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In a dismaying week for the PRC, India turned away from China...and gave further signals that it is ready to move beyond the narrative of Japanese World War II aggression that has informed China's Asian diplomacy and anchored the US presence in Asia for over half a century in favor of a view of Japan as a leading and laudable security actor in East Asia.

I don't know if there is a term in the diplomatic lexicon for "deep tongue kiss accompanied by groans of mutual fulfillment", but if there is, it seems it would be illustrated by the encounter between Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Japanese PM Abe Shinzo in Tokyo on May 27-29, 2013.

Singh (left) and Abe in Tokyo

Speaking to an assembly of Japanese government and corporate worthies in Tokyo, Singh said:

Asia's resurgence began over a century ago on this island of the Rising Sun. Ever since, Japan has shown us the way forward. India and Japan have a shared vision of a rising Asia. Over the past decade, therefore, our two countries have established a new relationship based on shared values and shared interests.

...

Our relationship with Japan has been at the heart of our Look East Policy. Japan inspired Asia's surge to prosperity and it remains integral to Asia's future. The world has a huge stake in Japan's success in restoring the momentum of its growth. Your continued leadership in enterprise, technology and innovation and your ability to remain the locomotive of Asian renaissance are crucial. India's relations with Japan are important not only for our economic development, but also because we see Japan as a natural and indispensable partner in our quest for stability and peace in the vast region in Asia that is washed by the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Our relations draw their strength from our spiritual, cultural and civilizational affinities and a shared commitment to the ideals of democracy, peace and freedom. We have increasingly convergent world views and growing stakes in each other's prosperity. We have shared interests in maritime security and we face similar challenges to our energy security. There are strong synergies between our economies, which need an open, rule-based international trading system to prosper. Together, we seek a new architecture for the United Nations Security Council. In recent years, our political and security cooperation has gained in salience. Japan is the only partner with whom we have a 2-plus-2 Dialogue between the Foreign and Defence Ministries. We have also begun bilateral exercises with the Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force.

The romance was consecrated by an audience with the Japanese emperor and empress for Singh and his wife, and the announcement that the royal couple would be visiting India before the year's end in only the second overseas trip for the aging emperor since 2009.

It should also be noted that India is studying Japan's offer to sell an amphibious plane, the US-2, that would be *de facto* Japan's first overseas military sale, though it would go out under the flag of "dual use" (the Japanese government has previously supplied maritime patrol vessels to Indonesia, and has promised them to the Philippines, but as "developmental assistance," not as a sale).

Compare and contrast Singh's effusions in Tokyo with the proper but distant tone of the communiqué on Chinese PM Li Keqiang's recent visit to India:

There is enough space in the world for the development of India and China, and the world needs the common development of both countries. As the two largest developing countries in the world, the relationship between India and China transcends bilateral scope and has acquired regional, global and strategic significance. Both countries view each other as partners for mutual benefit and not as rivals or competitors.

Much of the Indian coverage gave full rein to anti-PRC feelings (The Hindu being the exception, although it perforce titled its skeptical editorial on Singh's Japan trip as "Love in Tokyo"), implying that India's vociferous China bashers were celebrating an overt shift in Indian government attitudes or, at the very least, Japan had been extremely thorough in its spadework with right-wing Indian media to cultivate a Japan-India alliance.

The Times of India headlined:

India, Japan join hands to break China's 'string of pearls'

First Post wrote:

It's true that no other country in the world today feels as threatened by China's so-called "peaceful rise" as Japan. But then India too feels threatened by China. That is why Shinzo Abe, the Japanese Prime Minister and a known India friend, had said in his address to the joint session of Indian parliament in the Central Hall in the summer of 2007 that the Indo-Japan relations were a "confluence of the two seas", a phrase that he drew from the title of a book written by

the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh in 1655.

Abe is an unabashed China-basher who says he is determined to see that the South China Sea does not become a "Lake Beijing". He has proposed an ADSD – Asia Democratic Security Diamond, comprising Japan, India, Australia and the US.

This is what Abe said in a signed article in December 2012: "If Japan were to yield, the South China Sea would become even more fortified. Freedom of navigation, vital for trading countries such as Japan and South Korea, would be seriously hindered. The naval assets of the United States, in addition to those of Japan, would find it difficult to enter the entire area, though the majority of the two China seas is international water."

Abe has forecast that in about a decade Japan-India relations would overtake Japan-China and even Japan-US relations. "I envisage a strategy whereby Australia, India, Japan, and the US state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific," he said in this article.

