

Is the Return of Shinzo Abe Good News for India?

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Summary

The advent of Shinzo Abe to power appears then to be less of a good news for India than we could have expected owing to the context and the policy he is expected to adopt. It would be an exaggeration to say that Abe's election is bad news since India can take comfort in the coming to power of a pro-Indian Japanese leadership, but the foreign policy of Shinzo Abe could be an impediment to further cooperation between the countries as India has to consider the China factor. The first statements of Abe as PM would be crucial to assess as to whether the nationalist card was a tactical move during the election campaign or a true turn to the right. Similarly, an attempt to revise the constitution would also be an indicator of such a trend. Moreover, in the field of multilateral cooperation, Abe's Japan seems to be moving towards a closer alignment with the United States, potentially at the expense of India. Even if cooperation and strategic partnership will remain, Abe could then not renew Japan's commitment to the development of India-Japan partnership. Against this backdrop, India will have to closely monitor Abe's declarations, especially at the beginning of his tenure, and be careful not to let this partnership solidify into a bilateral or tri-lateral alliance openly directed against China. In the field of cooperation, it will have to strive to engage with the new Japanese administration, pointing to the many common challenges and interests the two countries share, so that they move towards the bigger purpose of the full realization of their strategic partnership.

The recent general elections in Japan saw the landslide victory of the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDP). The LDP came back to power after three years of rule by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) whose leaders were unable to improve the economy or meet the hopes of voters. As LDP leader, Shinzo Abe was designated Prime Minister on December 26. At first glance, this is good news for India since Abe has long been seen a supporter of India-Japan partnership.

The geopolitical context in Asia has markedly changed during the last decade. The rise of China, and to a more limited extent that of India, as well as the rebalancing, or “pivot strategy”, of the United States have tremendously increased the stakes in the region. Against this backdrop, Japan, whose constitution still edicts that the country has renounced the “threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes”, has started to rethink its defence posture towards greater assertiveness and a diversification of its alliances, notably with India.¹

After being separated during the Cold War, due to the affiliation to different blocs, India-Japan relations started over in the post-Cold War era. While the 1998 nuclear tests delivered a serious blow to this relationship, the 2000s witnessed a renewed momentum after the conclusion of a “Strategic Partnership”. Shinzo Abe, who was Prime Minister between 2006 and 2007, played a constructive role in strengthening this relationship and possibly suggested further developments. His return to the primeministership has opened the prospect of taking India-Japan relationship to the next level.

During the recently concluded election campaign, Abe adopted a tough and nationalistic tone against the growing Chinese assertiveness over the Senkaku islands, which has raised concerns about his ability not to antagonize China once in power. Although the rise of China is the main driver of India-Japan relations, Abe’s strong stance on China could unsettle the Strategic Partnership as India favours engaging rather than containing China. Moreover, Abe’s handling of China could prove prejudicial for stability in the region by fuelling competition and initiating a bloc-building logic leading to antagonistic alliance systems. Indeed, we can relevantly ask whether Abe’s election is good news for India-Japan relations. The aim of this issue brief is to provide an answer to this question.

China as a Driver of India-Japan Relations

The rise of China, more than other factors, has contributed to the recent rapprochement between India and Japan. Thus, for Mathur, “the rise of China and resultant power shift in Asia becomes a *primary* driver bringing Tokyo and New Delhi together [yet] maintenance

¹ The Constitution of Japan, Article 9, http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html, accessed on December 18, 2012.

of balance of power vis-à-vis China is not the sole driver of foreign policy and bilateral relations between India and Japan.”² The modification of the structural power architecture in Asia, creating a new strategic context, poses common challenges for both countries. In addition, others factors like economic complementarities as well as historical and cultural bonhomie also have to be taken into account. It appears that the current period is favourable for an increase in cooperation.

