

India-US-Japan Trilateral Meeting in Washington

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The recent trilateral meeting between India, US and Japan held in December 2011 at Washington had China looming large in the background. The US Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs at the State Department denied that China was specifically discussed at the meeting. However, the fact that the three major powers in Asia met and excluded China from their deliberations is indication enough. The reasons for India, Japan and the US to get together are not far to seek.

In the recent past China has started to flex its muscle, both economic as well as military, particularly over the South China Sea. This has alarmed most of the countries of East Asia ranging from Japan and South Korea in the north to Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia in South-East Asia. Chinese bluster in its official press threatening India and Vietnam over oil drilling rights in the South China Sea, to its threats to the Philippines have not gone down very well with these countries. Although most countries are aware of the potential of the Chinese market for their exports, they are nevertheless worried at a possible Chinese armed action in the region.

Japan has witnessed aggressive Chinese behaviour over the fishing boat incident near the disputed Senkaku islands and was alarmed at the harsh Chinese attitude threatening to cut-off exports of rare earths to Japan. This has led most East and South East Asian countries to seek the military cover of the United States. In fact, at the recent East Asian Summit held at Bali almost all countries represented there, with the notable exceptions of Laos and Cambodia, sided with the United States. The Chinese realised that they were completely isolated at that meeting.

With India as well, Chinese behaviour has been irrational. From incursions across the LAC, to denying visas to Indians from the State of Jammu and Kashmir, the Chinese have been behaving in a truculent manner. Recently even the long scheduled border talks had to be postponed as the Chinese were miffed at the Dalai Lama's presence at the World Buddhist Conference at New Delhi. Apart from this in recent Chinese press articles references to Indian policy have not been very flattering.

Perhaps what may have caused the maximum misgivings within the Chinese leadership have been the developments in Myanmar. When Myanmar decided halt the construction of the Chinese funded and built US \$ 3.6 billion Myitsone hydro –power project, the Chinese media speculated that it was the US that was behind this move. The decision of the ASEAN countries to pass on the Chairmanship of ASEAN to Myanmar in 2014 and the recent visit of the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Myanmar have also been seen in the same light.

China is worried about its enormous stakes in Myanmar. This year, China invested US \$ 8 billion in Myanmar and is Myanmar's second largest trading partner with Sino-Myanmar trade standing at US \$ 4.4 billion in 2011. China's south-west –

provinces having a population of about 200 million people directly depend upon Myanmar for their access to the sea, as otherwise the alternative route would mean increasing the distance by at least 3000 kilometres. In addition the South-East Asia Pipeline Co., an affiliate of the China National Petroleum Co.[CNPC], signed a deal with the Myanmar National Oil and Gas Co. to build two pipelines [Oil and Gas] from the Myanmar port of Kyaukpyu situated on the west coast of Myanmar to Ruili in Yunan Province of China. From there the pipelines can be extended to feed besides Yunan, the other southern Chinese provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi and Hunan. The two pipelines are 1100 kilometres in length and are expected to carry 22 m/t per year of crude oil and 12 bcm of gas on an annual basis and are expected to be completed by 2013. Along with the oil and gas pipelines, China has also undertaken to build a rail link from the west coast of Myanmar to the Yunan province of China. Nevertheless it will be extremely difficult for any outside power, including the US, to eliminate Chinese influence in Myanmar for it is quite deeply entrenched.

Thus as the US, Japan and India deliberate on issues of common interest their thoughts are likely to remain focussed on China. In the future this may lead to some interesting political developments within Asia. Individually it may be difficult for the countries of Asia to stand up to China. Even the US facing an economic downturn may also find it difficult, but joining together with other regional powers will be a different matter altogether. How should the rising power of China be handled is going to remain one of the major questions that Asian countries are likely to deliberate on with increasing frequency.

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