

## India-Japan relations in good health

India is known to grant titles of “strategic partnership” very generously. It is not odd to hear foreign ambassadors and high commissioners in New Delhi grumbling about this peculiar Indian trait in private conversations. The relationship with Japan, however, is too special to be given the same treatment. Therefore, the Indo-Japanese bilateral cooperation is carried out under the framework of a “special strategic and global partnership”. The better part is that the pace of cooperation between the two countries is indeed impressive and therefore justifies the unique nomenclature.

Although the bilateral relationship was on an upswing even earlier, the incumbent Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Shinzo Abe should be credited for giving it an unprecedented momentum. While the headlines during the 13-14 September visit of Abe to India were hogged by the commencement of [the Mumbai-Ahmedabad high speed rail project](#) (bullet train)—a flagship project of bilateral cooperation—Modi and Abe have succeeded in putting the relationship on the fast track in a number of other ways. In the last three years, a) Japan has been made a permanent participant in the Malabar naval exercises which also involves the US; b) the two countries have inked a nuclear deal—Japan’s first with a non-signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT); c) the India-Japan-US trilateral has been upgraded to ministerial level; and d) a new trilateral at the foreign secretary level has been initiated with Australia as the third country.

In addition to these, the numbers on Japanese foreign direct investment (FDI) and overseas development assistance (ODA) to India have been climbing. In his speech at the India-Japan Business Leaders Forum on Thursday, Modi announced: “Last year has seen the highest ever disbursement of official development assistance from Japan in a financial year.” He added that the “FDI flows from Japan have almost tripled in last three years.” Other than the Mumbai-Ahmedabad high speed rail, many other high-profile projects like the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC) and Mumbai Trans-harbour link project are under different stages of execution.

There are disappointments too. The trade numbers—below \$15 billion annually in the last two years—do not reflect the economic ties between the third and the fourth largest (on purchasing power parity terms) economies in the world. Long pending defence deals—especially the sale of US-2 amphibious aircraft to India—too haven’t moved forward. However, these areas of slow growth cannot take away from the tremendous distance that has been covered elsewhere.

The strategic logic underpinning the cooperation is well-known: the rise of China. The joint statement calls for “a free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific region where sovereignty and international law are respected, and differences are resolved through dialogue, and where all countries, large or small, enjoy freedom of navigation and overflight, sustainable development, and a free, fair, and open trade and investment system.” It doesn’t take much to decipher who is being targeted here. The joint statement also endorses the principles on which India decided to sit out the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Unlike previous versions, this joint statement is also much more direct in condemning North Korea and Pakistan. The statement also does well to hint at the role of China in creating the international problems that North Korea and Pakistan today are. In a way, India and Japan show themselves to be an open and democratic bulwark against the malafide conduct of the Rawalpindi-Beijing-Pyongyang axis.

The Abe visit also comes at a crucial time. Japan has been unsure of the US commitment to its allies ever since Donald Trump started his presidential campaign. The ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missile) capability of North Korea has aggravated Tokyo’s worries about the decoupling of the US-Japan alliance ([bit.ly/2jyf5vP](http://bit.ly/2jyf5vP)). It is not clear whether the Asean (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) will be able to hold its own in the face of increasing Chinese assertiveness in the

region. Indo-Russian relations, a stabilizing factor in the past, are in flux. In this scenario, India and Japan are the only major forces of stability in the Indo-Pacific.

It is therefore fitting that the two countries are exploring cooperation on infrastructure and human development projects beyond India. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), if pursued with an unwavering focus, has the potential to become a serious counterweight to China's BRI. Unlike BRI, the AAGC promises to evolve a consultative mechanism towards identification and implementation of projects.

In *Outlook* magazine, Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan of the Observer Research Foundation has put it provocatively: "Is Japan the new Russia for India?" Of course, no two countries are alike. Japan, for example, doesn't have the same military industrial complex as Russia. It also does not have a veto in the Security Council. But the question is: Is Japan going to be India's most reliable partner in the future, just as Russia was in the past? The answer, of course, will be known with time. For now, one can say that the start has been very good. The two countries should work on boosting bilateral trade and strengthening security cooperation. If the emerging geopolitical environment helps Japan become a "normal" military power—it is currently restrained by its own Constitution—it will help New Delhi and Tokyo in evolving a robust security architecture in the Indo-Pacific.

*Will the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor prove to be a serious competition to China's BRI? Tell us at [views@livemint.com](mailto:views@livemint.com)*

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