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Japan's PM Signals Intent: Suga's visit to Vietnam is good preparation for the future

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

Recently, new Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga embarked on his first overseas trip as premier to Vietnam. The choice of his first foreign destination certainly reflected a desire to continue with the free and open Indo-Pacific dynamic in light of China's aggressive behaviour in the region. In fact, Suga described Vietnam as the cornerstone of efforts to realise a free and open Indo-Pacific, and vowed to continue Japan's contribution for peace and prosperity in

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the region. Further, the two countries have agreed in principle to a military deal that would enable Japan to export defence equipment to Vietnam, including patrol planes and radars. These would certainly help Vietnam shore up its surveillance capabilities in the South China Sea where it is locked in territorial and maritime disputes with China.

Meanwhile, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc said that he was ready to support Japanese investments in his country, including by accommodating real estate and human resource needs. This too has a China angle as Japan is providing subsidies to companies looking to move out of China and relocate to Southeast Asia. Actually, of the 30 companies selected so far to receive the subsidies, half are planning to set up shop in Vietnam.

Therefore, both from the perspective of geopolitical strategy and economic supply chain diversification, Japan is eyeing Vietnam as a critical partner in Southeast Asia. In that sense, Suga with his first foreign trip is signalling a continuation of the Indo-Pacific strategy promulgated by his predecessor Shinzo Abe. The latter was quick to recognise the challenges to Japan and the region that an assertive China posed. Which is why Abe moved quickly to build a rapport with

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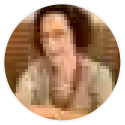
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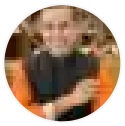
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US President Donald Trump when he was elected to the White House in 2016. This resulted in Abe getting Trump on the same page on regional strategic priorities, giving rise to the Indo-Pacific construct and resurrecting the Quad grouping of India, Japan, US and Australia.

Suga is likely to follow in Abe's footsteps and try to further strengthen Japan's regional connections to counterbalance China. But the big difference is in his personality compared to Abe. The latter was dynamic and charismatic, and for a modern Japanese leader not afraid to take bold decisions and shake up Japan's conservative impulses. Suga, on the basis of first impressions, is much more in the mould of a traditional Japanese politician averse to dramatic policy changes. This also means there are questions about how he will deal with the next US President. If Trump returns to office, there are apprehensions that he and Suga will be like oil and water. However, if Joe Biden comes to occupy the White House, a recalibration in US-Japan relations is expected.

In any case, it is Suga's ability to manage the relationship with the US that will matter the most in determining Japan's ability to influence geopolitics in East Asia. The fundamental conundrum for countries in the region is still the fact that

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they have deep economic connections with China despite having maritime and territorial disputes. Therefore, for countries like Vietnam the choice is between protecting economic growth and rising living standards of their citizens on the one hand, and safeguarding territorial and maritime sovereignty on the other hand. The only solution is if the US and Japan together can replace China as the regional economic heavyweight. This is precisely why it was a huge mistake for the Trump administration to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement that was designed to circumvent China. Had the full TPP been realised, Southeast and East Asian nations would have had far more strategic leverage to deal with China's aggressive behaviour today.

Therefore, much will depend on the US-Japan relationship after the American presidential election. For, Japan can't be expected to do all the heavy lifting in Asia. But a forward-postured Tokyo will surely be instrumental to a regional formation to counterbalance China, as and when the US becomes ready with a combined military and economic strategy that all nations concerned about Chinese aggression can get on board. In that sense, taking the Japan-Vietnam relationship to the next level is good preparation for the future.

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