Changing Dynamics of Nihon\(^1\)-Indo Diplomatic Ties: From Shinzo Abe to Yoshihide Suga

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ABSTRACT

The geopolitical scenario in the Indo-Pacific\(^2\) region is changing rapidly. India, Japan and other oceanic states are facing new multidimensional challenges manifested in the unpeaceful\(^3\) rise of China. In this shadow, India-Japan ties have witnessed unprecedented growth in the last decade. Outgoing Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his counterpart in India have been instrumental for India-Japan bilateral relations taking a dramatic leap forward. Abe's visionary approach recognised India's strategic importance, as he worked tirelessly to take the relations to its new heights with his personal chemistry with the Indian Prime Minister. His proactive policy transformed South Block's expectations of Japan as a strong, influential and dependable partner in East Asia. Yoshihide Suga has succeeded Shinzo Abe as Japanese Prime minister. The initial days of Suga's foreign policy began by prioritising Vietnam, the USA and Australia, pointing out a different approach to Japan's foreign policy. Suga's political commitment to foreign affairs is secondary to the focus on domestic issues. The article is a comparative study of the foreign policy approaches of two Japanese Prime Ministers Abe and Suga towards India. In view of Abe's accomplishments, it is natural that India might be concerned about the transition to a new leader. The paper will try to analyse the reliability of Japan in the vulnerable security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region and the Suga government's willingness to engage actively in the Asian order for democratic values and the rule of law. Though India may not be Suga's top priority, India needs to actively leverage the strengths of the Abe-era partnership to keep it relevant.

Key Words: Shinzo Abe, Yoshihide Suga, Abenomics, Suganomics, Foreign Policy, Indo-Pacific region, Security, China

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga took charge as the 99th Prime Minister of Japan, following the resignation by country's longest-serving Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Nine months ago, Suga was a little-known entity in global politics and academia. Closeness to Abe proved enough to propel Suga to the helm of the nation. After taking over the PM-ship, Suga declared that his cabinet would be one of continuity, to further the mission and policies championed by Shinzo Abe (CNA, 2020). It indicates that the Suga regime will continue with the military modernisation and post-war policy of pre-emptive strike capability (Kuper, 2020). Before dwelling on the policies of both the leaders, let us look at the unpredicted exit of Abe and the rise of Suga in the political echelons of Japan.

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\(^1\) Nihon Translates to “Japan”

\(^2\) Indo-Pacific also refers to Asia Pacific

\(^3\) The term Unpeaceful rise of China is coined by John J Mearsheimer
Shinzo Abe’s Sudden Exit

The unexpected resignation of Abe surprised Japan and the world. Abe became the longest-serving Prime Minister in the history of Japanese parliament, the Diet, which includes two stints in office—one short for a year (2006-07) and another for a longer tenure of almost eight years (2012-2020). Abe’s stepping down truly symbolises the end of an era in Japanese politics. Abe developed many personal relationships with world leaders, such as with India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi. As C Raja opines, "Few modern international interlocutors of India brought the kind of personal affection and policy innovation that Prime Minister Abe did in the engagement with Delhi. For Abe, India was very special" (Mohan, 2020).

Abe’s sudden resignation brought praise from all corners of the world, commending Abe for his contribution in strengthening Japan’s relations with other States, calling him a "true friend" and a "great friend". Prime Minister Modi expressed grief and addressed Abe as "my dear friend", acknowledging the role of Abe in deepening India-Japan ties (Modi, 2020). During the Shinzo Abe tenure, India and Japan deepened their bilateral relationship and broadened it by establishing a ‘triangular cooperation’ framework with countries in Africa, West Asia, and South Asia. With Abe’s resignation, multiple names came out for his succession and what might be in the bag for ever-evolving Japan’s foreign policy. Japanese media named multiple prominent leaders as the probable faces for the prime minister of Japan after Abe’s exit. It included LDP politician and former Defence Minister Shigeru Ishiba; former Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida; veteran Defence Minister Taro Kano; and Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi, as potential replacements for Shinzo Abe. These names played in rounds in Japanese media, transitioning from Abe to New LDP president.

