

China–India–Japan

Dissecting Complexities of the Asian Triangle

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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. Abstract | 1 |
| 2. China–India–Japan: Dissecting Complexities of the Asian Triangle | 1 |
| 2. Interdependent Liberalism and its Obscurity | 2 |
| 3. Realism Through the Geo-Strategic Prism | 5 |
| 4. The South Korean Twist | 9 |
| 5. Barack Obama’s Asia Tour | 12 |
| 6. Constructivism and the Personality Factor in Foreign Policy | 14 |
| 7. Conclusion | 16 |
| Notes | 18 |

China–India–Japan: Dissecting Complexities of the Asian Triangle

Abstract

Asia and its primary players are often confronted with a peculiarly prevalent predicament. And that is, whether trade and investment shall become the eventual driver fashioning the future course of strategic ties, more so at the cost of certain prevailing and pressing strategic realities that appear conflicting at times. That China has come up to serve as a key engine of economic growth in Asia and beyond is a reality that cannot be negated or ignored. China's much-debated "rise" has generated curiosity and concern, primarily because the direction of that rise continues to be ambiguous. The tempestuous geo-political relationship that has existed between China and India and that between Japan and China for decades has been leavened by increasing trade. In the specific case of China, India and Japan, while investments for sure have taken precedence, the ensuing competitive race is also far too visible. Bitter strategic realities and contest in the midst of vital economic imperatives only reinforce the truth that in contrast to conventional interpretations, opportunity costs associated with economic benefits, generally cannot deter disputes. An emerging facet in the triangular relationship among Beijing, New Delhi and Tokyo is the constructivist approach, highlighting the significance of the personality factor in foreign policy decision-making wherein identity, norms and the interaction of personalities could end up being most profound in terms of outcomes.

China–India–Japan: Dissecting Complexities of the Asian Triangle

The complexities of the China-India-Japan triangle are far too intricate to be spelt out in a simplistic fashion. Capital interdependence contributes to peace independent of the effects of trade, democracy, interest, and other variables. More specifically, strategic variables such as capabilities and resolve, can directly impact upon efficient *ex ante* bargains once they

have been normatively identified. The liberal conviction that trade fosters global peace has more than often been substantiated by means of various streams of research. Notwithstanding that, the existing understanding of linkages between conflict and international economics remains limited in at least two ways. First, cross-border economic relationships are far broader than just trade, with global capital markets dwarfing exchange of goods and services. Second, the manner in which economics is said to inhibit conflictual behaviour is implausible in the light of new analytical insights about the causes of war.

French theorist Montesquieu and German theorist Immanuel Kant, along with practitioners like Woodrow Wilson asserted that economic relations between states pacify political interaction that could potentially lead to conflict. The evidence appears to substantiate these claims of linking inter-state trade with reductions in militarised disputes or wars.¹ However, this interdependence does not necessarily permeate the various levels and degree of conflict, as has been argued, "... theoretically, liberalism does not specify what types of conflict are most likely to decrease in the presence of high levels of interdependence."²

Interdependent Liberalism and its Obscurity

Going by the school of interdependent liberalism, economic symbiosis woven together with the web of multilateral international institutions and frameworks ideally should propel states towards adopting a more cooperative framework. However, concurrently, pressingly bitter geo-strategic realities that these nations are faced with, prove that realignments in any part of the India-China-Japan security triangle shall have a far-reaching impact all across Asia. East Asia has been caught in what seemingly appears to be a never-ending security crisis with reference to the Senkaku Islands dispute, vehemently contested between Japan and China, and a third party, namely Taiwan. On the other hand, India and China share a long-drawn boundary and territorial dispute, where even a little provocation flares up tensions on the Indo-China border. All these existing realities can be referred to in the context of Chinese President and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Xi Jinping, when he addressed the 18th Party Congress in 2012 and advocated "rejuvenating China", which was

interpreted as an oblique reference to “reclaiming lost historical territories”. This approach could well have a direct bearing on both Japan and India, with which China contests territories and borders, while, at the same time, is essentially the main contributor economically—thus, multiplying the dilemma and quandary additionally.