The main factor bringing India and Japan together is then structural and directly linked with the strategic context. As Jacob, Rajamohan and Rahut argue, “the changing international order – including most notably, the rise of China – will see the two countries increasingly thrown together on a variety of issues.”³ The emergence of China as a potential regional hegemon in Asia has thus compelled India and Japan to adopt a balancing behaviour to prevent a potential threat to their security. Moreover, their common view of Asia’s security architecture has created some convergence. Indeed, as Chellaney points out, whereas “China seeks a multipolar world but a unipolar Asia, (...) India and Japan desire a multipolar Asia and a multipolar world.”⁴ These converging views have created the momentum for increased cooperation.

It has to be said that the United States remains Japan’s historical and main ally, but the recent years have witnessed a growing debate in Japan over dependence on the United States in the field of security and defence. It is against this backdrop that Japan’s cooperation with India is taking place. It is too early to say whether this cooperation will flourish and possibly become as important as that between Japan and the United States, but there will certainly be some attempt to diversify Japan’s alliance strategy. Two precedents point in the direction of a more assertive Japan. First is the ongoing debate over the revision of the constitution, so as to allow the Japanese Self-Defense Forces to be deployed in a streamlined process. A revision of the constitution would make Japan more “normal” and self reliant. Second is the precedent set by the Hatoyama administration in questioning the American military presence on Japanese soil. Although the new LDP administration is expected to restore ties with Washington, Japan could move towards multilateralism in the future. In that regard, its partnership with India could become more broad and deep.

However, if India-Japan partnership could be a good way to enhance the security of the two countries, some experts warn against the risk of antagonizing China. As Khan

² Mathur A., “India-Japan Relations: Drivers, Trends and Prospects,” *RSIS Monograph No. 23*, Singapore, Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2012.

³ Jacob J., Rajamohan P.G. and Rahut D.B., “Changing Paradigm of India-Japan Relations: Opportunities and Challenges,” *Working Paper No. 212*, Indian Council For Research on International Economic Relations, April 2008.

⁴ Chellaney B., “Towards Asian Power Equilibrium,” <http://www.hindu.com/2008/11/01/stories/2008110155261000.htm>, accessed on December 18, 2012.

underlines, “the Indian strategic thinking can be divided into two broader lines, one consisting of those who think a cooperation with Japan will put China in check and help achieve power equilibrium in the region and the second consisting of those who think that China is equally important for India.”⁵ In this regard, it seems important that both India and Japan insist on the cooperative aspects and the defensive nature of their relationship so as not to alienate China by openly allying against it.

Beyond security concerns, the economic dimension of the India-Japan partnership also has to be noted. For long India-Japan cooperation took the form of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), but the emerging character of India’s economy has changed the nature of this relationship. If ODA remains an important part of Japan’s economic cooperation with India, like its grant of USD 4 billion for the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC), Japanese businessmen have started to see India as a favourable destination for investments. The strong and sustainable growth of India during the last decade has thus opened the prospect for genuine economic partnership as well as for more Japanese investments in India. In this regard, the entry into force of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) on August 1, 2012, is expected to be a catalyst for increased trade between the two countries.⁶

It appears that the present context is favourable for closer cooperation between India and Japan. As they share common challenges and views, we can expect an increase in bilateral cooperation in the coming years. Yet, as it was the case during the Cold War, political commitment will be required. As it is the case for the overall context, it appears that the political mindset in both countries is also favourable for increased cooperation.

The New Momentum

India-Japan relations have long followed a trajectory of “peaks and troughs”,⁷ yet it appears that this relationship has gained a new momentum since the 2000s. Indeed, during the last decade, renewed political goodwill and commitment have paved the way for enhanced cooperation between the two countries in the framework of a “Global Partnership”.

After India’s nuclear tests took the bilateral relationship with Japan to a nadir, the visit by Prime Minister Mori paved the way for reviving the relationship with the establishment of

⁵ Khan S.A., “India-Japan Strategic Cooperation: Issues, Expectations and Challenges,” in Iwashita A., *India-Japan Dialogue: Challenge and Potential*, Sapporo, Slavic Research Center (SRC), 2011.

