

CHINA OR JAPAN? INDIA DOES A BALANCING ACT

NEW DELHI: Amid the feverish excitement over Narendra Modi's visit to Japan starting Saturday, the government has assured China that the Prime Minister attaches great significance to the upcoming visit of President Xi Jinping and that he is looking forward to a successful meeting with him.

External affairs minister Sushma Swaraj spoke to her counterpart Wang Yi and told him preparations are under way to ensure Xi had a highly successful visit to India next month. This was after Swaraj this week cancelled what would have been her maiden visit to China.

While the visit was not strictly bilateral - Swaraj was supposed to participate in the now abandoned Russis-India-China (RIC) trilateral dialogue in Tianjin - it entailed talks with Wang in Beijing and a possible meeting with Xi ahead of his visit to India.

Swaraj spoke to Wang on Wednesday and told him that she would not be visiting China as scheduling issues had precluded the RIC meet from taking place. Sources said she told Wang that she looked forward to an early visit to Beijing.

According to Indian officials, even though the visit to Beijing was also meant to prepare groundwork for the much touted Xi-Modi meet in September, the cancellation does not have any bearing on the visit as her main agenda was the RIC meet.

"In any case, she has met her Chinese counterpart twice already," said a source.

According to sources, Wang enquired about preparations in India for Xi's visit saying that Beijing expected to see considerable forward movement in ties. He said China wanted to take relations with India to a new level.

Swaraj told Wang the entire country is looking forward to Xi's arrival in India. Modi has been forced to walk the diplomatic tightrope with his almost back-to-back meetings with Japanese PM Shinzo Abe and Xi next month. While maintaining that he wants to take India-Japan relations to newer heights, Modi has managed to keep Beijing interested too by declaring that he would like to explore new opportunities with China.

The Chinese Premier Li Keqiang reciprocated the sentiment in a telephonic conversation with Modi when he said China is now looking at a more "robust" partnership with India.

While Modi's meeting with Abe is expected to be a breeze, with their great personal rapport based on mutual admiration and there being no outstanding issue between the two

countries, his greater test likely would be the meeting with Xi in which he will need to address issues like the border dispute and trade imbalance.

This will be his second meeting with Xi after the one in Brazil on the sidelines of BRICS summit in which the PM touched upon these issues as he stressed the importance of "strengthening mutual trust and confidence, and maintaining peace and tranquility on the border".

Beijing will also closely follow Modi's Japan visit which promises to be one of the most successful foreign visits ever undertaken by an Indian PM. Abe, who insists that India-Japan relations have more potential than any other bilateral relationship in the world, is flying to Kyoto to receive Modi where he will have a private meeting with him apart from the delegation-level talks and another restricted meeting in Tokyo later.