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Is China-Japan Relations Envisaging a Phase of Détente?

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The recent course of events suggests an upswing in the diplomatic equation shared between China and Japan. The frosty relationship seems to be experiencing ‘*new warmth*’ after a hiatus of tensions over historical issues and territorial dispute in the East China Sea. The ongoing reciprocity can be gauged from the change in their respective attitude towards the other. Most significantly, the sign of progress was witnessed at the 40 minutes long meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on the sidelines of the G20 Summit at Hamburg, Germany. This marked the first one-on-one meeting between the two leaders amidst growing tensions in the East China Sea, after an interregnum since a brief meeting on the sidelines of the 2016 APEC Summit. Thereby, the Xi-Abe meeting at G20 is not just symbolic but also significant.

To provide a momentum to the ties, both Xi and Abe agreed to build “*stable*” relations by reaffirming to their “*readiness to strengthen the partnership and cooperation between the two countries in the future despite differences in a trove of issues and severe challenges ahead*”. In this context, it can be stated that the two countries are making a roadway to welcome a phase of ‘*détente*’ in their strained relationship. Moreover, this year marks the forty-fifth anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between China and Japan and 2018 marks the fortieth anniversary of the signing of the China-Japan Treaty of Peace and Friendship. To suggest, China



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and Japan's behavioral change exemplifies a '*new thinking*' in the making, which runs in contrast to the past attitude of constantly testing the other's resolve.

What prompted the ongoing bonhomie can be traced in Japan's sudden tilt in favor of China's grand "*Belt and Road Initiative*" (BRI). Until recently, Japan expressed anxiety over China's intentions and motives behind the plan of building the "*Silk Road Economic Belt*" and "*21st Century Maritime Silk Road*" that connects Asia, Africa, and Europe. Japan's skepticism was witnessed in its reluctance to join the China-led Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which was established in 2015. In facing a China challenge, Japan rather adopted a proactive and competitive posture to rescue its long-standing monopoly in Asia's infrastructure build up.

In a counter to Beijing's BRI, in 2015 Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe launched the "*Partnership for Quality Infrastructure*" initiative (PQI) under a \$110 billion fund for building infrastructure in Asia. Under this initiative, Abe put forward the idea of spreading "*high quality and innovative infrastructure throughout Asia, taking a long term view*". Likewise, in 2016 Abe pledged to invest \$200 billion in "*high-quality infrastructure around the world over the next five years*". This doubling of the fund was equated with Japan-led Asian Development Bank's (ADB) increase in lending by 17 percent to \$31.5 billion from that of \$26.9 billion in 2015- which marked an all-time high. These actions by Tokyo came as a response to compete against China's BRI and AIIB. Indirectly slamming China's infrastructure initiative, Abe remarked: "*Infrastructure cannot be cheap and poor. We look at cost and effectiveness through the total life cycle of the project. [...] The projects need to be considerate to society and the environment*".

In a corollary to these precedents, it was hard to anticipate of Japan taking a forward bend towards China. However, the present scenario takes a departure from this assumption. Japan's attitudinal stalemate was broken, when in the event of the "*Future of Asia*" Conference on June 5, 2017, Abe endorsed China's BRI as having the "*potential to connect East and West*" and declared that "*Japan is ready to extend cooperation*" to the project. Here, it is essential to note that Abe's much-awaited nod to BRI came with conditions attached. As Abe categorically stressed on: "*harmony with a free and fair trans-Pacific economic zone,*" that the infrastructure to be built will "*be open to use by all*" and "*developed through procurement that is transparent and fair,*" and that the projects will "*be economically viable and financed by debt that can be repaid, and not harm the soundness of the debtor nations' finances*". Although being a conditional move, but Japan's acute tilt towards China does make a significant difference to the relationship. To this, Xi Jinping responded that- "*We [China and Japan] need to resolve political issues one by one, but they must not hinder the development of bilateral economic relations*". Xi further stated that: "*Cooperation in economics and trade is the impetus for bolstering ties between China and Japan. We [China] welcome Japan's expanding cooperation under the framework of the One Belt One Road initiative*"- treating politics separate from that of economics.

To note, the change in Xi-Abe political dynamics was preceded by the high-level diplomatic exchanges between China and Japan. Most notably, Toshihiro Nikai, the Secretary-General of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party visit to China in May as the Japanese government representative at the Belt and Road Forum. This was followed by Chinese State Councillor Yang



Jiechi's visit to Japan in June wherein Yang co-chaired with Shotaro Yachi, the head of Japan's National Security Council, a "*high-level political dialogue*". These incremental steps paved the way for a coming thaw in the relationship.

In view of the unfolding events, it would be wrong to judge the '*new warmth*' between China and Japan as a mere coincidence. That is, the thaw has been shaped in the backdrop of the changing dynamics of the international system. Wherein the external causal factors are- the collapse of the US backed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) wherein Japan was a key partner, the speeding up of talks on enforcement of Regional Comprehensive Economic Agreement (RCEP), the growing nuclear belligerence of North Korea that seeks to disturb the regional as well as global peace and stability. While the internal factors are concerns over domestic politics, as Xi needs to consolidate power stability ahead of China's upcoming 19th Party Congress, while Abe needs to secure his power as LDP faces a stiff challenge in the upcoming Tokyo assembly elections.

Given these forces at play, it can be rightly argued that the Sino-Japanese ties are witnessing a test of time. Will it be a hit or miss makes the current thaw highly uncertain. The quandary lies in the deeply seated contentions over historical issues, Taiwan and the territorial dispute in the East China Sea which act as strong impediments to any form of understanding. Nonetheless, the mutual efforts to stabilize the rocky bottoms can be seen as the beginning of a phase of '*détente*' between China and Japan, which will surely have both regional and global implications.

About the Author:

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