



Modi's Latest Visit to Japan:

The Indo-Pacific as the Template for Relations

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent Japan visit from October 27-29, 2018,¹ yet again reiterated that while terming India and Japan as "natural allies" may still be an over statement, describing them as "natural strategic partners," might not be wholly off the mark. A review of this visit reinforces the view that the India-Japan "special strategic and global partnership" has a deeper meaning and greater significance, with notable implications, for the regional strategic landscape. Modi's visit to Japan came hard on the heels of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to China from October 25-27, 2018. Incidentally, Abe's visit, the first by a Japanese prime minister since 2011, was perceived as marking a thaw in China-Japan relations.² Therefore, the scheduling of Modi's visit actually appeared to be conveying the message that mature relationships are not a zero sum game. It seemed to be highlighting the strength of the India-Japan strategic partnership. Officials though, do not confirm this inference.

The latest meeting between Modi and Abe, actually the 12th meeting between them in last four and half years³, underlined their joint striving for "a natural, open,

¹ "Transcript of Media Briefing by Foreign Secretary on Upcoming Visit of Prime Minister to Japan," Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), October 26, 2018, <https://www.mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?30534/Transcript+of+Media+Briefing+by+Foreign+Secretary+on+upcoming+visit+of+Prime+Minister+to+Japan>.

² "Japan PM Shinzo Abe to Make Rare China Visit on Oct 25-27," *The Straits Times*, last modified on October 12, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/japan-pm-abe-to-make-rare-china-visit-on-oct-25-27>.

³ "Transcript of Media Briefing by Foreign Secretary on upcoming visit of Prime Minister to Japan," MEA.

free and inclusive” Indo-Pacific region that would define the strategic partnership in which joint connectivity initiatives will play a key role, in times to come. The pronouncements, emerging from the visit, appeared to be acknowledging China’s place in the envisaged Indo-Pacific region, which, in turn, indicated that India and Japan were conscious of their responsibilities towards managing “a post-US Asia.” The visit also reaffirmed the ever refining institutional software of the strategic partnership, and at the same time served as a reminder of the existence of some long-pending issues.

According to Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale the prime minister’s visit was substantially focused on the Indo-Pacific.⁴ India-Japan Vision 2025 had based the two countries’ strategic partnership on “peace and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region and the world” during Abe’s visit to India in 2015.⁵ This premise was further sharpened as a commitment for “a free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific” during his next visit to India 2017.⁶ Reaffirming “the ASEAN unity and centrality at the heart of the Indo-Pacific concept, which is inclusive and open to all”⁷ during Modi’s latest visit to Japan, the two prime ministers made their vision for the Indo-Pacific more definable and saleable for the region. This reaffirmation bore the clear mark of Modi’s speech at Shangri La dialogue in Singapore in June 2018, in which he envisaged the Indo-Pacific as a regional integration rather than as a strategic-security theatre.⁸ Thus, the vision of ending the artificial divide between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean regions, co-authored by the two countries in contemporary times, has come a long way since Abe captured this theme in his “the confluence of the two seas” speech in the India Parliament in 2007⁹ and Indian naval military doctrine alluded to it, in 2004.¹⁰ The two countries stand as

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Joint Statement on India and Japan Vision 2025: Special Strategic and Global Partnership Working Together for Peace and Prosperity of the Indo-Pacific Region and the World,” Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), December 12, 2015, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/26176/Joint_Statement_on_India_and_Japan_Vision_2025_Special_Strategic_and_Global_Partnership_Working_Together_for_Peace_and_Prosperty_of_the_IndoPacific_R.

⁶ “India-Japan Joint Statement during Visit of Prime Minister of Japan to India: Toward a Free, Open and Prosperous Indo-Pacific,” Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), September 14, 2017, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28946/IndiaJapan>.

⁷ “India-Japan Vision Statement,” Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), October 29, 2018, <https://www.mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?30543/IndiaJapan+Vision+Statement>.