During the transition, what surprised Japanese politics was that prominent LDP leaders and the largest faction of Abe supporters, rallied around Suga for Prime Ministership. Suga was the longest-serving Chief Secretary under the Abe government and an influential bureaucrat. He kept a low profile until 2019, when he unveiled a new imperial era named Reiwa4 (McCurry, 2019). This made Suga a popular and prominent figure in Nihon politics and earned the title “Uncle Reiwa” (Macarthur, 2019). Due to his portfolio of controlling domestic affairs, he was little known internationally. Ishiba and Kishida were more familiar in the international domain; however, they lost the presidency to Suga. The sudden leaving of the PM-ship by Abe also surprised Modi and the South Block. Shinzo Abe left a colossal legacy of robust Indo-Japanese diplomatic ties.

India-Japan Relations Under Abe

Abe played a significant role in strengthening the bilateral ties between India-Japan. His speech, quoting a Mughal scholar-prince Dara Shikoh—the confluence of two seas’ (Shinzo, 2007) in the Parliament of India and articulated the Indo-Pacific Vision 2025 defining high-powered diplomacy. However, the world will never forget Shinzo Abe’s contribution in transforming post-world war Japan to play a more significant and vital

4 It translated to Japanese New Imperial Era. It comprises two Kanji characters rei and wa. The character is taken from a poem about plum blossoms which appears in Manyoshu, the oldest existing collection of Japanese poetry. In literary context rei translates to “fortune” or “auspicious” whereas wa translates to “peace” or “harmony”.
role in international politics by coming out of its comfort zone under the American security umbrella and encouraging the Asians to search for their identity.

Even though the protectionist regimes challenged the global liberal order, India and Japan converged their geo-political and geo-economic visions and converted them into actions. Perhaps befitting, India and Japan signed major military agreements during the Shinzo Abe era. Abe played an instrumental role in bringing Delhi and Tokyo closer in the security and strategic realm. The bilateral strategic relation reached its highest ladder under Abe when India-Japan signed an agreement facilitating the reciprocal provision of supplies and services between their respective armed forces to offer each other military support (Times, 2020). After Australia, India is the second country with which Japan signed such an agreement. India and Japan advanced issue-based alignment through QUAD, Japan-USA-India trilateral and creation of Resilient Supply Chain Initiative between Australia-India-Japan. Japan is the sixth country with which India has signed the agreement after Australia, France, Singapore, South Korea, and the United States.

The contemporary situation in North-East Asia is characterised by changing regional geopolitics with assertive China, alliance politics in Indo-Pacific and hedging against America’s abandonment, which shapes contemporary Tokyo’s strategic discourse. India was at the centre of Abe’s heart to restructure the regional and global order. The present-day Indo-Pacific resulted from the ‘confluence of two seas’, which widened Japan’s geographic horizon to include the Indian Ocean. It allowed Delhi to reclaim its lost strategic potential in the Pacific Ocean. The dream of ‘Broader Asia’ broke away geographical boundaries, which are taking a distinct form now. His initial efforts for a greater Indo-Pacific lost steam after he stepped down in 2007 due to ill health.

On returning to power in 2012, Abe took cognisance of the past initiative with much vigour and zeal amid mounting challenges from China. Shinzo Abe’s strategic calculation included both external and internal balancing. Abe restructured the post-war strategic posture, strengthened U.S. relations on his terms, and created a web of strategic partnerships across the Indo-Pacific region. In defining his ‘vast seas’ strategy, Abe was transforming Japan’s geo-political standing in the world. Before Abe, Japan struggled to position itself in international politics which swung between being an ‘economic giant’ and a ‘pacifist state’. Abe ushered Japan into regaining the leadership role in Asia amidst the growing uncertainty over the U.S. security guarantee and China’s muscular policies.