⁶ Government of Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) Website, http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/announce/2011/6/0630_02.html, accessed on December 20, 2012.

⁷ Jain P., “India-Japan Relations: Peaks and Troughs,” *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, pp. 403-412, 2010.

“Japan-India Global Partnership in the 21st Century”.⁸ Indeed, for Kesavan, the new momentum of India-Japan relations took shape through the building of a “Global partnership”.⁹ Mori’s successors further strengthened this approach. At the end of PM Koizumi’s visit to India in 2005, India and Japan released an “Eight-fold Initiative for Strengthening Japan-India Global Partnership” to “realize the full potential of their global partnership”.¹⁰ In 2006, a new statement was released under Shinzo Abe renewing the commitment of both countries towards “Japan-India Strategic and Global Partnership”.¹¹ Eventually, in 2008, PM Aso brought renewed attention by advocating for a “New Stage of Japan-India Strategic and Global Partnership”.¹²

Even with political alternation and the advent of the DPJ to power, Japanese authorities continued promoting their partnership with India. Although many were worried about Hatoyama’s stance on the matter, “[his] visit to India (...) early in his tenure sends a strong diplomatic signal of the importance his administration places on relations with India, even if his official rhetoric has been quiet.”¹³ Also, the fact that Hatoyama “had no hesitation in concretizing an action plan on security cooperation with India, which had been proposed by the previous government led by the LDP” asserted the reliable and sustainable character of this partnership beyond party lines.¹⁴

In the end, it seems that more than a simple new peak, the current relationship between India and Japan is solidifying thanks to political will and drivers related to the new international context. With the return of the LDP to power under the leadership of Shinzo Abe, this trend is likely to go on with greater vigour.

Shinzo Abe’s Contribution to India-Japan Relations

Abe is the heir of a dynasty of Japanese statesmen. Abe’s father, Shintaro, was a former Foreign Minister, and his grandfather Nobusuke Kishi was a former Prime Minister whose

⁸ MoFA Website, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/joint0112.html>, accessed on December 20, 2012.

⁹ Kesavan K.V., “India and Japan: Changing Dimensions of Partnership in the post-Cold War Period,” *ORF Occasional Paper No. 14*, New Delhi, May 2010.

¹⁰ MoFA Website, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/partner0504.html>, accessed on December 20, 2012.

¹¹ MoFA Website, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/pdfs/joint0612.pdf>, accessed on December 20, 2012.

¹² MoFA Website, http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/pmv0810/joint_d.html, accessed on December 19, 2012.

¹³ Jain P., “India-Japan Relations: Peaks and Troughs,” *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Kesavan K.V., “India and Japan: Changing Dimensions of Partnership in the post-Cold War Period,” *op. cit.*

visit to India in 1957 paved the way for the extension of ODA by Japan. Abe has already been Prime Minister for a short period from September 2006 to September 2007 and advocated for a more assertive Japan. In this regard, he is often characterized as hawkish and nationalist. Regarding India, he tried to increase India-Japan cooperation during his tenure. He publicly advocated for renewed cooperation with India, even writing in his book *Towards a Beautiful Country: My Vision For Japan*, that it would “not be a surprise if in another decade, Japan-India relations overtake Japan-U.S. and Japan-China ties.”¹⁵

During his earlier tenure as PM, Abe strived to take India-Japan cooperation to the next level not only by promoting further alliance but also by displaying symbolic gestures. Thus, when India’s Prime Minister visited Japan in December 2006, he was granted the honour of not only meeting the Emperor but also addressing the joint session of the Japanese Parliament. These efforts were rewarded one year later, in 2007, when Abe was given the honour of addressing the Indian Parliament during his state visit. As Jain notes, “his visit and the kind of reception he received were reminiscent of the visit of Prime Minister Kishi, Abe’s grandfather, 50 years previously.”¹⁶ Indeed, these symbolic moves illustrated the new importance India was given under Abe’s rule.

