

India-Japan Relations: Emerging Contours of Strategic Partnership

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What began as an attempt to engage India that was rapidly emerging as a major global power especially in view of a frosty relationship following the 1998 Indian nuclear testing that drew acerbic reactions from Tokyo in late 2000 has picked up such a strong momentum that not only these two countries have forged a formidable 'strategic partnership' but have grand plans to deepen and strengthen the length and breadth of bilateral relations. In fact, the India-Japan cooperation spans a wide spectrum encompassing global, regional and bilateral aspects. Whereas the manifestation of the India-Japan strategic partnership is beginning to be more discernible in the East Asian context, at the bilateral level in the security field, as expected cooperation in maritime security affairs has emerged the prominent and visible dimension. There are at the same time a few other areas where prospects to forge an enduring relationship between the two seem very bright. The economic ties, the weakest component of an otherwise robust, comprehensive relationship that is unfolding, are being strengthened through a variety of ways. The institutional mechanisms that have been set up, especially the annual prime ministerial meetings, have become singularly instrumental in providing the necessary fillip to sustain the political tempo.

Any discourse India-Japan strategic partnership needs to locate in the profound changes that are taking at the global level in general and at the East Asian regional level in particular. Further, the foreign and security policies of both India and Japan are undergoing major and

fundamental shifts. What is of noteworthy is that for the first time in history India and Japan have simultaneously become key stakeholders in the East Asian affairs. Fortunately, there is a broad consensus in both countries that the interests and concerns of these two converge rather than diverge and that it is an historic opportunity to work together on a range of issues. It is not surprising thus the nature of this partnership will largely determine the peace, security and prosperity of East Asia in the coming years. In the following, apart from providing a brief backdrop, the four distinct contours of the strategic partnership, viz, East Asian security, maritime security, nuclear issues, and space cooperation are discussed.

Introduction

It took Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori's bold initiative in August 2000 to visit India and restart the stalled process of strengthening bilateral relations. Based on what he called to build a 'Global Partnership,' the following visits by A.B.Vajpayee to Japan in December 2001 (after a gap of nearly a decade) and Junichiro Koizumi in 2005 set the ball rolling. If the 8-point initiative agreed upon during Koizumi's visit in 2005 laid a solid foundation to realise the strategic partnership, Manmohan Singh's December 2006 visit created the much needed institutional mechanisms. On the other hand, Abe's 2007 visit was meant to create a roadmap for newer dimensions to take the process forward with renewed vigour and the year 2008 was marked by attempts at further consolidation and expansion of the bilateral agenda.

It is instructive to examine the titles and contents of various bilateral statements issued in the last few years, which also reflect the intense and rapid strides the relationship has made. For instance, the joint statement during Mori's visit was entitled *Global Partnership in the 21st Century*, it was simply called *India-Japan Joint Declaration* after A B Vajpayee's visit. By the time Koizumi came to India 2005 the joint statement was called

Towards India-Japan Partnership in a New Asian Era: Strategic Orientation of India-Japan Global Partnership, however it took a simpler form when Manmohan Singh made his sojourn to Tokyo: *Towards Japan-India Strategic and Global Partnership*. As some one more passionate about India and probably to leave his stamp on strategic partnership with India, Shinzo Abe-Manmohan Singh's Delhi's August 2007 joint statement became the *Roadmap for New Dimensions to the Strategic and Global Partnership between India and Japan*. In October 2008 when Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Japan, the joint statement read the *Advancement of the Strategic and Global Partnership between India and Japan*.

As in the case of the labelling of joint statements, the contents of these statements have also undergone remarkable change; they have been becoming more and more comprehensive (and lengthier too). In other words, efforts seem to be constantly going on to take advantage of favourable conditions to promote bilateral relations and innovatively come up with newer ideas to ensure that the relationship does not suffer from the fate it did for more than five decades. These joint statements mirror the profound changes and common concerns they have about the world in general and East Asian in particular.

