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Decoding India-Japan and Sino-Pak Talks

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Abstract

The transparent scale-up of India's defence cooperation with Japan, evident during their latest summit, shows that New Delhi can deploy a diplomatic, not military, card with reference to China at this stage. Equally important are the signs that China has not given up its Pakistan card in regard to India even in the new context of an unusual paradox in Sino-Indian ambience. These aspects have come into focus in the just-concluded cameos of strategic forays by China in South Asia and India in East Asia.

The efficacy of inter-state diplomacy is determined by the timing of national initiatives and their intended messages. By this test, there was a coded signal for China from the Japan-India summit in Tokyo on 29 May 2013. Earlier, there was a different but clear message for India from the Sino-Pakistan talks in Islamabad on 23 May.

By design or default, the previously-postponed Japan-India summit was held in Tokyo at this time, within days after Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's recent talks in India and Pakistan.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh have announced a conspicuous scale-up of bilateral defence cooperation. Briefing Indian journalists who travelled with Dr Singh, India's Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai said: "India and Japan have agreed to institutionalise bilateral naval exercises, to conduct them regularly and with increased frequency. The Japanese Government has offered to sell the US-2 amphibious aircraft to India. ... This is one of the few occasions where Japan has offered to

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sell such dual use equipment with both military and civilian applications to a foreign country. ...this is an aircraft with extraordinary capabilities of landing even in fairly high seas where waves are quite high, and has a very, very, long range”.²

Dual-Use Aircraft

Emphasising that the dual-use plane was one specific aspect of the now-strengthened Japan-India Strategic and Global Partnership, Mr Mathai further amplified: “What we have agreed to is a setting up of a Joint Working Group to examine the potential of this aircraft, the possibilities of whether it can be used, whether it should be manufactured jointly. ... This is a very new proposal which has come to us. ... [The aircraft] is a technological achievement. So, we [the Indian side] would certainly like to look at it”.³

The amplification is designed to convey that the likely amphibious aircraft deal poses no threat to China, whose neighbours both Japan and India are. However, the relevant signal from India is that it has now acquired a virtual Japan-card to deploy with reference to China in diplomatic (not certainly military) terms at this stage.

The scene for such a conclusion was set by Mr Abe who told Dr Singh over dinner on 29 May: “You remember that I spoke of the Confluence of the Two Seas (Pacific and Indian Oceans) in 2007 at the Indian Parliament. I am of a belief that it is the task for the maritime democracies to safeguard our vast oceans”.⁴

In this new context, it will be a huge stretch of the imagination to argue that New Delhi’s Tokyo-card of this kind can match China’s Pakistan-card that has been in play with regard to India for long. In fact, Mr Li’s journey to Islamabad from New Delhi on 22 May – at a time of political transition there – is proof of the new Chinese leadership’s extraordinary display of trust in Pakistan.

Economic Core and Strategic Value

While in New Delhi, Mr Li did indicate China’s willingness to address India’s “concerns” on a reciprocal basis. Moreover, he virtually re-stoked happy memories of a one-time Sino-Indian bonding. However, travelling to Islamabad within hours thereafter, he spoke of diversifying the time-tested Sino-Pakistani “all-weather friendship”.

This message is not lost on New Delhi, whose relations with Islamabad are still determined by, among other factors, Pakistan’s enduring reliance on Beijing (and on Washington now and then, not to mention Saudi Arabia at a different level). Interestingly, though, some

² Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India: <http://www.mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?21760/Transcript+of+Media+Briefing+by...>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Japanese Prime Minister’s website: http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/96_abe/statement/201305/29india_e.html

analysts in Pakistan have begun to speculate differently, because of the bonhomie that Mr Li has exuded towards India despite the recent Sino-Indian border standoff that took several weeks to resolve (even without a fire-fight). The strand of speculation is that the value of Pakistan to China will diminish in proportion to the rise in cordiality and convergence of interests in the newly-changing Sino-Indian equation.

On balance, however, there is no hard evidence on the ground to suggest that China is giving up on Pakistan. Indeed, Pakistan's powerful military leaders and civilian leader Nawaz Sharif, who became Prime Minister for a third time on 5 June, were privy to China's latest offer of help for two projects of strategic importance in the widest sense of the term. One of these projects is the upgrading of the Karakorum Highway in the pivotal India-Pakistan-China tri-junction. The other project is Pakistan-China Economic Corridor that will link the underdeveloped Chinese provinces to the southern Pakistani port of Gwadar, which Beijing acquired recently.

It is easy to discern that these two projects, with economic core, are China's potential assets for possible purposes in its equation with India, in the widest strategic sense. To recognise this is to presuppose the durability of China-Pakistan "all-weather friendship" – not to discount Pakistan's sense of sovereignty.

No Zero-Sum Calculus

Conceived in these terms, the latest flurry of diplomacy in eastern and southern Asia – involving India and Japan at one corner of the spectrum and the Chinese Premier's talks in New Delhi and Islamabad at another – is no run-of-the-mill stuff. At the same time, it will be off the mark to see these moves as old-style zero-sum games. India's growing new links with Japan in China's eastern neighbourhood do not match the escalating intensity of Beijing's ties with Islamabad in New Delhi's western neighbourhood.

There is another diplomatic caveat too. The Sino-Indian relationship today is passing through a sensitive moment of truth and opportunity. It is an unusual paradox that the China-India ambience is now defined by positive signals over the seemingly-uncertain intentions of each side towards the other into the future. Equally emphatic is the fact that the current Sino-Indian equation, while being very delicate in nature, is not as fragile as the contemporary China-Japan relationship.

In these circumstances, the growing warmth in Japan-India ties is something that China is expected to take serious note of, without necessarily losing sleep over that. These cameos of China in South Asia and India in East Asia show that the two countries are making new strategic forays into each other's core neighbourhood while trying to rebalance the basic Sino-Indian equation.

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