

India and Japan: Time to Fill the Strategic Void

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Impressive speech by Abe

Shinzo Abe, the former Prime Minister of Japan has left a lasting impression on the Indian audience by being candid, forthright and straight forward about his vision of the future of the stability and security of the Asia Pacific region. Speaking in New Delhi on the subject of 'Two democracies Meet at Sea: For a Better and Safe Asia', Abe envisions a confluence of democracies where like minded states pool their naval and other assets to preserve order at sea. In that context, Abe makes a strong case for greater engagement between India and Japan to fill the 'strategic void' that is slowly but surely creeping into the region due to the relative decline of the US power in Asia. This is particularly so at a time when China is rising and also displaying a strong proclivity for assertiveness.

Concert of democracies

The economic vitality of India and Japan is highly dependent on assured supply of energy and safe and secure trading routes in the region. Given these realities, the two democracies are important stakeholder in the evolving security dynamics in the region and any insecurity could adversely impact on their economic growth.

The political leadership from both sides has stressed the need to expand security and defense cooperation and develop capacities through bilateral and multilateral exercises, information sharing, training and dialogue to respond to a number of security challenges including piracy in the Gulf of Aden, maritime security and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and response. The Indian Navy and the Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force should take the lead and develop a robust bilateral cooperative agenda to ensure stability in the Asia Pacific region.

Abe's vision of 'concert of democracies' to preserve order at sea also gains salience and criticality in the light of the recent incidents involving Chinese behaviors at sea. China has deployed its naval and air assets to challenge the internationally accepted 'freedom of the seas', questioned national jurisdiction of sea spaces as envisaged under the Law of the Sea, employed aggressive postures to intimidate other claimants of South

China Sea and even objected to legitimate exploitation of offshore resources. These developments have lowered the confidence of the regional countries who have raised the level of 'China threat' higher in their strategic calculations.

Key to success is naval cooperation

At the operational level, the Indian and the Japanese navies must contend with the Chinese ability to modify DF 21 into Anti Ship Ballistic Missile (ASBM) missile to attack and cripple large sea targets such as the aircraft carriers and fleet formations. In the coming years, the Chinese threat is likely to increase after its aircraft carrier joins the fleet and starts to make forays into the Indian Ocean.

In that context, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's vision of a trilateral dialogue among India, Japan and the US along with other democracies is a viable option. Joint naval operations and also the ability to operate with the US Navy will be the key to success.

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