Administrative Vice Finance Minister Junichiro Fukuda. In a parallel to the scurrilous #MeToo campaign in the US and elsewhere, Fukuda was confronted with unsubstantiated accusations that he asked to touch the breasts of an unnamed female reporter. The allegations are not only aimed against Fukuda, but Finance Minister Taro Aso for failing to investigate the claims.

Abe's poll ratings hit record lows this week. A survey released last Sunday by the broadcaster Nippon TV showed his support was just 26.7 percent—the lowest figure since Abe took office in December 2012. An *Asahi Shimbun* poll on Monday put his support at 30 percent. On Saturday, protests in Tokyo and other cities, involving an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 people, branded Abe "a liar" and called for him to step down.

There is widespread public hostility to Abe and his government, not simply over the corruption scandals,

but more fundamentally his program of remilitarisation and responsibility for deteriorating living standards and growing social inequality. However, factions of the ruling elite, including within the LDP, are exploiting the scandals in an attempt to effect a change of leader.

A number of LDP figures, including Koizumi's son Shinjuro Koizumi, are being touted as possible contenders. The most likely replacement, however, is the militaristic ex-Defence Minister Shigeru Ishiba, who has criticised Abe for not going far enough in pushing for constitutional amendments.

Ishiba has advocated for Japan to have the "right to belligerence," that is to advance the interests of Japanese imperialism through military aggression, and also suggested that it might need to develop its own nuclear weapons.

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