...

India and Japan were never as close to each other as they are today. The bonding is to become all the stronger in the near future. All thanks to China.

Economic Times observed:

Japan occupies a large space in Manmohan Singh's heart, and he has logged enough frequent flyer miles to Tokyo to prove it. When he lands in Tokyo on Monday, Singh is certain to get the kind of reception that will show Japan reciprocates in full measure.

...

Japan has the kind of technological and innovation heft India needs in spades. Acknowledging this, the PM once famously listed three of India's relationships he described as "transformational" - US, Japan and Germany - that if India used these relationships wisely, they could help transform our nation. ...

With Shinzo Abe back in power in Japan with a convincing mandate and a will to resuscitate Japan from its "lost decades", India has a unique opportunity.

...

It is time India came out of the closet to strengthen the countries in the region: Indonesia, Vietnam and the real power in Asia - Japan. India should not waste its time looking for Japanese endorsement of Kashmir or Arunachal Pradesh, though many officials will tell you this is why we're kind of reticent with them. Instead, India should be more helpful on the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue - because if China gets away with this one, it will be unstoppable everywhere else.

Put China on the list of observers who came away with the impression of an Indo-Japanese love fest.

For an illustration of the diplomatic equivalent of "green eyed monster that doth mock the meat it feeds on" i.e. jealousy/envy/sour grapes, note this People's Daily editorial which attempts to put the resolution of a minor border intrusion during Li Keqiang's visit to India on a par with the multi-course love feast between Singh and Abe (while diplomatically putting the blame for Singh's dalliance on Abe's shoulders):

Sino-Indian diplomatic miracle embarrasses Japanese politicians

"The clouds in the sky cannot blot out the sunshine of Sino-Indian friendship," said Premier Li Keqiang when describing the Sino-Indian ties on the last day of his stay in India. Before Premier Li Keqiang's visit, the China-India border standoff was hyped up by international media. The divergence and contradictions between the two countries were also exaggerated as if the Sino-Indian ties had been strained suddenly. But what surprised the media was that China and India properly solved the issue in a short time. During Premier Li Keqiang's visit, the top leaders of both countries had sincere and candid talks and came to a series of strategic consensus and cooperation. The shift of Sino-Indian ties in such a short time is a miracle. In the development of Sino-Indian ties there are several divergence and contradictions. Some countries see these differences as an opportunity to provoke dissension. Not long ago, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called on Japan, India, Australia and the U.S. to jointly form a "Democratic Security Diamond" to compete with the ascendant China. He also proposed that Japan should promote "Strategic Diplomacy" and "Values Diplomacy" and made visits in countries around China. Some politicians just made themselves petty burglars on China-related issues. The so-called "Democratic Security Diamond", "Strategic Diplomacy" and "Values Diplomacy" among other new terms seem very strategic. But in fact they unveiled the narrow-minded diplomatic thoughts of Japanese government. The conspiracy of these petty burglars is doomed to fail...

A brief note: the "Democratic Security Diamond" was originally bruited about in Abe's first term and independently championed by US Vice President Dick Cheney as a piece of unabashed China containment. He attempted to advance it during an Asian trip in 2007, over the objections of the rest of the Bush administration, which was trying to engage the PRC on the perennial North Korea nuclear issue at the time.

It is difficult to shed the feeling that Indian commentators who detect an anti-China shift in Indian government policy are on to something.

Certainly, the Japan-India affair has sound diplomatic and economic bases. India is not happy about its immense trade deficit with China; Japan sees India as an alternative manufacturing base to an increasingly hostile (and costly) China.

Mr. Abe also would welcome some big ticket deals with India—hopefully including a dominant share of India's nuclear power plant imports (see P.K. Sundaram's article at Japan Focus) -- to keep the economy humming and keep Abenomics out of the ditch.

Various national quid pro quos are at work—several billion dollars in Japanese loans, Indian support for the Tokyo Olympics in 2020, and a promise to work together to change the structure of the UN Security Council, to date notably China-heavy and Japan- and-India-unrepresented.

But an interested reader—and, indeed, the Chinese government—cannot escape the sense that Singh, encouraged by Abe's vigorous approach to restoring Japan's national and regional stature, has decided to place an open bet on Japan—a fellow democracy and, until recent years at least, acknowledged master of the global economic and financial game—instead of obstreperous, state socialist China in the Asian sweepstakes.