⁸ “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue,” Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), June 1, 2018, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>.

⁹ Shinzo Abe, “Confluence of the Two Seas,” (Speech, Parliament of the Republic of India, August 22, 2007), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pm0708/speech-2.html>.

¹⁰ Rukmani Gupta, “Vibhanshu Shekhar Asked: What is India’s Approach towards the Indo-Pacific Region?”, *ASK AN EXPERT* Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), Accessed November 10, 2018, <https://idsa.in/askanexpert/IndiasapproachtowardstheIndoPacificregion>.

the harbingers of the Indo-Pacific regional integration process, which in turn determines the strategic direction and template of India-Japan relations. This template subsumes their old normative pitch for a liberal, democratic and rule-based order.

The deliberations during the meeting illuminated the two leaders' efforts to jointly redefine connectivity by ensuring:

...quality infrastructure, and other projects including capacity building for shared prosperity...in an open, transparent and non-exclusive manner and based on international standards, responsible debt financing practices, and in alignment with local economic and development strategies and priorities...¹¹ [by guaranteeing] “mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.”¹²

They are willing to offer an “India, Japan plus one” trilateral format for cooperation in their “expanded neighborhood” in Africa and Asia.¹³ Some examples of this are: trilateral collaboration for a LNG terminal in Sri Lanka; housing, education and electrification in the Rakhine state in Myanmar; road widening, bridge construction and reconstruction projects in Bangladesh; and exploring trilateral cooperation for a cancer hospital in Kenya.¹⁴ In keeping with this, Modi and Abe endorsed the proposal for a Platform for Japan-India Business Cooperation in Asia-Africa Region.¹⁵ The two countries had also proposed the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) proposal in 2017.¹⁶ This wide ranging cooperation from Africa to Asia has been in keeping with the vision, of an Indo-Pacific region. Incidentally, “India, Japan plus one” can bring Taiwan’s New Southbound Policy within the India-Japan developmental cooperation.

On the face of it, the above-mentioned connectivity initiatives and their principles, advocated by India and Japan, may appear to be a response to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as there have been concerns flagged against the

¹¹ “India-Japan Vision Statement,” Ministry of External Affairs (MEA).

¹² “Transcript of Media Briefing by Foreign Secretary on upcoming visit of Prime Minister to Japan,” Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “India-Japan Fact Sheets: India-Japan Development Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, Including Africa,” Press Information Bureau, Government of India, last modified October 29, 2018, Accessed November 10, 2018, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=184461>.

¹⁵ “India-Japan Vision Statement,” Ministry of External Affairs (MEA).

¹⁶ Ruchita Beri, “India’s New Initiative in Africa: The Asia–Africa Growth Corridor,” IDSA, June 13, 2017, Accessed November 10, 2018, https://idsa.in/idsacomments/indias-new-initiative-in-africa-asia-africa-growth-corridor_rberi_130617.

BRI's revenue model. And also because, India has raised objections against the BRI's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), citing its concerns regarding the implications for sovereignty claims over Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir.¹⁷ However, although the BRI's scale is unprecedented, connectivity ideas and bids did not start with it. For example, connectivity has been a priority area in India's Look East policy all along. Connectivity initiatives have diversified and improved with time, and regions need multiple initiatives, that both complement and supplement each other.

While Japan endorses the BRI in a qualified manner¹⁸, India says it is open to collaboration with every country, without exception, provided the above mentioned principles are observed.¹⁹ The two countries repeatedly stress that their vision is for an Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and open to all. This combined with India's frequent clarifications that its reservations with regard to the BRI are principle based and not a China-specific opposition are an indication that they acknowledge the importance and place of China in the envisioned regional process. Their reaffirming the ASEAN's centrality to the process is also meant as a reassurance that they do not view the Indo-Pacific as their personal turf. The way India and Japan have positioned their relationship suggests, that they are guided by the realisation that they will eventually pick up the baton from the USA in the region. This realisation seems to have strengthened in view of the increasing uncertainty about Trump's strategic perspective and concerns regarding his indiscriminate transactionalism. Therefore, their push for an "inclusive" Indo-Pacific regional process is an exercise in the direction of preparing the region to manage its affairs on its own.

