

An Asian Nexus

China on the ascent, erratic American foreign policy and brilliant personal chemistry form the backdrop of the Modi-Abe summit beginning today

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P rime Minister Narendra Modi's third visit to Japan on October 28-29 for his fifth annual summit with his counterpart, Shinzo Abe, is a booster to India's one and only "Special Strategic and Global Partnership". From the personal chemistry between the two leaders to the depth and breadth which the bilateral cooperation is acquiring, it is evident that Japan and India are becoming de facto allies like no two other powers in Asia.

Modi and Abe are overseeing negotiations for a new military logistics pact known as Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA), which would offer the Indian and Japanese navies access to each other's facilities for servicing and refuelling. This deal is comparable to the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) that India signed in 2016 with the United States.

Such landmarks in defence diplomacy signal intent that India under Modi has overcome past hang-ups about entering alliance-like arrangements. Abe has invested a lot in cultivating his "bromance" with Modi because he sees the latter as a uniquely bold actor willing to go further in enhancing defence and economic coordination with Japan than previous Indian prime ministers.

United Against China

During an earlier stint as prime minister in 2007, Abe had sought India's participation in a "quadrilateral" mechanism involving Japan, Australia and the US to contain China's growing power in Asia. Upon returning to office in 2012, Abe mooted the concept of a "democratic security diamond" involving the four countries to "safeguard maritime commons stretching from Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific" from authoritarian China.

But the then Indian government, led by Manmohan Singh, vacillated out of fear of incurring China's wrath, and the US was overstretched with other priorities. The quad idea had to wait until 2017 to be relaunched, although doubts about how far it can operationalise persist amid US President Donald Trump's strategic flip-flops.

Unlike East Asian countries where Japan's history as a coloniser limits full-blown convergence, Indians see Japan as a great economic moderniser and technological achiever that can help lift India to middle-income status. Commercial and military expansion by President Xi Jinping's China bothers India as an encroachment, but Abe's Japan taking its place as a "normal"



Modi with Japanese PM Abe during the latter's visit to India last year

has not generated the same buzz as China's humungous Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but it needs

to progress for a balanced Indo-Pacific that avoids Abe's feared scenario of a gigantic "Chinese lake".

Abe's ardent nationalist goal of reviving Japan's lost military power and his quest for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) match Modi's vision. Mutually shared apprehension of the Chinese behemoth has been the unspoken but obvious cement binding them.

The Trump Factor

Since the US is also petrified of China's sharp-edged ascent, it is assumed that it would join hands with Japan and India. But lately, this straightforward formation has been jumbled up by Trump's erratic and strategically inept foreign policy.

Just prior to hosting Modi, Abe travelled to China on a historic state visit and advocated a "new dimension" in a "new era" of cooperation between Japan and China. The thaw between traditional rivals Japan and China is happening in the shadow of Trump, whose trade war and professed desire to remove American troops from East Asia and reduce American military activities in that region have spooked Tokyo.

Trump's chaotic stances are forcing the Big Three in Asia – China, Japan and India – to recalibrate their complex triangular ties.

If China and Japan are setting aside historical animus and trying rapprochement, India is looking to mend fences with China to manage territorial disputes from escalating.

The recent launch of a China-India partnership to train diplomats from Afghanistan suggests that the Trump factor is creating fresh possibilities where Asian actors think it is more rational to get along internally among themselves, instead of banking on American guarantees of siding with one Asian party against another.

That said, the essential pattern of Japan and India tag teaming to counter-balance China remains. It is driven by geography and the nature of China's regime and its ambitions of global dominance. Trump may unwittingly soften the China-centric logic in the Japan-India quasi-alliance. But Modi and Abe are battling as a pair with the long-term horizon in sight, where China inevitably looms large. ■

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Asian power with a proactive military and foreign aid profile is welcomed in India.

This is because Japan does not claim one inch of Indian territory and lacks intentions of checking India's rise in global multilateral institutions or in South and South-east Asia. Thanks to its smaller size and non-hegemonic outlook compared with China, an assertive Japan is good news in India.

As Modi and Abe embrace like comrades with a common foe, they are eyeing concrete infrastructure projects to be jointly implemented in countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Japan's commitment to maritime infrastructure development in East Africa and the Middle East offers other sites where twinning with India is a win-win proposition.

The Japan and India-sponsored Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC)

