The Way Forward for India-Japanese Ties

by Shingo Yamagami, Director General (Acting), The Japan Institute for International Affairs

“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)

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.” 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.

DPG Policy Note is produced by the Delhi Policy Group, an independent and autonomous, not for profit think tank which focuses primarily on strategic issues of critical national interest. In keeping with the growing dynamism of India’s foreign and security policy, the DPG is expanding its focus areas to include India’s broader regional and global role and the strategic partnerships that advance India’s rise as a leading power. To support that goal, the DPG undertakes research and organizes policy interactions across a wide canvas, including strategic and geo-political issues, geo-economic issues and defence and security issues.

DPG does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2016 by the Delhi Policy Group (DPG)
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 Vietnam. 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 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’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.

***

References:


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 power 6.