Abe conceptualised a world order based on a universal value, which is complemented by India’s Act East Policy. The personal relationship with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, mutuality of values and convergence of strategic interests deepened the relationship between India and Japan. Much of the thrust to the bilateral relations was given by the personal camaraderie between the two leaders. From the Shinkansen ride to Kobe to having a private dinner at Yamanashi home, Ganga aarti at Varanasi to the roadshow in Sabarmati Ashram- Abe has left a deep and heart-warming impression in Indian public memory.

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5 Translates to Bullet Train
Suga’s Entry

Yoshihide Suga is not a typical LDP leader. Though in the political domain, he is called Abe’s "right-hand" man, he stands in contrast to Abe with his political approaches. Like any other nation, dynastic politics prevails in Japan, and Shinzo Abe is among the blue blood pedigree. Around forty percent of Japanese Parliamentarians today are from different political families. Out of thirty Prime Ministers since post World War II, around twenty-seven were hereditary politicians. Like Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Suga is a self-made first-generation politician. From working in a strawberry farm to negotiating the confusing web of politics, he has steadily moved from being a municipal man to the Parliament in 1996 and now to the powerful prime ministerial position in 2020. However, Suga has big shoes to fill in.

Suga is not a member of any LDP faction, though he has mastered the moves of Japanese politics and the art of inter-factional negotiation. Suga, in his book titled Seijika no Kakugo: Kanryo o ugokasu (Commitment as Politicians: Shakeup Bureaucracy), broke the long-standing 'silo-culture' of Japanese bureaucracy. Suga may be an experienced hand when it comes to the internal dynamics of Japanese politics and governance, however his problem lies in lack of experience in the domain of foreign policy. Suga admitted his weakness in global diplomacy by stating that he "lacks the diplomatic skills of outgoing leader Shinzo Abe" (The Mainichi, 2020). Prime Minister Modi congratulated Suga and concurred on his vision of a stable and peaceful Indo-pacific during a phone call and expressed his intention to further strengthen the Indo-Japan relationship based on mutual trust and shared values (MEA, 2020).

India’s Position in Suga’s Foreign Policy

India remains one of Japan’s essential partners in the post-Abe era. Suga’s determination to continue the policies of his predecessor will surely translate in the foreign policy domain as he follows Abe's well tested path. However, the personal touch which Abe provided to India may not be there. Developing personal ties when the world is grappling a pandemic is an arduous task, and will take time and effort. Suga has far too many important issues in the domestic and Southeast Asian domain to put all his efforts and diplomatic focus on the Indian relationship.

For now, the foreign policy apparatus of Suga will focus more on strengthening U.S. relations as US is the sole security provider for Japan. The Suga government cannot take their eyes from the Biden administration. On Biden’s victory, Suga congratulated him by expressing the hope of strengthening the alliance further- 'Japan and the United States are allies tied firmly by bonds and shared values, Tokyo is looking forward to reinforcing the alliance and realizing a free and open Indo Pacific’ (Kyodo, 2021). In a later conversation with Biden, the United States gave assurance to defend Senkaku Islands, a group of East China Sea islets administered by Tokyo, however, claimed by China. The comment drew the ire of China, which often sends its naval assets around the island for muscle-flexing.

Other key concerns of Tokyo are the Korean Peninsula in general and China in particular. The ties under Abe with South Korea can be best described as persistent lows (Ferrier, 2020). The resignation of Abe took the Moon administration of South Korea by surprise. Some commentators in South Korea criticised for ruining one of the most
crucial democratic relationships in Asia (Park, 2020). The bilateral relationship was caught in the middle due to historical issues stemming from Japan’s colonisation of the Korean Peninsula. When Abe took back power in 2012, Sino-Japanese relations were in an abysmal state. After that, Abe offered an olive branch and even delayed dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic to host Chinese Premier Xi Jinping in Tokyo. Eventually, the visit did not fructify due to a rise in cases of Covid-19 infections. Since the region is witnessing China’s hard policies in different spheres, it will be a challenge for Suga to deal with it without escalating tensions.