Therefore, I for once and very gingerly take issue with the esteemed Mr. Bhadrakumar's conclusion that China's assertiveness in Ladakh strengthened the hands of India's China bashers and queered Li Keqiang's trip and Sino-Indian relations overall. Given the apparent desire of Prime Minister Singh to prioritize a Japan partnership, maybe somebody thought an Indian provocation in Ladakh would yield a timely and useful piece of anti-Chinese framing to the encounter in Tokyo. Or perhaps, Mr. Singh's heart was in Japan from the beginning.

Chinese state media has for the most part refrained from criticizing Manmohan Singh and India's Japan tilt directly. However, references to Radhabinod Pal have appeared in Chinese media and, provide an interesting perspective (and surrogate) for China's unease with its deepening Indio-Japanese conundrum.

Pal was an Indian jurist on the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal in 1946. Enamored of the anti-colonial rhetoric that accompanied the Japanese "advance" into SE Asia, he believed the United States had provoked Japan into war (the Japanese response was therefore not "aggressive"), was concerned about Allied wartime atrocities, and declined to endorse the "triumph of civilization" narrative of Japan's defeat or the creation of "Class A" war criminal category that the

Occupation used to prosecute the Japanese military and civilian leadership. While acknowledging the commission of atrocities in the field (though a Nanjing Massacre skeptic), Pal voted for acquittal of the "Class A" defendants and prepared a 1235-page dissenting opinion—suppressed by the Occupation until 1952 — stating that the trial was a "victor's justice" travesty.

So far so good.

After his dissent was published, Pal, unsurprisingly, became a hero to Japanese nationalists. Given the legal and moral flaws of the tribunal, the standard explanation is that Pal was simply a scrupulous jurist whose dissent got cherry picked by nasty nationalists for verbiage that supported their claim that the only thing Japan did wrong in World War II was lose it.

Actually, as an article at Japan Focus by Japanese scholar Nakajima Takeshi points out, in his dissent Pal went beyond challenging the legality and validity of the tribunal to excusing Japanese--activities? Aggression? Advances? Choose your favorite term— on the grounds that Japan was getting picked on by the West.

This is rather obvious in Pal's treatment of Japan's incursion into Manchuria in 1931, which Japan did on its own kick without the excuse that the US was forcing it into war.

Pal obviously finds it extremely awkward that Japan, in his mind the front line of resistance to western colonialism, adopted nakedly colonial policies in its dismemberment of China and subjugation of Manchuria.

He attempts to resolve his difficulties by deploying what might be characterized as the "monkey see monkey do" defense—that Japan, deluded by the precedent, pretexts, and spurious legality of Western colonial intrusions, mistakenly adopted the same methods and, indeed, erroneously adopted the very idea that it needed to occupy Manchuria, from the West.

After dismissing the Manchurian and Marco Polo Bridge incidents as examples of simple overexuberance by officers in the field and not elements of a conspiracy to justify occupation of north and northeast China, Pal deployed the "delusion" defense, as Nakajima writes:

Justice Pal then critically examined Western Imperialism, which, he asserted, Japan had imitated. Quoting theSurvey of International Affairs 1932, he turned the target of the criticism toward the colonial policies of Western Powers:

Was it not Western Imperialism that had coined the word 'protectorate' as a euphemism for 'annexation'? And had not this constitutional fiction served its Western inventors in good stead? Was not this the method by which the Government of the French Republic had stepped into the shoes of the Sultan of Morocco, and by which the British Crown had transferred the possession of vast tracts of land in East Africa from native African to adventitious European hands?

For Justice Pal, Japan's 'farce' was nothing but the result of imitating Western fashions of imperialism. From this point of view, he questioned why only Japan's establishment of Manchukuo could be assessed as 'aggression'. Weren't Western countries morally guilty as well in practicing colonialism? If the acts of aggression by Western countries were not charged as crimes, why was the establishment of Manchukuo by Japan?

Justice Pal further quoted theSurvey of International Affairs 1932:

Though the Japanese failed to make the most of these Western precedents in stating their case for performing the farce of 'Manchukuo', it may legitimately be conjectured that Western as well as Japanese precedents had in fact suggested, and commended, this line of policy to Japanese minds.