As far as cooperation was concerned, PMs Singh and Abe renewed their commitment towards “Japan-India Strategic and Global Partnership” and published a long joint declaration describing the partnership. The document underlines the importance of renewed partnership in the field of security and defence, economy, science and technology and people-to-people contacts. Both leaders underlined the fact that India and Japan face similar challenges and should cooperate accordingly. It is not by accident that defence and security comes first in the document, reflecting the fact that India-Japan cooperation is mainly driven by security concerns as shown previously. It also derived from Abe’s nationalist discourse.

Beyond this policy continuation, Abe has gone further by trying to promote the Quadrilateral Initiative (QI), also known as “quad”. *Quad* is a strategic quadrilateral security dialogue between the United States, Australia, India and Japan, designed to balance power in the Asian context and tackle transnational security issues. Despite the fact that it did not take off, the QI provides interesting insights into Abe’s political vision and its implications. Indeed, he seemed to attach great importance to creating a balanced security architecture in the region, using Japan’s alliance with the United States and to a lesser extent with India and Australia, against the rising might of China. Thus, Abe appeared in favour of a policy of “containment”, rather than one of engagement with China, irrespective of China’s

¹⁵ Abe S., *Towards a Beautiful Country: My Vision for Japan*, Vertical, 2007.

¹⁶ Jain P., “India-Japan Relations: Peaks and Troughs,” *op. cit.*

fears of encirclement. China voiced its concerns against the Quad, notably after the multinational exercise *Malabar 2007*, that it is designed against her.

Although Abe still envisages Japan's security within the framework of partnership with the United States, he also advocates greater India-Japan cooperation in building the Asian security architecture. His return to office can thus be seen as a good signal for India. Yet, his proposals seem to have raised Chinese concerns over a potential containment strategy by Japan and its allies, thus fuelling bellicose trends in the Chinese leadership.

Abe's Election and Its Potential Implications

With 294 seats on its own as well as the support of its ally, the New Komeito Party, the LDP-led coalition has a two-thirds majority in the House of Representatives, thus enabling the government to overrule the House of Councillors. This majority in the Lower House of the Diet would provide the government with the ability to pass bills by voting them through for a second time if they are contested in the Upper House. As a result, Abe will be able to push through his agenda within the limits of what his coalition partners find acceptable.

Since the focus here is on Japan's external relations, let us leave aside Abe's stance on the economy. As shown previously, Abe's is inclined to increase cooperation with India. Here, let us analyse his position with regard to the current security context in Asia. In this matter, and in the context of rising tensions over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands, Abe took a tough and nationalist stance during the election campaign. Indeed, he declared that "our goal is to stop China from making (...) challenges."¹⁷ Even if Abe is known for being a pragmatic and responsible leader, commentators noted that he adopted a nationalistic tone during the campaign, which raised concerns over his ability to avoid the populist discourse. As Chinese ships are patrolling around the Senkaku/Diaoyutai, and as a Chinese plane recently flew over the islands, it appears difficult not to confront China on this issue without worsening relations. Thus Abe's election seems to foretell a deterioration of China-Japan relations. However, we have to nuance this assertion in the face of journalist reports that the LDP maintains several ties with Beijing that facilitate discussion.

Against this backdrop, Abe is primarily expected to restore good relations with the United States, a relationship that saw a deterioration during the last three years when the DPJ ruled Japan. By announcing that his first destination for an official visit will be Washington in January, Abe confirmed the primary importance of the United States for Japan. In the field of defence, Abe's administration has announced its intention to review Japan's defence

¹⁷ New York Times Website, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/17/world/asia/conservative-liberal-democratic-party-nearing-a-return-to-power-in-japan.html?hp&_r=3&, accessed on December 21, 2012.

policy so that the Self-Defense Forces can work more closely with the US military in response to China's rise.¹⁸ Abe's first declaration seems to point in the direction of a renewed and strengthened strategic partnership with the United States, meaning a more US-aligned Japan. As shown previously, this move could fuel China's fears.

