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Japan-America-India: No reason to say 'JAI' unless Beijing listens

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INDIA-JAPAN

TRUMP ERA

The meeting between US President Donald Trump, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on the sidelines of the recent G20 meeting in Buenos Aires, was the first iteration of Japan-India-US (JAI) grouping at the summit level. In the words of Abe, the three countries share “fundamental values and strategic interests”.

Modi reportedly outlined five areas that the grouping could work on—connectivity, sustainable development, maritime security, disaster relief and freedom of navigation.

Tri-Lateralism: The Flavour of the Season

Tri-lateralism was clearly the flavour of the season. In addition to JAI, Modi also met with China’s President Xi Jinping and Russia’s President Vladimir Putin at the same venue. This took place after a gap of more than a decade. The three, who called for reform and strengthening of multilateral institutions like the UN and the WTO, have agreed to strengthen what is known as the Russia-India-China grouping. Modi also had a bilateral meeting, his fourth this year with Xi.

Diplomacy and security groupings in the vast Asia Pacific, or Indo-Pacific region, remain a work in progress, and tri-lateralism seems to be a special feature at this stage. Japan-India-US (JAI) is just one of several such networks that join the US with its allies and friends in the region.

Japan, Taiwan and the US are linked through a track 1.5 security dialogue, currently in its eighth iteration. While the US-Japan-South Korea security dialogue didn't quite take off, the one between US, Australia and Japan has been working since 2006.

The US maintained a hub-and-spoke system for its security alliances with South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines, which are all bilateral. It has been seeking to link them, not through the architecture of a formal alliance like NATO, but through what former US Secretary of Defense termed "principled security networks."

New Delhi's Cautious Posturing

The way the strategic networks are shaping up can be seen, for example, in the case of the trilateral 'Exercise Malabar' that links Japan, US and India. (Australia has been knocking at the door but has not yet gained entrance). Another manifestation of this is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue involving US, Australia, Japan and India.

They are all supposed to be united in their support for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)", but countries like India deny that the FOIP is a strategic concept, even though Modi insisted in his speech at the Shangri-la Dialogue earlier this year, that India also supports "freedom of navigation, peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law" as well with "a democratic and rules based international order".

While New Delhi's cautious posturing does not really go beyond words, the US and Japan, who are also security treaty allies, have been fleshing out what they call the "Indo-Pacific" agenda. The US has stepped up its Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) and military over-flights in the South China Sea while Japan carried out its first submarine exercise in the region in September and made a port call to Vietnam. Around the same time, its biggest ship, the helicopter carrier Kaga carried out drills in the Indian Ocean with a British warship headed towards the South China Sea.

India Needs All the Infrastructure Investment It Can Get

Japan is a major investor in infrastructure across the region through its Official Development Assistance (ODA) programmes, as well as through the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The US has finally put up serious money by the October 2018 passage of the BUILD Act that provides for some USD 60 billion worth of development finance.

In July, the US, Japan and Australia formed a trilateral partnership between the Australia's department of foreign affairs and trade (DFAT), the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation(OPIC) and the Japanese Bank of International Cooperation(JICA)promote investment in projects in the Indo-Pacific region.

India needs all the infrastructure investment it can get, so it is the obvious odd man out here. But it has a bilateral partnership with Japan called the 'Asian African Growth Corridor' to promote connectivity between South East Asia, an area of significant Japanese investment, with India and East Africa.

Japan, US, India Troika Have Varying Views on China

Japan and India have advanced their bilateral partnership. Though the AAGC is yet to take off, Tokyo has emerged as a major investor in India's infrastructure and the two countries are now working on developing joint ventures in third countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

Truth be told, neither Japan nor US, or even India is exactly on the same page when it comes to the elephant in the Indo-Pacific room — China. Both India and the US somewhat tartly say that the FOIP is not exclusive — it is open to all those who uphold sovereign equality, respect freedom of navigation, and follow the international rules and order.

Earlier this year, Prime Minister Modi met Chinese President Xi Jinping and reset the ties of the two countries, following an informal summit in Wuhan. Later this year, Prime Minister Abe has done the same. While India agreed to join China in a third-country project in Afghanistan, Japan will partner Beijing in 50 chosen infrastructural development schemes across the Indo-Pacific region.

The national perspective of the three vary, depending on where they are located. Distant and powerful US cannot be harmed by a belligerent China, but India and Japan can. So, some caution is in order.

India, a 'Swing State'

All said, India is what is called a "swing state", a country that is strategically placed in such a way that their choices have a disproportionate impact on the regional balances of power. Established powers like China, Russia and the US are locked in a competitive and conflictual relations that will not change in a short order. However, a swing state like India may have issues with these great powers, but it also has several points of cooperation. Yet the way it swings, be it on trade, non-proliferation, human rights, finance or maritime security issues, affects the international order.

New Delhi's current posturing is aimed at maximising its position as a swing state. In the old days it was called "non-alignment", nowadays there are other words for it—multi-alignment and strategic autonomy.

All three — Japan, India and the US — know that they cannot really stifle China's growth as a world power, short of a conflict. Given the way the economies of the US and Japan are enmeshed with China, that would hardly be a welcome development. What the three need, and are probably seeking, is a viable strategy that will address their legitimate grievances, and persuade Beijing that it is in its best interests to address them.

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