JAPAN / POLITICS

Top diplomats agree to take U.S.-Japan alliance to 'new heights'

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio meets with Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya at the State Department in Washington on Tuesday | AFP-JIJI

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Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya held his first meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio on Tuesday in Washington, with the two agreeing to take the U.S.-Japan alliance to "new heights" and touting the importance of trilateral ties with South Korea and the Philippines.

"We agreed to continue to work together to take the Japan-U.S. alliance to new heights and to work closely together to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific," Iwaya said following the meeting.

Iwaya, who a day earlier became the first top Japanese diplomat to attend a U.S. presidential inauguration, was visiting Washington for talks with officials in President Donald Trump's new administration as Tokyo looks to lay the groundwork for a leaders' summit with Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba in the coming weeks.

Japanese officials have hinted that those talks could come sometime early next month or in early March, after earlier attempts at a meeting foundered ahead of Trump's inauguration.

"I hope to work closely together to ensure that the summit, which is being coordinated by the Japanese and U.S. governments, is a meaningful one," Iwaya said.

In a statement, the State Department said the two had also "discussed plans to deepen ties during the Trump Administration, and how the United States and Japan can work together to counter ongoing threats in the Indo-Pacific and around the world, including joint efforts against China's destabilizing actions."

Tokyo has been gripped by concerns that the U.S. under Trump could pull back from some of the regional multilateral groupings that Japan views as crucial for deterring China and North Korea. Officials in Japan have also been bracing for increased pressure to plow more cash into its defense budget and costs for hosting U.S. troops.

But Iwaya, who also held talks with U.S. national security adviser Mike Walz, said that he had secured an understanding from Rubio on the importance of the allies' economic relationship, with the Japanese diplomat laying out in detail how Tokyo contributes to the U.S. economy, including its position as the top investor in the United States.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio shakes hands with Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya at the State Department in Washington on Tuesday | AFP-JIJI

Iwaya also said he explained to Rubio how Japan has been steadily boosting defense budgets in recent years. Tokyo has embarked on a five-year plan to spend 2% of gross domestic product on defense by 2027.

In a sign that the issue may be on Trump's mind, the U.S. president has tapped Elbridge Colby to be the Pentagon's undersecretary of defense for policy, a key post that provides advice and support on strategy, planning and management of international relations of the defense secretary. Colby has repeatedly asserted that Japan must quickly boost defense spending to around 3% of GDP.

Asked about the U.S. government's decision to halt Nippon Steel's $14.9 billion plan to buy United States Steel on national security grounds, Iwaya did not directly address the controversy, but urged the Trump administration to ease Japanese businesses' concerns.

"We intend to further expand our investment, and in order to do that, I asked (Rubio) to make efforts to dispel any concerns or worries about Japanese investment into the U.S.," Iwaya said.

The Japanese diplomat also said the two did not specifically broach the issue of tariffs. Trump has threatened to slap tariffs on Mexico, Canada and China — a move analysts say would have repercussions for Japanese businesses — but did not follow through on a pledge to implement those measures, as well as a so-called universal tariff, on his first day in office.

Still, Tokyo may eventually have to grapple with the threat of tariffs on Japanese steel, aluminum and automobiles — especially since it is likely to find itself in Trump's crosshairs over a trade deficit with the U.S. that has hovered around $70 billion annually in recent years.

The Iwaya-Rubio meeting, as well as a meeting of Quad nation diplomats ahead of that, should also ease concerns by policymakers in Tokyo that momentum for robust trilateral ties with South Korea and the Philippines could erode under Trump, who has viewed multilateral partnerships with disdain in the past.

Iwaya said that he and Rubio had agreed on "the importance of further strengthening partnerships between like-minded countries," including trilateral groupings such as the Japan-South Korea-U.S. and Japan-Philippines-U.S. partnerships.

Japan views all three of those groupings as crucial elements of regional pushback to growing Chinese assertiveness and North Korean saber-rattling.

Some analysts, however, remain concerned that rather than outright opposition to these groupings — and especially trilateral ties with Japan and South Korea — Trump could simply look to slow-roll their demise.

"Trump and his team are unlikely to be particularly opposed to U.S.-Japan-South Korea enhanced trilateral cooperation, but on the other hand Trump may not be particularly interested in investing diplomatic effort in it either," said Christopher Hughes, a professor of international politics and Japanese studies at the University of Warwick in England.

"He may also disown the trilateral cooperation as a Biden legacy, simply by not turning up."

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