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Japan doubles down on its U.S. alliance

Facing an immediate threat from North Korea and the long-term challenge of a rising China, Japan finds itself forced to rely on a Washington roiled by constant turmoil and led by an unpredictable president. Yet rather than turn away from the Trump administration, like some European allies, the Japanese government has doubled down on its U.S. alliance.

Personal ties between President Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe are strong, and there's zero public daylight between the governments on key issues. Privately, however, there surely is growing anxiety in Tokyo about the Trump administration — and in particular, worry that Washington may be wavering on its commitment to the elimination of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

Just before he was fired, White House chief strategist Stephen K. Bannon said what many in Washington were thinking: There's no viable military option for preventing a nuclear North Korea. "They got us," Bannon said in an interview with the American Prospect.

The day after Bannon's interview, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson publicly clarified the administration's position and defended the credibility of the North Korea military option, standing alongside their Japanese counterparts, Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera and Foreign Minister Taro Kono.

For Japan there's no debate: North Korea's nuclear program must be eliminated, not contained, Kono told me in an interview, after meeting with Mattis and Tillerson. Japan is depending on the United States to stick to that plan.

"This would mean that the leader of a country who has no intention of respecting the life and property and human rights of other citizens would have the opportunity to threaten or blackmail the other countries of the Earth," Kono said.

The United States and its allies must maintain the credible threat of military force against North Korea to support diplomatic efforts, he said, adding that Pyongyang must meet strict preconditions before any talks can begin.

Last week, Trump suggested that there might be an opening for dialogue with North Korea after leader Kim Jong Un retreated from his threats to shoot missiles in the direction of Guam. For

Japan, that's not enough. Tokyo wants Trump to continue insisting that Pyongyang not only halt testing, but also confirm that abandonment of the current nuclear arsenal is on the table.

"Until North Korea shows a clear intent with regard to denuclearization and they engage in specific actions, there should be no dialogue. And there is agreement on this with the United States as well," Kono told me.

Kono assumed the position of Japan's top diplomat earlier this month, as tensions with North Korea reached their highest point in decades. His father, Yohei Kono, was speaker of Japan's lower house of parliament and a leading figure in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

The elder Kono was known as a liberal who supported better relations between Japan and China. Foreign Minister Kono is a "robust realist," more hawkish than his father but without the nationalistic characteristics that his current boss, Abe, is known for.

For Kono, getting China right is crucial to solving the North Korea crisis, and vice versa. His idea is that the stronger the alliances in Asia, the more successful pressure on China will be.

"If Japan, the United States and the Republic of Korea properly put in place a defense framework and strengthen that, and that becomes clear to China, then China will take actions on North Korea, and they will understand it is in their interest to do so," he said.

Caught between his father's legacy and his boss's shadow, Kono is trying to stake out his own public identity while helping his country navigate the most dangerous period in its post-WWII history. Part of that effort includes standing up to China's military expansion and aggression in the South China Sea and East China Sea, while also pushing China to do more to rein in Pyongyang.

"It's about time China realizes that when they do something, the impact is felt of that power, so they need to curb the use of that power," Kono said. "Countries that yield great power must realize that with that power is an accompanying responsibility that they must assume."

To be sure, Japan has gone all in on the Trump administration in part because it has no better option. Still, the Trump and Abe-Kono visions for the alliance mesh. Both want Japan to

The Washington Post (政治)

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2017年8月28日付 A17面

evolve into a more self-sufficient alliance member with a greater regional role. Both realize that deeper U.S.-Japan cooperation is the best way to steer Asia toward greater peace and stability.

But until Washington is able to communicate and then implement a better strategy for confronting the North Korea threat and the China problem, allies such as Japan will continue to worry about their bet on the Trump administration and their dependence on U.S. leadership.

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