What stems from this peculiarly prevalent predicament is the query regarding whether trade and investment shall become the eventual drivers that would fashion the future course of ties bilaterally, more so at the cost of certain prevailing and pressing strategic realities that appear conflicting at times? The state visits that have taken place since autumn 2014 between India, China and Japan, with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, visiting Japan followed by Chinese President Xi Jinping’s first official state visit to India, clearly spell out that East Asia is eagerly attempting to court India’s new government under Modi with trade, investment and infrastructure being the buzzwords on the road towards deepening relations.

The tempestuous geo-political relationship that has existed between China and India for decades has been reinforced by increasing trade. China’s leading role in the economic growth in Asia is an indisputable fact. In the specific case of China, India and Japan, while cooperation in economic growth has taken precedence, a competitive race is also part of the process. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has announced that Japan’s private and public investment in India will double to \$34 billion over the next five years.³ Within a fortnight of this announcement came the arrival of Xi Jinping to India. There were high expectations, more so, because Xi’s administration reportedly plans to invest approximately \$500 billion overseas in the next five years, consequentially leading to improbable reports of big-ticket investments coming India’s way, probably exceeding \$100 billion. Speculations reached a point where it was being suggested that on power and highway projects alone, China could end up spending \$35 billion—almost the same share as Japan’s total investment in India. Even the Chinese Consul-General in Mumbai dropped hints of such a figure, and the numbers started drawing direct comparisons with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s earlier announcement of Tokyo doubling its private and public investment in India. As a result, the debate turned into a three-way contest within the China-India-Japan triangle. Ultimately, when China finally announced a \$20 billion investment package for India over the

next five years, it was received with a fair bit of disappointment by India's trade and investment sector.⁴

Advocates from the school of interdependent liberalism are often confronted with the fair share of obscurity in economic considerations. For instance, India continues to be hurt by the growing trade deficit with China that stands at a record \$31.4 billion (as in 2013). In fact, China accounted for more than 50 percent of India's current account deficit in 2012-13, coupled with a sharp decline in Indian exports, with a near 10 percent fall. China and India are the largest developing countries in the world and also the largest emerging markets in the world, which makes them natural competitors.

Similarly, the fledgling trade recovery between Japan and China is always under the threat of getting derailed by political disputes, even though their respective economies continue to face domestic challenges. The vehemently contested Senkaku Islands, especially post-September 2012, have severely impacted the bilateral ties between Tokyo and Beijing to the extent that trade between the two countries, with great difficulty, grew only in the second half of 2014, for the first time in three years. According to the government-affiliated Japan External Trade Organisation, which drew figures from the Japanese Ministry of Finance and China's General Administration of Customs, Japan's exports to China registered a rise in the first half in 2014. Getting Japan's fiscal house in order has been a perennial challenge for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, while China too is coping with slower domestic growth rates. The business environment deteriorated to a point that quite a few Japanese companies started turning away from China, resulting in a 10 percent drop in the number of long-term Japanese residents until the end of 2013.⁵

As per a report from the global market research provider Ipsos Business Consulting, the number of Japanese cars sold in China fell to 122,200 in September from 175,200 in August 2012. Amongst the foremost reasons for the decline in sales was "... the Chinese people's strong reaction to the Diaoyu Islands dispute", clubbed with adversely impacting upon Japan's Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) in China. Exports to China fell 14.1 percent in September 2012 and Japan's deficit hit nearly \$7 billion. The total volume of Japan's exports fell 10.2 percent—the largest decline since the aftermath of the 2011 earthquake, leaving a deficit of Yen 558.6 billion (\$7 billion),

according to the Japanese Finance Ministry. According to Yao Haitian at the Institute of Japanese Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, "... significant contraction in Japan's exports was absolutely influenced by strained relations with China since September."⁶

The preceding case studies of bitter strategic realities and contest in the midst of vital economic imperatives only reinforce that in contrast to conventional interpretations, opportunity costs associated with economic benefits generally cannot deter disputes. Instead, interdependence creates the means for states to demonstrate resolve without resorting to military violence. Liberal states more ably address the informational problems that give rise to costly contests, credibly communicating through costly signals using passive methods of conflict.⁷

