

Japan-US (News Focus)

FOCUS: With Trump, Japan could pivot away from U.S.-centric policy

By Junko Horiuchi

NEW YORK, Nov. 18 Kyodo - Prime Minister Shinzo Abe became the first foreign leader to meet face-to-face with U.S. President-elect Donald Trump on Thursday and took the opportunity to share his "basic views" amid uncertainty over the incoming leader's commitment to the Asia-Pacific region.

Despite the talks' atmosphere described by Abe as "very warm," Japan may need to consider diverting energy into pursuing more self-reliant diplomacy when working with Trump, a billionaire businessman who it is presumed will handle foreign policy with his "America First" rhetoric driving decision-making, analysts say.

The meeting was hastily fixed, agreed in telephone talks on Nov. 10 shortly after Trump's election victory, and was cautiously watched by policymakers around the world who are concerned about Trump's campaign remarks about U.S. military presence overseas and trade policies.

After the talks held in Trump Tower, Abe did not reveal details of the unofficial meeting but said he is "convinced" that he can "establish a relationship of trust" with Trump that is essential for the Japan-U.S. alliance to function.

"Mr. Trump would say reassuring things about the importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance, but what he would do as president about Japan, about China, about many other things, is unknown," Gerald Curtis, Burgess Professor of Political Science at Columbia University said in a recent symposium.

During his presidential campaign, he has threatened to pull U.S. troops out of Japan and other U.S.-allied countries unless they pay more for military protection.

Trump has emphasized that the U.S.-Japan security relationship is not a fair deal because the United States is obliged to defend Japan while Japan is not obligated to defend U.S. territory.

"The countries we are defending must pay for the cost of this defense. And if not, the U.S. must be prepared to let these countries defend themselves," Trump said in April.

Japan, suspecting Trump may be misunderstanding the cost borne by Tokyo in hosting the U.S. forces, totaling some 49,000 troops, is set to assert an "appropriate" sharing of costs between the two countries. Japan pays nearly 200 billion yen (\$1.9 billion) on so-called host-nation support every year.

Tokyo will be steadfast in explaining to Trump that the United States also benefits from stationing troops in Japan, Japanese officials said.

"If he is a man who thinks with a profit-and-loss motivation, I think he will understand the benefits of U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific region" such as keeping the military near China and North Korea under the forward deployment strategy, a senior Japanese official said earlier.

Takashi Kawakami, a professor at Takushoku University, said, "Mr. Trump's basic, businesslike thinking would not change (even after becoming the president). He will likely see foreign policy as something to bargain for."

"Japan would need to show what it can do for the interests of the United States and convince Mr. Trump that it is willing to defend itself and not rely on U.S. protection. Only then can Japan be seen by Mr. Trump as a partner he can make a deal with," Kawakami said.

In an attempt to strengthen national security, Japan had already begun to take steps even before Trump was confirmed as the president-elect, analysts said.

Japan's new security legislation came into force in March, giving the Self-Defense Forces an expanded role. It ended the ban on exercising the right to collective self-defense, or defending allies under armed attack, even if Japan itself is not attacked.

Japan has also resumed talks with South Korea on the signing of a pact to exchange military intelligence to strengthen security ties and better cope with threats posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile development.

Elsewhere, the country has also bolstered ties in the area of maritime security with Australia, India, the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries amid the rising clout of China in the region.

Tokyo also seeks closer ties with Moscow, with Abe set to hold his third talks this year with Russian President Vladimir Putin later this week in Peru on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit.

That will precede Putin's official visit to Japan in December to discuss economic cooperation and a territorial spat over disputed islands north of Japan.

As for the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact which Trump opposes, Abe has warned that rejecting the free trade deal could push Asian countries to a different trade pact known as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which includes China and is currently under negotiation.

Japanese Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Hiroshige Seko, who chaired the meeting of TPP members in Lima on Thursday, said while the TPP is an important pact to counter protectionism, talks to conclude the RCEP need to be accelerated.

The RCEP groups the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations plus Japan, China, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand.

"What Mr. Abe is doing now, engaging in strengthening ties with countries, including U.S.-allied countries such as South Korea and the Philippines, is important," Kawakami said. "Japan forging closer ties with Russia also helps elevate Mr. Abe's bargaining power vis-a-vis Mr. Trump," he said.

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