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Testing times for India-Japan ties: Former ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh

Both India and Japan are impacted, but in different way

Aditi Phadnis October 28, 2018 Last Updated at 05:35 IST



Hemant Krishan Singh, former ambassador to Japan

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrives in Japan for a two-day visit, former ambassador to Japan, **Hemant Krishan Singh** delves into the changing global order, how it affects both India and Japan, and how the outcome of the bilateral summit will speak for itself. In an email interview to **Aditi Phadnis**:

The global order is witnessing disruptive change and the US posture under President Trump stands radically transformed. How do you read these changes and what is their impact on India and Japan? Can we presume continued predictability in our bilateral relations?

Defining disruptive change in the “global order” — such as it is — is a complex issue, but I can outline some elements. To begin with, change itself is inevitable, as there can be no presumption of settled permanence in an era of global power flux, which is driven largely by the economic resurgence of the Indo-Pacific littoral, from India to Japan. The predominant American post-Cold War policy paradigm, predicting “end of history” and perpetual liberal hegemony of the West, has unravelled. The spectacular rise of China that this myth enabled has failed to deliver a “responsible stakeholder” in the rules-based order upheld by free market democracies like India and Japan. China’s expansionist assertions for dominance have disrupted regional stability.

Meanwhile, President Trump has been remarkably consistent in driving his “America First” agenda, which has fundamentally altered America's strategic posture. He has set aside past liberal internationalist pretensions and multilateralist pursuits, which he believes have undermined the US global influence. Briefly put, his policies appear designed to construct a “neo-American” order by confronting strategic challengers to American power and deploying the full spectrum of America’s enormous leverages to achieve geopolitical advantage. A major shift is underway in the US policy towards China, potentially the most significant since 1971. This policy goes beyond Trump and enjoys broader support within the US political establishment. The US policy is no longer risk averse.

Both India and Japan are impacted, but in different ways.

Japan is dealing with the turbulence caused by change in the US policies towards China and the Korean peninsula, as well as the US de-coupling from liberal prescriptions of trade and economic interdependence.

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For India, the US National Security Strategy has marked an accelerated shift towards the Indo-Pacific, breaking from the Asia Pacific-oriented strategies of the past to engage India as a strategic partner in the Indian Ocean and South Asia. The India-US defence and security cooperation has emerged as a key driver of bilateral relations, even as the overhang of differences on trade and investment issues remains.

So, quite clearly, the element of predictability in India-Japan relations will be tested and some differences in their respective regional approaches may well appear. Looking ahead, we will need to clearly recognise these gaps and find new ways of sustaining our privileged relations.

PM Shinzo Abe will receive PM Narendra Modi immediately after attending a summit meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing, signalling improved Japan-China relations. Despite their differences over security issues, there are signs of growing economic collaboration, including on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Will this upstage the Abe-Modi summit?

There is an emerging dichotomy in the Japanese political discourse between the primacy of China as a security concern and China as a key economic partner. We are also seeing renewed Japanese focus on “renormalisation” of ties with China.

The reality, however, is that China is reaching out to both India and Japan, whether tactically or otherwise. India has welcomed the “Wuhan spirit” but also made it clear that sustained progress in ties will depend on border tranquillity and mutual respect for each other's concerns, interests and aspirations. Japan on its part is keen to ensure that the change of the US policy towards China does not adversely impact Japan's economic interdependence with China. Japan is also opening up towards China's BRI strategy, including joint third country projects, albeit with minor caveats. This runs counter to the US and European trends mainstreaming India's views on BRI. Japan may also face pressure from China to constrain PM Abe's constitutional change agenda.

So yes, we need to wait and see how the back-to-back summits stack up in terms of their major outcomes.

As a US ally, Japan has enjoyed the US nuclear umbrella and assumed that the US will take responsibility for ensuring security in the region. Is this changing? Is Japan ready to play a greater security role in Asia and enhance defence ties with India?

These again are complex issues. The US-Japan alliance has been further strengthened in recent years but there is also considerable anxiety about the continued US commitment to Asian security, particularly in areas impacting Japan, such as the Korean peninsula. As such, there may be some nuanced changes in Japan's posture, particularly if a hiatus emerges between Japan and the US on

handling China. However, there is little likelihood of Japan breaking free from its US alliance-oriented mindset to become a more independent regional security actor. Japan's security focus accords primacy only to its neighbourhood concerns in East Asia and the Asia Pacific. Japan will continue to rely on the US to counter major threats emanating from China and the North Korea. There are limited prospects of Japan joining the US and India in contributing to Indian Ocean-centric security architecture. In fact, an explicit bilateral understanding on what India-Japan strategic and security convergences in the Indo-Pacific are and what common objectives should be pursued remains elusive, not least in terms of facing the challenge of Chinese power.

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What does this mean for Japan's defence ties with India? First of all, Japan will continue to prioritise the US and its allies ahead of India, and to consider the US involvement as an essential enabler of India-Japan defence ties.

India has yet to gain from the relaxation of Japan's defence trade and technology regime five years ago, and progress under the framework of defence and security cooperation established nearly a decade ago has been glacial. However, we have seen the conclusion of two enabling agreements for defence cooperation in 2016, and will likely see the signing of a long delayed maritime domain awareness agreement at the forthcoming summit. So, while there is continued reticence from Japan, there is also some recognition that defence ties should increasingly focus on the maritime security concerns of both nations and mutually reinforcing capacity building across the Indo-Pacific. Negotiations on a logistics exchange agreement, or ACSA, which is an essential component of reach and interoperability, are expected to get underway. Overall, prospects may be modest but we should keep pushing.

Since he assumed office, PM Narendra Modi has attached high priority to the strategic partnership with Japan. Four years down the road, how is the India-Japan relationship poised?

Steady progress in bilateral relations has unquestionably benefited from the extraordinary rapport between Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Shinzo Abe. In terms of concrete outcomes, the high points have been the 2014 and 2016 summits. The agenda of bilateral engagement has expanded in depth and scope to cover trade and investment, infrastructure and connectivity, environment and energy,

including civil nuclear, and defence and security. However, progress has been uneven across these sectors, and the main focus now is on building India's economic infrastructure, including HSR, and connectivity networks, especially in India's Northeast which is the gateway to ASEAN. This area will likely remain the mainstay of bilateral ties, which we must try and broaden to include a more vibrant trade, investment and technology transfer partnership. In other areas, perhaps it is time to moderate expectations and not allow rhetoric to get ahead of reality.

That said, a strategically oriented, special strategic and global partnership with Japan must remain a cornerstone of India's Act East and Indo-Pacific policies. As Asia's leading maritime democracies, we must continue to support a free, open, inclusive and rules based Indo-Pacific. We should also encourage Japan to recognise its own long-term interest in strengthening partnership with a strategically independent India, which will bolster Japan's ability to play a greater role in regional and global affairs.

In the midst of disruptive change and conflicting trends, Prime Ministers Modi and Abe will need to wield greater and more decisive influence to maintain the promising trajectory of our strategic partnership. Continued progress in India's strategic engagement with the US will also remain a key external driver of India-Japan relations.

As for the annual bilateral summit, it is best that we let the outcomes speak for themselves.