

Shinzo Abe's win will shape Asia's future

Just a few months back, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's political future was looking uncertain as his unpopularity rose and corruption scandals took the sheen off his governance agenda. And now he has bounced back, and how. Abe's ruling coalition has won a clear majority with more than two-thirds of Parliament's 465 seats, with the Liberal Democratic Party holding a majority even without its coalition partner. Abe's gamble of calling snap elections earlier this month has paid off, which was underlined by him in his post-victory comments: "We were able to earn the powerful support of the Japanese people, well surpassing our goal."

Flush from his win, Abe went straight to business by focusing on his priority: "My immediate task is to deal with North Korea. It will take tough diplomacy. With the mandate given by the people, I would like to exercise my command in diplomacy." Even during the congratulatory call from US President Donald Trump, Abe's focus was on the need of being united to increase pressure on North Korea.

Along with a focus on the North Korean threat, a victory for Abe means a continuation of his earlier policies, which include strengthening the alliance with the US, a more robust defence and foreign policy vis-à-vis China, as well as a super-loose monetary policy. With a so-called supermajority in both houses, Abe can now move forward on pushing for a revision to Japan's war-renouncing constitution, a long-cherished goal of his and his nationalistic supporters. While Article 9 technically bans the maintenance of armed forces by saying that "land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential will never be maintained", it has been interpreted by successive Japanese governments to allow the nation's Self-Defence Forces for exclusively defensive purposes. As Chinese regional ambitions rise and uncertainty over America's willingness to continue contributing to regional security continues, Article 9 is viewed by some as something of an anachronism. Abe had set a deadline of 2020 to revise Japan's constitution though this remains a highly divisive issue.

Abe will be welcoming Trump during the latter's first trip to Asia early next month at a time when China under Xi Jinping is convinced of the inevitability of its emergence as a global superpower. And the Trump administration's chaotic foreign policy is causing consternation about the future of its commitments to Asia. Abe has invested a lot in reaching out to Trump but he has also developed other regional partnerships.

An assertive Japan will be welcomed by India. Of all of Tokyo's neighbours, India is perhaps the most comfortable with Japan's rise. The two nations already share a close relationship across various sectors—economic, defence, nuclear—and even personal chemistry. Prime Minister Narendra Modi shares a close personal rapport with Abe that has only grown over the last three years. And the Indo-Japanese partnership is key to maintaining a stable balance of power in the wider Indo-Pacific. Abe always had a special place for India in his vision of the emerging order in the Asia-Pacific. Much before anyone else, he could foresee the need to view the Indian and Pacific oceans as a cohesive unit. In Modi he has found a kindred spirit. Both have a vision for the region in which the Indo-Japanese relationship plays a central stabilizing role.

India and Japan are keen on building a broader coalition of like-minded countries with the US and Australia to manage unfolding strategic realities in the broader Indo-Pacific. Abe had articulated a need for such a security architecture way back in 2012 when he had suggested "a strategy whereby Australia, India, Japan, and the US state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific". China's aggressiveness has only made this idea more tangible.

India and Japan complement each other economically and this has allowed the two to leverage each other's strengths. While Japanese investment in India continues to grow and India's need for Japanese technology in the infrastructure sector keeps on expanding, India has also decided to send 300,000 youth to Japan for on-job training for three-five years as part of the government's skill development programme. India is the largest recipient of Japanese foreign aid. Japanese investment in India is booming, with the Japanese making record investment in private equity and venture capital in India. Japan made an exception to its rule of not conducting nuclear commerce with any state that is not a signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The two nations are working on an ambitious programme, the Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), which will find place in the Abe-Modi summit. With a Japanese commitment of \$30 billion and an Indian commitment of \$10 billion, the project is aimed at building capacity and human resource development in Africa as well as developing infrastructure and institutional regional connectivity.

As Abe begins to work on his ambitious agenda for Japan, he will find in India a reliable friend. And as Modi works to project India as a leading global power, he will find in Japan an important and powerful interlocutor at a time of unprecedented change in the larger Asian landscape. Delhi and Tokyo will need to continue to nurture this very important bilateral partnership but Abe's victory augurs well for the relationship.

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