Realism Through the Geo-Strategic Prism

The Chinese identify with the balancing game being integral to foreign policy in the wake of their ancient experience at it. From 656 to 284 BCE, the ancient Chinese system was remarkably stable. Balancing as a foreign policy was generally pursued, and balances in the distribution of relative capabilities occurred at various times. In these early centuries, the future unifier, the Qin Dynasty, was comparatively much weaker than the other great powers. At the turn of the 4th century BCE, Qin even lost some strategic territories on the west bank of the Yellow river to the then hegemonic power Wei. However, the scenario changed after Qin embarked on comprehensive self-strengthening reforms. To increase military strength, Qin developed an elite professional force and in order to improve economic capability, it granted lands to the entire registered male population in return for military service, taxes, and corvée.⁸ By the 320s BCE, Qin recovered all lost territories from Wei and proceeded to make inroads on the east bank of the Yellow river. In the ensuing decades, the Qin Dynasty decimated its immediate neighbours, the Wei, Han, and Chu. While, as the balance-of-power theory would expect, when Qin's relative capability rose and became increasingly threatening to its neighbours, other states responded by balancing. However, balance-of-power theorists often seemingly fail to notice that the balancing (*hezong*) strategy can be countered by its opposite—the divide-and-conquer (*lianheng*) strategy.⁹ It was visible in that with ever widening gaps in relative capabilities,

it became increasingly futile for the Qin Dynasty's adversaries to pursue a meaningful balancing—either internally or externally.

Balance-of-power theorists assume that the problems of uncertainty, collective action, and endemic domestic-level impediments to balancing can be overcome endogenously. Another version of balance of power argues that because units in anarchic systems have an interest in maximising their long-term odds on survival (security), they will check dangerous concentrations of power (hegemony) by building up their own capabilities (internal balancing), aggregating their capabilities with those of other units in alliances (external balancing), and/or adopting the successful power-generating practices of the prospective hegemon (emulation).¹⁰

Contextualising this to the present day scenario, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to New Delhi in June 2014, as a special envoy of President Xi Jinping, within a fortnight of Prime Minister Narendra Modi assuming office, was seen as a strong indication of China's stance towards the new political dispensation in Delhi. Considered investor-friendly and pro-business, Modi has been keenly watched in China for a long time. As Chief Minister of the western Indian state of Gujarat, Modi had been reaching out to Beijing and seeking Chinese investments in his state. The Chinese saw Gujarat as a rare exception in India—an investor-friendly region in a nation mired in bureaucratic lassitude. Modi has visited China many times as Chief Minister, with the 2011 trip quite extraordinary in that Beijing rolled out the red carpet for him, a gesture usually reserved for heads of state.¹¹ China correctly gauged India's mood and played its cards accordingly, in direct contrast to the prolonged censure that the United States maintained against Modi.¹² Although President Barack Obama's reaching out to Modi is being read as a step towards rapprochement, the sense in China is that it has trumped its great global rivals.¹³ In a telephone conversation with the Indian Prime Minister a few months ago, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang said his government would work towards the construction of a Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar regional economic corridor, a matter that was raised during Premier Li's visit to India. After becoming Prime Minister, Modi described relations with China as "a priority of Indian diplomacy", a far cry from the hard-nosed rhetoric he used on the campaign trail: at one election rally, he demanded China abandon its "expansionist attitude", referring to India's ongoing territorial

and boundary disputes with China in Arunachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). China lays claim to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh almost in its entirety. It refers to it as “Southern Tibet” and continues to keep the border dispute alive with tactical incursions as a pressure point against New Delhi. It would be interesting to gauge what strategy China will employ so as to engage Modi’s government, and particularly the Prime Minister himself.

The expansionist debate surfaced yet again, causing discomfort in China, this time, with Modi as the Prime Minister of India when he indirectly referenced China during his state visit to Japan. The Chinese government chose to downplay the statement, with the Chinese Foreign Ministry preferring to term it as a non-zero sum game. However, the reaction of the state-controlled Chinese media over Modi’s “... 18th century expansionist mindset of some countries” remark was noticeably irate. The Chinese media fervently cautioned against “...any attempt by Tokyo to structure a united front against Beijing with New Delhi as its pivot”.¹⁴ All this very palpably falls into the realist paradigm of international relations which posits that states often find themselves in a zero-sum contest for power and influence, where the prevailing international power balance remains a key determinant to the region’s future stability and strategic order.

