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5 on 45:

On Trump's meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network: analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

SOLÍS: I am Mireya Solís, Knight Chair in Japan Studies and senior fellow in the Center for East Asia Policy Studies. The Prime Minister of Japan visited on February 10th and 11th. This is his first visit since the inauguration of President Donald Trump, and this was a big deal for both countries. First of all, from the point of view of President Trump, I think that it was very important to have a successful meeting with a foreign leader. We all know that his previous interactions over the phone with some foreign leaders like Mexico, Australia and Germany had not received stellar reviews, and therefore, I think there was this sense that it was important to make this summit work.

And from the point of view from Prime Minister Abe, this was also a very very important meeting, I think that Japan wanted to get reassurances on the basic parameters of the US-Japan relationship. We all know that during the presidential campaign, Mr. Trump had said things that created concern in Japan. He had been somewhat dismissive of alliances, had complained about Japan's level of support for American troops, and more recently, after the election and after being inaugurated, he had also complained about some economic issues, the value of the yen and also he had criticized Toyota, for example, for a decision to open a plant in Mexico and had threatened to impose border taxes for that. So I think it was very important for Japan to get reassurances that, both in security and economics, the basic parameters of the bilateral relationship were sound.

Now I think that when you look at the two days of meetings, there were three main dimensions to this event. One, I think, one very important dynamic, was about creating personal rapport among the two leaders, and I think that explains why the second day was allocated to an outing to Florida for golf, and I think the idea was that it's important to have unstructured time to develop that personal bond. And, you know, the optics of it from the beginning were that there was indeed a strong interest for both leaders to have these personal connections. People remark on that very long handshake and I think that people are also talking about the birth of a bromance. Why is this important? Because I think that there is past precedent in U.S.-Japan relations that when there is good chemistry, good personal connection, things can work more smoothly. We have, you know, famous examples, Koizumi and Bush, Nakasone and Reagan, as examples of how these bilateral dynamics can work to good effect.

Then the second dimension I think has to do with security, and I think that the joint statement is very important here. It touched on all the important points, it struck the right tone on everything. The work had started previously the week before when Defense minister Mattis was in Tokyo and he began to give these very important reassurances, but the Japanese side clearly wanted to hear very directly from President Trump. So, language regarding how "unshakeable" the U.S.-Japan alliance is, that the United States is committed to the defense of Japan, that the Senkaku islands are covered by Article V of the defense pact between both countries, those were very important reassurances that were conveyed to Japan.

Now, the third dimension of these meetings, and that is going to be the most interesting going forward, is on the economic agenda, because you can imagine that

there was some level of awkwardness, if you will, because President Trump—one of his first acts has been to withdraw the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, which Japan continues to hold as a very, very important platform to advance rules to liberalize markets across the Asia-Pacific. So how would they then talk about these differences in views regarding the role of the Trans-Pacific Partnership? I think a compromise was struck. Again, you, know there was language saying that Japan would be able to pursue its regional initiatives and that both sides would talk about a bilateral framework.

So, two interesting things here. There was no direct mention of a bilateral free trade agreement. I think Japan wants to know better what would an American trade policy actually look like on paper before signing on to a trade agreement negotiation. And secondly, I think it was very interesting and perhaps wise to not have the two leaders discuss directly the economic agenda, but actually to delegate that discussion to their deputies. Deputy Prime Minister Asō and Vice President Pence will now launch a bilateral economic dialogue to address issues such as monetary policy, energy, infrastructure, and trade.

So, I think overall this was a very successful meeting. I think that the reassurances on security were there, I think the personal bond was created. But I think the most difficult balancing act for this relationship is going to center on the trade agenda, and they decided not to address it directly. And, you know, how will this evolve over time? Will this become an issue that is manageable in a productive way? Or could it create friction? I think it's something that we have to continue paying attention to going forward. Thank you very much.