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Japan-India Development and Security Cooperation Should be Steady, not Rushed

BY SHUTARO SANO

Under the strong leadership of Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe and Narendra Modi, Japan and India strive to synergize their respective “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” and “Act East” policies in a variety of areas including economics, energy, climate change, global governance, and security in line with their “Special Strategic and Global Partnership.” Notably, the relationship has gained greater strategic significance with the growing demand to converge economic development with security issues in regions bordering India as well as in the broader Indo-Pacific.

Japan’s “proactive contribution to peace” initiative stresses the need to integrate economic development with its national security strategy. The 2015 Development Cooperation Charter highlights the “strategic” dimension of development cooperation, and cites the importance of seeking regional stability by developing infrastructure and strengthening connectivity in the Asia Pacific. Tokyo’s position is consistent with Modi’s “Make in India” initiative and “Neighborhood First” policy, which aim to establish reliable, sustainable, and resilient infrastructure within India and between India and its neighboring countries. For India, a peaceful neighborhood is essential for economic development.

Efforts to build a stronger strategic foundation between Tokyo and New Delhi are prompted by the changing international security environment — notably in the Indian Ocean. Maritime security against seaborne threats has become a vital issue for Asia Pacific countries including Japan and India. In particular, China’s increasing naval activities are a matter of concern. Tensions remain along the borders of Arunachal Pradesh in North Eastern India and the Aksai Chin region in the west. Beijing’s growing infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road (BRI) Initiative, which include the development of Pakistan’s Gwadar Port and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), have also caused suspicion. India refused to attend the BRI inaugural conference earlier this month despite being one of the first countries to join the Beijing-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

The deepening of Japan-India strategic cooperation has become increasingly important in areas including the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. In February 2016, the two countries entered negotiations over an upgrade of civilian infrastructure on the islands—reversing India’s longstanding prohibition on foreign investment in the archipelago. The project is modest in size, but has a strategic significance as the islands are located northwest of the pivotal maritime choke point at the Strait of Malacca and will enable New Delhi to consolidate its maritime influence in the region. The islands have been significant for India since the establishment of a tri-service theater command on the islands in 2001. In January 2016, in the face of increasing regional geopolitical competition, India deployed its most advanced

Shutaro Sano, Professor and Deputy Director at the Center for International Exchange, National Defense Academy of Japan, explains that “Tokyo’s position is consistent with Modi’s ‘Make in India’ initiative and ‘Neighborhood First’ policy, which aim to establish reliable, sustainable, and resilient infrastructure within India and between India and its neighboring countries.”

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maritime patrol/anti-submarine aircraft P-8I and Searcher-II UAV on the islands. The Indian Navy also has plans to station Japan-supplied US-2s there once a deal is reached. Tokyo has strong reasons to support such efforts. Under President Trump’s “America First” policy, Japan is likely to take on some of the burden that the United States has traditionally shouldered in the Asia Pacific, including in the Indian Ocean. In such a case, the logistical use of Port Blair, for example, would benefit operations of the Japanese Maritime and Air Self Defense Forces.

The politically sensitive north eastern region of India is also an area that demands deeper linkage between development and security. Today, Japan is the only country which has been authorized to engage in development projects in the region. Notably, the importance of enhancing regional connectivity has been stressed during the Japan-India summit meetings. While problems exist due to harsh weather and terrain and insurgencies in the region, development of transportation infrastructure — such as roads — would enhance connectivity and improve economic integration within India as well as with other South Asian and Southeast Asian countries. In March 2017, the Japan International Cooperation Agency signed agreements with India to provide official development assistance (ODA) loans (a total of over 300 billion yen) for eight development projects under the Quality Infrastructure Initiative. This includes the North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project, which aims in part to widen and improve the quality of the National Highways 51 and 54. Greater land connectivity will also be critical to enhance regional initiatives such as the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation.

Tokyo and New Delhi are also keen to extend their strategic partnership beyond South Asia. The development of Iran’s Chabahar port and the strengthening of connectivity between Iran and Afghanistan were acknowledged during the 2016 summit. With the India-Iran-Afghanistan trilateral agreement, the Chabahar economic corridor will provide India access to Afghanistan and vice versa, bypassing unstable routes in Pakistan. The increased flow of goods in and out of Afghanistan and the diversification of transportation routes are expected to stimulate the Afghan economy, improve the daily lives of the local people, and help stabilize the region. Iran’s existing domestic road networks and Afghanistan’s Zaranj-Delaram Highway, which New Delhi helped build for Kabul, will greatly contribute to the development of the corridor. Furthermore, Chabahar’s significance will increase because CPEC is heavily dependent upon Gwadar port, which is only a short distance away from Chabahar. Meanwhile, Japan and India are also determined to promote the development of industrial corridors and networks in Africa. The two countries are supporting the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor initiative. In 2014, Japan and India’s foreign direct investments in Africa stood at \$10.5 billion and \$12.5 billion, respectively.

Challenges to Japan-India cooperation exist. There have been concerns that the deepening of the Japan-India relationship would provoke countries like China to feel that they are being contained. Similarly, an increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan poses the threat of encirclement to Pakistan, and could instigate Islamabad to support or conduct terrorist attacks against India, destabilizing the region. India’s “Neighborhood First” policy faces difficulties as countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Bangladesh have been establishing stronger bilateral relationships with China. Japan’s development effort has been criticized for strengthening the linkage between development and security, a shift away from the non-military principle of the past versions of the ODA Charter. These challenges are likely to affect the level of support for the Japan-India partnership. Therefore, it is critically important that Tokyo and New Delhi take sound and steady — rather than expeditious and rushed — steps in linking development and security as they solidify the foundation for deeper strategic cooperation.

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