By saying, '[i]t may not be a justifiable policy, justifying one nation's expansion in another's territory',he emphasised that both Japan and the Western countries were morally responsible for the colonisation of other nations. Justice Pal explained that Japan was at that time possessed with a 'delusion' and believed that the country would face death and destruction if it failed in acquiring Manchuria.Pal regarded this as the reason for Japan's attempts to establish interests which it saw as necessary for its very existence. Justice Pal said that carrying out a military operation driven by 'delusion' was not unique to Japan as it had been repeatedly practised on a large scale by Western countries for many years. Saying, '[a]lmost every great power acquired similar interests within the territories of the Eastern Hemisphere and, it seems, every such power considered that interest to be very vital', Pal argued that Japan had the 'right' to argue that the Manchurian Incident was necessary for the sake of 'self-defense'.Japan claiming national 'self-defense' in regard to its territorial expansion in China was in step with international society at the time, Pal said, and thus Japan's actions stemmed from the 'imitation' of an evil practice of Western imperialism. Based on this premise, he concluded: 'The action of Japan in Manchuria wouldnot, it is certain,be applauded by the world. At the same time it would be difficult to condemn the same as criminal.'

Pal's brief seems to go beyond the questioning of a dubious legal proceeding by a distinguished and experienced international jurist to rather dishonorable special pleading on behalf of his favorite country, Japan.

In 1966, the Emperor of Japan conferred upon Pal—who stated his lifelong admiration of Japan as the one Asian country that stood up to the West-- the First Class of the Order of the Sacred Treasure.

The Pal dissent is a cornerstone of the recent nationalist tilt of the Japanese government, as can be seen from this Telegraph report of the aftermath of the LDP's victory at the polls in 2012:

"The view of that great war was not formed by the Japanese themselves, but rather by the victorious Allies, and it is by their judgment only that [Japanese] were condemned," Mr Abe told a meeting of the House of Representatives Budget Committee on Tuesday.

In his previous short-lived spell as prime minister, for 12 months from September 2006, Mr Abe said that the 28 Japanese military and political leaders charged with Class-A war crimes are "not war criminals under the laws of Japan."

Pal was enshrined at Yasukuni, which gives the lie to the claim that it is simply a memorial to the war dead and not a revisionist shrine. The photo illustrating Pal's entry in Wikipedia is his Yasukuni stele.

Prime Minister Abe made a pilgrimage to Kolkata in 2007 to meet with Pal's son and receive two pictures of Pal with Abe's grandfather, ex-Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke, who was detained after the war as a suspected Class A criminal but never indicted or tried.

For those who like their national history convoluted, it should also be pointed out that Pal was an admirer of the Indian National Army, which fought with the Japanese against the British in Malaya and Burma. When the British moved to try the leaders of the INA for treason after the war, the combination of outrage in the Indian military and popular revulsion against the British exercise of justice was a crucial factor in Great Britain granting Indian independence.

So, by an alternate reading of history, Japan can claim credit for the decolonization of India as well as Malaysia and Burma.

Prime Minister Singh's attitude to the potent symbolism of the Pal dissent and the Japanese decolonization narrative was displayed in Singh's toast to

Pal at Yasukuni Shrine

Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi in 2005:

The dissenting judgment of Justice Radha Binod Pal is well known to the Japanese people and will always symbolize the affection and regard our people have for your country.

On December 14, 2006, Singh upgraded Pal's judgment to "principled" and an expression of Indian-Japan solidarity in his speech in the Japanese Diet. He stated:

"The principled judgment of Justice Radhabinod Pal after the War is remembered even today in Japan. Ladies and Gentlemen, these events reflect the depth of our friendship and the fact that we have stood by each other at critical moments in our history."

This does not look like a matter of parsing the legal and moral flaws Pal detected in the war crimes tribunal. It looks as if Singh's heart, like Pal's was with Japan—and its view that Japan was unfairly stigmatized—and China unnecessarily benefited—by the narrative of Japanese national criminal aggression in World War II.

As generational memories fade of the miseries inflicted as a result of Japan's rampage through Asia, resurrecting the comforting abstraction of the Japan decolonization narrative is a potent political and diplomatic weapon for 21st century Asian politicians interested in the possibility of a new, more Japan-centric security order--despite the fact that Japan has to be discreet in wielding it in the presence of the United States, which is completely vested in the Greatest Generation/triumph over evil version.

The fact that the overt anti-China/pro-Japan tilt is a risky bet and, to a certain extent, Japan needs early and active Indian buy-in for the Abe gambit to succeed, make it appear that Singh decided to follow his heart and match Abe's boldness with his own.

Singh did not have to endorse that reliable if somewhat misleading anti-Chinese bugbear "freedom of navigation" and claim an overt Indian strategic role in East Asia through the Look East policy.

But he did so in his remarks in Tokyo.