It needs to be recalled that in February 2014, Narendra Modi, then in the midst of a gruelling domestic election campaign in India, as the Prime Ministerial candidate, addressed three election rallies in India’s northeast—Silchar (Assam), Pasighat (Arunachal Pradesh) and Agartala (Tripura). During his Arunachal Pradesh rally, Modi thundered and said that the northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh was an integral part of India and would always remain so, further stating that in the changing times, expansionist mindsets would not be acceptable anymore and that China, too, would have to give up this mindset. These strong words were entrenched in nationalistic sentiment and fervour, thereby sending a clear message to China, which refers to Arunachal Pradesh as “Southern Tibet”.

Moving further, East Asia has been caught in what seemingly is a never-ending security crisis with reference to the Senkaku Islands dispute. The much contested Senkaku Islands is a collective term referring to a group of eight islands and rocks, including Uotsuri, Kitakojima, Minamikojima, Kuba,

Taisho, Okinokitaiwa, Okinominamiwa, and Tobise located west of the Nansei Shoto Islands in Japan, forming part of Ishigaki city in the Okinawa prefecture. Further, Okinawa forms part of the Ryukyu Islands, known in Japanese as Nansei-shotō, stretching southwest from Kyushu to Taiwan. The Senkaku Islands are located in the East China Sea (approximately 170 km north of Ishigaki Island and 410 km west of Okinawa Island). Japan claims that the Senkaku Islands were incorporated towards becoming Japanese territory in January 1895, as per the international legal framework existing at that time. The Japanese carefully ascertained that there had been no trace of control over the Senkaku Islands by another nation-state prior to that period. Following World War II, the San Francisco Peace Treaty placed the Senkaku Islands under the administration of the United States as part of Okinawa, thereby reaffirming the Islands' status as part of Japanese territory. Moreover, the Senkaku Islands were included in the 1972 Okinawa Reversion Agreement between the United States and Japan as part of the area over which administrative rights were returned to Japan. Tokyo asserts its claim over the Senkakus based on the above events and facts, stating that the islands have been a consistent part of Japanese territory in the post-war international order, in accordance with international law.

Although the People's Republic of China (PRC) vehemently contests the Japanese claims, Tokyo points out that even after the San Francisco Peace Treaty placed the Senkaku Islands under the administration of the United States as part of Japanese territory, and the United States made use of some parts of the islands as firing ranges, the Senkaku Islands continued to be treated as part of Japanese territory in Chinese Communist Party publications as well as on Chinese maps. In this very public and bitter squabble, almost exclusively between Beijing and Tokyo, there is an increasing threat to peace and stability in the East China Sea. However, a third party laying claim over the Senkaku Islands, calling it as the Tiaoyutai Islands (釣魚台), is often ignored and to a large extent, not considered a factor at all.¹⁵ This third party is the Republic of China (Taiwan). The Taiwanese claims get heavily weighed down with critical provisions, beginning with the fact that Taiwan is not a member of the United Nations and, consequently, does not have the right to negotiate with Japan over sovereignty issues. Second, and more importantly,

Beijing considers Taiwan as a renegade province of China and places it as its topmost area of “core interest”.¹⁶

The rising tide of nationalism has propelled the levels of tensions in East Asia. As for ties between China and Japan, there could not have been a worse time, with the bitter ongoing contest over the East China Sea amidst a rising tide of nationalist sentiment against one another in both countries. What is more disturbing is that this nationalist traction is riding not just at the popular level, but also among the political elites in both China and Japan. While, the Chinese leaders were the oft-cited pawns of nationalist agitators, amidst the backdrop of Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro’s initiation of buying the Senkaku Islands, the Japanese leaders were seemingly unwilling to condemn Ishihara’s efforts, which unsurprisingly triggered assertive responses from China.¹⁷ This trend has been continuing and the latest autumn 2014 survey poll shows that more than half of China’s population is of the view that China could go to war with Japan in the future, with more than a fifth saying it would happen “within a few years”, while 29 percent of Japanese foresee a military confrontation. The survey findings came ahead of the second anniversary of Japan’s nationalisation of the disputed Diaoyu, or Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea—which have become the epicentre of Sino-Japanese bilateral tensions. The survey was conducted by the Japanese Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), Genron and the state-run, *China Daily*, in July-August 2014. According to the survey results, the most common reason for the unfavourable impression of China among the Japanese public was, “China’s actions are incompatible with international rules” (55.1 percent). On the Chinese side, the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands was the most prominent reason for the unfavourable impression of Japan among the Chinese public (64 percent).¹⁸