It is true that no formidable, long-term relationship between two nations can be built unless it is strongly propped by the three principal pillars: defence and strategic, political and economic. Among these, as India's own experience demonstrates, defence/strategic links tend to be much more enduring and long-term. The repeated use of the term 'strategic' has generated considerable speculation leading to the belief that it is synonymous with 'defence' which is not the case if one looked at the bilateral statement issued in May 2006. It says"

(it) will involve closer political and diplomatic coordination on bilateral, regional, multilateral and global issues, comprehensive

economic engagement, stronger defence relations, greater technological cooperation as well as working towards a quantum increase in cultural ties, educational linkages and people-to-people contacts.¹

Thus, the strategic partnership between India and Japan encompasses a range of issues, including bilateral defence cooperation. Ambitious plans are being made to build a 'strategic partnership' between the two by increasing not just the frequency of high-level political contacts but also regular exchange of visits by the defence ministers and chiefs of the armed forces. India obviously looks at Japan as a partner that can help promote its interests in East Asia whereas Japan wants to make India a close political partner in dealing with East Asian security issues. For the first time, both India and Japan have recognised that there are several areas of common interest and concern, that they share certain values as two largest democracies in Asia, and that many complementarities that can be harnessed for mutual benefit.

What is of interest is the repeated use of the expression 'strategic,' particularly so by the Japanese while dealing with India. For instance, the joint political statement issued at the end of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to New Delhi in April 2005 was called *India-Japan Partnership in a New Asian Era: Strategic Orientation of Japan-India Global Partnership*.² More recently, the joint press release issued during Foreign Minister Taro Aso's visit in January 2006 states: "Recalling that during Prime Minister Koizumi's visit to India, the two Prime Ministers had decided to enhance the strategic focus of the India-Japan Global Partnership, the Ministers agreed to conduct henceforth Foreign Minister-level talks with a strategic perspective."³ Another important politician, Shinzo Abe, in an interview to a leading television network observed: "Our relations with India have been relatively weak though it is a country very friendly to Japan. It is important to strengthen ties with this country a lot more and forge *strategic relations*" (emphasis added).⁴ Significantly, India

too has responded positively and appears to be equally enthusiastic to underpin the strategic nature of bilateral relationship.

Despite the lack of historical baggage and enormous popular empathy towards each other, India-Japan bilateral relations failed to deepen due to cold war. A window of opportunity opened only in the early 1990s. India's Look East policy in fact initially was targeted at Japan but it failed to materialise for a number of reasons. Two developments contributed to the change of Japanese perception of India: the rise of China and betterment of India-U.S. relations. Moreover, there was a general feeling that India did not pose a threat to Japan and their interests were most unlikely to clash. It is this belief that prompted Yoshiro Mori to visit India in August 2000,⁵ which surprisingly turned out to be a turning point in India-Japan relations leading to a landmark agreement dubbed as 'Global Partnership.' The 9/11 events added further urgency to security cooperation between Japan and India. Though much of the substantive interaction on security is a recent phenomenon, importantly, there is commitment by both sides to deepen the security dimension of the relationship.

Thus, a new strategy steadily began to evolve premised on (i) broadening the agenda of interaction, (ii) maintaining regular contacts and exchanges at various levels, and (iii) strengthening the defence component of relationship. When compared to the decade of 1990s where only one prime ministerial visit materialised, between 2000 and 2008 six visits have taken place, a clear indication of the new bonhomie between the two countries.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this partnership is the two bilateral agreements that have been entered into. One, the *Joint Statement* issued specifically on defence cooperation by the two defence minister in May 2006.⁶ Two, the *Joint Declaration on Security*

Cooperation between India and Japan issued during PM Manmohan Singh's visit in October 2008.⁷ India happens to be the only country outside the US alliance system that Japan signed such an agreement. This Declaration provides comprehensive details on elements, mechanism and implementation of cooperation encompassing a wide array of areas.

