

Enhancing the India-Japan partnership

There has been much ado about the advance in India-Japan relations following the recent summit between Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Shinz Abe, which the India-Japan joint statement heralded as a “Special Strategic And Global Partnership”. Doubtless, the relationship has evolved to a level that might have been unimaginable just a few years ago and bears the distinct imprimatur of Abe and Modi. Abe believes that while a security pact with the US might suffice for now to ensure regional stability, there are long-term benefits in buttressing this key alliance through a strategic partnership with a rising power. Modi’s policy of hedging by diversifying partners and its growing interests in the Indo-Pacific, coupled with an emphasis on short-term deliverables, made New Delhi amenable to closer ties.

If the relative uncertainty of the US as a long-term guarantor of Japan’s security is a key factor behind Tokyo’s enthusiasm, then the pace of the relationship for both is being determined by the growing ambitions of an actor not mentioned in the joint statement: China. Beijing’s spreading geopolitical and geo-economic tentacles via One Belt, One Road, its ability to fragment the cohesion of the Association of South-East Asian Nations, its blatant disregard of the laws of the sea convention—to which it is a party—in the South China Sea, and the nuclear threats posed by its client states Pakistan and North Korea, clearly lent urgency to the process.

Yet, the two nations have curtailed their ambitions to align “Japan’s free and open Indo-Pacific strategy with India’s Act East policy” to the Indo-Pacific region. While this is aimed at containing China, it does not go far enough. Unless there is similar alignment on the Middle East and Africa, China will remain unconstrained.

Clearly, India-Japan relations are still not at a stage where they can mutually and effectively advance their bilateral, regional and global interests. To do so, the two will also have to work together on international development, maritime security, civil nuclear issues, reform of the UN Security Council (UNSC), and UN peacekeeping.

While there has been some progress in the area of maritime security, through the trilateral Malabar exercises (with the US), and on civil nuclear energy with the entry into force of the agreement for nuclear cooperation, there has been little or no progress in other crucial areas.

Herein lies the rub. While both India and Japan are keen on enhancing development cooperation, becoming permanent UNSC members, and working together in peacekeeping operations, in reality they remain far apart on the principles and practice in these areas.

For instance, while Japan is the fourth largest provider of official development assistance (ODA) to the UN—after the US, the UK and Germany—its contribution is short of the UN’s ODA target of 0.7% of gross national income. Thus, when India chides members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for not meeting their ODA target and shirking from their commitment towards international development, it inadvertently targets Japan.

Moreover, while Japan’s development funding is primarily governed by OECD norms, India’s isn’t. If the two want to jointly fund development projects in third countries, as part of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (which, curiously, finds no mention in the joint statement), they will have to work out common norms.

Similarly, while both New Delhi and Tokyo aspire to be on the UNSC permanently, they have very different perspectives of their roles when they eventually become members. Japan is solidly in the Western camp and invariably supports Washington and its allies and is less squeamish about

imposing sanctions or interventions. India, on the other hand, presents itself as a champion of the developing world, of sovereignty and non-intervention, and is opposed to sanctions. These differences are visible for most UN members from Asia and Africa, which will ultimately decide the reform of the UNSC. Unless Japan and India (along with Brazil and Germany, which collectively are the G-4 aspirants to the council) can develop a convincing narrative for African and Asian countries that an enlarged council will benefit them, reforms are unlikely.

One area where Japan and India can work together to build a common narrative is UN peacekeeping. Currently, they are on the opposite sides of the gold versus blood debate. Japan as one of the biggest funders of UN peacekeeping operations is keen to reduce peacekeeping costs while expecting troop contributing countries (TCC) to take on challenging mandates. Its own peacekeeping record in the field has been appalling—recent activities of its troops in South Sudan forced the defence minister to resign.

India, as a leading TCC, has been involved in the majority of UN peacekeeping operations and has decades of experience. It has been at loggerheads with Japan and other funders for increasing reimbursements and reducing complex mandates. Were India and Japan able to cooperate within the UN on peacekeeping and, perhaps, evolve ways to bridge the contentious gold versus blood debate, they would not only make peacekeeping more effective but might also win kudos from African nations where most of the peace operations occur.

Clearly, while India-Japan relations have moved much faster and further than in the past, they still have several fundamental and structural differences, which will prevent further progress. Unless, of course, Abe and Modi can lead the way to resolve the differences.

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