

## News analysis

# Abe negotiates minefield of bias as he plays peacemaker

Japan PM's bid to broker peace between US and Iran marred by hit on oil tankers in Gulf



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In Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe travelled to Teheran this week in a high-stakes bid to broker an uneasy peace between Iran and the United States, but ended up being caught in an awkward position after two oil tankers were attacked.

He had been upbeat at first, after a rare meeting with Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, saying that "major progress has been made towards securing peace and

stability in this region".

But any illusion of reduced tensions was quickly shattered later when news broke that two oil tankers were attacked near the vital Strait of Hormuz.

That the two vessels, one owned by a Japanese company, were struck just when Mr Abe sat down with Mr Khamenei was a fact not lost on many observers, who believe it was an attempt to scuttle the ongoing diplomacy.

"It's hard to believe that this came at the direction of the Iranian leadership," Institute of Energy Economics senior research fellow Shuji Hosaka told the Nikkei daily. "It may have come from forces (like the Islamic State) that want to stop Iran-US relations from improving."

Both sides immediately pinned the blame on the other.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo cited the sophistication of the attack, while Iranian Foreign

Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif accused the US and its Middle East allies of "sabotage diplomacy".

This exemplifies how Mr Abe will have his job cut out for him as he walks the diplomatic tightrope between a friend (Iran) and an ally (the US), an act that will mean navigating potential minefields of biased perception on both sides, while urging them to make concessions despite their enmity.

He spoke by phone with President Donald Trump last night.

The ongoing crisis is rooted in Mr Trump's decision last year to pull out from the 2015 nuclear pact, saying it failed to curb Iran's role as a malign actor in the Middle East.

In doing so, he reinstated tough sanctions and, more recently, threatened punitive tariffs on countries including Japan if they were to continue buying oil from Iran. Tokyo has stopped doing so.

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei at their meeting in Teheran on Thursday. Mr Abe is walking a diplomacy tightrope between Iran and the US. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

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On his trip, the first to Iran by a Japanese premier since 1978, Mr Abe scored a significant commitment from Mr Khamenei that Iran has "no intention to make,

possess or use nuclear weapons".

Japan broke with the US to back the nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), whose importance Mr Abe and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani affirmed on Wednesday.

"Overall, we could see that Iran is still committed to the JCPOA," said Dr Yasuyuki Matsunaga of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, who noted there was no similar commitment by Iran to ensure safe passage of vessels through the Strait of Hormuz, and that Japan would have been able to help Iran's position had there been a commitment.

The Japan Times said: "It is easy to call his effort a failure, but if he has established a connection that can facilitate conversations in the event of a crisis, then the trip should be considered a success."

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## US, Japan exchange candid views on trade

WASHINGTON/TOKYO • Japan and the United States have deepened their understanding of each other's positions on trade, Japan's Economy Minister said after meeting his US counterpart, adding that the two countries will likely meet again ahead of a Group of 20 (G-20) summit later this month.

After Thursday's meeting in Washington, Mr Toshimitsu Motegi said he exchanged views on trade "candidly" with US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer, but refrained from commenting on details.

"Japan and the US have been sorting out points of discussion over trade issues and those points are clarifying but we need to continue ministerial talks," Mr Motegi said.

"We will coordinate a meeting with (Mr) Lighthizer, probably in Osaka ahead of G-20 summit late this month."

Mr Motegi said Japan and the US have already agreed to aim for an early trade deal after Japan's Upper House election, likely to be held next month.

Trade issues are seen as among key topics of debate during US President Donald Trump's expected meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Osaka, western Japan, on June 28-29.