

Japan-India Strategic Ties: time to move beyond mere words by Sourabh Gupta

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During the last week of May, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh paid a return visit to Tokyo, in keeping with a tradition inaugurated by him and Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in 2007 to exchange summit-level visits on an annual basis. China's cancellation of the 2013 Trilateral (Japan-China-Korea) Summit meeting, slated for late-May, opened space on the calendar for the Abe-Singh meeting. China's equally short-notice announcement of a Premier Li Keqiang visit to New Delhi in May and its attendant engineering of a mini-crisis on the disputed China-India frontier that drained political and bureaucratic attention from preparations for the Japan visit, robbed the Abe-Singh meeting of substantive content. There was modest progress in resuming negotiations toward a bilateral civil nuclear cooperation accord.

At first blush, Prime Ministers Singh and Abe are a study in contrasts. Of modest upbringing, calm demeanor, and apolitical technocratic bent, Singh has reigned over the world's largest democracy for nine years despite having never won a popular election. Abe, by contrast, traces his personal lineage to the economic czar of war-time Manchuria (and future prime minister), Kishi Nobusuke, and his political lineage to Choshu and its pioneering traditions of national reform, revivalism, and restoration constructed around the identity of a timeless Japanese nation. His tenure in the Diet has been as continuous (since 1993) as his first stint as prime minister in 2006-07 was short-lived.

By all accounts though, both prime ministers genuinely enjoy each other's company – a rarity among current world leaders. Neither has lost his deep affection, further, for his counterpart's country or its role in their respective worldviews, with Abe even reiterating his belief that the Japan-India relationship has the largest potential of any bilateral relationship, bar none. The goodwill between the two is mirrored in the state of bilateral ties and the rapid strategic strides taken over the past decade or so – at least on paper.

In April 2005, Prime Ministers Koizumi and Singh declared a Japan-India Partnership in a New Asian Era, inaugurating an eight-fold initiative to strengthen bilateral ties. In December 2006, the relationship was elevated to a Strategic and Global Partnership by Abe and Singh. A Roadmap to realize this strategic partnership was unveiled in August 2007 during Abe's visit to New Delhi. To embed the strategic dimension of Indo-Japanese cooperation within the larger bilateral partnership, Prime Ministers Aso and Singh issued a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in October 2008. To reinforce the notion that the landmark change in party

fortunes in Tokyo had no negative impact on the relationship, Democratic Party of Japan Prime Minister Hatoyama and Prime Minister Singh drew up an Action Plan in December 2009 to advance security cooperation based on the 2008 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation. At the October 2010 Japan-India annual summit, Prime Ministers Kan and Singh drew up a Vision Statement for their strategic partnership for the next decade – an Enhancement to which was agreed by Prime Ministers Noda and Singh in December 2011.

The reality of strategic cooperation has been less impressive. Aside from participation within the Tsunami Core Group relief effort in 2004, joint involvement in a flashy five-power exercise in the Bay of Bengal alongside the US, Australia, and Singapore in 2007, and an ongoing anti-piracy convoy coordination mission in collaboration with the PLA Navy, instances of Japan-India maritime and strategic cooperation have been relatively few. The first bilateral exercise between the Indian and Japanese navies was conducted only in June 2012. More to the point, both countries have placed a shallow operational ceiling to their scope of strategic cooperation in Asia and beyond.

Just before the Japan-India Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation was signed (October 2008), a similar Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation was signed (March 2007) by Prime Ministers Abe and Howard. Action Plans to realize those Declarations were issued in 2009 by both sets of countries. The Japan-India Declaration and accompanying Action Plan, unlike its Japan-Australia counterpart, omits a reference to trilateral cooperation with the United States as well as fails to provision for bilateral logistics cooperation and classified information sharing. Both such agreements, by contrast, were stitched up between Canberra and Tokyo in May 2010 and May 2012. A Japan-India defense relationship that is not premised in principle or letter on functionally-joined common actions is likely to bump up quickly against natural limits -- staff talks, ship and aircraft visits, bilateral exercises, and unit exchanges between defense divisions, by themselves, not amounting to much.

Bilateral cooperation frameworks aside, both Japan and India appear to operate within a set of self-imposed limitations that confine the practical scope of such cooperation.

On the Indian end, limits appear to be informal. In its Indian Ocean zone of core interest, New Delhi as a matter of principle seems disinclined to be appended to US and allied 'coalition of the willing' missions -- be it in regards to nonproliferation (Proliferation Security Initiative), anti-terrorism (Indian Ocean refueling operations) or nontraditional security (anti-piracy). The preference rather is to participate in only blue-helmeted missions or those that come under broad-based umbrellas such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and perhaps the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting + (ADMM+).

