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Japan and India: The Making of a New Alliance?

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27 August 2007

After decades of mutual neglect, Japan and India are well set to build a new alliance that has the potential to transform Asian geopolitics. For both Tokyo and New Delhi, elevating their bilateral partnership is far more important than building an “Asian NATO” involving the United States and Australia. As they draw closer to cope with the rise of China, traditional definitions of the region are yielding place to the notion of a “broader Asia”.

THE THEME of an “Asian NATO” grabbed the headlines from the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s visit to India last week, but it is the potential for a future bilateral alliance between Tokyo and New Delhi that is far more consequential for the region.

Abe and India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stayed close to the Asian security tradition of bilateralism when they jointly declared that “a strong, prosperous and dynamic India is in the interest of Japan and a strong, prosperous and dynamic Japan is in the interest of India”. The Indian and Japanese emphasis on bilateralism underlines the enduring primacy of traditional alliances and the elusive nature of collective security arrangements in the region.

It was indeed Abe’s idea that the four major Asia Pacific democracies — the US, Japan, India and Australia — must work together for regional security and prosperity. However, none of the four countries is ready for anything more than a low-key consultative mechanism, even the US. The four nations, including India, have an expansive relationship with China and no wish to invent a new Cold War in Asia. None of them would want an exclusive forum that would drive the rest of Asia either towards neutrality or closer to China. Through their partnership, India and Japan would want to create a new magnet in Asia; not a wall of separation. The talk of an Asian NATO, then, is just a red herring.

Changing Asian balance of power

What is changing, however, is the template of Asian balance of power. Until recently, the triangular relationship between the US, Japan and China defined the terms of the regional security order. The rise of India — rooted in its recent higher economic growth rates and reflected in a vigorous Asian diplomacy — has altered the power politics of the region. Washington was quick to see the implications of a rising India and has rapidly transformed its relations with New Delhi. Abe’s India sojourn has signaled that Japan is following suit.

That Abe chose the Indian Parliament to articulate Japan’s new vision of a “broader Asia” was not accidental. Asia, as traditionally conceived in Tokyo, has become too restrictive a framework to achieve Japan’s national security objectives. In expanding its geographic definition of Asia to beyond Myanmar in the west, and drawing India into a strategic partnership, Japan believes it has a better chance of coping with the rise of China and establishing a stable balance of power in the region.

Declaring that Japan has “rediscovered India as a partner that shares the same values and interests”, Abe insisted that ties with the South Asian giant are “blessed with the largest potential for development of any bilateral relationship anywhere in the world”. Japanese diplomacy has never been known for soaring rhetoric. Abe had good reasons to do so in New Delhi. After all there are few countries in Asia that are willing to embrace a “strong and dynamic Japan”.

Unlike much of East Asia, India carries no baggage about Japan’s history or a grudge against its nationalism. More significantly, India is perhaps the only country in the world that is willing to celebrate the much maligned “Asianist phase” of Japanese foreign policy. No wonder then Abe made a conscious decision to go to Kolkata and talk eloquently about the historic links between Japan and Bengal. In Kolkata, Abe opened a cultural centre named after Bengal’s great poet Rabindranath Tagore and the Japanese nationalist, Okakura Tenshin.

Abe also visited the family of Radhabinod Pal, the only judge who gave a dissenting opinion in the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal at the end of Second World War. Abe also rejoiced at visiting the Kolkata home of Subhas Chandra Bose, who led the Indian National Army and fought the British Empire with Japanese assistance during the Second World War.

Why India warms up to Japan

If Japanese nationalism finds itself comfortable in Kolkata, India’s new enthusiasm for Japan is more fundamental. India knows that Japan is the only nation that could transform its manufacturing sector and give its economy the kind of boost Tokyo gave earlier to Southeast Asia and China.

Japan, now eager to assist India’s rise, has agreed to fast track an ambitious US\$ 90 billion project to develop an industrial corridor between Mumbai and New Delhi, along with a high-speed rail link to move larger loads at a faster pace. This could turn out to be the single largest investment in India’s woefully inadequate infrastructure.

Although public attention was riveted to Tokyo’s attitude towards the controversial Indo-US nuclear deal, New Delhi is looking at access to a much broader range of advanced technologies from Japan. The implementation of the Indo-US nuclear agreement and the likely change in Japan’s policy on sensitive exports to India could open the doors for a very rewarding high technology partnership between Tokyo and New Delhi.

India and Japan have agreed to expand their current defence cooperation which is focused on securing the sea-lanes in the Indian Ocean, so vital for Japanese access to energy and raw materials. As they look to the future, cooperation in the area of defence research, development and production presents itself. That, however, must wait some major changes in Japanese defence policy.

An enduring alliance?

Irrespective of the current political turmoil in New Delhi and Tokyo, all the elements of an emerging alliance between the two Asian powers are on view. These include shared democratic values, economic and technological complementarities, common concerns about the rise of China, and a joint commitment for a stable balance of power in Asia. As Japan and India move from an indifferent relationship of the last many decades to an all encompassing strategic partnership, Asia’s geopolitics is bound to alter irrevocably.

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