

## JAPAN CHAIR PLATFORM

January 22, 2013

**Shinzo Abe and Delhi-Tokyo Ties**

Harsh V. Pant

With the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) winning a landslide in Japanese parliamentary elections and Shinzo Abe assuming the office of prime minister in Japan, India-Japan ties have entered a new phase. For Japan, embroiled in its domestic political instability and economic drift, India has not been a top priority in recent years. Indian bureaucracy has also been unwilling to push the pacts underpinning the “strategic partnership” to signal seriousness toward Japan. It is now possible to envision an end to this drift in Delhi-Tokyo ties.

In his second inning, Abe has promised to stimulate the Japanese economy and end deflation by passing a strong stimulus bill, as well as to make Japanese exports more competitive by devaluing the yen. Though he is viewed as a staunch nationalist and a hawk vis-à-vis China, he has made it clear that he would be working toward improving ties with China, as well as the United States. What is perhaps most significant is that nuclear power will be back in business with the coming to power of the LDP. What is very controversial is Abe’s expressed desire to rewrite the Japanese post-World War II pacifist constitution allowing for a full-fledged military.

Tensions between China and Japan have been rising over the islands known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China ever since the Japanese government decided to buy some of the islands from a private owner. In recent days, China has not only sent a flotilla of navy ships nears the islands but a Chinese military surveillance plane also entered Japanese airspace, forcing Japan to scramble fighter jets in response. China is steadily escalating its pressure on Japan as part of a strategy being overseen by the new leader, Xi Jinping. Abe was quick to underline after his party’s victory that “China is challenging the fact that [the islands] are Japan’s inherent territory” and suggested that his party’s “objective is to stop the challenge” and not to “worsen relations between Japan and China.”

As the world watches carefully how Abe’s second term in office will shape Japan’s domestic and foreign policies, New Delhi should lose no time in reaching out to Tokyo. Given Abe’s admiration for India and his repeated articulation of the need for India and Japan to work more closely, this is a unique opportunity to radically alter the contours of Indo-Japanese ties. While Delhi-Tokyo relations have been developing slowly and steadily over the last few years, the momentum seems to have left this very important bilateral partnership some time back. The two nations have recently concluded an agreement on social security, as well as a memorandum on cooperation (MoC) in the rare earths industry. The rare earths industry MoC was a significant initiative in light of China’s decision to cut off its exports of rare earths minerals to Japan following a territorial dispute in 2010. But the discussions on civilian nuclear energy cooperation between the two states have been stuck for quite some time now. With Abe’s coming to power with a strong pro-nuclear power agenda, time is ripe to regain the initiative on these negotiations.

China’s rise is the most significant variable in the Asian geostrategic landscape today, and both India and Japan would like to see a constructive China playing a larger role in the solving of regional and global problems rather than becoming a problem itself. Concerns are rising for both states about China’s assertive diplomatic and military posture. China’s attempts to test the diplomatic and military mettle of its neighbors will only bring Japan and India closer. While New Delhi and Tokyo would like greater transparency and restraint on Beijing’s part, there is now a need for them to be more candid about their expectations.

Of all recent Japanese leaders, Shinzo Abe has been the most enthusiastic about the future of the India-Japan relationship and gave it an entirely new dimension. In his address to the joint session of the Indian Parliament, Abe talked about a “broader Asia” constituting the Pacific and Indian Ocean countries—such as Japan, India, Australia, and the United States—that share the common values of democracy, freedom, and respect for basic human rights. He argued for greater

cooperation among these states. In his book, *Towards a Beautiful Country*, Abe makes the case for Japan advancing its national interests by strengthening its ties with India. He has argued: “It will not be a surprise if in another decade Japan-India relations overtake Japan-U.S. and Japan-China ties.” Building on the idea of a triangular security dialogue between Washington, Tokyo, and Canberra initiated by his predecessor, Abe made known his desire to create a four-way strategic dialogue with the United States, Australia and India, a framework that he stressed would be based on their shared universal values such as freedom, democracy, human rights, and rule of law. Since assuming office in December, Abe has once again underscored the importance of not only consolidating Japan’s historic alliance with the United States but also expressed a desire to deepen partnerships with India, Indonesia, and Australia.

New Delhi now has a chance to give a new dimension to its ties with Tokyo. With a new leadership in Tokyo with a decisive mandate, the old issues that once seemed insurmountable should be able to find some resolution. India should push Japan into giving Delhi-Tokyo ties a much more substantive dimension and move beyond old shibboleths. The time is right for India and Japan to seize the initiative and transform the strategic landscape in the Asia-Pacific region.

*Harsh V. Pant is a reader in international relations in the Department of Defence Studies, King’s College London, and an adjunct fellow (nonresident) with the Wadhvani Chair in U.S.-India Policy Studies at CSIS.*

---

***Japan Chair Platform* is published by the Office of the Japan Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).**

**© 2013 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.**