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Tensions with China to escalate following Trump's visit to Japan

On Tuesday, US President Donald Trump concluded a four-day trip to Japan where he met with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. In their talks the pair continued to push ahead with their agenda for increased military and economic pressure on China, which includes the remilitarization of Japan and preparations for war.

Trump's visit was filled with flattery and spectacle from Abe, seemingly designed to play on the US president's vanity, a fact repeatedly referred to in the bourgeois media. Behind the pomp and ceremony, both Washington and Tokyo are seeking to offset their relative economic declines, including by trade war and military means.

At a joint press conference on Monday, Trump gave his explicit approval to Japanese remilitarization, saying: "The United States supports Japan's efforts to improve its defense capabilities, and in recent months, we have greatly expedited the sale of large amounts of defense equipment to Japan, made in the United States."



President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump, joined by the Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe and his wife, Akie Abe, Credit: Shealah Craighead

Trump confirmed Tokyo's purchase of 105 F-35 stealth fighter jets, saying it would give Japan the largest such fleet of any US ally. Additional purchases of weaponry this year include a variety of missiles, such as 160 air-to-air cruise missiles announced earlier this month, and the approved sale in January of two Aegis Ashore missile batteries.

Trump has made weapon sales to allies a major part of his campaign to increase US exports, boost the profits of American corporations, and further align recipients of the military hardware with Washington's war plans. Australia currently plans to purchase 70 F-35s, while South Korea has ordered 40 F-35s.

Chinese military commentators remarked that Japan's purchase would trigger an arms race in Asia. Song Zhongping, a military analyst in Hong Kong and former instructor in China's Artillery Corps, said the US arms sales would prompt China "to do the same by developing and deploying more of its own advanced stealth fighter jets in the region to counter the military presence of the US and its allies."

Zhou Chenming, an analyst in Beijing, commented: "This is bound to upset the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region, given the large quantity of warplanes ordered by Japan."

While accusing China of trying to upset "freedom of navigation" in the South and East China Seas, Washington and Tokyo are attempting to squeeze Beijing economically while boosting their combined militaries.

Trump has launched an economic war against China, levelling 25 percent tariffs on Chinese goods and demanding a trade deal that would dramatically open up China's economy to US influence and undermine its ability to compete in hi-tech goods, a step Beijing has been unable to accept.

Trump said during his press conference with Abe that a deal with Beijing was not close. He threatened China with additional tariffs, saying: "As far as China is concerned, they want to make a deal... We're not ready to make a deal. And we're taking in tens of billions of dollars of tariffs, and that number could go up very, very substantially, very easily."

Abe more directly threatened Beijing with the consolidation of an anti-China bloc. He said he and Trump "welcomed the steady progress of US-Japan cooperation, looking toward the creation of a free and open Indo-Pacific, including in areas such as energy, digital, and infrastructure." Abe added: "We will be promoting the idea forcefully. With countries concerned—like Australia, India, ASEAN, UK and France—we will fortify the cooperation toward the realization of a free and open Indo-Pacific."

To this end, Japan is in the process of refitting the JS *Kaga* and JS *Izumo*—its two "helicopter carriers"—to carry fixed-wing aircraft, specifically the newly-purchased F-35 fighters. These will become the first aircraft carriers in Japan's fleet since the end of World War II. Tokyo previously claimed that, as helicopter carriers, the ships did not violate the constitution's ban on "war potential."

With no serious opposition from Japan's other parliamentary parties, including the nominally liberal Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP), the government has been able to proceed with re-configuring the vessels for offensive purposes. In fact, construction of the first carrier began under the CDP's predecessor, the now-defunct Democratic Party of Japan.

Trump put his stamp of approval on this agenda Tuesday when he boarded the *Kaga* for a tour and address to US and Japanese troops. He became the first US president to tour a Japanese naval vessel and undoubtedly meant it to be a message to China.

Significantly, the *Izumo* completed separate naval drills with the US navy in the Malacca Strait and the Indian navy in the nearby Andaman Sea a few days before Trump's visit to Japan. Both locations are strategic points that could be used to choke off trade to China.

Whatever agreements exist between Washington and Tokyo, however, do not change the nature of the underlying conflicts between the two imperialist powers. As well as China,

Trump is also threatening trade war measures against Japan. Earlier this month, the US administration delayed a threatened 25 percent tariff on Japanese automobiles for 180 days. Nevertheless, Trump complained on his first day in Japan that the latter had a “substantial advantage” on trade.

Trump and Abe also differed over North Korea. When the US president was asked if he was upset over Pyongyang’s short-range missile tests in early May, he responded: “No, I’m not. I am personally not.” He added, contradicting Abe, that he felt the tests did not violate United Nations Security Council resolutions. While short-range missiles do not pose a threat to the US mainland, they do potentially menace Japan.

The strategic and economic interests of Washington and Tokyo are diverging, even if they just appear as cracks at the moment. This is part of the reason behind the Abe government’s emphasis on remilitarization. As trade and geopolitical considerations drive the two imperialist powers apart, the potential for conflict between these two powers will also grow, as it did in the lead-up to World War II. Guns pointed at China today could easily be pointed at each other in the future.

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