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5 on 45: Before the North Korea summit, Japan's Abe has a word with Trump

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(MUSIC)

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.

SOLIS: I am Mireya Solis, co-director of the Center for East Asia Policy Studies at Brookings.

Prime Minister Abe is in town today and he's meeting once again with President Trump. So you could say, "Well, what's so remarkable about this?" After all, all the major players who have a stake in the resolution of a North Korea nuclear issue have been meeting quite regularly. Sometimes it's actually very hard to keep up because it seems that everybody is seeking a meeting with everybody else. But there's actually something very important that I would like to highlight about the visit this time of the Prime Minister of Japan to the United States. Two things to point out, actually.

One is that it's important to note that the Prime Minister of Japan is the one that has not met directly with Kim Jong-un, the leader of North Korea. So that means that when Japan articulates its interests, its views, its concerns as to how this process of dialogue and negotiation with North Korea to make sure that that threat abates takes place, it has to go through the American president—and here is the wrinkle. The fact is that Japan has had a very consistent policy on what is the right approach towards North Korea. Japan has insisted on a fast calendar for the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea, and also has been one of the strongest supporters of the approach known as maximum pressure.

But on the other hand, the American president has shifted somewhat the messages it is sending about how he thinks about the issue and its possible solutions. And it's actually been quite a fluid situation if you take into account that not so long ago this summit actually was cancelled, and then a couple of days later it was back on again. And therefore this creates a lot of concerns for interested parties in trying to make sure that their interests will be represented on the table.

So, you know, there's some statements that the president of the United States has made in recent days that do create some concerns for Japan. For example, the fact that President Trump said—not long ago—that he was not eager to use anymore the term maximum pressure, because now that he's going to meet with Kim Jong-un and with a desire to get along and make that a productive dialogue he does not want to use that term. There have also been comments to the fact that you know maybe denuclearization could be taking place at a slower pace. So all these issues then create concern in Japanese circles as to what will the American president will sit down and discuss exactly with the leader of North Korea. So I think that explains the visit of the Prime Minister. He wants to convey to the American president what the Japanese views are.

And I think that there are a number of core security objectives that the prime minister would like to see very much represented that at that table in Singapore. One is that it's essential for Japan that discussion is not just about intercontinental ballistic missiles, that is, those missiles that can hit the American homeland. Because Japan already lives with this threat because North Korea has short and medium range missiles. Therefore, Japan wants a more comprehensive discussion as to the missile threat.

The Japanese side has also identified a more comprehensive set of threats. It's not just the nuclear capabilities, but it's also the biological and chemical weapons that should be discussed. And the very important issue for Japan, one that the Japanese public is very much fixated on, is a question of the abductees. The fact that in the past the North Korean regime kidnapped Japanese citizens, and there are still some citizens that have not been accounted for, and therefore for Japan it's very important that the American president conveys to the leader of North Korea that that issue has not reached a resolution. And therefore, that there cannot be any normalization of relations with Japan until there is proper attention and resolution to that issue.

Now finally, to make this all the more interesting and complicated, there is a larger context here. And that is that the central objective of the leader of Japan in

coming here is to talk about North Korea but this is taking place among a somewhat more sensitive climate regarding trade and economic issues because Japan has been hit with tariffs that were imposed by the U.S. administration on steel and aluminum. But also, Japan now also is fearing that this administration may use the same mechanism, the so-called 232 investigation that uses national security grounds to restrict imports, but applied to sectors that are far more important for the Japanese economy, far more important for bilateral economic relations with the United States, and that is automobiles. So how will Japan be able to turn around this so that you can actually have a productive economic relationship with the American side is an issue that obviously in the minds, I believe, of Japanese policy makers.

So, you know, the meeting already took place. I think that some of the goals of the Japanese side were probably achieved, but that doesn't mean that everything is over now and the Japanese side can go back home. Rest assured, I think that we still have five more days before the summit and in this new normal a lot can happen in those five more days. And also keep in mind that right after this the G-7 summit is going to start in Canada, and we anticipate a very, very testy environment because in that meeting you'll have trade front and center. And it's not just Japan who's being hit with these American unilateral trade measures, but there's also now a great displeasure among the Canadians and the Europeans. So how will this larger conversation about a new U.S. posture and trade impact the G-7 dynamics and the U.S. Japan economic angle in particular remains to be seen.

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