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The Return of Shinzo Abe: Implications for Indo-Japanese Relations

By Tomoko Kiyota

Synopsis

The newly elected Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe has aroused expectations that his second term in office will lead to deeper Indo-Japanese ties. While there is indeed considerable scope for this, Abe has to address several domestic challenges.

Commentary

THE LIBERAL Democratic Party of Japan (LDP), which won 294 seats in the 480-member Lower House in the December 2012 elections, returned to power after over three years in opposition. The LDP leader, Shinzo Abe, has reassumed the position of prime minister five years after he resigned from the post.

Besides being known to be 'nationalistic' and 'conservative' in outlook, Abe is also remembered by many as being 'pro-India' in foreign policy. During his first term from September 2006 to September 2007, he promoted the Quadrilateral Initiative which was deemed by observers as an attempt by Japan, India, Australia and the United States to encircle China.

Enhancement of strong Indo-Japanese ties?

Japan and India also signed a joint statement on a Roadmap for Strategic and Global Partnership in August 2007 during Abe's visit to New Delhi. Soon after the latest election, Abe told interviewers that he sought to expand the Japan-US security partnership to India and Australia. There are thus renewed expectations that the two countries will work further to enhance Indo-Japanese ties. However, it may not be easy for him to promote further cooperation with India in concrete terms, especially in the security sphere.

To begin with, it is questionable if he can sign new significant agreements and treaties with India. Tokyo and New Delhi already have many treaties and agreements including the "Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between Japan and India," signed in October 2008 under PM Taro Aso, and the "Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement" signed in February 2011 under PM Naoto Kan. In the security and energy spheres, there are hopes that cooperation would take place in the fields of nuclear and military technologies.

Although former Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh agreed in November 2012 to continue dialogue on civil nuclear technology cooperation there are obstacles, such as

India's nuclear liability law and non-membership of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, as well as the Japanese public's opposition against nuclear power after the Fukushima disaster.

On the other hand, the previous Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government eased Japan's Arms Export Ban in December 2011, and opened up new opportunities for Japanese defence industries to potentially participate in the co-development of weapons with India. On this matter, Abe will have to seek the agreement of his Indian counterparts not to use the co-developed weapons in international conflicts, and not to sell them to the third parties, without prior agreement of Japan. Since India has fought several border conflicts with neighbouring countries even in recent history, Abe will also have to overcome Japanese domestic objections. Both will be likely to take a long time, possibly even beyond Abe's current tenure.

Apart from such treaties, there are other ways to engage in substantive cooperation, like having more regular and practical joint military exercises. The Japan Maritime Self-Defence Forces has conducted several joint operations including the multilateral Exercise Malabar with the US, Australia and Singapore, and the first bilateral Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) with the Indian Navy in 2012. Since 2000, Japan and India have also agreed to implement joint exercises between the two coast guards annually. Both activities have potential to expand into areas such as land and air forces joint operations, beyond counter piracy or disaster relief exercises.

Abe's challenges

However, Abe will again face obstacles with such initiatives. Firstly, since Japan's Self-Defence Forces still has to overcome the legal and Constitutional restrictions in order to step up cooperation with India, it is necessary for Abe to review the structure of Japan's national security system. Remarkably, the LDP promised to amend the Constitution and change the name of Self-Defence Force (Jieitai) to National Defence Force (Kokubogun). This is a big difference in Japanese because "gun" means the armed force while "tai" means a team. Nonetheless, such developments are highly dependent on the result of the Upper House elections due in summer 2013, because a two-thirds majority vote in both houses is required to amend the Constitution while the opposition DPJ has a majority in the Upper House.

In this context, his ability to manage the domestic political challenges must also be factored into Tokyo's policy towards New Delhi. Abe has to concentrate on tasks such as the reconstruction of the Tohoku region following the March 2011 earthquake; whether to join the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade talks; and recovery of the Japanese economy. In addition, he will also have to settle the American base re-location problem which impacts relations with Japan's most important ally, the US.

Secondly, he has to deal with China's strong reaction towards closer ties between Japan and India. The Quadrilateral Initiative involving Japan, US, Australia and India during his previous tenure faded away in part because it provoked China's discomfort; it is possible that any similar initiative will encounter the same problem. As Abe also mentioned during his interview, the enhancement of Indo-Japanese ties is necessary to strengthen Japanese diplomatic power to cope well with China.

However, if the Indo-Japanese ties remains symbolic, China will not see those relations in terms of Japanese diplomatic power. If Abe likes to enhance the ties with India in more concrete terms to encounter China's assertiveness, he will have to manage China's strong reaction. Abe therefore has to balance Japan's diplomatic and strategic orientations cautiously.

Ultimately, whether Abe is able to take Indo-Japanese relations to the next level will depend on his China policy, as well as his ability to manage the domestic political challenges. All these depend on how long he is able to stay as prime minister this time round, giving Japan's "revolving door" political system.

Tomoko Kiyota is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Department of Geopolitics and International Relations, Manipal University, Karnataka, India, and a doctoral candidate at the Graduate School of International Cooperation Studies, Takushoku University, Tokyo. He contributed this article specially to RSIS Commentaries.