Abe's signature narrative of "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" will be the core of Japanese foreign policy in the upcoming days, even under Suga. By this narrative, India gains centrality in Suga’s strategic and security architecture, becoming an asset for Japan. Tokyo under Suga will be eager to continue this policy to play a vital and active role in Indo-Pacific. Security, diplomatic and economic partnership will continue to be broad in scope. In his first call with Modi, Suga reassured Japan’s commitment to promoting bilateral cooperation in security and economic matters and to work with India to achieve a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (Chaudhury, 2020). India-Japan also discussed supply chain issues during the COVID pandemic and regional connectivity issues.

**Transition From an Economy Centric to a Broader Gamut Of Relations**

India-Japan relations for most pre and post-Cold-war periods were solely based on shallow and narrow focussed economic relations with minimal political interaction. Relations, despite being friendly lacked breadth and depth and were limited to direct economic assistance from Japan. with Maruti-Suzuki a grand success. India was in the periphery of Japan’s strategic calculation, while significant focus was given to China and Southeast Asian nations. The prominent Japanese scholar Takenori Horimoto in the mid-1990’s opined that "Japan and India have long been out of sync, and their mutual interests coincide rarely" (Horimoto, 1993). Even the small-scale relation reached a cliff in the wake of India’s nuclear test in 1998, attracting condemnation from Tokyo, which led to a near breakdown of the bilateral relationship.

The dent in the relationship recovered after the visit of Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori to India in 2000. This visit propelled the bilateral relationship forward. Mori’s successor Junichiro Koizumi (2001-06) kept the relationship on an upward trajectory; however, Abe’s visit in 2007 created new dimensions in the bilateral relations between India and Japan. In his second stint as PM in 2012, Abe worked closely with former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, and from mid-2014, both Abe and Modi wrote new chapters of success in Indo-Japanese ties. No doubt, bilateral trade and Foreign Direct Investment by Japan saw an upward swing. However, what took the limelight was defence and strategic ties between the two states.
India-Japan Security and Defence Links


Since the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in 2008 and 2009, the Action plan paved the way for advanced security cooperation. Since then, Indian and Japanese Defence Chiefs’ visit each other regularly and hold talks on mutual concerns, to promote better synergy between the forces. There is still a vast potential of defence ties which India and Japan have not tapped yet. India and Japan upgraded the 2+2 dialogue to the ministerial level in 2018. The inaugural talks in the new format were held in 2019, where a significant announcement was made regarding the India-Japan Joint Fighter Aircraft exercise (Chaudhury, 2019).

Significantly under Abe, Japan shifted from its position on having a nuclear energy agreement with a Non-Proliferation Treaty signatory by signing an agreement with India in 2016. Interestingly, India is the only non-NPT signatory state with which Japan signed such a nuclear pact. In the final year of Abe’s Prime Ministership in 2020, the two countries signed the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) for the defence forces of the two countries to share supplies. One can clearly say that India’s position in Japan’s defence vision has gone up. In its 2020 defence white paper, Japan mentioned Australia and India as number one and number two defence partners after the United States (MoD, 2020).

