

Forward Together We Go with Japan: ‘Dazzling’ US-India Rapprochement for Tokyo by Tomoko Kiyota

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The meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Barack Obama, Sept. 29-30, was warmly welcomed by Tokyo, which seeks to expand US-Japan security cooperation with New Delhi. Japan's major newspapers highlighted the two leaders' Joint Statement which underlined the importance of their trilateral dialogue with Japan and called for a trilateral dialogue among foreign ministers. The timing of Modi's visit to Washington also served Japanese interests. The Japan-India 'special relationship' that was emphasized during Modi's visit to Japan in early September had lost some of its shine after Chinese President Xi Jinping visited India two weeks later. Especially notable was Modi's hospitality to Xi, which signaled to Japanese observers that Delhi would not be willing to join a coalition to encircle China anytime soon.

US-Japan-India relations have changed rapidly over the last 10 years. During the Cold War, US-India relations were mostly bad, except for a few years after the China-India border conflict. India's leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement annoyed Washington, while US arms sales to Pakistan irritated New Delhi. Washington's attitude toward New Delhi threw a long shadow over Japan's relations with India, which were characterized primarily by indifference. Japan-India relations worsened after India's 1998 nuclear test and the Japanese sanctions that followed.

In the post-Cold War period, Washington's India policy continued to shape Japan's policy toward Delhi. US President Bill Clinton's March 2000 visit to New Delhi, the first US presidential visit to India in 20 years, prompted Japanese Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro to do the same in August of that year. After Mori's visit, Japan-India relations dramatically improved in tandem with US-India relations. Thus, the US has been both a push and pull factor in Japan's India policy.

Washington was also happy to see its ally lining up with US policy. *The Hindu* cited a US diplomatic cable from New Delhi on May 2006, which argued that "[t]he opportunity for the US to secure closer trilateral relations with the world's largest democracy and one of our greatest allies is dazzling." It also noted that "times have changed, and the time is right for the world's oldest democracy, the world's largest democracy, and Asia's most stable and prosperous democracy to become strategic partners." Consistent with that logic, the US Navy invited Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) to the US-India maritime exercise *Malabar* in 2007 for the first time, and again in 2009 and 2013.

The initiative for trilateral cooperation has shifted to Japan since mid-2006, when Abe Shinzo and Aso Taro came to power. Those two Japanese leaders never hesitated to show a pro-India attitude even if that provoked anxiety in China. Abe, who became prime minister in September 2006 for the first time, proposed the so-called "Quadrilateral Initiative," which was typically interpreted as encirclement of China by the US, Japan, Australia, and India. During Abe's August 2007 visit to India, he told the Indian Parliament that "a strong India is in the best interest of Japan, and a strong Japan is in the best interest of India." The Quadrilateral Initiative faded when Abe stepped down as prime minister in 2007, and his successor focused on other priorities. Aso, who became prime minister in September 2008, announced the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between Japan and India when Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Japan in October 2008. When Abe returned to power as prime minister in 2012, he expressed a desire to expand the Japan-US security partnership to India and Australia, and visited New Delhi again in January 2013 as a guest of the Indian Republic Day.

Abe's approach toward India accelerated after Modi assumed office in May 2014. Abe first met him when Modi visited Tokyo as Gujarat chief minister in 2007, and cultivated a friendship with the Indian politician whom Abe saw as a future prime minister. As soon as Modi and his party won the 2014 election, Abe called to invite Modi to Japan. Abe has also publicized that he follows only three Twitter accounts: his wife, former Tokyo mayor Inose Naoki, and Modi. When Modi visited Japan at the end of August, Abe took him to Kyoto and spent more time with him than any other visitor to seal this "special relationship."

Those in Japan who seek to promote security cooperation with India are concerned about the security environment in East Asia and want to strengthen Japanese national security. The US-Japan alliance is seen as an effective defense against Chinese aggression now, but there are some doubts about its future viability. There are also some in Tokyo who worry about a strong US-China relationship that overshadows the US-Japan alliance. They demand reassurance from Washington while seeking other reliable security partners. India is one of the top candidates, since anti-China sentiment is strong there.

There is no mistaking Modi's lukewarm attitude regarding China policy, however. Tokyo was disappointed that it could not reach agreement with Delhi to upgrade the current secretary level 2-plus-2 dialogue to the ministerial level. The *Asahi Shimbun* explained that New Delhi does not want to provoke Beijing because the volume of China-India trade is nearly four times that of Japan-India trade. This apparently even outweighs tensions caused when the PLA made an incursion over the Line of Actual Control during Xi's visit to India from Sept. 17 -18. Although it is reported that Modi and

Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj strongly denounced the incursion during their meeting with Xi and the Chinese delegation, the fact that Modi entertained Xi in his home town in Gujarat was perceived in Japan as enough to offset the “special relationship” between Japan and India.

Therefore, the summit between Obama, the president of Japan’s only ally, and Modi, Abe’s best friend, got high marks in Tokyo, too. Obama gave Modi a warm reception at the White House, although the Indian leader only had warm water at the dinner due to his religious fast. Obama took him to the Martin Luther King Memorial, an especially poignant visit for Indian politicians. Obama’s welcoming gesture was a good move for US-India relations, which had deteriorated after Indian diplomat Devyani Khoragade was arrested in the US in December 2013. It also might help to improve Modi’s image in the US. The US government had denied him a visa after sectarian riots killed more than 1,000 people in Gujarat in 2002, when he was serving as chief minister. Finally, the two leaders released a vision statement for the US-India Strategic Partnership, which captures the spirit of the US-India relationship: “Chalein Saath Saath: Forward together we go.”

Japanese leaders are hoping that they, too, will go forward together with Washington and India. At a minimum, the US-India rapprochement should help strengthen Japan-India security cooperation. Japan has developed its national security policy based on the US-Japan alliance for more than 60 years, thus it is easier to expand the alliance to include India than develop bilateral relations separately. Tokyo is delighted to read the Obama-Modi Joint Statement which mentioned the trilateral foreign ministers’ meeting among the US, Japan, and India. Japan’s involvement could be the glue for fragile US-India relations. Japan will also be able to leverage this move to balance China in Asia. In this context, Obama’s treatment of Modi at the White House is satisfying not only to Delhi, but Tokyo as well.

This Japanese preference will not be easy to achieve. Tokyo is still struggling to figure out how much it can gain from New Delhi, given India’s traditional preference for strategic autonomy. Beyond India’s economic partnership with China, anti-Americanism in New Delhi could also be an obstacle to US-India-Japan alignment. Subhash Kapila, an Indian strategist, for instance, wrote “India should vehemently reject any proposition of a Japan-India-United States Military Alliance.” According to him, “the United States could jettison India specially and Japan even from its strategic calculations in favor of China.” Tokyo will not be able to do anything to improve this Indian sentiment toward the US, but can only hope that China’s aggressive behavior pushes New Delhi closer to Tokyo and Washington.

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