Contours of India-Japan Strategic Partnership

East Asian Security

The significance of India-Japan relations is perhaps the greatest in the East Asian regional context. That has been a major focus of the strategic partnership since Koizumi's visit in 2005. This is once again emphatically reiterated by the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh by stating on the eve of the summit meeting with his counterpart in October 2008 in Tokyo that India and Japan are two pillars of Asian security and "I consider our bilateral relations with Japan to be one of the most important bilateral relationships we have. A strong India-Japan relationship will play a significant role in the emerging Asian security architecture and will contribute to the peace, stability and prosperity of Asia and the world."⁸ This is first time an Indian prime minister so emphatically underscored both India's stakes in East Asia as well as the role of India-Japan partnership can shape a new economic and security order. This is a clear indication of mutual concerns about the future of East Asian security.

The region encompassing India, Southeast and Northeast Asian subregions, what is called East Asia, is on the cusp of such a remarkable transformation that by most forecasts the current century will be dominated by developments in this region. An assessment of East Asian security should however keep in view its complexity and uniqueness in many ways compared to any other region in the world. By any yardstick the most dominant feature of East Asian security is the rise of new power centres and growing assertion of regional great powers. It is this aspect

that will be the key determinant in the regional security architecture, for historically the great powers and the relations that governed them have been at the heart of the nature of this architecture.

Persistence of historical legacies and mutual suspicions remain especially among major powers which tend to give rise to nationalist feelings and arms races. This is further compounded by the large number of unsettled territorial/boundary and maritime disputes involving almost every country of the region, which quite often are highly emotive.

There is no doubt that East Asia continues to be economically the most vibrant region and economic interdependence has been rapidly increasing. It can be argued that the economic stakes are so high that no country would risk a major disruption on account of political reasons. However, this also, as history has proved on several occasions, is an insufficient condition to ensure peace and stability. In fact, growing economic interdependence has not exactly mitigated security concerns of both Japan and India vis-a-vis China. Since there is no viable balance of power in East Asia and great power relations are yet to become predictable, perhaps it may be useful to search for ways to deal with regional security. Precisely because the current phase is still evolving, it becomes incumbent on India and Japan to work together in ensuring a peaceful and stable regional order. Not surprisingly, the 2006 Joint Statement on defence cooperation refers to Asia at least six times.

Maritime Security

Maritime security concerns were in fact responsible in prompting Japan to review its relations with India after the 1998 nuclear testing. Although mutual ship visits and contacts among officials of the respective defence ministries began in the mid-1990s, they were few and far between. However, the 1999 incident of prompt rescuing of a Japanese freight ship, Alondra Rainbow, by the Indian coastguard not only highlighted

Japanese vulnerabilities in the critical Indian Ocean transport routes but also Indian maritime capabilities. The Indian Coastguard was invited for the first time to a meeting convened by then P. M. Keizo Obuchi of navies and coastguards in March 2000 of the Asia Pacific. Ever since, India and Japan have been actively collaborating in ensuring the security of sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean region.

Of importance was the first-ever visit by an Indian defence minister George Fernandes in January 2000. He later claimed, "New Delhi will hold annual high-level defence consultations with Tokyo, while Japanese coastguard ships and Indian vessels will conduct joint training in tackling piracy. The issue, though, is not piracy alone."⁹ Referring to the unresolved territorial disputes in South China Sea, he said, "A strong India, economically and militarily well endowed, will be a very solid agent to see that the sea lanes are not disturbed and that conflict situations are contained."¹⁰ Japanese scholars have also expressed similar views.¹¹

The coast guards of two countries have been conducting joint exercises regularly and additionally the Indian Navy and the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces have also begun to enhance their contacts and activities. As part of the upgraded navy-to-navy cooperation, the two navies for the first time participated in the trilateral maritime exercises (with the U.S. being the third one) in April 2007 off Japan's east coast in the Pacific. This was not only the first time the two navies participated but also first time for the Indian Navy to take part in multilateral exercises in the Pacific near Japan. As a follow-on, in September 2007 the five-nation naval exercises were in the Bay of Bengal. Spread over five days and comprising more than 27 major ships, including two American and one Indian carrier, nuclear submarines and other major ships and nearly 200 aircraft, these were one of the largest and probably the most advanced exercises that both India and Japan have participated. The 2008 Joint

Declaration makes a specific reference to "Navy-to-Navy Staff Talks" in addition to the "two Coast Guards will continue to promote cooperation to ensure maritime safety, maritime security and to protect marine environment through joint exercise and meeting between the two Coast Guards according to the Memorandum on Cooperation between the Japan Coast Guard and the Indian Coast Guard."¹² Thus, maritime security cooperation will continue to be a major aspect of India-Japan relations.

