

India, Japan and China — eternal



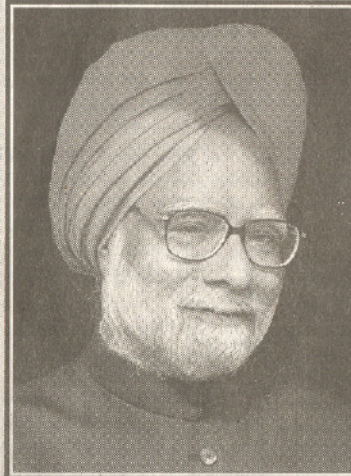
By C Raja Mohan

As the triangular relationship between India, Japan and China acquires a new dynamism in the wake of the Indo-US nuclear deal, the consequences are likely to be felt far and wide in Asia

AS Prime Minister Manmohan Singh heads to Tokyo and Beijing this week, the contrast between India's changing relations with Japan and China is bound to come under scrutiny. Quite early on in its tenure, the UPA government had announced plans to simultaneously deepen relations with both the Asian giants, during the quick visits in succession by the then Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in April 2005. Three and a half years later, India and Japan, in their painfully cumbersome way, are ready to expand their relationship. New Delhi and Beijing, in contrast, might have to try and overcome the recent downward slide in their bilateral ties.

The civilian nuclear agreement has had different effects in the two capitals. The popular anti-nuclear sentiment in Japan and Tokyo's strong commitment to the non-proliferation regime meant inevitable opposition to American recognition of India's nuclear exceptionalism; Beijing saw the Indo-US nuclear deal entirely in terms of two balances of power, one involving the United States, China and India, and the other China, India and Pakistan. After intensive diplomatic engagement over three years, New Delhi believed it had promises from China and Japan that they would not come in the way of implementing the Indo-US nuclear deal. Last month's dramatic Nuclear Suppliers Group meeting made it obvious that Japan kept its word while China did not. As a consequence, Dr Singh's engagement with the Japanese and Chinese leaders this week will be in very different tones. In Tokyo, Dr Singh's emphasis will be on advancing a strategic partnership. In Beijing, he will hope to limit the damage to the bilateral relationship.

After decades of neglecting each other, India and Japan announced their intent to build a strategic partnership in April 2005. Annual summits since then have sought to lend some substance to this proclaimed goal. Three broad themes stood out: first, the decision by Japan to build the ambitious Delhi-Mumbai Freight Corridor to speed up the movement of goods between the two



Manmohan Singh



Hu Jintao



Taro Aso

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cities. The two sides also agreed to develop modern manufacturing industry along the 1468-km route. Bureaucratic delays in both capitals

cast a shadow over this, the single-largest infrastructure project that India has ever undertaken. Dr Singh, however, has been determined to

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move it along and his Japanese counterpart, Taro Aso, has been equally keen on promoting this transformational project. During Dr

triangle

Singh's visit, Japan is expected to announce a \$4.5 billion loan to kick-start the project. A second theme has been the trade liberalisation. Given the inherent difficulty of negotiating free trade agreements, it is not a surprise that the talks on the Enhanced Partnership Agreement have remained inconclusive.

While they renew their political commitment to bring the EPA to an early fruition, Dr Singh and Aso would also want to consolidate the third new dimension of the bilateral relationship — security co-operation. They are expected to unveil a broad new framework that will identify the elements of such cooperation: ranging from counter-terrorism to the protection of sea lanes, from expanded engagement between the two militaries to the identification of joint missions to promote cooperative security in the Indian Ocean and Asia Pacific.

A stronger economic and security partnership with Japan provides an interesting context for the PM's next stop in Beijing. While India and Japan have no reason to premise their co-operation on opposition to a third party, a neuralgic China is likely to see it in terms of an Asian realignment. Beijing has watched the India-Japan rapprochement with as much wariness as it did the transformation of the Indo-US relationship.

India, meanwhile, is deeply disappointed at the turn its relationship with China has taken. Hopes had soared in April 2005,

when Dr Singh and Premier Wen announced a new framework for the resolution of the boundary dispute. Since then, stalled talks and Chinese opposition at the NSG dredged up New Delhi's old suspicions about Beijing's intentions. Pakistan's claims following President Zardari's visit to Beijing last week that China has agreed to sell it two nuclear reactors have not helped.

Beijing itself has not publicly confirmed this decision. And the international legal basis for new Sino-Pakistani nuclear co-operation remains unclear. If there is some truth in Pakistan's official claims, New Delhi might have to conclude that Beijing wants to sustain nuclear parity between India and Pakistan in the wake of the Indo-US nuclear deal.

That in turn brings us to a final contrast between the approaches of China and Japan. While Beijing might want to keep playing Pakistan against India, Tokyo could choose an entirely different course. As a major aid donor to Islamabad, Kabul and New Delhi, Japan has every reason to promote regional integration between India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. As the triangular relationship between India, Japan and China acquires a new dynamism in the wake of the Indo-US nuclear deal, the consequences are likely to be felt far and wide in Asia.

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