

TEAMING UP WITH TOKYO

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Japan

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Tokyo later this month will be keenly watched by India's strategic community. Since he assumed office in 2014, Mr. Modi has made India-Japan relations a key priority area of his foreign policy. Now, in the last year of his term, Indian analysts are looking for tangible signs of a transformation in economic and security ties.

Fortunately for India, Mr. Modi's Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe is a keen advocate of closer bilateral relations. Mr. Abe views India as the pivotal state in the Indian Ocean. A strong India, he candidly professes, is in Japan's interest, just like a strong Japan is beneficial for India.

The Abe administration is focusing attention on two critical areas — maritime security and strategic connectivity. On the security front, Japan is keen to strengthen the trilateral Malabar exercises with India and the U.S. During the last iteration of the exercises off Guam in June this year, the Japanese Navy deployed a maritime surveillance aircraft and a submarine, demonstrating a readiness for a strategic role in Asia's sensitive littorals.

In a bid to raise its Indian Ocean profile, Japan recently deployed its state-of-the-art helicopter carrier-destroyer, Kaga, to South Asia. After a brief stopover at Colombo, the ship is in Visakhapatnam for the Japan-India Maritime Exercises.

Tokyo is keen that its military exchanges with India also include Army and Air Force exchanges. An Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement — on the lines of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement with the U.S. — is in the offing, and there is also talk of joint collaboration in unmanned armoured vehicles and robotic systems. Further, Japan also wants to assist India in improving the state of maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean, where India is keen to set up an 'information fusion centre'.

Notwithstanding the excitement over security relations, it is strategic connectivity that presents the bigger opportunity. Tokyo and New Delhi have been working together on infrastructure projects in the Northeast. They are also building the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, whose four pillars — developmental projects, quality infrastructure, capacity building, and people-to-people partnership — make it an effective counterpoint to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

What makes Japan a reliable partner in the connectivity arena is its emphasis on 'quality'. Unlike China's Belt and Road projects, Japanese infrastructure initiatives are environmentally friendly and financially sustainable, with project managers laying particular stress on life cycle costs and asset resilience. Not only has Japanese development aid produced demonstrable results on the ground, Tokyo's insistence on transparency has generated enormous trust.

The Modi government's economic and security outlook — often articulated in terms of its 'Act-East' outreach — fits well with Mr. Abe's vision for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'. Both countries want a regional order based on rules. However, neither country is keen to antagonise China. While Tokyo is willing to work with Beijing on overseas infrastructure projects, New Delhi has expressed reservations about its 'Quadrilateral' partners (the U.S., Japan and Australia) resorting to China-containment tactics.

Even so, Japanese and Indian policymakers recognise the importance of balancing Chinese power in the Indo-Pacific. To deter China's maritime aggression in their strategic backwaters, Japan and India have upped their defence engagement.

None of this suggests a neat alignment of strategic interests and ambitions. Despite repeated attempts, talks for the sale of the US-2i amphibious aircraft have been deadlocked over issues of price and technology transfer. The deal has been hanging fire since 2014 when Indian officials raised objections over the platform's high cost. Tokyo subsequently agreed to a concession but the aircraft's price was still deemed high by Indian negotiators (over a \$100 million apiece).

Of greater concern has been Japan's unwillingness to let India license produce the US-2i, insisting on delivering all aircraft in flyaway condition. The hard-bargaining, say observers, hasn't been worthwhile, not least since the plane does little other than search and rescue.

Even so, India's foreign policy establishment knows the deal has come to be seen a symbol of India-Japan defence cooperation. A failure to procure it would be deemed as a setback. Policymakers also acknowledge that the partnership is increasingly vital for the security of littoral Asia. In the wake of growing challenges in the maritime domain, New Delhi knows that operational synergy with Tokyo is a strategic imperative. Striking a deal on the US-2i would be a good start point.

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