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REUTERS

Japanese official: Abe's Iran visit aimed at deepening friendship

By Farzam Vanaki

The purpose of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's visit to Iran is to deepen the friendship between Tokyo and Tehran, which already exists, said a Japanese government official.

Accompanied by Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono, Abe arrives in Iran on Wednesday to hold a number of meetings with top Iranian officials.

This visit comes at a very precious moment in the history of the two countries' relations when they are celebrating the 90th anniversary of the establishment of their diplomatic relations, he added at press conference on Tuesday ahead of Abe's Iran trip, answering to Iran Daily's question.

He noted that Japan and Iran will deepen their friendship based on mutual interests and the long history of their friendship so far.

Elaborating on the schedule of the visit by the Japanese officials, he said, "On Wednesday, Kono will meet Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. Following his arrival at Mehrabad Airport in the Iranian capital on Wednesday afternoon, Abe will attend a welcoming ceremony at Sa'dabad Palace. Next, he will meet with

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, after which they will have a joint press announcement. Then, Abe will attend a dinner ceremony hosted by Mr. Rouhani."

On Thursday, he said, Abe will be received by The Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, following which he will leave Tehran in the afternoon.

He said this fall, Abe will become the longest serving prime minister of Japan, adding his political base is very strong.

"As of June 6, he has been serving as Japan's prime minister for 2,720 days, making him already the third longest serving prime minister in the history of Japanese constitutional government. Backed by such a domestic support, Abe has been actively engaged in diplomacy. For him, as well as the Japanese diplomacy, 2019 is a very important year. For instance, this year Japan will host the G20 meeting in Osaka which will be held on June 28 and 29."

At this meeting, Abe is expected to meet with US President Donald Trump, Russian President Vladimir Putin and also Chinese President Xi Jinping, he said.

In terms of bilateral relations between Japan and Iran, this is a very special year for the two

countries as it marks the 90th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Tokyo and Tehran, he noted.

In February, he said, Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani visited Japan and in May, Zarif met his Japanese counterpart and paid a courtesy call to Abe.

He stressed that Japan has been consistently supporting the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed between Iran and the P5+1 in July 2015.

On Tehran's importance to Tokyo he said, "Iran is a linchpin for the stability of the Middle East region which is crucially important for Japan's energy security. It is one of the great powers of the region and has been enjoying traditional friendship with Japan."

Turning to the significance of Abe's meetings with Iranian leaders in his visit to Tehran, he said under the circumstances that tension is tightening in the Middle East region, Japan works on Iran as a great power of the region to ease tension at every level, including the highest leadership.

Abe's Tehran visit will be the first trip by a Japanese prime minister to Iran in 41 years, which will contribute to the further deepening of the two sides'

traditional friendly relationship.

He added the visit by two senior Japanese officials to Iran represents the country's commitment to the peace and stability of the Middle East.

Resumption of oil imports

On whether the resumption of Japan's oil imports from Iran will be discussed in Abe's visit, he said the issue pertains to private Japanese companies as they are the ones purchasing crude.

In May 2018, Trump pulled the US out of the JCPOA and reimposed Washington's unilateral sanctions on Iran in two phases. The White House constantly claims that part of the sanctions are aimed at reducing Iran's oil exports to zero, Japanese refineries used to be among major customers of Iranian oil prior to the reinstatement of unilateral US sanctions.

Easing tension

Answering to a question whether Abe's Iran visit is aimed at mediating between Tehran and Washington, he reiterated that this time, the main purpose of Abe's trip to Tehran is to ease the tension in the region.

He added this is the prime minister's own initiative.

US says 'fine' with Iran trade channel for non-sanctioned goods



AFP

International Desk

The United States is "fine" with a European trade mechanism that would allow trade with Iran to continue without falling foul of American sanctions, the US State Department said.

State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortugus said in Washington on Monday that "any payment systems in which there are goods or services, or whatever the commodity might be, that is not sanctioned by the US government is fine."

Ortugus, however, noted that the US "would not support any payment mechanism from any country in the world that would allow businesses or entities or countries to engage in transactions with Iran that are sanctioned entities."

France, Britain and Germany have set up a special-purpose vehicle called INSTEX, designed to allow payments to Iran that would legally bypass US sanctions which were reinstated after Washington abandoned Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers a year ago. INSTEX has yet to become operational.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said in Tehran on Monday that the three European signatories to the nuclear deal are determined to stick to their commitments from the 2015 agreement.

"We want to fulfil our obligations," he said. "We cannot work miracles, but we will try to avert a failure (of the nuclear deal)," Maas told a joint news conference with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif.

Iran signed the landmark accord with China, Russia, Germany, Britain, France and the United States, leading to sanctions relief in exchange for Tehran curbing its nuclear program.

But the US administration of President Donald Trump has imposed sweeping sanctions on Iran and, according to Tehran, waged an "economic war" against it after walking away from the deal.

