

Can Japan Take Forward the B3W Initiative Ahead?

In 2020, Shinzo Abe, Japan's longest-serving prime minister, resigned suddenly citing health reasons, bringing about the end of an era of political stability. After nearly eight years in office, Abe left an enduring mark on Tokyo's foreign policy. The introduction of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) mantra in Japanese foreign policy; the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) as a strategic diamond partnership between Japan, India, Australia and the United States; the strengthening of Japan's regional and global position by employing personal camaraderie with leaders around the world; and the promotion of a "quality" infrastructure campaign focused on infrastructure and connectivity diplomacy were key signatures of Abe's foreign policy.¹

Notably, Abe's focus on financing infrastructure development projects has emerged as a critical strategy, not only as part of Japan's long-term economic growth strategy, but also as a geo-political move to balance China's ever-increasing regional clout, thanks to President Xi Jinping's ambitious flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This focus on infrastructure growth continued during the previous prime minister Yoshihide Suga's short stint in office (Suga, who took over as Japan's prime minister after Abe resigned in September 2020, abruptly stepped down in September 2021, setting the stage for a new premier). And now under the new leadership of Fumio Kishida (Prime Minister) in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and in Japan in the coming years too, this focus is likely to continue and expand through various Japanese diplomatic initiatives that include supporting and joining hands with new global initiatives, such as the Build Back Better World (B3W).²

This policy paper looks at Japan's interests in the B3W: primarily, how the newly envisioned initiative takes account of

Tokyo's geo-political goals, infrastructure, and connectivity diplomacy. Can Japan take forward the B3W initiative in the Indo-Pacific region based on its status as a reputable leader in the infrastructure developmental aid domain? What are the ways in which Japan can capitalise on its expertise and long-standing leadership as an aid partner to effectively and efficiently implement the B3W initiative? The central argument put forth in this policy brief is that Japan's expertise and geo-political positioning makes it a critical part of the B3W venture and, accordingly, Tokyo can be a vital leader in shaping and implementing the B3W.

The B3W initiative was first proposed by US President Joe Biden at the June 2021 summit of the Group of Seven (G7) industrial democracies, which also included the guest nations India, Australia, and South Korea.³ It not only came as a major diplomatic achievement for the newly elected president to revitalise American alliances,⁴ but also as a much-needed programme to overhaul the collective international approach towards infrastructure investments to make them more sustainable and resilient in the new era.⁵ At the same time, the B3W, at least implicitly, was announced (and envisioned) as an initiative to balance China's unchecked outreach in the Indo-Pacific region. Notably, Japan ranks as the only Asian G7 economy and is, therefore, critical to the initiative's implementation and execution in the region. Japan's involvement in the venture also assumes increased importance in terms of Japan's status as an American treaty ally and a key power countering China's belligerent action in the Indo-Pacific. Yet, it should be noted that as a recently ideated venture, the scope and specifics of the B3W presently remain uncertain. Amid such lack of clarity over the logistics and particulars of the programme, the extent to which Japan could realistically associate with the B3W, as well as the potential nature of its involvement, remains to be seen.

Aligning B3W with Tokyo's Infrastructure Diplomacy

As the leading Official Development Assistance (ODA) provider of the region and a major regional/global power, Japan's complete inclusion into the B3W is essential to its progress. In 2015, seen as a counter to Beijing's BRI, Japan dispatched its own Asia-focused "Partnership for Quality Infrastructure" (PQI) under the then prime minister Shinzo Abe. The PQI was updated and once again introduced in May 2016 as the "Extended Partnership for Quality Infrastructure" (EPQI) by Abe at the G7 Ise-Shima Summit in a bid to offer the initiative to a worldwide milieu.⁶ Overseas Infrastructure Development Assistance (OIDA) emerged as one of the top priorities of Abe's foreign and economic policies, marking a significant change in Japan's aid plans of the 1990s and the 2000s, when the Japanese Government had sought to expand the weight of humanitarian assistance with its aid strategy.⁷ Further, during his tenure, Tokyo moved away from its traditional approach of supporting huge scale, government-driven infrastructure projects. Via the EPQI, Abe returned to Japan's original aid strategy in line with Tokyo's focus on "economic multilateralism".⁸

Theoretically, for Japan, promoting by incorporating relevant B3W proposals in the EPQI initiatives leaves room for much synergy: both ventures ultimately seek to bridge the gap between "quantity" and "quality". The B3W can emerge as a venture that greatly furthers Japan's infrastructure diplomacy by looking at areas beyond conventional sources of connectivity. It can also greatly enhance Tokyo's soft power development, strengthening Japan's already strong presence as an ODA/OIDA provider. Quality infrastructure development is the part that Japan will focus on the most, rather than initiating competition against China.⁹ Here, regional monetary ventures like the Asian Develop-

ment Bank (ADB) can help further Japan's goal especially as funding logistics of the B3W have not yet been declared: the G7 communique on the B3W requires each of its members to mobilise financing through their own development institutions and Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs). As the ADB falls in this bracket and in view of long-standing Japan-ADB cooperation – in 2015, Japan and the ADB announced a \$16 billion partnership for the next 5 years focused on infrastructure development¹⁰ – the ADB could be a likely partner. Moreover, a similar synergy between the ADB and the B3W can lead to other Asian economies also adopting the B3W proposals.

