
JAPAN MUST REFUSE US TRADE DEMANDS AHEAD OF MIDTERM ELECTION

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The governments of Japan and the United States have held their first round of new ministerial negotiations on trade issues. The talks were decided to take place at the summit meeting in April between Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and U.S. President Donald Trump, who has been complaining about the U.S. trade deficit with Japan.

In the latest meeting, Washington demanded bilateral talks with an apparent aim of signing a free trade agreement (FTA) with Japan. Tokyo, meanwhile, urged the U.S. to return to the Trans-Pacific Partnership multilateral free trade agreement. Their positions did not converge and negotiations were extended to the next round, which is expected to be held in September or later.

The United States is considering slapping high tariffs on imported cars, and American negotiators in the latest talks did not say clearly that Japan would be spared of the punitive action. It's possible that Washington would demand Tokyo have bilateral negotiations using the tariffs as a leverage.

One-on-one negotiations tend to favor a superpower like the United States. Threatening a negotiating partner to force a one-way compromise ignores fair trade practices.

To put it bluntly, the United States is acting self-centered.

Trump has criticized that automobile trade between Japan and the United States is unfair. But Tokyo has already abolished tariffs on U.S. cars, while the United States maintains such duties on Japanese cars.

The U.S. is also aiming to demand Japan open up its agricultural market. Washington appears to be doing this because it needs to find a new market for American farm products, which have been hit with retaliatory tariffs from China in a trade war.

In the U.S. midterm elections in November, the ruling Republican Party is expected to face an uphill battle. Trump is bent on securing the support of white factory workers and farmers who were a driving force behind his victory in the 2016 presidential election.

To achieve this goal, he seems to have calculated that he needs to win results over cars and farm products. Trump is telling voters in his stump speeches that he will try to cut the U.S. trade deficit.

Japan should not be used by Trump, who is trying to make a deal to benefit himself in the upcoming elections.

A free trade system is essentially designed for participating countries to open up their respective

markets and expand their economies as a whole. Japan should make tenacious efforts to persuade the United States that respecting such fair trade practices based on rules will benefit the country substantially.

Some people in the Japanese government are calling for accepting the U.S. demand of joining the FTA negotiations to avoid high tariffs on cars. But it is not a time for an easy compromise. The United States may abuse the Japanese retreat and make additional demands.

The Trump administration is trying to turn trade negotiations with the European Union to its favor by showing its intention to slap expensive duties on cars. Japan should cooperate with the EU and others to counter the U.S.

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