

# ISAS Brief

No. 520 – 7 November 2017

Institute of South Asian Studies  
National University of Singapore  
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
#08-06 (Block B)  
Singapore 119620  
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505  
www.isas.nus.edu.sg  
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



## Shinzo Abe's Victory in Japan: Implications for India

*In the national elections in Japan on 22 October 2017, the ruling coalition, led by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, returned to power, defeating a divided opposition. While the election results show a strong mandate for Abe domestically, they also augur well for Japan-India relations. Abe has put much of his political capital into developing close ties with India, which has reciprocated positively under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.*

Rupakjyoti Borah<sup>1</sup>

The national elections in Japan on 22 October 2017 saw the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)-Komeito coalition convincingly defeating the opposition, including the new party, Kibō no Tō (Party of Hope), set up by the Governor of Tokyo, Ms Yuriko Koike. The Party of Hope had high expectations, fielding 235 candidates.

When Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called for snap elections on 25 September 2017, the main opposition party, the Democratic Party, broke up. Some of its members set up the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP), which incidentally fared better than the Party of Hope in these elections. The ruling coalition won 313 out of the 465 seats at stake, with the LDP securing 284 and the Komeito 29. The Party of Hope secured only 50 seats while the

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr Rupakjyoti Borah is Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at [isasrb@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasrb@nus.edu.sg). The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

breakaway CDP won 55, thereby becoming the largest opposition party in the Diet (Parliament). The Ishin Party secured 11 seats while the Japanese Communist Party won 12.

The strong showing by the Abe-led coalition has strengthened his hand even within the LDP. It now seems certain that Abe is set to be elected for another term as the President of the LDP and he could, in effect, become Japan's longest-serving Prime Minister in the post-Second World War era.

## **Major Issues at Stake**

The biggest issue during the Japanese election campaign was the threat from North Korea. Pyongyang had fired missiles over Japan's northern Hokkaido island and even threatened to "sink" Japan.<sup>2</sup> It had also threatened to attack the United States (US) Pacific island of Guam. There had also been a verbal duel between North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and US President Donald Trump.

On the domestic front, the issues ranged from the planned consumption tax hike to the proposed revision of the Japanese Constitution, particularly the war-renouncing Article 9 to make clear the role of the Self-Defence Forces. In addition, the Abe government had been plagued by a series of scandals<sup>3</sup> in the run-up to the elections, and the government had suffered a fall in its popularity ratings.

## **Implications for India**

The resounding victory has strengthened Abe's position. The win also has significant implications for Japan's foreign policy imperatives. Among its international partners, India will be most-pleased.

---

<sup>2</sup> "North Korea threatens to 'sink' Japan, reduce U.S. to 'ashes and darkness'", Jack Kim and Kiyoshi Takenaka, *Reuters*, 14 September 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles/north-korea-threatens-to-sink-japan-reduce-u-s-to-ashes-and-darkness-idUSKCN1BP0F3>. Accessed on 27 October 2017.

<sup>3</sup> "Scandals threaten Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's grip on power", *The Guardian*, 25 September 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/25/scandals-threaten-japanese-prime-minister-shinzo-abe-s-grip-on-power>. Accessed on 29 October 2017.

Abe has been a good friend of India since his first term as prime minister (between September 2006 and September 2007). In his landmark speech titled “The Confluence of the Two Seas” during his visit to India in August 2007, Abe had noted that “[T]he Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity. A ‘broader Asia’ that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form. Our two countries have the ability – and the responsibility – to ensure that it broadens yet further and to nurture and enrich these seas to become seas of clearest transparency.”<sup>4</sup>

Abe, in fact, has a strong personal connection with India as well. His grandfather Nobusuke Kishi was the first-ever Japanese prime minister to visit India in 1957 and it was during his time that Japan started providing official development assistance to India.

During Abe’s second term as prime minister, which began in December 2012, much progress was made in Japan-India ties. A number of big projects between India and Japan are on the anvil. These include their proposed collaboration in the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor and the Mumbai-Ahmedabad Shinkansen (bullet train) as well as cooperation in the civil nuclear energy sector. The cooperation in the civil nuclear field is significant, as India has not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and Japan is the only nation to have suffered from atomic attacks.

In September this year, Abe paid a state visit to India and the two sides agreed on a number of major initiatives on the bilateral and the multilateral fronts. Japan has also committed itself to a slew of projects in the infrastructure sector, and there is a great deal of convergence between India’s “Act-East” policy and Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy”.