Japan's take on the B3W fundamentally stems from the importance of infrastructure diplomacy for its own national interests. Tokyo remains the biggest provider of infrastructure-focused ODA in Southeast Asia. And thanks to Japan's long-standing, strong aid policies, while hosting the Group of 20 (G20, which also includes China) in 2019, Japan was able to win the endorsement of the G20 leaders to create a set of principles for quality infrastructure investment.¹¹ In line with this G20 outlook, in late 2019, the "Blue Dot Network" (BDN)¹² was announced by Japan, the US, and Australia. It is important to note here that despite being sold as a counter or alternative to the BRI, the B3W appears more as an extension of the BDN, and can even be complementary to the BRI in some sectors.¹³ Based on initial announcements and reports, the B3W is a "values-driven, high standard" initiative that seeks to focus on four key areas – *climate, health security, digital technology, and gender equity-equality* – apart from infrastructure investment.¹⁴ BDN for its part also seeks to emerge as a certification for "infrastructure projects that demonstrate and uphold global infrastructure principles",¹⁵ borrowing greatly from Japan's focus on 'quality' infrastructure. Such a focus at the very outset shows that B3W and BRI (which is primarily an infrastructure connectivity-driven venture) are not competitors by definition, but have been termed so rather by virtue of being led by competing powers, namely the US and China, respectively.¹⁶

B3W: An Anti-China Project?

China, in response to the 47th G7 summit in June 2021, stated that countries "should not seek bloc politics on the basis of the interests of small cliques, suppress different development models by holding ideology as the yardstick",¹⁷ while the media in China termed the B3W a US "fantasy"¹⁸. Beijing's reaction to the BDN itself had been to deem the venture the US's "delusion".¹⁹ In light of this, should Japan seek to move forward with the B3W as part of the BDN drive, it can expect a harsh response from Beijing. And amid the current economic tensions with China, especially as China believes that "Japan has been attempting to lead institutional campaigns to counterbalance China", Japan will need to tread extra cautiously.²⁰

Framing the B3W as an "anti-China" initiative is not just going to create complications for Japan, but is also not good in the long-term for the B3W *per se*, if the project is to succeed. Rather, it is important that the venture resonates collectively not just with the G7 countries, but also the developing low- and middle-income states it is focused on, especially as such states have close ties with China and its economy. In other words, the B3W's success in the region can be actualised by envisioning a grand alliance on quality and sustainable infrastructure and via transparent and democratic lending practices between the developed countries and the low- and middle-income recipient states, thereby contrasting it with China's unsustainable and opaque practices under the BRI. Japan is well renowned for its global leadership on development issues vital to developing nations (such as through its massive ODA programme in Southeast Asia); it can thus be a central link to initiating such a grand alliance between its extended neighbourhood, Europe, and the US. Institutions like the ADB, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and even the World Bank must be involved actively to give it global credibility and backing. These institutions will be useful in exerting influence globally, as both China and the G7 will try to sway economic rhetoric in their favour.²¹

Japan's leadership in "building back better" post disasters has long been hailed as one of its key strengths;²² its policy of *sanpō yoshi* (which means ensuring satisfaction for the society, seller, and buyer) has been lauded as the reason behind its "deep-rooted sense of value that emphasizes relationships with society".²³ Yet, as Japan remains heavily dependent on China for trade, the extent to which it can support the B3W remains to be seen. For the same reason, how far the G7 can push the boundaries of the B3W is uncertain. Other countries associated with the B3W – including Italy, Germany, India, South Korea, and Australia – themselves have nuanced economic ties with China, and so would like to tread carefully even as they attempt to limit dependency on Beijing-centric supply chains. It is important to note here that for an initiative like B3W to have success, it needs active participation by multilateral actors. Building links between B3W, BDN, EPQI, India-Japan-Australia-led Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI)²⁴ and sustainable development-focused ventures like India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)²⁵ is crucial. How Tokyo manoeuvres its China-policy with regards to the B3W remains to be seen; nonetheless, even before Japan or any participant nation takes any kind of significant stand on the venture, it is vital for the B3W to first clearly define its logistics, funding, and target objectives.

