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What Trump Gained in Japan?

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U.S. President Donald Trump undertook his Asian tour of five countries namely; Japan, South Korea, China, Vietnam, and the Philippines that was commenced on 5 November and will end on 14 November. He will also attend the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) moot and East Asian Summit (EAS) of the Association of the South Asian Association (ASEAN) that will be held at Da Nang in Vietnam on 10 November.

Trump's tour is the longest taken by an American president in more than a quarter century. There are a number of thorny issues of bilateral concerns between the United States and these countries as well as many regional chaotic issues on the top of which is the North Korean mess up of nuclear and missiles built up. The United States needs the support of China to handle the North Korean worries.

Trump called Japan a “warrior nation” just ahead of embarking on the Asian tour – a message given to North Korea. The post-war Japan, however, is a peace-loving nation. At Hawaii, Trump laid a wreath in honor of the Pearl Harbor’s victims who were attacked by the imperial Japanese forces on 7 December 1941 before taking the East Asian tour. Trump left the impression on Japan that America has not forgotten the Japanese attack in spite of lofty developments between the two nations. It was Japanese Prime Minister who made a tactical move to mend fences with Trump and met with him when he was just elected.

Abe built rapport with him when he visited New York and Florida. Abe needs the United States’ support against the North Korean threat and Trump needs Japan as strong U.S. ally in the Asia-Pacific. The visit will just re-kindled ties between the two countries.

Japan will also seek American support in the South Pacific against what it called the rising Chinese militarisation and particular for Senkaku Island, known as Diaoyu in China. China is modernising its PLA’s navy to face new challenges posed by new strategic developments in the South China Sea.

Trump arrived in Japan on 5 November and departed on 7 November. He held a summit meeting with Abe on 6 November but just upon his arrival addressed the American troops at Yokota Air Base at the outskirts of Tokyo. He also met with Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo before the formal summit with Abe.

Trump called Japan as a crucial ally at the Yokota Air Base while addressing American troops. Trump also met with some of the relatives of the Japanese abductees who were abducted by North Korea in the 1970s. The matter is not fully resolved between Tokyo and Pyongyang. One has to see how the involvement of the United States would dissolve the abductees’ issue. Trump and Abe are also trying to align their thinking on the free and open Indo-Pacific region in which they are also assigning a greater role to the Indian Navy.

A sticking point in the United States relations with Japan is the issue of trade. Trump withdrew from the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) in January and Japan is still in lurch as how to fill the vacuum. Trump wants better trade deal with Japan. He does not think that the trade between the two countries is free, open, and reciprocal. The US-Japan bilateral trade stood around US\$ 270.7 in 2016. The United States exports were US\$ 107.9 billion while its imports from Japan accounted for US\$ 162 billion, making the trade deficit US\$ 54.9 billion.

The main trade issue Trump has raised in Japan was autos manufacturing. He asked Japanese businessmen to manufacture cars in America rather than to ship them from Japan. Mazda and Toyota are investing US\$ 1.6 billion to create new jobs in the United States. The Japan Automobiles Manufacturers Associations (JAMA) says that around 75 percent cars that are sold in North America are built there by Toyota, Honda, Nissan and Mitsubishi, and these companies built 3.9 million vehicles in the U.S. in 2015, according to JAMA. The organization said that, as of 2015, Japanese automakers operated at least 26 manufacturing plants and 36 research and development facilities in the U.S. Japan buys American military hardware to balance its trade with the United States.

In tackling North Korean crisis, Trump has won Abe's hawkish approach but remained unable in getting the same from President Moon Jae-in whose approaches differently in tackling the North Korean spade. Trump even opted for a unilateral military action. Moon goes for engagement and a negotiated settlement. Trump may be upset with Moon but fully coordinates with Abe.

Trump made it undeniably clear that the United States stands behind Japan under its treaty obligations if attacked by North Korea. Much is not expected to come out of the Trump-Abe discussions on North Korea and bilateral trade deal between the United States and Japan. The reinforcement of ties and strategic partnership will be a major outcome of this visit.

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