India has not joined the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (also known as the One Belt One Road initiative) because of sovereignty concerns relating to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The joint statement, issued during Abe’s recent visit to India, noted that “the two Prime Ministers also underlined the importance of all countries ensuring the development and use of connectivity infrastructure in an open, transparent and non-exclusive manner based on

---

<sup>4</sup> “Confluence of the Two Seas”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan). <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>. Accessed on 27 October 2017.

international standards and responsible debt financing practices, while ensuring respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, the rule of law, and the environment.”<sup>5</sup>

Japan and India are also collaborating to become permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, along with Germany and Brazil, by forming what is informally known as the Group of Four (G-4), and coordinating their efforts in international fora. Besides, Abe and India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi have struck a close friendship at the personal level, which has also seeped into the Japan-India equation, driven among other things by their concerns about a China-dominated Asia. Many a time, they have broken protocol to welcome each other and have given their personal push to key initiatives.<sup>6</sup>

Under Abe in Japan and Modi in India, Japan has now been welcomed as a permanent member of the *Malabar* naval exercises. In this year’s edition of the *Malabar*, India, Japan and the US brought in their biggest naval assets.<sup>7</sup>

During his visit to India for the annual bilateral summit in September this year, Abe had noted that, “[I]f you take the first two letters from Japan, ‘JA’, and the first from India, ‘I’, we get ‘JAI’. So, its Jai India, Jai Japan.”<sup>8</sup> Japan’s Foreign Minister Taro Kono has mentioned that Tokyo may propose a new dialogue between Japan, India, Australia and the US when Trump visits Japan in early November 2017.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> “India-Japan Joint Statement during visit of Prime Minister of Japan to India”, Ministry of External Affairs (India). [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28946/IndiaJapan+Joint+Statement+during+ vis+it+of+Prime+Minister+of+Japan+to+India+September+14+2017](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28946/IndiaJapan+Joint+Statement+during+vis+it+of+Prime+Minister+of+Japan+to+India+September+14+2017). Accessed on 26 October 2017.

<sup>6</sup> “Asia’s best friends shape an axis”, Brahma Chellaney, *The Japan Times*, 2 September 2014. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2014/09/02/commentary/japan-commentary/asias-best-friends-shape-an-axis/#.WfXMO4-Cx0w>. Accessed on 29 October 2017.

<sup>7</sup> “Malabar 2017 is aimed at strategic relationship among India, Japan and US”, V Ayyappan, *The Times of India*, 10 June 2017. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/malabar-2017-is-aimed-at-strategic-relationship-among-india-japan-and-us-vice-admiral-hcs-bisht-says/articleshow/59531952.cms>. Accessed on 29 October 2017.

<sup>8</sup> “Abe chants ‘Jai India, Jai Japan’ mantra”, Virendra Pandit, *The Hindu Businessline*, 14 September 2017. <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/logistics/pm-modi-japanese-counterpart-shinzo-abe-lay-foundation-stone-for-indias-first-bullet-train/ article9858430.ece>. Accessed on 30 October 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Reuters, Japan to propose strategic dialogue with U.S., India and Australia Nikkei, <https://in.reuters.com/article/japan-diplomacy-kono/japan-to-propose-strategic-dialogue-with-u-s-india-and-australia-nikkei-idINKBN1CV020>. Accessed on 30 October 2017.

## Conclusion

When Modi took over as India's prime minister in 2014, his first bilateral visit outside South Asia was to Japan. The visit signified the importance India accorded to Japan under the Modi administration. With Abe coming back to power now, many crucial projects are expected to progress. These include the deal for India to buy Japanese-made US21 aircraft, which will be a first for both Japan and India. New Delhi is also planning to send Indian youths to Japan for on-the-job training as part of its skill-development initiative.<sup>10</sup> It is expected that the re-election of Abe will ensure the continuation of the tremendous momentum in India-Japan ties generated in recent years.

• • • • •

---

<sup>10</sup> "How his right-wing friend Shinzo Abe's sweeping victory strengthens PM Modi", *The Economic Times*, 23 October 2017. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/how-his-right-wing-friend-shinzo-abes-sweeping-victory-strengthens-pm-modi/articleshow/61186678.cms>. Accessed on 29 October 2017.