

The Indo-Japanese bonhomie



INTERNATIONAL
THE NEWS

The Indo-Japanese relationship is rapidly gathering impetus, taking shape faster than any of New Delhi's current strategic partnerships in Asia. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited India this month to attend the 12th India-Japan Annual Summit. Both countries have agreed to establish the India-Japan Act East Forum with the intention to connect India's Act East Policy with Japan's Free and Open Asia-Pacific Strategy in the backdrop of China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative.

China's rapid economic rise and its military preeminence in Asia have brought India and Japan on the same page with a view to counterbalance Beijing in the region. Japan's verbal support to India during the Doklam standoff is indicative of the growing Indo-Japanese bonhomie to checkmate China's military presence in South and East Asia. Since China is inclined to peacefully continue its economic expansion in the region, it has so far responded positively to the budding Indo-Japanese alliance that has been designed to limit Beijing's regional economic and military clout.

What is perplexing and worrying is that Pakistan has scarcely paid any attention to the growing military partnership between New Delhi and Tokyo. Though the Indo-Japanese bloc is not mainly directed against Pakistan, it will have severe repercussions on Balochistan's low-intensity insurgency and the timely completion of CPEC.

During Abe's visit, both India and Japan inked 15 agreements to intensify the strategic ties between the two countries in various spheres, including civil aviation, trade and science and technology.

Japan wishes to acquire two major long-term objectives from its burgeoning partnership with India. First, Tokyo has not forgotten its position as the second-largest economy in the world. Needless to say, China has replaced Tokyo as the second-largest economic power and is widely projected to economically outsmart the US by 2050 if its current growth rate continues unimpeded. China's rapid economic expansion has instigated a cut-throat competition between Japan and China with regard to dominating the economies of developing countries in Asia.

China has continued to leave Japan far behind in winning multi-billion dollar contracts for building the transport and energy infrastructure in the region. In 2015, Beijing outbid Tokyo to win a \$5.5 billion contract in Indonesia. Both the industrialised countries are presently engaged in bracing themselves for an imminent face-off over a proposed Singapore-Kuala Lumpur Link, which is expected to be completed by 2016. The incumbent Japanese government is aware of the fact that Beijing's rapid economic expansion will further squeeze the regional markets for Japanese exports in the near future.

What should not be forgotten is that Japan had enjoyed the position of a great power from the second half of the 19th century until 1945 despite the lack of indigenous natural resources. So, it will leave no stone unturned to wrest its economic position from China by forging a regional alliance to challenge and limit China's military rise in Asia.

India's fast-expanding economy has provided Japan an ideal market to increase its exports and allow multinational corporations in Japan to increase their investments in different infrastructural projects in India. In addition to funding the 508-kilometre-long Mumbai-Ahmedabad High-Speed Rail Project, Japan has also decided to spend \$35 billion more for several infrastructural projects in India for the next five years. Tokyo will provide 81 percent of the funding for the \$16.9 billion bullet train project through a 50-year loan at an annual interest of 0.1 percent.

Japan is also deeply involved in several infrastructure projects in India. These include the Delhi-Mumbai Freight Corridor, the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor, the Chennai-Bengaluru Industrial Corridor, a series of metro projects in Chennai, Bengaluru and Delhi, the Mumbai-Ahmedabad high-speed railway and setting up several Japanese industrial townships. These projects will not only help Japanese companies amass a substantial amount of money, but will also assist Japan in bringing India under its regional umbrella against China.

Second, Japan is increasingly anxious about China's military assertiveness in the South and East China Seas. Tokyo has simmering territorial disputes with Beijing over the Senkaku and Diaoyu islands. These two factors have made many Japanese leaders highly apprehensive that if they do not check the growing military assertiveness of China in the region, Beijing could pose a major security threat to

Mainland Japan in the future. Under American influence, Japan has lately started exerting efforts to form a military alliance with India and Australia in order to slow down China's military ascendancy in Asia.

It is surprising to note that both China and India enjoy robust trade relations. This makes it abundantly clear that New Delhi does not wish to see Beijing's economic collapse anytime in the near future. China is India's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade worth \$71.5 billion. India exports \$61.3 billion worth of Chinese products while it exports only \$10.2 billion worth of goods to China. So, it is patently clear that both countries need each other to gain their economic interests in the region.

But India is deeply concerned about Beijing's alleged intention to encircle New Delhi through its grand connectivity projects, such as the 'String of Pearls' and the OBOR. Despite such apprehensions, India appears to be largely incapable of economically competing with China in South Asia because of the giant size of the Chinese economy, its efficient administrative structure and its fast rate of economic expansion in Asia. To Indian economists, if China is left to expand its economy regionally, it will flood regional markets with its cheap products and leave little space for India to export its goods.

As the main economic interests of India and Japan converge against the Chinese connectivity projects, both countries have decided to scuttle Beijing's initiatives from Asia to Africa. Both India and Japan have launched the \$40 billion Asia African Growth Corridor (AAGC) in May this year. Although the joint statement of India and Japan didn't specifically mention the AAGC, it vaguely promised to further accelerate connectivity initiatives in Africa. In this ambitious and counter-China move, Japan will contribute \$30 billion while India will spend some \$10 billion over the next few years to build connectivity between Asia and Africa.

This begs a major question: will the growing Indo-Japanese bloc succeed to outweigh China economically in mineral-rich Africa? It is pertinent to mention that China has already outclassed the US in Africa in terms of trade and is heavily engaged in expanding its economic influence throughout the continent. Given India's economic constraints and its inefficient political and obstructive bureaucratic structure, it is likely to be a tough task for the Indo-Japanese alliance to surpass China economically in Asia and Africa.

Under American influence, the Indo-Japanese bloc will attempt to challenge China's increasing naval presence in the East China Sea and the Arabian Sea. In this regard, Japan has assured India that it will provide all the necessary military assistance. Despite the price issues, India is bent upon purchasing the US-2 amphibian aircrafts from Japan. This would be one of Tokyo's first arms transfers since it ended a self-imposed embargo. Furthermore, India is also interested in purchasing the US-2

ShinMaywa aircraft for its navy from Japan. More importantly, the Japanese chief of staff is scheduled to visit India in the first half of 2018.

According to India Today, Japan asked India in 2014 to forge a group of likeminded Asian countries to thwart China's expansionist moves in the East China Sea as well as in the Himalayas. Surprisingly, China has brought almost all major regional countries under its economic fold, except Bhutan. What is crystal clear is that India will not be able to economically weaken China's influence in South Asia with the support of Bhutan.

China seems to be already prepared for any untoward situation created by the Indo-Japanese alliance. But Pakistan urgently needs to set its house in order and brace itself economically and militarily for the changing economic and security dynamics of the region.

The writer is an independent researcher.

Email: ayazahmed6666@gmail.com

Twitter: @ayazahmed66665

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