The South Korean Twist

Adding another twist to the East Asian affairs would be the direction which South Korea and the US take towards North Korea and China at large. Perhaps, the biggest foreign policy challenge for South Korean President Park Geun-hye comes in the form of engaging North Korea peacefully, while simultaneously pressing it to abandon its nuclear pursuit and embark upon a trust-building process in the Korean Peninsula. Sensing that North Korea’s

nuclear ambitions may never be deterred after all, following the conduct of a third nuclear test by Pyongyang in February 2013, the clamour within Park's governing Saenuri Party calling for South Korea to secure its own nuclear deterrent has gone up in the recent weeks. These developments entail catastrophic consequences in so far as regional peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula is concerned. Delivering her address at the presidential inaugural ceremony, Park revisited familiar themes, including the state of the South Korean economy and more critically, its relationship with North Korea. Park Geun-hye has indicated time and again that she is disposed to bringing an end to a period of deteriorating ties with the North under her predecessor and fellow conservative, Lee Myung-bak. It is hoped that in the wake of a somewhat yielded approach by North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un, the prospect of South Korea adopting a softer stance towards the North remains a possibility. That notwithstanding, Park Guen-hye has stated in unequivocal terms that her government, under no circumstances, shall tolerate any military provocations from the North as she averred, "... provocations by the North will be met by stronger counter responses, the North's willingness to make the right choice and walk the path of change will be answered with more flexible engagement."

South Korea's relationship with the North can be described as tetchy amidst the hardline approach of Park's predecessor, Lee Myung-bak. With a series of provocations from the North, including testing long-range missile technology with the multi-stage Unha-3 rocket and, more recently, a nuclear device, the ruling Saenuri Party has appealed to its conservative power base through President Park, "... North Korea's recent nuclear test is a challenge to the survival and future of the Korean people... the biggest victim will be North Korea itself." There are visible indicators that the impact of the North Korean nuclear test on the Northeast Asian security environment has instantaneously been negative. Internal divergences amongst neighbours as to how to deal with a defiant North Korean regime loom large at a time when politico-strategic equations amongst the Northeast Asian nations remain unsettled. These regional pressures, in turn, render the possibility of a unified response against the North to become more complicated. Within South Korea, Hwang Woo-yeo, Chairman of the ruling Saenuri Party and Moon Hee-sang, leader of the main opposition Democratic United Party's

emergency committee, reaffirmed their position for a bipartisan approach towards responding to North Korea's third nuclear test.

Meanwhile, South Korean intelligence and experts have not disregarded the possibility of more ballistic missile test-launches by the North and in this reference, South Korea appears to be bolstering its own military preparations for any eventuality by elevating its military readiness alert levels, according to the South Korean Ministry of National Defence. President Park's administration is likely to strengthen cooperation and coordination with the international community to denuclearise North Korea based on strong deterrence. As the American and South Korean forces undertake their annual Key Resolve and Foal Eagle joint military exercises, practising air, ground and naval field training and war-games involving US troops stationed in South Korea and their Republic of Korea (ROK) counterparts, regional tensions are expected to be fuelled further. While President Park's idea of trust-building as a basic foundation for more invigorated economic cooperation with the North caters to conservative South Koreans, it needs to be seen as to how she would sell this idea to policy-makers in Washington, a majority of who view denuclearisation as a precondition for any economic liberality. Park's approach of exploring both retaliation and flexible engagement appears to be a formidable task in that it needs to be determined whether economic incentives alone will be able to deliver regional stability. Amidst the repeated pattern of the North Korean regime's nuclear and missile brinkmanship, the probability of any such reconciliation seems to be very low — at least in the near future.

