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# Obama says he shares Japan's concern over China's maritime conduct

WASHINGTON | BY MATT SPETALNICK AND JULIA EDWARDS

(Reuters) - President Barack Obama told Prime Minister Shinzo Abe he shared Japan's concerns about China's assertive behavior in maritime disputes with its neighbors and assured him of the U.S. commitment to defending Japanese territory, including tiny islands that Beijing claims.

Speaking at a joint news conference in the White House Rose Garden, Obama said a strong U.S.-Japan alliance should not be seen as a provocation to China, but he sought to put to rest any Japanese doubts on whether Washington would stand by Tokyo in any possible confrontation with Beijing.

"I want to reiterate that our treaty commitment to Japan's security is absolute," Obama said with Abe standing at his side.

Obama also said he and Abe agreed their nations would work together to bring a quick, successful conclusion to talks over a 12-member Pacific trade agreement, despite the failure of U.S. and Japanese negotiators to work out the final details of a U.S.-Japan trade deal essential to any broader accord.



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"Prime Minister Abe, like me, is deeply committed to getting this done and I'm confident we will," Obama said.

Hailing the U.S.-Japan partnership as "indestructible," Obama welcomed Abe to the White House on a visit aimed at showcasing deeper defense ties and advancing the Pacific trade pact as the two allies seek to counter China's growing power in the region.

But even as both leaders sought to look forward, Abe was dogged during his U.S. visit by criticism over his handling of Japan's wartime past.

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Obama and Abe used their Oval Office meeting on Tuesday to put their stamp on new guidelines for defense cooperation, a sign of Japan's readiness to take more responsibility for its security as China increasingly flexes muscle in the region.

But while Japan moves to loosen restrictions on its post-war pacifist constitution, details are still to be worked out on how much leeway its military will have to assist U.S. forces beyond Japanese waters, especially in the tense South China Sea.

Japan is in dispute with Beijing over Japanese-administered East China Sea islets known as the Senkakus in Japan and the Diaoyus in China.

"We share a concern about China's reclamation and construction activities in the South China Sea and the United States and Japan are united in our commitment to freedom of navigation, respect for international law and the peaceful resolution of disputes without coercion," Obama said.

Though the White House dashed hopes for a breakthrough U.S.-Japan trade deal during Abe's visit, the leaders tried to push the negotiations forward and chart a path toward a major 12-nation Pacific trade pact.

"We welcome the significant progress that has been made in the bilateral negotiations," the two governments said in a joint "vision statement."

Abe, who on Wednesday will be the first Japanese prime minister to address a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress, will face the challenge of helping Obama win over fellow Democrats who oppose the trade deal as being bad for U.S. jobs.

A deal between the two economic powerhouses is vital to clinching a Trans-Pacific Partnership pact, which would cover a third of world trade. But differences remain between Washington and Tokyo over autos and agriculture.

(Additional reporting by [Nathan Layne](#), [David Brunnstrom](#) and [Chizu Nomiya](#); Editing by Paul Simao)

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