

## Unfold the Abe-Modi axis

Harsh V Pant, Nov 4 2017, 0:51 IST



Just a few months ago, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's political future was looking uncertain as his unpopularity rose and corruption scandals took the sheen off his governance agenda. Now he has bounced back, and how! Abe's ruling coalition won a clear majority with more than two-thirds of parliament's 465 seats, with the Liberal Democratic Party holding a majority even without its coalition partner. Abe's gamble of calling snap elections last month paid off, which was underlined by Abe in his post-victory comments: "We were able to earn the powerful support of the Japanese people, well surpassing our goal."

Flush from his win, Abe went straight down to business by focusing on his priority: "My immediate task is to deal with North Korea," Abe said. "It will take tough diplomacy. With the mandate given by the people, I would like to exercise my command in diplomacy." Even during the congratulatory call from US President Donald Trump, Abe's focus was on the need for the allies to stay united to increase the pressure on North Korea.

Along with a focus on the North Korean threat, a victory for Abe means a continuation of his earlier policies, which include strengthening the alliance with the US, a more robust defence and foreign policy vis-à-vis China, as well as a super-easy monetary policy. With a so-called supermajority in both houses, Abe can now move forward to push for a revision to Japan's war-renouncing constitution, a long-cherished goal of his and his nationalistic supporters.

While Article 9 technically bans the maintenance of armed forces by saying that "land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained," it has been interpreted by successive Japanese governments to allow the nation's Self-Defence Forces for exclusively defensive purposes. As Chinese regional ambitions rise and uncertainty over America's willingness to continue contributing to regional security continues, Article 9 is viewed by some as something of an anachronism. Abe had set a deadline of 2020 to revise Japan's constitution though this remains a highly divisive issue.

Abe will be welcoming President Trump during first official trip to Asia this month at a time when China under Xi Jinping is shedding its reticence and is convinced of the inevitability of its emergence as a global superpower, while the Trump administration's chaotic foreign policy is causing consternation about its commitment to Asia. Abe has invested a lot in reaching out to Trump, but he has also developed other regional partnerships.

An assertive Japan will be welcomed by India. Of all Tokyo's neighbours and friends, India is perhaps the most comfortable with Japan's rise. The two nations already share a close relationship across various sectors - economy, defence, nuclear, and now even personal chemistry between their leaders. Prime Minister Narendra Modi shares a close personal rapport with Abe, which has only grown over the last three years.

An Indo-Japanese partnership is key to maintaining a stable balance of power in the wider Indo-Pacific. Abe always had a special place for India in his vision of the emerging order in the Asia-Pacific. Much before anyone else, he could foresee the need to view the Indian and Pacific oceans as a cohesive unit. In Modi, he has found a kindred spirit. Both have a vision for the region in which the Indo-Japanese relationship plays a central, stabilising role.

India and Japan are keen on building a broader coalition of like-minded countries with the US and Australia to manage the unfolding strategic realities in the broader Indo-Pacific. Abe had articulated a need for such a security architecture way back in 2012 when he had suggested: "a strategy whereby Australia, India, Japan, and the US state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the Western Pacific." China's aggressiveness has only made this idea more tangible. Not surprisingly, the Japanese foreign minister has once again floated the idea of a 'Quad' comprising of the US, Japan, India and Australia, which has been cautiously welcomed by New Delhi.

Economic partnership

India and Japan complement each other economically, and this has allowed the two to leverage each other's strengths. While Japanese investment in India continues to grow

and India's need for Japanese technology in the Indian infrastructure sector keeps expanding, India has also decided to send three lakh youth to Japan for on-the-job training for three-five years as part of the government's skill development programme. India is the largest recipient of Japanese foreign aid. Japanese investment in India is booming with record investments in private equity and venture capital in India. Japan made an exception to its rule of not conducting nuclear commerce with any state that is not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The two nations are working on an ambitious programme, the Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), which will find place in the Abe-Modi summit. With a Japanese commitment of \$30 billion and an Indian commitment of \$10 billion, the project is aimed at capacity-building and human resource development in Africa as well as developing infrastructure and institutional regional connectivity.

As Abe begins to work on his ambitious agenda for Japan, he will find in India a reliable friend. And as Modi works to project India as a leading global power, he will find in Japan an important and powerful interlocutor at a time of unprecedented change in the larger Asian landscape. Delhi and Tokyo need to nurture this very important bilateral partnership, but Abe's victory augurs well for its prospects. These are interesting times, and new strategic equations are in the offing based on the old friendship between India and Japan.

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