With Abe taking a nationalistic stance and confronting China over the Senkakus, India-Japan cooperation could suffer since it does not seem to be in India's interest to confront China. Indeed, both countries need a peaceful and stable regional order to pursue economic and social development and could cooperate towards this objective. With China rising, especially in the military field, it is "natural" that India and Japan adopt a balancing behaviour, yet, as often in diplomacy, perceptions have great importance. If presented as directed against China, India-Japan cooperation could reinforce China's belligerent trends and potentially prompt China to gather allies against it. As Chellaney notes: "never before in history have China, India and Japan been all strong at the same time."¹⁹ Asia thus faces a very competitive environment, somewhat like Europe in the 1900s. If Asian countries want to avoid the same fate that befell European countries, they will have to put a hold on increased cooperation and avoid increasing the security dilemma in the region. Abe's declaration during his campaign did not seem to go in this direction, yet India has to pay great attention to ensure that this partnership does not solidify into a confronting alliance system that could potentially increase tensions and eventually trigger a war.

Regarding the tri-lateral alliance between India, Japan and the United States, Abe's election seems to point towards Tokyo moving back closer to its historical partnership with the United States, which is openly promoting military containment through the "pivot". This move by Japan is coherent in the current strained context, when it needs more than ever the insurance of its powerful ally against China. India, though, operates on a different logic. While the Tokyo-Washington axis seems focused on keeping China's power and influence under check, New Delhi is engaged in a more balanced approach, owing to many factors ranging from strategic concerns to the history of India-China relations. As a translation of that, India, which has welcomed the strategic partnership with the United States, has declined any form of alignment. In this regard, while bilateral ties and coordination measures will remain and certainly thrive, it is unlikely that something like a Trilateral Initiative will come out. This "realignment" by Japan could affect India-Japan relations, in the sense that Japan will probably renew the emphasis on cooperation with the United States at the expense of India.

¹⁸ Asahi Shimbun Website, http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201212270074, accessed on December 27, 2012.

¹⁹ Chellaney B., "Towards Asian Power Equilibrium", *op. cit.*

Finally, it has to be noted that China has already reacted to Abe's election through the state media *Xinhua*. An editorial published in the English version of *China Today* states that Abe's "foreign and defense policies (...) may destabilize East Asia", notably because he "has called for an increase in Japan's defense spending, easing constitutional restrictions on the military and even changing Japan's so-called Self Defense Forces into a full-fledged military."²⁰ It is thus apparent that China does not turn a blind eye to Japan's growing assertiveness and could be tempted to react to what it perceives as provocations. If both countries' fears are legitimate – China as a regional hegemon for Japan, and encirclement for China – it has to be allayed by more discussion and through positive engagement in order to avoid the confrontational logic.

The advent of Shinzo Abe to power appears then to be less of a good news for India than we could have expected owing to the context and the policy he is expected to adopt. It would be an exaggeration to say that Abe's election is bad news since India can take comfort in the coming to power of a pro-Indian Japanese leadership, but the foreign policy of Shinzo Abe could be an impediment to further cooperation between the countries as India has to consider the China factor. The first statements of Abe as PM would be crucial to assess as to whether the nationalist card was a tactical move during the election campaign or a true turn to the right. Similarly, an attempt to revise the constitution would also be an indicator of such a trend. Moreover, in the field of multilateral cooperation, Abe's Japan seems to be moving towards a closer alignment with the United States, potentially at the expense of India. Even if cooperation and strategic partnership will remain, Abe could then not renew Japan's commitment to the development of India-Japan partnership. Against this backdrop, India will have to closely monitor Abe's declarations, especially at the beginning of his tenure, and be careful not to let this partnership solidify into a bilateral or tri-lateral alliance openly directed against China. In the field of cooperation, it will have to strive to engage with the new Japanese administration, pointing to the many common challenges and interests the two countries share, so that they move towards the bigger purpose of the full realization of their strategic partnership.

²⁰ The Diplomat Website, "How Beijing sees Abe's return," <http://thediplomat.com/china-power/how-beijing-sees-abes-return-to-power/>, accessed on December 26, 2012.