

Japan's Prime Minister Abe Is Trump's Informal Ambassador to Iran, but He Wants More Than to Mediate

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Region: [Asia](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#),
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*Japanese **Prime Minister Abe** is functioning as Trump's informal ambassador to Iran during his two day trip to the Islamic Republic, though he has much greater strategic interests in mind than just being the US President's proxy such as expanding his island nation's footprint in the Mideast as part of its attempt to "contain" China.*

Japanese Prime Minister Abe's [trip to Iran](#) is the first time that one of his nation's leaders visited the Islamic Republic since its 1979 Revolution, and it carries extra significance because of how he was recently tasked by Trump to be his informal ambassador to the country. This is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the agreement that they made during their last meeting to have Abe try to encourage the Iranian leadership to re-enter into dialogue with the US, something that they vehemently refused to do after being so brazenly disrespected by the American President since the beginning of his tenure. It's curious that the two allied leaders publicly spoke about Abe's ambition to play this peacemaking role since other indirect channels of communication already exist between the US and Iran, so involving Japan in this process is seemingly redundant.

If one steps back and appreciates the bigger strategic picture, however, then it makes more sense why this is happening. The US and Japan are on the same page when it comes to "containing" China, with the Pentagon [praising](#) it as the "cornerstone of peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific" in its recently published "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report". Japan has had a quiet strategic presence in the greater region ever since it opened its first-ever overseas military base in Djibouti in 2011, but it aims to do much more with American assistance. Seeing as how Iran is poised to become a joint Russian-Chinese economic condominium as the most realistic form of sanctions relief in the coming future, there's a certain logic to Trump encouraging Japan to give the country a third choice that would indirectly tie the Islamic Republic to the Western-led unipolar system.

It might sound a bit convoluted at first listen but the fact of the matter is that Trump's weaponization of sanctions as America's reinvigorated form of economic warfare is highly selective and based on double standards, so it's very possible that while his administration might sanction Russian and Chinese firms operating in Iran, they'll probably turn a blind eye to Japanese ones doing the same. This would give Japanese companies a competitive advantage over Russia and China's because they wouldn't have to fear the potential isolation that would accompany primary and secondary sanctions. As such, Japan could help expand the incipient influence of the "Asia-Africa Growth Corridor" (AAGC) transregional

initiative in Iran that it's jointly constructing with India all throughout the "Indo-Pacific", thereby laying the basis for countering China's [Belt & Road Initiative](#) (BRI).

This "[competitive connectivity](#)" is at the core of the [New Cold War](#), but it's still a far way's off from posing a tangible threat to China's interests. Nevertheless, the ground is already being built for this to become a long-term challenge to China if one considers the selective application of the US' sanctions regime (both primary and secondary) and the geostrategic importance of the Greater "Indian Ocean" Region in which this competition is poised to play out. Abe's role as Trump's informal Ambassador to Iran is being heavily promoted in order to justify the US turning a blind eye to the forthcoming Japanese investments in the Islamic Republic that its leader hopes to clinch during his visit. In addition, positioning Japan as the US' preferred "mediator" with Iran is also a rebuff to the earlier offer made by China's close partner Pakistan to fulfill this role instead.

That observation reinforces the notion that this is all about directly and indirectly "containing" China on the diplomatic, infrastructural, and overall influence fronts. Japan is China's historic rival so supporting its presence in Iran is deliberately designed to inflame the competition between these two Asian Great Powers, with Tokyo having an edge over Beijing in the sense that its companies could possibly be exempt from American sanctions on a case-by-case basis in order to give them a competitive advantage. That said, while these are the strategic opportunities that most realistically present themselves, Trump will likely demand that Abe enter into more concessions on trade in order to be given these other economic benefits in exchange as a part of a quid-pro-quo that keeps the US calling the shots in this unipolar game.

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