India has been discussing possible cooperation with South Korea under the bilateral Agreement for Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy. In fact, Seoul had requested India for allocation of a site for South Korean nuclear reactors, during the visit of the Indian Prime Minister to the Republic of Korea in March 2012. Besides, in India's effort to strengthen its national infrastructure and plans to invest US\$ 1 trillion in infrastructure development until 2017, the South Korean companies have a crucial role as they participate in the construction projects for highways, ports, airports, metros and power plants being launched in India. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs had stated that during the summit meeting held earlier in March 2012, a new bilateral trade target of US\$ 40 billion by 2015 was

set. With Prime Minister Modi's announcement of the "Act East" policies, bilateral trade between India and South Korea has already increased by about 70 percent since the entry into force of the India-Republic of Korea Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). This percentage will only go higher with both nations agreeing to explore constructive and forward looking ways to facilitate greater market access to each other's products and services.

Barack Obama's Asia Tour

American President Barack Obama's tour to Asia in the spring of 2014 was one of reassuring its commitments to alliance partners in East and Southeast Asia amidst a sea of strategic reverberations in the region. Commencing the tour with a visit to Japan, Obama sought to set a conciliatory tone with the Japanese leadership under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Obama's visit happened in the backdrop of an internal debate in Japan, including sections within the conservative ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), in which, the role of the US in the very bitterly escalating Senkaku Island dispute between Japan and China was beginning to be questioned. The subtle tensions between Washington and Tokyo came to the surface when the US government expressed "disappointment" following a visit by Abe to the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013—marking his first visit there as Prime Minister. Was this rare show of disapproval by Washington a crafty move to appease China, given that Beijing accuses Japan of war-time belligerence and strongly objects to visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, which honours convicted Class A war criminals from World War II? Indeed, it is clear that there is a strong undercurrent that the unfair denigration of Japan for its war-time past is a prime factor for Abe to cater to, and thereby, consolidate, his conservative support base at home.¹⁹ The purported idea that Washington was prioritising its equations with China over Japan did not go down well with the Abe administration and the Obama visit appeared to be aimed at quashing any such thought or belief. The Abe administration reportedly clarified that the security alliance with the US stands as a counter to the offensive Chinese posturing regarding its claim over the Senkaku Islands. China's uncoordinated declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea has upped the ante in this intensely contested and explosive zone under Japan's administrative

control, in addition to the greater part of the East China Sea, including sections of Taiwan and South Korea — thereby infuriating the region.

Obama categorically stated that the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea were covered under the Japan-US Security Treaty obligations applicable to the Senkakus, with Washington ready to oppose any unilateral move to assert territorial or maritime claims or change the status quo by intimidation, coercion, or force. While Obama did manage to find success in reassuring Japan of the American commitment to its treaty alliance and by doing so, stitching one end of the direction of the strategic Asian pivot, his pitch for new trade agreements could not be sealed despite heavy behind the scene activity to negotiate for a multi-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).²⁰ In order to make the 'Asian rebalance' a reality, the economic pillar will have to come through effectively and simultaneously. Another sticking point in the US-Japan alliance comes in the form of stationing of US marines on Japan's Okinawa prefecture, which hosts around 65 percent of total US forces in Japan. Although the US military bases in Okinawa serve as a lynchpin for the US-Japanese military alliance, this continuing presence is deeply resented by the locals, thereby spurring strong local opposition in the Okinawa prefecture. While both nations are required to devise a broader framework for the sustainability of US forces in Japan, the continuing post-war presence of US troops, particularly in Okinawa, will have to be handled more carefully. In fact, at a 2 + 2 meeting in early October 2013, Washington agreed to deploy reconnaissance drones to Japan, and also pledged up to \$3.1 billion to relocate 5,000 US Marines from Okinawa to Guam.²¹

The April 2014 meeting between Obama and Abe not just reaffirmed the US-Japan joint engagement and cooperation, but more significantly underlines trilateral diplomatic, economic, and security coordination. Shared commitment to security and stability in the Asia-Pacific region along with third nation partners is a cornerstone of this vision.²² An instance is the trilateral cooperation among the US, Japan and the Republic of Korea reiterated at the Hague Summit. Moreover, the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) among the United States, Japan and Australia too focusses on coordination on key issues pertaining to regional stability. Besides, the United States and Japan also have a trilateral dialogue with India on a wide range of regional and global issues, particularly in the domain of maritime security in the Indian Ocean and the

Western Pacific, with the sixth iteration of the trilateral meeting scheduled to take place in New Delhi in the coming months. In retrospect, the original US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty signed in 1951 outlined a security arrangement for Japan in the light of its pacifist Constitution and the alliance has been the keystone of the US security role in Asia ever since.