Separately, Modi's visit yet again highlighted that a strong India-Japan alignment in regional politics is a reality that needs to be reckoned with. On the bilateral front, the visit reported important steps to further deepen strategic partnership. Some of these are: reaffirmation of their commitment to institute Foreign and Defence Ministerial Dialogue (2+2); bilateral tri-service joint exercises;

¹⁷ "Official Spokesperson's Response to A Query on Participation of India in OBOR/ BRI Forum", Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), May 13, 2017, <https://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28463/Official+Spokespersons+response+to+a+query+on+participation+of+India+in+OBORBRI+Forum>.

¹⁸ "Abe Offers Conditional Cooperation with China's Silk Road Initiative", *The Japan Times*, last modified Jun 06, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/06/05/national/politics-diplomacy/abe-offers-conditional-cooperation-chinas-silk-road-initiative/#.WKdeORRfIU>.

¹⁹ See note 1; note 7 and note 17 above.

and the initiating “of negotiations on the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA).” This is in addition to the substantial heft India-Japan strategic cooperation already has “in terms of institutionalisation, regularity, frequency, and the substance of cooperation.”²⁰ Significantly, the visit saw the underlining of “the area of Unmanned Ground Vehicle (UGV) and Robotics” for cooperative research.²¹

It is not possible here to fully capture the domestic developmental dimensions of the partnership that Modi and Abe touched upon during the visit. Suffice to say, Japan’s Official Developmental Assistance (ODA) has played an important role in India’s development plans. The India-Japan Act East Forum, which was set up in 2017 as an outcome of Abe’s visit to India in that year, for “economic modernisation” of India’s Northeast region say a lot.²² Japanese contribution to infrastructure and connectivity in India is, particularly, notable. The ongoing Mumbai-Ahmedabad High Speed Rail project, targeted to be completed by the 75th anniversary of India’s independence in 2022, has attracted attention in the recent period. Japan has been participating in Metro projects (subway projects) in Indian cities. It has immensely contributed to the Western Dedicated Freight Corridor and the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor.²³

On the flip side, one may argue that the ‘special strategic and global partnership’ is still grappling with the issues such as tardy decision-making, delayed execution of projects and stagnating trade figures. The delay in the completion of the Dedicated Freight Corridor and long-pending decision regarding the sale of US2 amphibious aircraft to India are some examples.²⁴ While their vision for joint connectivity initiatives is laudable, the availability of resources, particularly in India, will require smart prioritising. There have been bottlenecks in India-Japan nuclear cooperation, largely due to Japan’s domestic political compulsions. Nevertheless, one has to accept that the India-Japan partnership that began rather late in the early 2000s, has emerged as the fastest developing “special strategic and global partnership” in this century. This partnership meets every condition – shared

²⁰ Prashant Kumar Singh, “Korea in India’s Look & Act East Policy,” In *Major Powers and Korean Peninsula: Policies, Politics and Perspectives*, ed. Titli Basu. New Delhi: Pentagon Press (under process for publication).

²¹ “India-Japan Vision Statement,” Ministry of External Affairs (MEA).

²² “Launch of India-Japan Act East Forum,” Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), December 5, 2017, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29154/Launch_of_IndiaJapan_Act_East_Forum.

²³ “India-Japan Vision Statement,” Ministry of External Affairs (MEA).

²⁴ “Miles to go,” *Indian Express*, October 31, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/editorials/miles-to-go-13-narendra-modi-shinzo-abe-japan-india-relation-5426201/>.

norms, strategic convergence, huge prospects for multidimensional (economic, science and technology, and culture) cooperation and, more importantly, aspirations to discharge larger responsibilities – that qualify India and Japan to be described as, “natural strategic partners.”

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