

The Way Forward for India-Japanese Ties

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*“When Time shall have softened passion and prejudice,
when Reason shall have stripped the mask from misrepresentation,
then Justice, holding evenly her scales, will require
much of past censure and praise to change places.”*

-(Radha Binod Pal, 1953)¹



The foregoing words are part of Judge Pal's dissenting opinion at the Tokyo International War Tribunal of 1948. What impressed a great number of Japanese then and since, besides Judge Pal's poetic eloquence, is his steadfast intellectual honesty and unswerving courage in resisting the prevailing mood of the court, which was later critically described by George Kennan as “self-righteous punitive enthusiasm.”² In his commitment to fairness, even at the price of swimming against the tide, Judge Pal was indeed the quintessential Indian.

While I was posted in Geneva more than ten years ago, a seasoned European diplomat once half-jokingly confided that the secret of successfully chairing a multilateral conference rests with how to get Japanese participants to speak up and Indian participants to shut up. Herein I will emulate my respected outspoken Indian colleagues in speaking up to present a rationale for further strengthening bilateral ties between Delhi and Tokyo.

India and Japan are natural partners, and the geopolitics of Asia make this all the more so. Some observers argue that the recent improvement of the India-US relationship was an important factor in, and perhaps even a precursor to, the reinforcement of India-Japanese ties. It is also true that in the past, Japan's excessive preoccupation with post-World War II pacifism and India's long association with the non-aligned movement during the Cold War severely limited opportunities for the two countries to develop mutual cooperation. However, one cannot ignore deeper forces underpinning bilateral relations. While India is Asia's most populous democracy, Japan has been Asia's oldest democracy. Both nations struggled strenuously in coping with the overwhelming power of Western colonialism and imperialism. Japan extended moral and material support to India's aspirations for independence.

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What has dramatically changed the landscape of India-Japan relations in recent years is activism on both sides by the governments of Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister Abe in pursuit of shared values and common interests. Under these two political leaders, the relationship has been raised to a remarkably higher plateau. This might prompt Indian friends to ask, “What exactly has Japan got to offer India as India evolves into a global power?”

First, there are the economies of the two nations. A number of Chinese intellectuals privately admit that, if it had not been for economic aid, direct investment, and the transfer of both technology and business know-how from Japan, the Chinese economy would never have been able to grow as fast and as big as it has. Now is the time for India to do likewise.

India is currently the second largest beneficiary of Japan’s ODA, after Vietnam³. The introduction of Japanese bullet trains between Mumbai and Ahmedabad would certainly be a powerful symbol of such aid. As a frequent traveler on bullet trains, I am convinced that, along with speed and safety, accelerated flows of people, goods and services will open new doors for the Indian economy. Building on the entry of Suzuki into India in the 1980s, and the construction of the Delhi metro in the 1990s, this would make another visible and epoch-making project of bilateral cooperation.

In terms of Japanese business, as corporate Japan takes the China Plus One approach in light of China’s rapidly rising labor costs, lack of transparency and political risks, increasing attention is being focused on India and other emerging economies of South Asia. In fact, surveys reveal that Japanese businesses regard India as the most promising investment destination for the next three years. The day may not be far off when direct investment from Japan could change the landscape of Indian manufacturing. However, we must not underestimate the importance of India continuing to improve its investment climate. The basic agreement on civil nuclear cooperation would be highly significant in expanding the scope of bilateral cooperation in this sensitive yet critically important sector.

The second area of promising cooperation would be transfer of defense equipment and technology. Under the three principles

promulgated by the Abe government, a new horizon has been opened. During my recent visit to Delhi, some Indians expressed their grievances concerning Japan’s unsuccessful attempt to sell *Soryu*-class submarines to Australia, asking me “Why Australia, why not India?” As a US admiral put it, the tragedy for Japan’s defense industry was that the first game was the Super Bowl. Instead of pursuing highly sensitive equipment and technology such as submarines, India and Japan can perhaps make a start by opting for something more ordinary and less sensitive. US-2 amphibious aircraft, which has been in the pipeline for some time, would



Japan's Bullet Train

make a good candidate in this regard. Indians should be aware that the Japanese defense industry might be an inexperienced new kid on the block in terms of overseas sales, but the track record of Japanese businesses amply demonstrates that they could be a really quick study when it comes to interactions with overseas counterparts and direct foreign investment. Patient efforts backed up by the two governments are urgently required.

Maritime security provides the third stage of India-Japan cooperation. The international community has seen a series of unilateral attempts to challenge the status quo both in the South China Sea and the East China Sea through the accumulation of *faits-accomplis* by China. India cannot be indifferent to such alarming developments for two obvious reasons. First, as India embarks upon its policy of “Acting East”, these waters constitute important sea lines of communication for

India. More ominously, what has been taking place in the rough waters of those two seas might well be repeated in the Indian Ocean. When an Indian commodore states that “India-Japan cooperation should be in place before the PLA Navy commences its power projection sorties in the Indian Ocean, which is likely to happen sometime in the middle of the next decade”⁴, he attracts the rapt attention and agreement of a vast majority of merchant seamen and strategists in the region. India and Japan can certainly play a leading role in promoting the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific region. For both nations, the international arbitration court ruling just handed down in the case brought by the Philippines against China would provide a useful common tool for strongly advocating, along with the international community, peaceful settlement of disputes. Furthermore, regular cooperation between India and Japan in Exercise Malabar involving the US Navy would never be more timely. After all, deterrence has to work at sea as well as on land, as Indians learned from their own land border issues.



Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, Photo Gallery, US-2 aircraft

The last area of closer cooperation that I want to emphasize is joint work on the multilateral front. Already India and Japan are working together, along with Germany and Brazil, for the reform of the UN Security Council so that it reflects not the political reality of 1945, but the changed circumstances of the 21st century. Insightful Indian strategists are aware of “China’s unwavering opposition to India’s rise to global power”⁵. If so, Japan would be an ideal partner with which India can work to let India’s large continental neighbor understand that both Asia and the UN are big enough to accommodate other Asian powers such as India and Japan.

Cooperation could be expanded to other multilateral issues. Japan’s experience of engaging in domestic structural reform through accepting multilateral and regional trade and investment liberalization might well provide some useful reference for Indian endeavors which India cannot avoid as it embarks upon its road to becoming a global economic power⁶.

India’s contribution at the COP21 is duly acknowledged by many. It was noteworthy since India enlarged its scope of diplomatic activities without getting entangled in the traditional dichotomy between developing countries and advanced countries. India and Japan can work together as responsible members of the international community.

Hot and spicy curry is exquisite and really tempting, but some stomachs may be able to better deal with it with the help of some yogurt or vegetables. Japan, whose soft power is well noted by many Indians, could play a role of softener for the stimulating food for thought often prepared by Indian colleagues.

What a natural partnership it could be! Still, the potential for further closer ties is untapped. The finest hour of India-Japan relations is yet to come.

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