Maas acknowledged the economic benefits Tehran hoped for from the deal were now "more difficult to obtain" but urged Iran to fully respect the agreement.

"This is an instrument of a new kind, so it's not straightforward to operationalize it," Maas said. "But all the formal requirements are in place now, and so I'm assuming we'll be ready to use it in the foreseeable future."

The three EU members want INSTEX to meet norms for legitimate financing set by the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force, even though Iran as a country is not yet fully compliant with them.

US weighing sanctions on trade vehicle

Meanwhile, Bloomberg reported on Monday that the Trump administration is weighing sanctions on Iran's counterpart to the European special-purpose vehicle.

The financial news provider quoted a senior administration official as saying that the latest measures will target the Special Trade and Finance Institute, which Iran set up to correspond to Europe's INSTEX in bypassing sanctions.

The US government is targeting Iran's Special Trade and Finance Institute (STFI) on the ground that the country has not implemented global safeguards against money laundering and terrorism financing, Bloomberg cited the unnamed official as saying.

It said punishing STFI could doom INSTEX because it raises the possibility of sanctions risk to anyone who is part of the European mechanism.

The initiative, it said, drives home a letter sent by the US Treasury Department in early May to Per Fischer, the president of INSTEX, arguing that the financial body could face sanctions.

"If they are looking at sanctioning STFI, you're essentially trying to kill INSTEX through the back door," said Ellie Geranmayeh, a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

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Trump defends tariff strategy as China says 'not afraid of trade war'

US President Donald Trump on Tuesday defended the use of tariffs as part of his trade strategy while China vowed a tough response if the United States insists on escalating trade tensions amid ongoing negotiations.

"Tariffs are a great negotiating tool," Trump tweeted, one day after saying he was ready to impose another round of punitive tariffs on China. On Monday, the Republican president said he would raise tariffs on Chinese imports further if he cannot make progress in trade talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the G20 summit later this month, Reuters reported.

Trump has repeatedly said he is getting ready to meet Xi at the summit in Osaka, Japan, at the end of June, but China has not confirmed it.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang again would not be drawn into confirming a Xi-Trump meeting at G20, saying information would be released once it was available to the Foreign Ministry.

"China does not want to fight a trade war, but we are not afraid of fighting a trade war," he said, adding China's door was open to talks based on equality.

"If the United States only wants to escalate trade frictions, we will resolutely respond and fight to the end."

Last week, Trump said he would decide after G20, the meeting of the leaders of the world's largest economies, whether to carry out a threat to impose tariffs on an additional \$300 billion in Chinese goods.

Tensions between Washington and Beijing flared in May after the Trump administration accused China of renegeing on promises to make structural economic changes during months of trade talks.

The United States is seeking sweeping changes, including an end to forced technology transfers and theft of US trade secrets. It also wants curbs on subsidies for Chinese state-owned enterprises and better access for US firms to Chinese markets.

On May 10, Trump raised tariffs on \$200 billion of Chinese goods to 25% and took steps to levy duties on an additional \$300 billion in Chinese imports. Beijing retaliated with tariff hikes on a revised list of \$60 billion in US goods.

US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross on Tuesday downplayed the likelihood of resolving the dispute at the G20 summit, saying it would not be "a place where anyone makes a definitive deal."

"At the G20, at most it will be ... some sort of agreement on a path forward, but certainly it's not going to be a definite agreement," Ross told CNBC.

Petchem chief derides US sanctions on Iran

The CEO of Iran's National Petrochemical Company shrugged off US sanctions on the country's largest and most profitable petrochemical group, saying they will not impact the industry.

"The newly-announced US embargo will have no effect on the production and sale of Iranian petrochemicals," Behzad Mohammadi told reporters on the sidelines of a ceremony to sign an industrial development agreement.

"The petrochemical industry has been grappling with sanctions for many years, and in this situation, we are looking to develop this industry," said Mohammadi, according to Press TV.

The CEO of Iran's Persian Gulf Petrochemical Industries Company (PGPIC) with economic sanctions due to its ties with the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC).

The IRGC, founded in 1979 after the Islamic Revolution, is tasked with defending Iran against threats, but its civilian branch has been playing a key role in the country's development projects as a strategic partner in many fields.

The Treasury said in a statement that its sanctions aim to choke off financing to the PGPIC and extends to its 39 subsidiaries and "foreign-based sales agents."

The PGPIC group, it said, holds 40 percent of Iran's total petrochemical production capacity and is responsible for 50% of the coun-

try's petrochemical exports.

Washington is trying to stop Iran's petrochemical, steel and copper exports, and to disrupt its ports and shipping services.

Mohammadi said, "Sanctions against Iran's petrochemical industry are not a new thing, because we have been struggling with these issues for many years, and have still been able to build an appropriate production and sale basis."

On Tuesday, Iranian media outlets said the country is pressing ahead with building its third petrochemical hub which will have such capacities as power generation, water production, petroleum refining as well as steel and aluminum production.

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