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Japan Foreign Minister Kono: U.S., Japan 'completely in sync' on North Korea

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TOKYO (Reuters) - The United States and Japan are “completely in sync” over North Korea and agree that it must abolish its medium- and short-range missiles as well as intercontinental and intermediate range ballistic missiles, Japan’s foreign minister said on Tuesday.



Japan’s Foreign Minister Taro Kono speaks during an interview with Reuters at the Foreign Ministry in Tokyo, Japan March 27, 2018. REUTERS/Toru Hanai

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is set to see U.S. President Donald Trump in Washington next month before a proposed summit between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un on the crisis over Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile programs.

That U.S.-North Korea summit would follow a North-South summit in April.

Trump's decision to meet Kim has sparked concerns in Japan that the U.S. leader could do a deal that would protect America's homeland but leave Japan vulnerable, while a rapid turnover in key White House personnel has meant Japanese officials are having to deal with a changing line-up.

"I think the U.S. and Japan are in sync for this North Korea issue. It is important for the international community as a whole to keep maximum pressure on North Korea until North Korea takes concrete steps toward complete irreversible and verifiable denuclearization," Foreign Minister Taro Kono told Reuters in an interview.

Kono, who recently met U.S. officials in Washington, also said Washington agreed with Tokyo that North Korea must abandon its medium- and short-range missiles as well as ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles) capable of hitting the U.S. mainland.

"They are in full agreement," Kono said, speaking fluent English.

"There are tens of thousands of American soldiers and their families living within their range, so I think they are also concerned with medium- to short-range missiles," he said, referring to U.S. troops stationed in South Korea and Japan.

STEEL TARIFFS COULD HURT U.S. AUTO MAKERS

The U.S.-educated Kono, 55, left the door open to the possibility that Abe might himself meet the North's Kim at some point. Speaking after reports that Kim was visiting Beijing on Tuesday, Kono said Japan was closely watching preparations for the North-South Korean summit and the Trump-Kim meeting.

Kono, referring to the reports Kim might be in Beijing, quipped: "So we never know if someone would come to Tokyo."

Kono also said Trump's decision not to exempt Japanese steel products from 25 percent tariffs could hurt the U.S. auto industry because U.S. auto makers would keep buying the high-quality Japanese products they need.

He urged Washington not to violate World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules and expressed hope the United States would return to a multi-nation Asia-Pacific trade pact negotiated by Trump's predecessor but shunned by Trump.



Experts have said Trump may want to use the tariffs to pressure Japan into starting talks on a two-way free trade agreement (FTA).

But Kono said bilateral economic matters would continue to be handled in an "economic dialogue" led by Vice President Mike Pence and Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso.

Japan has been opposed to bilateral FTA talks because it would likely increase pressure to open up politically sensitive markets such as agriculture.

"There is Japan-U.S. economic dialogue between Vice President Pence and Deputy Prime Minister Aso, so the economic issue will be handled in that dialogue," Kono said.

"We are looking forward to have Americans come back to TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership)," he said. Japan and 10 other countries signed a "TPP-11" version of that agreement this month.

Kono, sometimes floated as a potential candidate to succeed Abe as premier, declined to say whether he might challenge Abe in a September ruling Liberal Democratic Party leadership vote.

Abe's support ratings have slid over a suspected cronyism scandal and possible cover-up regarding a discounted sale of state-owned land to a school operator with ties to his wife. Abe has denied any wrongdoing by himself or his wife.

"Whenever I think it's appropriate, I will make a move," he said.

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