



THE INDIA-JAPAN-VIETNAM TRILATERAL: AN “INCLUSIVE” PROPOSITION

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The pledge to have a “partnership for peace” has fast emerged as a key threshold in India-Japan security relations in recent years. Under the rubric of promoting a “free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific” region, a new assurance of engagement seems to be unfolding with frequent bilateral naval exercises, including dialogues and training between the Coast Guards of the two sides. Japan, an essential part of the Malabar exercise with India and the US, has ensured that “maritime security cooperation” is an essential aspect of India-Japan relations as much as “maritime cooperation” in Indo-Pacific. Given the commercial and security interests that India and Japan hold, particularly in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, it is natural to accord priority to exercises like the Malabar one. Yet, the envisioned India-Japan maritime security cooperation will only be strengthened ahead if a ‘third’ country in Southeast Asia joined the framework of cooperation built on conjoined land and maritime features.

Strategic communities on both the Indian and Japanese sides have time and again deliberated on the merits of a ‘triangular’ relationship. An official reference to extend cooperation beyond bilateralism, primarily to enhance connectivity in Indo-Pacific, is also visible in the 2017 India-Japan official Joint Statement. Scholars from Think-Tanks in India and Japan at the Track-II and Tack 1.5 dialogues have pondered upon the prospects of having Vietnam, Indonesia and few other countries in Southeast Asia as prospective third country partner. Yet, more than any other country, Vietnam’s problematic maritime relationship with China in the South China Sea has always made it a strong prospective candidate for becoming a partner of trilateral relationship with India and Japan.

Furthermore, all the three countries – India, Japan and Vietnam – have shared concerns over China’s territorial assertiveness. Beijing’s unilateral attempt at changing the status quo

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in the South China Sea poses a broader strategic challenge to maritime Asia where both Indian and Japanese interests are seriously contested, and for Vietnam as claimant country in the South China Sea dispute. The Indo-Southeast Asia Deployment 2018 initiative intended to improve operability and the Japanese initiative to show submarine are indications of Tokyo's increasing security interest in the South China Sea. India's continuous insistence on protection of commercial interests in South China Sea boosts a natural connotation for Japan to contemplate this trilateral understanding. A renewed interest to expedite further the oil and gas exploration cooperation involving companies such as Petro Vietnam and India's ONGC in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Vietnam explicates an open case of cooperation in the South China Sea. More importantly, India and Vietnam's mutual interest in identifying "models for cooperation" involving third country is a fitting reference for Japan to emerge as a tripartite partner.

It is, nevertheless, important to note that the India-Japan-Vietnam tripartite partnership must be based on an 'inclusive' proposition that must transcend beyond the anti-China conception. Rather, the strand of this trilateral inclusiveness must be based on promoting connectivity, growth corridors, building capacity along the Bay of Bengal region to facilitate economic opportunities and encourage value-chain networks in Southeast Asia. These will strengthen the all-encompassing character of the regional architecture in Indo-Pacific that India, Japan and Vietnam are advocating for.

Connectivity promotion should become the first referral point since it figures highly in bilateral understandings. Under an India-ASEAN cooperation framework, physical and digital connectivity projects are fast becoming important aspects of India-Vietnam cooperation. Likewise, the future of Japan-Vietnam connectivity cooperation is based on the Master Plan on

ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 that envisions other countries' cooperation within and beyond the region where India could emerge as a natural partner. This connectivity cooperation could be enhanced within and outside the ASEAN framework that India and Japan are promoting through their pledge for a "free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific" region. India's aim to extend the India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) highway to Vietnam via Cambodia and Laos could be a part of the trilateral cooperation where Japanese capital investments could be helpful.

India's future thrust on reaching Vietnam by enhancing connectivity cooperation through the framework of CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) countries compliments Japan's hard and soft connectivity planning under the New Tokyo Strategy 2015. Importantly, these connectivity projects compliment the inclusive regional architecture that both India and Japan have been supporting within the framework of an "ASEAN-led fora". In this context, partnering with Vietnam will undoubtedly enhance this thrust.

Promoting growth corridors could be another hallmark of the India-Japan-Vietnam trilateral relations. Over the last few years, Vietnam's "Two Corridors and One Economic Circle Plan" is increasingly being challenged by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The South China Sea dispute and other strategic underpinnings between Vietnam and China have encouraged Hanoi to stay guarded of any big Chinese financial overture. Vietnam's 2011-2020 Socio-Economic Development Strategy stresses structural reforms where infrastructure development is one of the priorities. Both India and Japan could emerge as possible alternative partners in Vietnam's search for economic opportunities.

For Vietnam, Japan is the largest ODA provider, one of its strongest trading partners, and most importantly, it's second largest foreign investor. Japan's Comprehensive Asia Develop-



ment Plan released in 2010 promotes construction production networks and enhancing value chains which will find strategic consonance with both India and Vietnam. Tokyo has been actively supporting the 'East-West and Southern Economic Corridors' (Land Corridors) and 'Maritime ASEAN Economic Corridor (Maritime Corridor)' including investing in soft infrastructure projects throughout the ASEAN countries. A more concentrated plan of cooperation among India, Japan and Vietnam could also be envisioned under the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Framework in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) where India has been an active promoter. A common understanding to promote these growth corridors would further enhance a proposition like the Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) envisioned by India and Japan which has its primary inception from Southeast Asia.

The India-Japan-Vietnam trilateral relationship needs to be also seen from an extended India-Japan concentrated cooperative prism in the adjacent region. Both India and Japan had decided to forge a cooperative understanding in Northeast India during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Tokyo in September 2014. This offered a special emphasis on connectivity and development. It was an important political statement on India's part to invite Japan to engage in infrastructural development in Northeast India since the region is marred with militant outfits that have troubled India for long. A lot has happened since Japan has emerged as a reliable and significant developmental investor in north-eastern India. Highlights of this partnership range from connectivity to collaborative projects in areas such as energy, water supply and sewage, health, agriculture, and environment, including in people-centric social projects.

The unique point of India-Japan cooperation in Northeast India is that it is based on a 'people-centric' partnership. The

Japan-India Coordination Forum on Development of North East is a good example of this partnership that endorses the spirit of people-to-people exchanges. This cooperation is based on youth empowerment, training and educational collaboration, making it a grassroots partnership. Furthermore, this partnership promotes human security stressing 'peace and prosperity' through a cooperative model. Promoting such a stable partnership in China's backyard is without doubt a joint Indian-Japanese strategic statement. The scope of this cooperation must extend to neighbouring Southeast Asia, and by further factoring the CLMV countries as future partners.

The above-mentioned connectivity and corridor cooperation cannot be encouraged in an isolated context. It is imperative to note that inclusive vision of cooperation rather than an exclusive China connotation must guide the trilateral understanding to expedite the regional development. China should not be the dictum of this trilateral proposition. Rather, protecting and promoting all the three countries' respective interests and enhancing a regional character of cooperation should be the basis of this trilateral relationship which would be default act as a balancer to China's rise in the region.

Besides, it is important to understand that all the three countries have a problematic security relationship with China. Yet, at the same time, all the three countries are strongly connected with China in a range of bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. The overarching objective of this India-Japan-Vietnam trilateral, therefore, should be envisioned as boosting the regional consultative character of comprehensive economic growth based on cooperation in critical areas such as promoting infrastructure connectivity and corridors. In other words, the India-Japan-Vietnam trilateral must be based on a consultative mechanism, following the ASEAN framework of cooperation, complementing the inclusive character that the region is aiming at.



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