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Abe's India Visit: Raising the Bar

By Rupakjyoti Borah

Synopsis

The upcoming visit of the Japanese PM Shinzo Abe to India will take bilateral ties between Tokyo and New Delhi to a higher level. India ranks high in Abe's priorities as Japan faces an aggressive China, while trying to once again make its presence felt in Asia's balance of power.

Commentary

THE UPCOMING visit of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to New Delhi on 26 January 2013 as the Chief Guest at India's Republic Day celebrations is slated to be a landmark event in the evolution of the bilateral ties between the two countries. This will be the third high-level visit from the Japanese side in a short span of two months.

Last December the Japanese Emperor paid a State Visit to India - significant because it is rare for the Emperor to undertake foreign visits. This was followed recently by the Japanese Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera who made a highly successful visit to India. This series of high-level visits, coming one after another, clearly shows the desire of the Abe-led government to put relations with India on the fast track.

Significance of Abe's upcoming visit

This impending visit by the Japanese premier is significant for several reasons. Firstly, by choosing to come to India on Republic Day, which is mainly a display of India's military strength, along with its cultural diversity, both India and Japan are sending out a clear message that relations between the two nations are going to deepen, regardless of what other nations have to say.

Secondly, Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh has invested a huge amount of personal capital in the relationship with Japan. Since PM Singh has already announced that he would not be seeking another term in office, he would be very keen to ensure that he leaves a lasting legacy on the relations between Japan and India.

Thirdly, for Japan, already on the back foot due to an aggressive China and a hesitant United States, relations with India are a top priority. When China unilaterally declared the Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea, the US did not overtly ask China to rescind the zone and in fact told American commercial airliners to comply with Beijing's orders.

The US has also expressed “disappointment” with PM Abe’s visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo on 26 December. The fact that Washington may not be willing to antagonise China is not lost on Tokyo. Recently, India’s ties with the US too have taken a hit following the arrest of an Indian diplomat in the US and her subsequent expulsion.

Fourthly, Japan is also looking towards India as a major market for Japanese products and a prospective buyer for its weapons. Japanese businesses have almost reached a saturation point in countries like China - in addition to political tensions between them - and hence they are looking towards emerging markets like India. New Delhi has also emerged as the world’s biggest arms importer and Japan has, in a major departure from its ban on weapons exports, offered the ShinMaywa US-2 amphibian aircraft to India.

Fifthly, on the Indian side, New Delhi is looking to Tokyo to source high-end technologies which can help India fast-track its economic growth. Although the Indian economy has become sluggish of late, it is growing faster than many other economies across the world. In spite of many Japanese companies being mired in red-tape in India, the huge size of the Indian market and its growth prospects is something which no major Japanese business can afford to ignore. Japan’s population is shrinking and it would do well to take the help of highly-skilled Indian workers in areas like Information Technology, besides doctors, nurses etc.

Sixthly, the rise and assertiveness of China is an important factor bringing Tokyo and Delhi closer. Last year, Chinese troops entered Indian territory and very reluctantly moved back, ruffling quite a few feathers in the Indian establishment, which saw the move as a sign of China’s increasing belligerence.

Stumbling blocks

However, a few stumbling blocks remain. One major hurdle in the burgeoning ties is the unwillingness on the part of Tokyo to sign a civilian nuclear deal with India. Japan is the last major developed country to hold out on a nuclear deal with India while the US, Russia and France have already signed nuclear deals with Delhi. Another sore point is the Japanese insistence on India signing the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which India considers as highly unequal.

Internally there is cross-party support in India for improving relations with Japan. India is scheduled to go for elections in May this year, but whichever party or group of parties gain power in New Delhi, Japan-India relations are certain to become stronger. The biggest positive factor in Japan-India ties is that there is no historical baggage in the relationship, unlike in Japan’s ties with many other Asian countries.

From Tokyo’s perspective PM Abe’s visit to India will reinforce Japan’s strategic diplomacy in South and Southeast Asia to balance China’s extensive influence in Asia and strengthen Japan’s presence in the emerging economies of the Indo-Pacific region.

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