Constructivism and the Personality Factor in Foreign Policy

On another level, based on the constructivist concept, wherein identity, norms and the interaction of personalities is vital, the camaraderie between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Shinzo Abe speaks volumes. The systemic conditions present a favourable platform for the duo to bring to light, "... the dawn of a new era in India-Japan relations". Moreover, providing credence to this approach, Modi underlined the significance of India and Japan being democracies, which provides them a solid foundation to converge at various levels on the Asian stage. Modi and Abe have a shared perspective on the future of the geo-political and economic order of Asia. Some commentators have described this as the new dawn of Asian nationalism. Indo-Japanese proximity generates noticeable unease in official and unofficial circles in China and frantic reactions in its state-controlled media. Whether Xi Jinping will succeed in making inroads into Delhi and "buying" a sizeable share of Indian attention, is too early to say.

When Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe penned his book *Utsukushii kuni e (Towards a Beautiful Country)* in 2006, he publicly advocated the concept of a "broader Asia" that constitutes nations in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, most significantly, campaigning in favour of strengthening ties with India. Abe appeared to have anticipated Asia's geo-strategic future exclusively through the prism of political realism, and rightly so.²³ Today, in the ceaseless pursuit of securing national interests set in the backdrop of the struggle for power amongst nation states, the upbeat phase in Indo-Japanese relations is a tangible outcome stemming from commonalities of culture, shared interests and complementing ideologies that have critically shaped the course of the bilateral relationship. A five-day official visit to Japan — Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first trip outside South Asia since assuming office — attempted to realise the maximum potential of the India-Japan Strategic and Global Partnership

and elevated the same to a new “Tokyo Declaration for India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership”.

In the given reference, it would only be reasonable to argue, that while evaluating the various determinants in foreign policy-making, perhaps, it is individuals and personalities who could end up being most profound in terms of outcomes. Personality impact in foreign policy decision-making may not necessarily be exclusive. It hinges on cognitive processes, including perceptive reasoning that defines the behaviour of nation-states based upon the existential constraints of the international system as well compulsions of domestic political structures. Modi’s assurance to Japanese investors that it would be a “red carpet” and not “red tape” that would welcome them in India, exhibited both his showmanship and that he means business.²⁴ In fact, it is the flexibility in the political environs that tends to create variable boundaries in decision-making, more so, in the realm of foreign policy.

The systemic conditions have presented a favourable platform for Modi and Abe to envision and operationalise what has been termed “...the dawn of a new era in India-Japan relations”. The decisional latitude and output of both Modi and Abe was very much on display, and the resultant policy announcements were manifest. The novelty in the present setting and discussion rests in the fact that Modi and Abe have underscored distinctness in bilateral engagement between India and Japan imparted by multi-sectoral ministerial and Cabinet-level dialogues, most significantly between the Foreign Ministers, Defence Ministers and National Security Advisers. All these announcements have certainly added strategic content and furthered ties to a far more concrete level. While the next rounds of the Foreign Ministers Strategic Dialogue and Defence Ministers Dialogue would be held later this year, what stands out is the announcement of a “2 plus 2” dialogue, involving Foreign and Defence Secretaries. Moreover, Japan has demonstrated interesting and noteworthy developments in its policy on transfer of defence equipment and technology, which can prove beneficial to India in the long run. The removal of six of India’s space and defence-related entities from Japan’s Foreign End User List is a welcome step.²⁵

A very significant area where Japanese assistance and collaboration shall be much needed is infrastructure build-up and connectivity, with a decision of setting a target of doubling Japan’s FDI within five years, along with Abe’s

intention to realise Yen 3.5 trillion of public and private investment and financing from Japan, including Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), to India in five years. The primary mandate would be to finance appropriate public and private projects of mutual interest, including areas such as next generation infrastructure, connectivity, transport systems, smart cities, clean energy and water security, among others. Besides, Japan has also pledged an ODA loan of Yen 50 billion to the India Infrastructure Finance Company Limited (IIFCL) for a public-private partnership infrastructure project in India. With the Modi government according special emphasis to the northeast and linking it further to other economic corridors within India and Southeast Asia, Japanese cooperation for enhanced connectivity and development of this region, particularly, will be crucial. It needs to be highlighted that “Look East” is the second most vital pillar of the Modi government’s foreign policy orientation, following consolidation of India’s position in its immediate South Asian neighbourhood. The Modi-Abe leadership combine exhibits showmanship, content and cognitive consistency by means of converging themes of nationalism, coupled with motivated eagerness to initiate action driven towards ushering in an era of policy-oriented change, both domestically, and regionally.²⁶

