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Defrosting Sino-Japanese Relations: What Now?

By Amrita Jash

Synopsis

The recent commitment to dialogue between Xi Jinping and Shinzo Abe in Hamburg indicates a thaw in China-Japan relations. By favouring a stable relationship, China and Japan are unveiling a 'new thinking' to their strained bilateral relationship.

Commentary

ON 8 JULY 2017, meeting on the sidelines of the G20 Summit at Hamburg, Germany, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe agreed to strengthen their dialogue with the goal of improving their bilateral ties. Both sides affirmed the importance of building "stable" relations.

At this juncture, this timely warming of relations is an important step forward as both countries embark on the 45th year of their normalisation of diplomatic ties this year and the 40th anniversary of the signing of the China-Japan Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 2018. The Xi-Abe talks have helped navigate the relations out of the risk zone and marks a new milestone in the relations between the two Asian rivals.

Growing Warmth in Ties

China and Japan's mutual commitment to thaw the frosty ties reflects the adage that in international politics there are no permanent enemies or friends, just permanent interests. As a result, the choices made thereby broadly oscillate between a continuum of hedging and bandwagoning vis-a-vis the other.

In view of this, China and Japan's warming up is no coincidence. It is a calibrated decision on either side, given the growing contingencies. As the common goal lies in

achieving regional peace and stability against the background of the United States' reduced interest in the Asian theatre and its withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, besides North Korea's increasing nuclear belligerence; there is also the push towards Regional Cooperative Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Furthermore, the Xi-Abe equation is also bolstered by their domestic politics wherein both the leaders aspire to enhance their political control. For Xi, consolidation of power is the top priority with the upcoming 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China. Likewise, for Abe, securing his political grip is important given the challenges faced by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in the upcoming Tokyo assembly elections. At this juncture, a stable China-Japan relationship is most desirable for both Xi and Abe.

In this context, what preceded Xi and Abe's joint affirmation to build the Sino-Japanese ties was the increased reciprocity of gestures between the two countries. The recent high-level diplomatic exchanges between the two countries proved to be both symbolic and significant. In May 2017, Toshihiro Nikai, Secretary-General of Japan's ruling LDP visited Beijing and represented the Japanese government at the Belt and Road Forum.

This was followed by Chinese Councillor Yang Jiechi's visit to Tokyo in June, wherein Yang co-chaired with Shotaro Yachi, the head of Japan's National Security Council, a "high level political dialogue". With Xi-Abe talks they have significantly helped ease the brimming tensions.

The Catalyst

With China and Japan embroiled in tensions over historical issues, territorial and maritime dispute in the East China Sea, Taiwan and others, a breakthrough was highly uncertain. However, the icebreaker was Japan's surprising tilt in favour of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), formerly known as One Belt, One Road (OBOR), bringing an end to Japan's longstanding objection.

In a departure from Tokyo's past attitude, Abe declared on 5 June 2017 that BRI has the "potential to connect the East and West as well as the diverse regions found in between", and most importantly, stated that "Japan is ready to extend cooperation" to the initiative. This pronounced tilt towards China has brought a welcome change in the Sino-Japanese relations.

Japan's initial sceptical attitude towards BRI had strained the relations. Japan refused to become a founding member of the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Second, as a counterbalance to BRI, Japan in 2015 launched the "Partnership for Quality Infrastructure" (PQI) initiative with the objective of a "high-quality and innovative infrastructure throughout Asia, taking a long term view".

Third, adding to the competition, Japan pledged to invest US\$110 billion in infrastructure, which was increased to \$200 billion in 2016, thus, raising the ante against the China-led AIIB. Hence, given these differences, Abe's pro BRI tilt gave the impetus for improving the damaged ties.

Road Ahead

Since China and Japan are experiencing a thaw, the uncertain nature of this bonhomie remains a cause of concern. Although 'hot economics' continue to temper the 'cold politics', what makes it volatile is the contention in the East China Sea, where the structural reasons for security tension between the two countries are real and consequential.

There is a tendency of each country testing the other's resolve by constantly challenging the limits of their territorial and maritime claims. Both sides should take this opportunity to build the resilience in the relationship which will have significant implications for both regional as well as global stability.

Despite the positive turn, it is too early to suggest that China and Japan will be able to set the relationship completely on track. Although reciprocity is at play the overall bilateral relationship remains poor. However, the new found warmth does provide traction to the otherwise fragile relations.

In this regard, China and Japan's understanding to constructively manage the damaged ties is highly encouraging. Thus, the wisdom lies in actualising the commitment in order to minimise the risks of unwarranted challenges. In doing so, both sides should adopt measures to support greater resilience in their ties.

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