

# ISAS Brief

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469A Bukit Timah Road  
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770  
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239  
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447  
Email: [isassecc@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isassecc@nus.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)



## **Abe's Visit to India: The Strategic Implications**

Sinderpal Singh<sup>1</sup>

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe attracted much international attention as India's guest of honour at this year's Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi. A large part of final joint statement issued at the end of discussions between Mr Abe and India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh featured enhanced cooperation between the two countries in the economic domain. However, the joint statement also pointed to significant expansion of ties between the two countries in the defence-security realm. This potential expansion of defence-security relations has three major strategic implications.

### **Shared Anxiety about China**

The first, and probably the most significant, strategic implication is the shared anxiety both countries increasingly exhibit about China's recent behaviour. Just a few days before coming to India, Mr Abe outlined, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, this anxiety when he

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Sinderpal Singh is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at [isasss@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasss@nus.edu.sg). Opinions expressed in this paper, based on research by the author, do not necessarily reflect the views of ISAS.

compared the Japan-China relationship to the Germany-Great Britain relationship just before the onset of the First World War. A large part of such Japanese perceptions is shaped by China's recent announcement of an 'air defence zone' in the East China Sea. India obviously has its own set of anxieties about China's actions vis-a-vis their territorial dispute which dates back to 1962. In addition to this territorial dispute, India's anxieties have been heightened more recently by China's apparent drive to augment its naval presence in the Indian Ocean. China's zeal in developing and obtaining access to seaports in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Pakistan seems to be, in Indian perceptions, proof of such Chinese intentions to boost its influence in the Indian Ocean. Indian strategic thinkers, accustomed to viewing India as the pre-eminent naval power in the Indian Ocean, view these developments with the utmost trepidation.

Two points in the joint statement speak to this shared anxiety about China. The first is the commitment by the two prime ministers to "the importance of freedom of overflight and civil aviation safety in accordance with the recognized principles of international law and the relevant standards and recommended practices of the International Civil Aviation Organization". This is a very thinly veiled reference to China's 'air defence zone' declaration in the East China Sea and the first time India has made a public reference, however oblique, about this Chinese action. The second point is the reference to the "successful conduct of the second bilateral exercise between the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and the Indian Navy in December 2013 off the coast of Chennai" and "their intention to conduct the joint exercise in the Pacific Ocean in 2014". China's perceived assertiveness in both the East China Sea and the wider Indian Ocean has brought to the fore more starkly the common threat perception, and thus the common interests, both Japan and India share. The conduct of joint maritime exercises, especially the planned exercise in the Pacific Ocean in 2014, is a clear signal of Japan and India intending to present a unified front in the event of increased Chinese naval assertiveness. The sale of Japanese naval craft to India is one element of this process. India will become the first exception to Japan's self-imposed ban on defence exports since 1967 with the impending sale of the U-2 amphibious patrol aircraft. As outlined in the joint statement, the second meeting of the Joint Working Group on this impending sale will take place in March 2014, by which time the sale of 15 of these patrol aircraft is expected to be finalised.

## **India-Japan-US Maritime ‘Role’**

The second major strategic implication is the growing desire to strengthen the India-Japan-US trilateral grouping. While India's bilateral relationships with both Japan and the US have their own specific histories, the India-Japan-US grouping gained institutional life as the US-Japan-India trilateral dialogue in 2011. Since then, representatives of the three states have been meeting regularly and the issue of maritime security has been an important part of this dialogue. This trilateral forum allows India to build on its strategic relationship with the US by insulating it to some extent from its domestic critics who fear India's growing ties with the US will result in a loss of its strategic autonomy at the global level. Given the broad domestic consensus within India for constructing closer defence and strategic ties with Japan, the trilateral arrangement facilitates India's political leaders in their efforts to build closer defence and strategic relations with the US. India's invitation to Japan to re-join the annual India-US *Malabar* naval exercise, contained in the joint statement, relates to this desire to strengthen the India-Japan-US trilateral grouping, especially in the realm of maritime security. Since China's protest in 2007 at Japan, Singapore and Australia's inclusion in the annual *Malabar* exercise in the Bay of Bengal, India has kept this naval exercise a largely bilateral affair with the US. The invitation to Japan to join this year's *Malabar* exercise is therefore significant and points to the Indian desire to strengthen the India-Japan-US trilateral grouping, especially in the sphere of maritime security. When contrasted with earlier Indian moves to scale down the *Malabar* exercises, as recently as 2013, in response to China's criticism of these naval war games, this invitation to Japan signals a course correction. India wants to maintain and strengthen its strategic relationship with both Japan and the US and the trilateral dialogue seems the best medium in which to achieve this goal.

## **India in East Asia**

The third strategic implication of Prime Minister Abe's visit to India is Japan's clear endorsement of India for playing the role of a net security provider in East Asia. Located geographically outside the East Asia region, and largely irrelevant to this region for most of the Cold War period, India is now being asked to not only participate merely in the security dialogues of East Asia, but instead India is being urged by East Asia states, to varying degrees (with the prominent exception of China), to play the role of a net security provider in

East Asia. At this moment, Japan, together with certain other East Asian states, view this role as being critical, specifically in the realm of maritime security. The possibility of territorial disputes escalating, in both the East China and South China seas, to a degree where freedom of navigation is adversely affected in these areas, has become a source of some concern to several countries in East Asia, with Japan being a key representative. India's role is viewed as significant in both preventing any slide towards such a state of affairs as well as in actively committing to reverse such a situation, if it transpires, in coalition with other like-minded states in East Asia like Japan. Increasingly, led by countries like Japan, India's leaders are being pressed to declare its unequivocal commitment to the coalition of states in East Asia committed to the territorial status quo, with specific reference to the maritime space increasingly represented as the 'Indo-Pacific'.

This attempt to enmesh India as an important actor in East Asia's security ecosystem is discernible in the joint statement. The agreement to launch regular consultations between the head of Japan's recently established National Security Council (NSC) and India's National Security Advisor is likely designed to facilitate India's deeper understanding of, and participation in, the core security issues in East Asia. In fact, the Japanese government made a public point about the significance of the first head of Japan's NSC choosing India as the destination of his début trip. This segment of the joint statement is therefore significant. In addition, the two prime ministers reaffirmed their collective commitment to the East Asian Summit (EAS) in their joint statement. This signalled the significance of India's membership of the EAS and the acceptance of India as part of the East Asian security system by a large majority of East Asian states.

In conclusion, Mr Abe's recent trip to Delhi holds potentially profound strategic implications for the East Asian region. Japan and India's shared discomfort, with China's seemingly aggressive behaviour rising especially in recent months, is providing the incentive for both countries to improve their bilateral relationship further. In the event that India's political leaders, of whichever political hue, reciprocally accept Japan's, and the wider East Asian, vision of India's role in the region, this visit would be viewed a key turning point for the international politics of Asia.

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