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India-Japan Logistics Pact: Why Tokyo is crucial for the free and open Indo-Pacific concept

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Rudroneel Ghosh

I am a Delhi-based journalist working for the Edit Page of The Times of India.

Last week, India and Japan inked a mutual logistics support agreement that allows for interoperability and use of each other's military facilities. In fact, the agreement allows for closer cooperation between the two armed forces and facilitates reciprocal provision of supplies and services. In other words, India and Japan can now coordinate more effectively in the defence sector to bolster their presence in the Indo-Pacific.

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There is no denying that the India-Japan agreement has been inked keeping in mind China's aggressive behaviour in the Indo-Pacific in recent years. Currently, both New Delhi and Tokyo are engaged in live territorial disputes with Beijing. While India and China are engaged in a border standoff in eastern Ladakh, China and Japan have been shadow sparring over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea since 2012. And as I have explained in my previous articles, China will continue to push its expansive territorial claims in the Indo-Pacific to serve as a cover for its domestic socio-economic transformations presently underway.

But the heat of Beijing's strategy will be felt by other countries in the Indo-Pacific region. This is where it is important for India and Japan to step up and coordinate as part of a larger regional coalition that pushes back against China's aggressive designs. In fact, India and Japan geographically bracket the vital segment of the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, ideally, they should serve as two pillars of the free and open Indo-Pacific architecture.

But this requires a political-strategic recalibration on the part of Japan. After all, since World War II, Japan hasn't played the hard strategic game, constrained by

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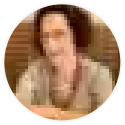
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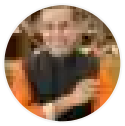
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its pacifist constitution. In fact, the pacifist constitution was imposed on Japan specifically to prevent it from going down the militarist path once again. For, East Asian nations, including but not just China, still retain painful memories of Imperial Japan's exploits during the second great war. Episodes like the Nanjing massacre in which thousands of Chinese civilians and soldiers were killed by the Imperial Japanese army continue to influence the political DNA in large parts of East Asia. Add to this the horrors wrought by the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and pacifism has been deeply embraced by vast sections of the Japanese public.

But it is important to remember that today's Japan is very different from the Japan of 75 years ago. It has emerged as a strong democracy and its billions of dollars worth overseas development assistance bears testimony to its commitment to shared prosperity and multilateralism. Plus, Japan has expressed regret for its World War II excesses and provided compensation for the same, although many contend that it hasn't done so enough. Interestingly, China's absolute leader in the revolution and immediate post-revolution period, Mao Tse-tung, in 1954 had told a Japanese

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parliamentary delegation, “You cannot be asked to apologise every day, can you?”

The point is that Japan today has done everything to prove it is a normal country. While history certainly has its place, it cannot become a paralysing baggage for Japan. The facts today are that China has emerged as an Asian economic and military behemoth, and the US, despite its pre-eminent position in the world, is witnessing its national power plateau. In this scenario, China feels that it can test the US alliance system in Asia. In other words, the US alliance system, defence treaties and military bases in Asia are no longer an absolute deterrent against China. Add to this an isolationist-minded American President in Donald Trump – who is as likely to bicker with his alliance partners as he is with his rivals – and Beijing feels that it can push around regional neighbours to serve both its political and strategic purposes.

Against this backdrop, Asian countries that believe in democracy, rule of law and international agreements must come together to counterbalance China. In this regard, Japan’s 2015 reinterpretation of the war renouncing Article 9 of its pacifist constitution that allowed for Japan’s Self-Defence Forces to mobilise overseas under certain conditions – when Japan is attacked or when a close ally is attacked

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and the result threatens Japan's survival – was a step in the right direction. It gave Japan some much needed strategic security dynamism. The pact with India now is an extension of this new Japanese strategic security posture.

China's assertive rise presents a complicated strategic challenge for the whole region. Deep economic connections sit next to geopolitical rivalries and issues left over from history. The only way countries like India and Japan can navigate this tangle is by working closely with each other and other regional stakeholders in multilateral and plurilateral arrangements. The India-Japan mutual logistics support agreement is a small piece of the answer.

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