Conclusion

Treading along this line of thought, although China is being referred to as part of an uneasy and complex Asian triangle, it takes up such a huge part of the triangle that it cannot be referred to simply as one corner of the strategic triangle, the shape of which will determine the global geo-political balance. China’s quest for seeking greater economic and military might more than often injects a debate about whether Beijing would reject the liberal regional order, seeking to replace it with its own Sino-centric Asian order, stretching through the geographical limits of Asia’s periphery? China’s much-debated “rise” continuously generates curiosity, primarily because the direction of that rise is ambiguous and has not been outlined by China. Given its refusal to clarify the current status, or future vision, for the modernisation of its military capabilities, the uncertainty and suspicion surrounding Chinese intentions raise the levels of apprehension in the immediate and far neighbourhood. Whether this has been the case by default or by design is not very lucid.

More so, in the strategic sphere, are Asian nations, including India and Japan prepared to recognise such an order, if at all it begins to assume shape? One is often confronted with a debate on whether an Asian century finds itself at the crossroads with becoming a Chinese century—so profound is the presence, rise and status of the People’s Republic of China. It would only be imperative to trace this back to when Samuel Huntington famously avowed, “... the size of China’s displacement of the world balance is such that the world must find a new balance within a few decades.”²⁷

In the backdrop of the strategic turmoil currently gripping East Asia, the quest to seek a rules-based international order will be a tall order for future US-Japan cooperation given the enveloping and perilous ‘China factor’. The political and security environment in the Asia-Pacific region, more in terms of any potential visible signs of an “anti-China stronghold, southwest of China”,²⁸ is being closely watched in Beijing. Although China, India and Japan have vast stakes in shaping Asia’s emerging regional order, a palpable concern emerging within the China-India-Japan triangle was stated by none other than former Chinese President Hu Jintao, wherein he referred to the strengthening of military deployments in the Asia-Pacific region, including the US-Japanese military alliance and Washington’s strategic cooperation with India, inferring both as extended outposts and pressure points on China from the east, south, and west, which impact upon the Chinese geo-political environment.²⁹ The official state-controlled *Xinhua News Agency* further buttressed this point by forewarning that China should be on the alert against any changes in its peripheral security environment.³⁰

Chinese politico-military belligerence witnessed on multiple fronts brings into focus the larger debate structured around the consequential strategic changes taking place in Asia in tandem with the growing power of China. The power differential between China and other Asian players including India and Japan will be a significant factor in determining the regional geo-strategic permutations, through the strategically maladaptive triangle of China-India-Japan, the outcome of which shall bear the imprint on the future security design within Asia.

While economic symbiosis appears the ideal driver for states to adopt cooperative frameworks, the concurrently pressing geo-strategic realities are likely to invade upon any/all realignments in the China-India-Japan

security triangle. The constructivist concept especially vis-à-vis interaction of personalities, is likely to become the defining factor in India-Japan relations. In the recent Parliamentary elections in Japan, the ruling coalition has won two-thirds majority—seen more in terms of a referendum on Prime Minister Abe’s economic and foreign policy and giving him four more years in power. Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has retained its House of Representatives majority. Further consolidation of his domestic political standing will bear significance on the Abe administration’s foreign policy decision-making. Given that both Modi and Abe now have a definitive political mandate at home for the next four years, they should not let go of the solid foundation and converge at the strategic level for greater leverage and say in the future security design of Asia, more so since both Abe and Modi share similar perspectives on Asia’s future geo-political and economic order. It is time to make flexible, the variable boundaries in decision-making that political environs tend to create in the realm of foreign policy and achieve strategic deliverables in the coming years, without allowing any “external third factor” to cast a shadow on Indo-Japanese ties.

Notes

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