Besides multiple security and strategic frameworks, the two nations have created platforms such as the India-Japan-US trilateral, India-Japan-Australia trilateral and the India-Japan-US-Australia, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. The Quad platform has given a significant push to the security environment in the Indo-Pacific region. Even during the pandemic, India, the USA, Japan, and Australia held a quad meeting in 2020 to discuss the post COVID world order and building a resilient supply chain (India, 2020). No joint statement was released showing a lack of consensus among the Quad nations. Although “China” was not mentioned by name in the meeting, the group’s key concern remains Chinese assertive and aggressive behaviour in the Indo-Pacific region, a cause of concern to the Quad nations.
Transition From Abe to Suga

With the sudden news of Abe's resignation in August 2020, Indian media outlets and think tanks carried several media reports and commentaries, emphasising Abe's legacy and his role in giving a new direction to the bilateral ties. Famous diplomat Shyam Saran rhetorically asked whether India-Japan relations will remain as strong as the Abe era (Saran, 2020). The Suga regimes are in their early days; however, as the indications suggest, there is unlikely to be a tectonic shift in the India-Japan relationship.

Developments

The relation will miss its acceleration due to the limited experience of Suga and will majorly depend upon his Foreign Minister Toshimotsu Motegi and new defence minister Nobuo Kishi.

Suga, in his telephone conversation with Modi, confirmed bilateral commitment to the relationship and step-up cooperation in security and economic areas and contribute to 'Free and open Indo-Pacific.'

The Indo-Japan relationship stands on a solid foundation, thanks to the initiatives of Abe and his counterpart. Japan is a special country and has both annual summit progress and 2+2 ministerial dialogue.

The two nations share the same values of an open and accessible Indo-Pacific region and have similar concerns of expansionist China, which bind them together. Also, closeness with the USA and Australia in terms of strategic goals are additional reasons for Japan to engage deeply with India.

Challenges

The relations between India and Japan have some ‘misses’ as well. Some issues linger in the Japanese establishment, which include trade balance and progress in transfer of cutting-edge technology. For several years, Japan and India have been in negotiation for US-2 amphibious aircraft. The Indian side has withdrawn from the deal citing cost and technology transfer issues, and the deal has yet to be finalised. Similarly, there are concerns over the timely completion of High Speed (Bullet) Trains for which ODA loans are provided at the cheapest rate. No other country other than India has received such extensive aid in a single project from Japan.

Further, withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) at the last minute has dented the hopes of Japanese policymakers and the business community. India’s participation in RCEP was critical to challenge China’s domination. Japan still awaits and hopes for India to join RCEP. Due to India’s RCEP gamble, India has shifted to the periphery in the Japanese corporate focus, whereas China and Southeast Asia hold the centre position. In the current COVID-19 pandemic, Japanese corporations are still sceptical about investing in India.
Conclusion

Abe worked holistically with both the regimes of Manmohan Singh and Modi, placing India at the centre of Japan’s global engagement. Similarly, both Indian Prime Ministers religiously reciprocated Abe’s efforts, where Abe-Modi relations developed into a unique personal bond.

However, the new political landscape tells a whole new story. Suga will put his energy into consolidating his political position within the LDP’s multiple factions and winning the next general election in October 2021. Suga’s term will expire in the coming four months, making it essential for him to win the LDP presidency to continue as Prime Minister or else face the problem of the ‘revolving door’ Prime Minister that Japan faced during 2006-12.

As Delhi gears up for the post-Abe leadership, India’s ascendancy in Japan’s strategic framework will endure and outlive the Abe administration. It is India’s turn now to do some heavy lifting for nurturing and solidifying the bilateral relations. India must go beyond government-to-government engagement. The need of the hour is focussing on creating more attractive platforms for Japanese corporations to relocate from China and diversifying supply chains to India. Indian commentator Jagannath Panda optimistically noted the complementarities of Indo-Japan economic relations, which both nations can leverage under “Suganomics” (Panda, 2020). Even though India has a limited capacity to absorb the investment, India must seize the opportunities provided by shifting Japanese business entities to diversify its investment portfolio. Even though the defence and security cooperation and strategic convergence have been fast paced between Indian and Japan, intensified economic cooperation and transfer of technology are essential for the relationship to be enduring. There is no going back in Indo-Japan relations primarily because the variables that pushed India and Japan closer are still changing dynamically. The question is whether India and Japan are up to the challenge.

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