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Beyond wishful thinking: India and Japan both have an interest in checking China, but they come from different places

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Manoj Joshi
The writer is a Distinguished Fellow, Observer Research Foundation

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Indian commentators have made much of the statement of a junior Japanese minister that Tokyo wanted more negotiations in RCEP for including India, before signing on to it. He didn't quite say, as some Indian reports claimed, that Japan won't sign the RCEP minus India. When it comes to Japan, many of our analysts are into wishful thinking.

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The remarks were made before a "2+2" meeting of India and Japan's foreign and defence ministers at the end of last month. In the joint statement that followed there was a reference to their pet peeves – North Korea and terrorism (Pakistan). There was a long paragraph on terrorism and the need to halt cross-border movement of terrorists without naming any country. But no mention of Jammu & Kashmir, indicating that Tokyo was not inclined to underwrite New Delhi's folly.

There is no doubt that Japan and India are developing good and even close political relations. This is driven by their wariness of China. That is why Japan would rather have India in the trade agreement, than outside. And that is why Tokyo wants closer political ties with New Delhi.

After Beijing's "lawfare" in declaring an ADIZ over islands it disputes with Japan, Tokyo wants to uphold the larger concept of freedom of navigation and overflight in the Indo-Pacific and New Delhi has gone along with this.

This is less about a military alliance and more about a balance of power that will persuade Beijing that there is more to be gained by playing by the rules, than breaking them. Japan's economic power and India's size and location make them

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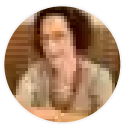
important hinges in Tokyo's Indo-Pacific strategy which is more about political than military strength. That is why to assume that some kind of battle lines are being drawn, and Japan and India are on one side of it, is to overinterpret the Japanese position. There may be an identity of interests between the two in checking China, but they come from two different places.

Though they have a history of bad blood between them, the China-Japan dispute over the Diaoyu-Senkaku islands is trivial compared to that over the militarised Sino-Indian border. India and Japan may suffer from China's relationships with Pakistan and North Korea, but the Beijing-Islamabad relationship is qualitatively different from that between China and North Korea.

Most importantly, Japan was an early investor after China opened up, and currently has some 32,000 companies with investments worth over $125 billion in China. In comparison, the $30 billion Japanese FDI in India is spread among some 1,500 companies. China is Japan's largest trading partner – 20% of Japanese exports and 25% of its imports come from China as compared to 1.3% and 0.83% from India. These figures alone cannot tell the whole story, but they provide a palimpsest upon which a more realistic



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analysis of the Indo-Japanese relationship can be written.

Having adopted a confrontationist posture in the 2012-18 period Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has made peace with China. Last year, Japan agreed to take up 50 joint infrastructure projects with China – this is BRI in all but name. Japan's companies need Chinese business to remain profitable. So Tokyo has adopted a pragmatic posture, but it is based on strength. On the one hand, it is building up military and geopolitical networks with countries like India and Vietnam to balance China. On the other, because of its vaunted technological capacity it remains a desirable partner for China, especially as the latter faces a US technology denial regime.

All this is in contrast with India where many commentators, and some in the government, can barely hide their deep sense of inferiority, and want to stiff it to Beijing at every opportunity. We, of course, are the net losers. Prime Minister Narendra Modi would do well to learn a lesson or two from Abe on dealing with China when the Japanese PM comes visiting New Delhi next week.

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