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India, Japan, and the Indo-Pacific: Breaking Out of the Middle Power Status

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Nidhi Prasad, Researcher at Aoyama Gakuin University in Japan, explains that “India and Japan refuse to be caught in binary choices and are gradually creating room within which other Asian countries can maneuver.”

A day after China launched its second aircraft carrier, the American administration under Mr. Donald J. Trump appeared jubilant about celebrating the first 100 days of its “America first” policy. Asian nations have to grapple with an uncertain security environment which lacks the structure or predictability that existed during the Cold War. They are caught between an aggressive China — their largest trading partner and their security ally or partner — and an increasingly capricious United States. Should one kowtow and shape Asia’s “common destiny” or negotiate a deal to “make America great again”? This article explains three ways in which India and Japan refuse to be caught in binary choices and are gradually creating room within which other Asian countries can maneuver.

First, India and Japan under Prime Ministers Modi and Abe respectively, have attempted to change the geopolitical imagination of their nations. By 2014 China had announced its plans to link the Eurasian landmass and Pacific Rimland (through ports, pipelines, etc) by reviving the maritime and continental ‘Silk Road’. In 2015 India and Japan signed a joint statement to mutually work towards building peace and stability in the Indo-pacific region within a decade. This was the first time the two nations agreed to expand the geographic scope of their strategic partnership (almost a decade after Abe first proposed it in India). Until 2014 the two nations looked for convergence in their foreign policies (‘Act East’, ‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’, ‘Make in India’, ‘Quality Infrastructure Initiative’, etc...). The United States under the Obama Administration additionally engaged in ‘burden sharing’ and institution building, as well as recognizing Indian and Japanese intentions to break out of their middle power status. It promoted India’s ‘leading power’ ambitions and supported the unprecedented changes in Japanese security legislation to make it more ‘proactive’.

Secondly, India and Japan are making attempts to transform the security order rather than being either status-quo nations or revisionist actors. The United States expects its Asian partners to balance against Chinese aggression while China’s biggest concern is a joint coalition that would resuscitate the ‘cold war mentality’ of containment. China has increasingly used its geoeconomic tools punitively to target trade, tourism, and other sectors against any diplomatic disobedience. This was glaringly visible when South Korea decided to go ahead with setting up the THAAD missile defense system against Chinese wishes. Recently Beijing standardized the names of Arunchal Pradesh localities with Chinese character in retaliation against the Dalai Lama’s visit to the Indian state (which Beijing claims is part of “South Tibet”). Meanwhile, Japan has deployed its helicopter

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carrier Izumo to a tour through the South China Sea (where China and ASEAN countries have disputed territories). Additionally, Izumo will participate in the Indo-US-Japan Malabar exercise in the Indian Ocean in July this year. Such “resistance” by India and Japan is a sign that both nations are unwilling to be dictated to by China.

India and Japan are keen to play active roles and engage in close cooperation with all actors in their respective restive neighborhoods on issues for which China exercises influence such as the North Korean nuclear crisis or negotiations on Afghanistan. The complexity of relations further illustrates that states in this region cannot adopt simple strategies of balancing, band-wagoning, or hedging; rather, India and Japan need to present alternatives to others that are unable to afford to maneuver in the present system.

Third, India and Japan are moving beyond middle power narratives as they seek to support smaller Asian nations and provide alternatives to China’s “win-win” diplomacy that has placed nations like Sri Lanka and Cambodia in a Chinese debt-trap. In 2016 India and Japan articulated a joint “Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy” towards achieving this goal, but have not yet spelled out any specifics. The two countries can assist with the need to fill the estimated \$1.3 trillion estimated infrastructure gap in the region. China, under the pretense of connectivity and trade, is attempting to “hard-wire” geopolitical realities and Chinese influence, brush territorial disputes and disagreements under the carpet and carry out business as usual. Neither India, Japan, nor the United States were among the 28 countries that sent heads of government to China’s maiden Belt and Road Forum. Before the forum develops into an overarching platform to discuss Indo-Pacific security issues, India and Japan need to quicken the pace of infrastructure cooperation.

In order to succeed Japan and India must compete with China’s ability to mobilize resources at a fast pace and engage in robust diplomacy without threatening smaller nations or appearing interventionist. India is seeking Japan’s help to regain lost geopolitical capital in its neighborhood. Ultimately, India and Japan need to help realize the aspirations of smaller nations like Sri Lanka, Nepal, Vietnam, Pacific Island countries, and others who need economic and security assistance.

Finally, the role of the United States to project power and influence is also of great significance to Indian and Japanese strategy. Recent talks of the creation of an Asia Pacific Stability Initiative (with a fund of approximately \$7.5 billion) and other diplomatic overtures hold the potential to stem the direction of the current power transition in the region. Asian nations now have to deal with an America that expects allies to do most of the heavy-lifting, and security guarantees in the future will be conditional on free and fair trade. Unlike before, it is the United States (in order to retain its dominance) that has to strengthen credibility in dealing with a new geostrategic landscape, where intra-Asian trade is high and China is no longer shy about its hegemonic aspirations. Ultimately the United States would have to pressure China and maintain the security and stability of the region. To preclude China’s hegemony or Sino-US rapprochement, India and Japan are breaking out of their traditional roles and are willing to shoulder the responsibility of securing the Indo-Pacific region.

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