To avoid any hint of alignment with selective ‘minilateral’ groupings, joint exercises across a broad range of maritime security activities, including search-and-rescue, minesweeping, tactical maneuvers and passage exercises, are likely to remain bilateral. Overall, security collaboration in the Indian Ocean region will stay geared to cooperating with most, aligning with none, keeping the seas open to free passage and closed to great power contestation. And while New Delhi has participated in trilateral exercises with Washington and Tokyo in the waters of the East China Sea, it is by no means clear that New Delhi envisages the extension of any security obligation to these extra-regional waters.

Tokyo, on the other hand, remains hemmed-in by a slew of constitutional and administrative restraints, the most notable only of which is its inability to lend support, let alone be joined in the use of force, to a fellow state actor in a combat zone even in its own backyard (defined as ‘areas surrounding Japan’). That Tokyo can credibly signal itself to be a significant conventional security partner in an extra-regional theater (i.e., west of Malacca) would appear to be implausible – particularly at a time when its geographic horizons are retreating to its core ‘Far East’ theater of strategic interest. Although the Abe government can be expected to appropriately reinterpret/revise some of these constitutional restraints so as to expand the perimeter of defense cooperation with foreign partners, the scope of such exemptions is unlikely to noticeably benefit non-allied security partners like India. Rather, the bulk of such reinterpretations or exemptions, much like the December 2011 Three Arms Sales Principles exception instituted by the Noda government, will be overwhelmingly geared to enhancing defense industrial base integration and operational joint-ness with Japan’s Western alliance and security partners.

Clearly, Japan and India are not likely to be military partners in a conventional security contingency featuring China, now or anytime soon. That they can be political partners though in navigating the management of China’s rise will require that the security elements of their strategic cooperation be credible and meaningful – and be seen to be credible and meaningful. For that to be the case, Japan and India must find a way to engage in scenario-relevant practical cooperation on the ground and at sea such that joint actions during contingencies can adequately be planned for. The nature of defense exchanges need to be premised on information exchange, logistics sharing, formulation of joint contingency plans for non-traditional security operations and joint exercises premised on joint response to such contingencies.

As a first step, the two countries need a basic military information exchange accord like the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) that New Delhi and Washington signed in 2002. Down the line, cooperation in the area of search-and-rescue, anti-submarine warfare (ASW) surveillance and minesweeping can be conceived.

Second, Japan and India must agree to share equipment and supplies during UN blue-helmeted operations. Gradually, such logistics and equipment sharing can be extended to cover a range of other nontraditional security missions. Down the line, New Delhi will be well-served to strike up logistics

cooperation arrangements with all Indian Ocean SLOC (sea-lines of communications) users and so restore, in time, the Ocean to its historic role as a thoroughfare for all and a threatened barrier to none. Equally, Tokyo needs to loosen its restrictive weapons-use rules so that its personnel can provide modest armed assistance to Indian and multilateral state partners in non-traditional security missions.

Third, at this time both countries need to keep their defense cooperation strictly bilateral – at best, shadowing emerging developments in security cooperation among like-minded partners. The vocabulary of a ‘broader Asia,’ an ‘Indo-Pacific,’ or an ‘Indo-Asia-Pacific’ region has tended to run ahead of commitments and interests on the ground. Japan isn’t India’s security partner of choice in South Asia nor is India Japan’s in East Asia, nor will this state of affairs change anytime soon. Tightly-knit Japan-India security arrangements need to be framed horizontally instead within the emerging practice of Asian security multilateralism.

Fundamentally, however, both India and Japan need to revisit some cherished precepts of foreign policy. Although swayed by competing currents of Asia-centered or autonomy-oriented diplomacy, modern-day Japan has rarely been able to postulate an order independent of a Western-led diplomatic and alliance framework. Within this scheme of things, Tokyo’s relations with distant Asian actors has been an afterthought, resting in part on the need to compensate and rebalance for its inability to forge enduring partnerships with its neighbors. Post-independence India’s foreign policy, by contrast, has never sought to articulate an identity within the framework of an alliance system – be it Western or any other, and continues even today to remain conspicuously committed to a pluralistic model of a cooperative security order. Within this scheme of things, independent-minded powers capable of exercising autonomy of judgment and decision-making are accorded a position a preference.

If Japan-India strategic cooperation is to realize its potential in Asia and beyond, both Tokyo and New Delhi will have to de-emphasize a tad-bit the virtues of alliance or autonomy, respectively, and accommodate the virtues of alignment a lot more.

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