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The Rise of Trump and Its Global Implications

Japan and India: Deepening Ties in Age of Uncertainty

By Tan Ming Hui and Nazia Hussain

Synopsis

The largely successful bilateral summit between Japan and the US points to the ability of the longstanding alliance to ride out a few diplomatic storms. However, lingering uncertainties highlight the need for Japan to continue to diversify its alliances and partnerships. India seems to be its natural choice.

Commentary

JAPANESE PRIME Minister Shinzo Abe held his first official summit with President Donald Trump on 10-11 February 2017. Being Japan's most important ally, it was crucial for Abe to reaffirm bilateral security and trade ties with the United States. In many aspects, the summit was deemed a great diplomatic success for Abe. During their joint press conference, Trump called the US-Japan alliance "the cornerstone of peace and stability in the Pacific region" and indicated his administration's commitment to "the security of Japan and all areas under its administrative control."

While there is little doubt about the ability of the longstanding alliance to ride out a few diplomatic storms, uncertainties about the Trump administration's foreign policy direction remain. Such uncertainties pose a risk of strategic miscalculation for Japan, underscoring the need for Tokyo to seek a degree of self-reliance and additional stability beyond the alliance. Under such a geopolitical climate, Japan will benefit from improving its relations with other regional players, and it will likely pursue deeper ties with India — a natural partner for Japan.

Unpredictability in the Age of Trump

Japan and India share concerns over the Trump administration's unpredictable foreign policy decisions. During his presidential campaign, Trump alarmingly suggested that US Asian allies Japan and South Korea should pursue their own nuclear armaments as a deterrent, showing a lack of understanding of the complexities in Northeast Asian relations. Recent developments, including Trump's immediate withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and his unfortunate phone call with the Australian prime minister over an Obama-era refugee agreement, have also called the credibility of US leadership and commitment to its partners into question.

There is also uncertainty over who calls the shots when it comes to US foreign policy strategy. During US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis' visit to Japan and South Korea, he indicated his preference for diplomatic resolutions with China over disputes in the South China Sea. Trump also seemed to be softening his stance on China, agreeing to honour the "one China" policy in a phone call with the Chinese president. In contrast, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has suggested that he would take a more assertive approach toward the South China Sea issue, proposing a blockade of Chinese access to the islands. Also, Steve Bannon, the White House's chief strategist, has previously predicted the United States will go to war with China over the South China Sea.

Despite being one of the United States' strongest allies, Japan was a foreign policy target during Trump's campaign. Besides portraying Japan as a free-rider on the US security guarantee, Trump also criticised Japan's automotive trade practices and accused Japan of devaluing its currency. During the recent summit, Abe made deliberate moves to underplay these economic disagreements in favour of promoting a positive relationship with Trump. It is a smart diplomatic move at this stage; however, simply sidestepping such issues is not sustainable in the long run.

Japan and India as Natural Allies

The 2016 India-Japan summit clearly envisages a greater role for Japan and India in the region. Without the burden of historical baggage or outstanding disputes, and with a shared vision for democracy, Japan and India are natural allies and are ready to expand the scope of their economic, strategic, and defence cooperation.

In fact, Japan is the only country New Delhi has allowed to tread in the politically sensitive region of northeastern India, where Japan is investing in socioeconomic development projects. Tokyo has been providing official development assistance (ODA) loans in the fields of energy, water supply, forestry, and urban development in India's northeast since 1981. Also, New Delhi has for the first time allowed for foreign investment in the strategically critical Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The Modi government is open to collaborating on upgrading civilian infrastructure on the islands with Japan; the first project being discussed is a 15-megawatt diesel power plant on South Andaman Island. The Japanese Embassy in India has confirmed that Japan was eager to use ODA to enhance India's "connectivity" with

countries that are members of ASEAN or the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

The regional security environment also remains a prominent factor. A joint statement following the 2016 summit outlined a convergence of interests on bilateral issues and regional concerns, including nuclear cooperation, counterterrorism, coordination on regional issues, and defence industry cooperation. Furthermore, Japan and India inked a civil nuclear agreement in 2016, making India the first non-signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to have signed such a deal with Japan.

Meanwhile, Trump seems to be keen on developing close ties with India. Overall, Trump's rhetoric toward India and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been largely positive. Nevertheless, such development may not be a permanent fixture. One major source of potential contention might be Trump's move to clamp down on H-1B visa programmes, which would affect Indian outsourcing firms. The biggest beneficiaries of H-1B visas are Indians; in 2014, Indians accounted for 70 percent of the total H-1B petitions approved.

Timely Partnership

Several members of ASEAN remain embroiled in tension with China over the South China Sea disputes. This, combined with the possibility of the US playing a reduced role in the region, may make some countries nervous at the prospect of China's emergence as the sole regional leader. As such, the strengthening of Japan-India relations is timely and offers an alternative to China's otherwise unhindered dominance.

Although a more robust Japan-India partnership will be welcomed as a counterbalance to China's assertiveness, bandwagoning against China will be counterproductive. To this end, Japan and India are already working to engage with other regional players; Abe recently visited the Philippines, Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam in January to promote close cooperation while Modi's "Act East" policy hinges on connectivity with Asian nations. To ensure stability, however, they should also engage with China to promote peaceful solutions to regional conflicts.

Some might argue that India lacks the political will to assume a greater leadership role in the Asia-Pacific. However, India is already gearing up to keep a check on China's expanding footprint in the Indian Ocean littorals, which have traditionally been under India's sphere of influence. New Delhi will not want to rely just on a shaky White House to cope with a rising China.

It is likely that the Modi leadership will adopt a more proactive foreign policy approach, looking for natural allies in Asia. If there are any reservations about India's past reputation as a passive actor in world affairs, there is enough indication of political will now, which signals a more proactive stance. This will certainly be welcomed by the Abe administration.

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