Japan & B3W: Constraints

Japan's involvement can be a central driver behind the B3W's success in the region; however, Tokyo is likely to face several constraints, both domestic and foreign, in its engagement with the B3W. *Firstly*, Tokyo's continued focus on infrastructure diplomacy and engagement with the B3W will be dependent on the change in its political leadership after the upcoming general elections. Former prime minister Suga inherited a massive task from Shinzo Abe: to steer the country through a trying pandemic, economic recession, and increasingly challenging geo-politics, as well as to revive somehow the fortune of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) simultaneously. While he had both succeeded and failed on several international fronts,

Suga's popularity at home had continued to slide, and now he is out of power. As Japan is currently undergoing an imminent change in its leadership (the ruling LDP's new leadership, followed closely by general elections in October 2021), the internal divisions over how Tokyo should manage its dynamics with China will not die down (and might even widen), which could bring about an end to the continuity and stability in Japanese foreign policy over the past decade or so.

Regardless, a change in direction from Abe's focus on Indo-Pacific outreach and infrastructure diplomacy could potentially mean a change in Tokyo's 'China calculus' and, therefore, its current stance towards the B3W, which Beijing views negatively. It is imperative that notwithstanding the change in guard, Tokyo continues to recognise the importance of the B3W beyond its posture as a China-balancing venture and as a much-needed global initiative in the right direction, in order to create a new sustainable development model for the new era.

Secondly, Japan's already sluggish growth took a downturn amid the COVID-19 pandemic, prompting the government to enact multiple stimulus packages.²⁶ Even though growth is likely to resume soon, it will be slow; hence, committing to massive financial aid for infrastructure projects may be a difficult choice. Amid such perilous economic circumstances, it will be vital for the G7 states to work together to co-develop and co-implement projects. More importantly, the focus must be to raise financing by mobilising the private sector and MDBs in order to supplement government spending. Under the B3W, the G7 states must ensure that such lending practices prioritise green growth, sustainability, quality, and transparency.

Lastly, B3W's success will also be dependent on how well Japan (and its partners like the US and Canada) can navigate the complexities and nuances behind the seemingly straightforward ideals of the B3W. The B3W will be tested on the political and economic will and capacity of the G7 leaders – Japan, Canada, France, Germa-

ny, Italy, the UK, the US – and the EU as a whole.²⁷ The recently announced AUKUS alliance between Australia, the UK and the US is a new security/ military partnership that has already ruffled some feathers: France's reaction has created a doubt over the future of the Transatlantic partnership. Moreover, the non-inclusion (or perhaps, non-consideration) of Japan and India in this pact will no doubt have a psychological impact: exclusion of Asian powers from a pact that has implications for the Asian or Indo-Pacific region will not be favourably received.²⁸ Such tensions may further create unnecessary fissures among the B3W participants.

It is noteworthy that many of these states, including Japan, are economically reliant on China to a high degree. For example, Germany, while being the economic anchor of the EU, is extensively dependent on China as its largest and most important trade and import partner;²⁹ Berlin has hence employed a flexible and pragmatic China approach, even treading lightly in raising the human rights issues with Beijing.³⁰ Therefore, for these states to not show ambivalence to the project, the B3W cannot be seen as a hardened US-led policy against China. Tokyo must take cognisance of the same and utilise its outreach to strengthen ties in the infrastructure and connectivity financing domain as well as the other B3W focus areas, especially climate change, health, and digital technology infrastructure. Japan is already collaborating with the EU, for example, via their shared focus on the Indo-Pacific:³¹ an EU-Japan Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure was initiated in 2019, as part of a wider strategic partnership agreement.³² This growth in the EU-Japan partnership will certainly benefit the B3W in the long term, thereby making a "strong contribution to a sustainable world order".³³

Summing-Up

Japan's long-standing experience in providing quality infrastructure aid in the Indo-Pacific region, under the EPQI, makes it uniquely positioned to take forward the B3W's infrastructure investment agenda. Japan is the only G7 nation in Asia (India is a guest country); it must, therefore, take the lead in implementing the initiative in the region. More importantly, Japan must actively shape the B3W from an on-paper initiative to one with defined goals and a concrete envisioned plan that can be effectively and successfully put into practice. Furthermore, for the B3W to succeed, it will be vital for the G7 countries to come together and find synergy in not only their ideologies but also their approaches, strategies, and tactics. Japan must capitalise on its expertise with infrastructure financing and diplomacy, as well as its strategic partnerships (especially with the EU) and treaty alliance with the US, to make sure all involved actors are on the same page, as well as initiate and implement a cohesive action plan.

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Endnotes

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Layout: Medienbüro Meyer