

COMMENT

Scripting another Asian narrative



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DECEMBER 02, 2017 00:02 IST



Japan is filling the vacuum created by the U.S.'s withdrawal from the region

[Japan](#) has long been an anomaly: an economic powerhouse within a geostrategic pygmy. But China's muscular ascent combined with the capriciousness of a Trump-led U.S. is causing Tokyo to slough off its diplomatic slumber and rethink its role in Asia. From proposing new security dialogues, to taking the lead in developing multilateral trade agreements, it is beginning to pick up some of the slack left by the U.S.'s "America First"-influenced withdrawal from leadership in Asia.

Japan is in a potentially explosive neighbourhood, and it no longer believes that a wholesale reliance on the U.S. for a defence umbrella is sufficient to secure its best interests. Foreign Minister Tarō Konō said in October: "We are in an era when Japan has to exert itself diplomatically by drawing a big strategic picture."

Military normalisation is one prong of Japan's new foreign policy, but even if a controversial revision of Japan's pacifist Constitution, as proposed by newly re-elected Prime Minister Shinzo Abe goes through, the archipelago's armed forces will remain under strong, self-imposed constraints. The constitutional revision would merely recognise the legality of Japan's long extant Self-Defense Forces (SDF). Offensive weapons and preemptive strikes would remain outlawed.

Countering China

His nationalist leanings notwithstanding, even Mr. Abe realises that remilitarising alone will not provide Japan with an effective solution to its diplomatic dilemmas. What Tokyo needs to prevent the region from succumbing to a Pax Sinica is to use its strengths, its capital, its technological know-how and its democratic credentials to win friends and influence countries across the region and beyond. It needs to beat infrastructure sugar daddy [China](#) at its own game.

A large part of China's rise has to do with its indispensability to global trade. But Japan is a trading heavyweight too, and is attempting to stake leadership on the regional platform with the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). With the U.S.'s departure from trade negotiations, Japan has become the principal driving force keeping the deal alive. At November's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Vietnam, Japan got the 11 countries still involved to agree on the "core elements" of a deal. It wants to lead rule-making on trade in the Asia Pacific, rather than let China set the agenda with alternatives to TPP such as the Beijing-backed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

At the same time, Japan is stepping up aid and investment in Southeast Asia. A train line near Manila, a seaport in Cambodia, and assistance in the reconstruction of Marawi City in the Philippines are some examples. As the top source of development aid to Vietnam, it has helped construct a new airport terminal in Hanoi as well as the first subway line in Ho Chi Minh City.

Mr. Abe recently committed 1 trillion yen (\$8.7 billion) to the Philippines over the next five years, with a continued focus on infrastructure development. Japanese investment in major Southeast Asian countries is estimated to have averaged \$20 billion per year, from 2011 to 2016, more than double the average annual flows between 2006 and 2010.

Japanese sales pitches to countries in the region always have one eye on China, emphasising advantages in areas where Beijing is vulnerable such as safety, reliability and solutions that deliver benefits to local populations.

Looking to India

China's \$900 billion, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure building campaign across Eurasia is a gauntlet that Japan has picked up by turning to the only country in the region with the heft to match China, India.

Japan and India have announced an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, aimed at creating sea corridors linking the countries of the Indo-Pacific to Africa. In addition, Japan is cooperating with India in third country infrastructure projects such as Iran's Chabahar Port, Sri Lanka's Trincomalee port, and the possible joint development of the Dawei port along the Thai-Myanmar border.

Japan has bagged the \$17 billion contract to build India's first high speed railway line, linking Mumbai and Ahmedabad. Tokyo is also investing in development projects in the Northeast and the Andaman and Nicobar islands. And Japan's Diet gave the go ahead to a Japan-India civil nuclear energy deal earlier this year. The possibility of purchasing Japanese submarines and search-and-rescue planes to help the Indian Navy is being discussed.

Creating a 'Quad'

A free and open Indo-Pacific, a phrasing that places India as a major actor in the Pacific, is an idea being proselytised by Japan in conjunction with the U.S. This is a response to concerns over the expansion of the Chinese navy and Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea, waters through which a huge majority of Japanese energy supplies transit.

It is against this background that Tokyo's championing of the Quadrilateral dialogue with the U.S., India and Australia aimed at creating a community of democratically oriented interests in the region must be understood.

Tokyo wants to use the bilateral ties it is developing to create a multilateral architecture in the region. Like Germany in post-World War II Europe, Japan is aware that unilateral moves by it invariably conjure up images of militarism and expansionism. However, without making genuine amendments for its past aggressions, an idea that Mr. Abe does not seem interested in, Japan's attempts to shape the future of the region will remain constrained.

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