Our Look East engagement began with a strong economic emphasis, but it has become increasingly strategic in its content.

...

Our relationship with Japan has been at the heart of our Look East Policy. Japan inspired Asia's surge to prosperity and it remains integral to Asia's future. The world has a huge stake in Japan's success in restoring the momentum of its growth. Your continued leadership in enterprise, technology and innovation and your ability to remain the locomotive of Asian renaissance are crucial. India's relations with Japan are important not only for our economic development, but also because we see Japan as a natural and indispensable partner in our quest for stability and peace in the vast region in Asia that is washed by the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Our relations draw their strength from our spiritual, cultural and civilizational affinities and a shared commitment to the ideals of democracy, peace and freedom. We have increasingly convergent world views and growing stakes in each other's prosperity. We have shared interests in maritime security and we face similar challenges to our energy security. There are strong synergies between our economies, which need an open, rule-based international trading system to prosper.

For outside observers, India's overt buy-in validates the idea of the anti-China pivot and reinforces the narrative that the PRC is a rogue actor that needs containment.

Global Times talked tough on the occasion of the Singh visit, putting the onus on Abe once again but presumably also sending a message to India not to end up on the wrong side of (long term) history (as well as reassuring itself that, despite the unfavorable set of current circumstances, the PRC will come out on top in the end):

It will take time for Japan to face the reality that the once only great power in East Asia has to give way to China, whose GDP and marine strength will surpass that of Japan. The process will be tougher for Japan, which will be sincerely convinced some day. The day will come sooner or later. The little tricks that Japan is playing are nothing but a struggle for self-comfort, which will not affect the development of Asia. Japan is trying every means to hide its decline against China in order to boost its national morale, but China does not need to compete with Japan to regain confidence and prove its strength. The conflict between China and Japan should not be regarded as a "strategic" game. In fact, the overall strategic future of Japan and China has already been determined. Gains and losses incurred by the frictions between China and Japan make no difference to the futures of either country. There is no need for China to exert too much energy on Japan. As a growing but young giant, Chinese society will unavoidably have to deal with various conflicts with Japan. It will be a long journey for China to become mature enough so that a real great power will emerge with confidence. This is not a final showdown between China and Japan, neither is it an opportunity for China to mend its broken fences with Japan. All China should do is "take it easy." China should be aware that Japanese tricks can never impact China strategy. China should take the initiative to decide when and how seriously we respond to it.

But maybe Singh sees a once-in-a-career opportunity for rollback against the PRC with Abe in Japan, the US in Myanmar, and China's problems with ASEAN on a prolonged, ugly boil.

It is already clear that India is slow-walking its negotiations with the PRC over a free trade agreement. If India and Japan both insist that China's proposed regional trade zone regime, the RCEP, needs to look more like the TPP, the negotiating initiative for all of the region's trade pacts may switch over to Japan and India.

The PRC appears to have decided it is a good idea to draw closer to the United States (which Abe is discreetly shouldering aside as he pursues his Japan-centric initiatives and promotes his vision of Japan as a victim of "victor's justice"), and declare allegiance to the World War II narrative that exalts US leadership and Japan's demotion to self-defense force quarantine.

PRC premier, Li Keqiang, found himself in the unlikely position of trying to reawaken nostalgia for the Potsdam declaration—which mandated the return to their owners of territories like Taiwan, the Pescadores, and Manchuria that Japan had stolen—during his trip to Germany. Beyond giving the PRC some kind of claim to the Senkakus, invoking the Potsdam declaration is probably meant to remind the United States of a happier time when the West's writ was respectfully acknowledged and not covertly defied by the subjugated and defeated nations of Asia.

On the other hand, if the weakened yen and Abe's frenetic regional deal making fail to keep the Nikkei afloat and the long-expected revulsion against Japanese bonds (and the 240% of GDP national debt they fund) materializes and spikes Japan's borrowing costs, Japan will be licking its wounds a few months from now and Singh will face some awkward moments in dealing with Beijing.

But for the time being, the vision (or, to the PRC, the specter) of an active Japan-India alliance inciting and recruiting opposition to Chinese strategic and economic penetration in Asia offers the prospect of a potentially far-reaching rejuggling of Pacific relationships.

Peter Lee writes on East and South Asian affairs and their intersection with US global policy. He is the moving force behind the Asian affairs website China Matters *which provides continuing critical updates on China and Asia-Pacific policies. His work frequently appears at Asia Times. This is a revised and expanded version of an article that appeared at* Asia Times.

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