Uncertainty surrounding the foreign policy of US President Donald Trump’s administration, among both allies and adversaries, has introduced a new dynamic in relations among China, India and Japan.

Tokyo and New Delhi, in particular, are grappling with how best to reach out to Beijing without offending Washington. Beijing, for its part, is forging new diplomatic initiatives in the face of an unpredictable US administration, writes Rupakjyoti Borah.

Why Tokyo and New Delhi Are Reaching Out to Beijing and Vice Versa

By Rupakjyoti Borah
Beijing has been reeling from the impact of US tariffs, leading to a situation where China has been sending out feelers to both India and Japan. For their part, Tokyo and New Delhi have reciprocated by grabbing Beijing’s hand. So is this the ‘new normal’ in ties between India and China and between Japan and China?

**JAPAN AND CHINA — AGREETING TO DISAGREE**

Meanwhile, Tokyo has been making overtures to Beijing, despite major political differences. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made a state visit to China in late October, during which the two sides signed nearly 500 business deals worth approximately $2.6 billion. In addition, they signed a $30 billion currency swap agreement. This year also marked the 40th anniversary of the signing of a friendship treaty between Japan and China. Tokyo needs Beijing’s help as it seeks to come to grips with North Korea, which has come out of the diplomatic wilderness following the Singapore Summit in June between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Without a doubt, Beijing has the biggest influence on Pyongyang.

It is also worth noting Japan’s territorial dispute with Russia, and any further tensions with China would be detrimental — something Abe clearly understands. China, of course, also has its territorial dispute with Japan over the Japanese-held Senkaku Islands (claimed by China as Diaoyu Islands). In addition, there have been many instances of Chinese bombers and fighter jets violating Japanese airspace, with Japan scrambling aircraft to intercept them. Japan has also been sending out mixed signals with regard to the BRI. There are more than 30,000 Japanese companies operating in China, and during the Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing, a representative from Japan’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) attended the conference, although Japan did not participate directly.

**JAPAN, INDIA AND THE US — NEW BEST BUDDIES**

Against this backdrop, relations between Japan, India and the US have been improving by leaps and bounds. The Malabar naval exercise, which began as a bilateral exercise between India and the US in 1992, saw Japan become a permanent member in 2015. The three countries have also been holding a trilateral dialogue since December 2011. There are many other international forums where the three are actively collaborating. Meanwhile, the first-ever trilateral meeting between the Indian and Japanese prime ministers and the US president was held on the sidelines of the G-20 Summit in Argentina earlier this year. On the occasion, Modi remarked that “If I put it differently, Japan, America and India is ‘JAI.’ In Hindi, ‘JAI’ means success.”

What is also bringing India, Japan and the US closer is the fact that India is increasingly buying disputed borders with China — a land border in India’s case, a maritime border in the case of Japan. This new equation among the three countries merits deeper analysis and is the product of several factors.

**INDIA’S CHINA OPTIONS**

China is India’s largest bilateral trade partner, and India has a long land border with China. Both are part of the so-called BRICS countries along with Brazil, Russia and South Africa. New Delhi has no option but to deal with Beijing, hence the Wuhan Informal Summit that was held in late April this year after the tense 2017 standoff between India and China over road construction in Doklam in Bhutan. India and China also have deep strategic interests in stabilizing Afghanistan. In addition, both are developing countries and have been co-operating on climate change — but both are loath to agree to binding emission cuts. After the Wuhan summit between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs noted in a press release that the two leaders “believe that the simultaneous emergence of India and China as two large economies and major powers with strategic and decision autonomy, has implications of regional and global significance. They shared the view that peaceful, stable and balanced relations between India and China will be a positive factor for stability amidst current global uncertainties.”

Likewise, at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June this year, Modi noted that the informal April summit with Xi “helped us cement our understanding that strong and stable relations between our two nations are an important factor for global peace and progress. I firmly believe that Asia and the world will have a better future when India and China work together in trust and confidence, sensitive to each other’s interests.”

However, there are many areas where India and China do not see eye to eye. The disputed border and memories of the short border war fought in 1962 after Chinese troops invaded India remains an issue. The two sides have also been at loggerheads over China’s growing influence in India’s “strategic backyard” — South Asia. Beijing’s influence has grown in countries such as Sri Lanka, where it has picked up a majority stake in the port of Hambantota, and in Nepal and the Maldives, where a pro-China government was in power until recent elections put in place a new president more favourably inclined towards India.

In addition, China’s so-called string of pearls strategy is to build ports in Gwadar (in Pakistan), Chittagong (in Bangladesh) and Kyaukpyu (in Myanmar), in addition to Sri Lanka. Beijing is also pushing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is designed to change the face of the Pakistani economy. Given India’s troubled relationship with Pakistan, any deterioration in ties with China will only give more leverage to Pakistan, something which New Delhi clearly understands. At the same time, New Delhi has not joined the Beijing-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India’s Ministry of External Affairs said in a statement that “we are of firm belief that connectivity initiatives must be based on universally recognized international norms, good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency and equal- ity. Connectivity initiatives must follow principles of financial responsibility to avoid projects that would create unsustainable debt burdens for communities; balanced ecological and environmental protection and preservation standards; transparent assessment of project costs; and skill and technology transfer to help long-term running and maintenance of the assets created by local communities.”
military hardware from the US — unlike in the past, when Russia was its major supplier of military hardware. The increasing use of the term “Indo-Pacific” in both scholarly and policy-making circles also reflects the growing importance of India. One significant sign was the change in name of the US Pacific Command to the US Indo-Pacific Command, reflecting a change in US calculations about India.

**GROWING INDIA-JAPAN TIES**

New Delhi and Tokyo are collaborating in a wide variety of areas, especially on infrastructure development. Tokyo has provided soft loans to India to develop a high-speed railway corridor between Mumbai and Ahmedabad at a very nominal rate of interest. This railway corridor is expected to be completed by 2023. Then there is a civilian nuclear deal between India and Japan. Given the present flux in the Indo-Pacific, it seems that going forward, India and Japan will keep their options open regarding relations with China. It will be a case of hedging and co-operating at the same time. As long as the present ambiguity exists in Washington, India, Japan and China will continue to reach out to each other, while at the same time working on closer ties with Washington. The times, it seems, truly are a-changing in the Indo-Pacific.

**THE NEW NORMAL?**

China’s status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council with veto power is also not lost on India and Japan. Given the present flux in the Indo-Pacific, it seems that going forward, India and Japan will keep their options open regarding relations with China. It will be a case of hedging and co-operating at the same time. As long as the present ambiguity exists in Washington, India, Japan and China will continue to reach out to each other, while at the same time working on closer ties with Washington. The times, it seems, truly are a-changing in the Indo-Pacific.

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