

# India and Shinzo Abe's Strategic Legacy

C Raja Mohan

## Summary

*Prime Minister Shinzo Abe played a significant role in strengthening Japan's relationship with India, which resulted in New Delhi and Tokyo signing a major agreement on military cooperation. However, that apart, Abe will also be remembered for moving post-World War Two Japan out of its defensive comfort zone under American shadow and encouraging Asians to take responsibility for their own security.*

It was perhaps befitting that Delhi and Tokyo signed a major agreement on military cooperation in the final days of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's extended tenure at Japan's helm. After all, it was Abe who played an instrumental role in bringing India and Japan closer to each other on security issues. The agreement, signed on 10 September 2020, facilitates reciprocal provision of supplies and services between their armed forces and offers access to [each other's military facilities](#). India is only the second country after Australia with which Japan has such an agreement. For India, Japan is the sixth partner for logistical support agreement after Australia, France, Singapore, South Korea and the United States (US).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi was all set for a virtual summit meeting with Abe in the second week of September 2020 but it had to be rescheduled as his counterpart stepped down as prime minister in late August 2020, citing health reasons. However, the two prime ministers spoke over the telephone shortly after officials of the two countries signed off on the agreement on mutual military logistical support. According to the [Indian Foreign Office](#), Modi and Abe "concurred that the Agreement will further enhance the depth of defence cooperation between the two countries and contribute to peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region."

Modi also expressed his gratitude for Abe's "personal commitment and leadership in greatly strengthening the relationship between the two countries." Few modern international interlocutors of India brought the kind of personal affection and policy innovation that Prime Minister Abe did in the engagement with Delhi. For Abe, India was very special. He has often recalled his maternal grandfather and former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi's visit to India in 1957 and the special bond he struck with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. India's warm embrace of Japan, when the rest of Asia was keeping post-war Tokyo at arm's length, was of special political value to Kishi. However, the brief warmth at the leadership level did not endure beyond the 1950s. In the decades that followed, bilateral ties were marked by political indifference, Delhi's transactional thinking on Tokyo's annual economic assistance and widening differences on regional security. While the relationship began to improve in the new millennium, it was Abe who gave the big boost.

For Abe, India was at the heart of his plans to restructure the regional economic and security order. In his address to a joint session of the Indian Parliament in 2007, when he

visited Delhi in his brief first tenure as prime minister, Abe boldly re-imagined the shared geography of India and Japan. Abe's vision on the 'confluence of two seas – 'now the Indo-Pacific, simultaneously widened Tokyo's geographic horizons to include the Indian Ocean and an invitation to Delhi to reclaim its large strategic potential in the Pacific Ocean. As [Abe put it in the speech](#), "The 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."

It was also in that speech that Abe highlighted the importance of India and Japan building a coalition of Asian democracies in partnership with Australia and the US. He hoped that the Japan-India partnership "will evolve into an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the United States of America and Australia. Open and transparent, this network will allow people, goods, capital, and knowledge to flow freely."

Abe's initiatives for the Indo-Pacific as well as the Quad, however, lost steam after he stepped down immediately after visiting India in 2007 because of ill health. A series of short-lived governments in Tokyo as well as the political concerns in Canberra, Delhi and Washington about offending the sensitivities of China led to the diminished support for the Indo-Pacific and the Quad.

On returning to power at the end of 2012, Abe took up both these initiatives with much vigour. And as the challenges from China mounted, Abe's emphasis the Indo-Pacific and Quad found resonance in India, Australia and the US and have emerged as important new themes in the new Asian and global security discourse. In defining the Indo-Pacific geography and developing the democratic Quad, Abe was also transforming Japan's own standing in the world. Before Abe, Japan was widely viewed as an "economic giant, but a political pygmy". Under Abe, Japan has reclaimed the leadership role in Asia amidst the growing uncertainty in US regional role and muscular assertion of Chinese power. Abe's Japan has become an active champion of a rules-based Indo-Pacific order that can survive the current tectonic shift in great power politics.

It is such a pity that Abe's short first term (2006-07) and the long second run (2012-20) had to end because of ill health. Abe will be remembered for long as the man who moved post-war Japan out of its defensive comfort zone under American shadow and unveiled the possibilities for Asians taking responsibility for their own security. That job though remains unfinished. Japan's friends and partners, including India, will certainly worry about the dangers of Tokyo now slipping back into political instability and strategic passivity. Abe's many admirers in Delhi will have a regret of their own – that institutional inertia and political ambivalence prevented India from seizing the full range of possibilities that the Japanese leader had opened up for the bilateral partnership.

. . . . .

Professor C Raja Mohan is Director at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at [isascrm@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isascrm@nus.edu.sg). The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.