

The arc to Tokyo: on India-Japan ties

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to India, part of annual summits between the two countries, has set strategic ties on a fast track. This is best symbolised by the [Ahmedabad-Mumbai bullet train project](#) that was launched by Mr. Abe and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. India's decision to partner with Japan for the 508-km, 1.1 lakh-crore project is as much about politics as it is about infrastructure: Japan has been keen to export its high-speed train technology along with rolling stock, and India's move to confirm the Japanese contracts while China wins projects along its Belt and Road railway line is significant. The joint statement and comments by the two Prime Ministers in Gandhinagar also sent out a similar message that will be read closely in China on several counts. For example, Mr. Abe said [North Korea was a "joint" challenge for India and Japan](#), and the statement contained a phrase about holding countries "that have supported North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes" accountable, obviously aimed at Pyongyang's benefactors in Beijing. The clause calling for zero tolerance on terrorism referenced China's veto on the Jaish-e-Mohammad chief being put on the list of UN-designated terrorists. Both the title of the joint statement, "Toward a free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific", and substantive paragraphs on cooperation in the region, indicate a much closer alignment between India and Japan in countering China's influence in the South China Sea, its forays into the Indian Ocean, and investments in South Asia and Africa. The coming into force of the India-Japan nuclear deal and more military and maritime exercises will buttress such efforts. India has also extended to Japan an offer denied to any other country, which is to assist in infrastructure development in the Northeast.

In 8 km, Japan and India come closer

It is clear that the Modi government has set India-Japan ties on an accelerated geopolitical course that will be a major factor in its dealings with the rest of the world, especially China, at a time when the U.S. is perceived to be retreating from the region. Having made this leap, it is imperative that India and Japan also look beyond their lofty geopolitical aims, at the more basic aspects of bilateral engagement. While Japan is India's largest donor and the third largest provider of FDI, bilateral trade has steadily declined since 2013, and is down to \$13.61 billion in 2016-17 from \$14.51 billion the year before. The contrast with India-China trade, at \$71 billion a year, and Japan-China trade, at \$279 billion, is stark, and the decision to finalise four new locations for special Japanese industrial townships may be only one way of addressing the difficulties businessmen face in India. With the opulent pageantry and 8-km roadshow in Gujarat over, it is time to get down to brass tacks and address some of the issues in order to facilitate closer ties between India and Japan, even as the two leaders and militaries forge closer bonds.

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