Cooperation in Nuclear Issues

When seen against the backdrop of bitterness and acrimony between India and Japan after the nuclear tests, the progress on cooperation in nuclear issues has been astounding. Anything nuclear would have been dismissed given Japan's unflinching support to global non-proliferation regimes such as NPT, CTBT, etc. Since India not been a signatory to these, any relaxation of existing norms or attempts at cooperation with India would have elicited strong reactions from Japan as it did with imposition of sanctions in 1998. Things have undergone remarkable change.

When the issue of India-US nuclear deal came up, Japan for the first time maintained a non-committal, wait-and-see attitude. Later on it even went to the extent of almost justifying it. Japan even went to the extent of justifying the deal. "It would be wrong to discuss India's nuclear issue on the same basis as North Korea's," Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe Abe said. He further added that Japan "understands the strategic importance of India and the significance of meeting its energy demand."¹³ Starting from looking at India as a nuclear pariah state, now plans are afoot to forge a comprehensive cooperation plan in nuclear issues. Universal total nuclear disarmament though had been the stated goals of both India and Japan, they could never evolve joint mechanism or understanding to achieve that objective because of Japanese reservations about India's

refusal to sign the NPT. For the first time during then Foreign Minister Taro Aso's visit in January 2006 nuclear disarmament was widely discussed and agreed to mount joint efforts to achieve that objective. This was first time that Japan and India saw eye-to-eye on anything nuclear. This issue now is part of the bilateral global agenda. The Joint Declaration reiterated "their common commitment in pursuing disarmament and non-proliferation as partners seeking a peaceful nuclear-weapon free world and working together against proliferation."

The second dimension is cooperation in civilian nuclear energy. Japan's stance with regard to India specific waiver in the IAEA and NSG consequent to the India-US deal was keenly looked at. It is understandable that the Japanese government kept its decision in suspended animation since the issue is highly sensitive and emotive as the only country that suffered the devastation of a nuclear attack. Nonetheless, Tokyo had been sending fairly positive signals that it would not come in the way if there was a broad consensus. Eventually, Japan supported the deal without reservations. Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura told, "Japan has decided to join the consensus from a comprehensive viewpoint," saying nuclear power would, for instance, help India fight global warming.¹⁴ That Japan was willing to understand India's energy needs and to bring it on to the global mainstream was apparent when it supported India's participation in the ITER project. An influential Japanese think tank, the Japan Forum on International Relations (JFIR), in a report submitted to the prime minister strongly recommended to speed up nuclear ties with India. "India will presumably want to depend much more heavily on nuclear power in the future. Japan's technology and expertise in generating and ensuring the safety of nuclear power is among the best in the world, so it is in an excellent position to cooperate with India in these areas."¹⁵

That it is almost unavoidable to ignore Japan if India were to pursue nuclear energy ambitions is obvious if one looked at the reactor building companies involved. Today Toshiba alone has over 30 percent of global civilian nuclear reactor building capability. There are two American companies that are in nuclear energy business, the General Electric and Westinghouse. While Westinghouse has been taken over by Toshiba, GE has close collaboration with Hitachi. Similarly, the French company Areva has close technical cooperation agreement with Mitsubishi. In fact, experts claim that Areva is critically dependent on Mitsubishi for certain advanced materials and machine tools. In any case, it is well known that Japanese companies produce technologically the most advanced civilian nuclear reactors. Obviously, nuclear cooperation was one of the major issues that came up for discussion during the Indian prime minister's 2008 visit. From a purely commercial point of view, the estimated US\$100 bn Indian nuclear energy market in the next decade or so is an attractive for Japanese companies. Bigger Japanese involvement in this field will in fact contribute to the stated political goals of further strengthening economic ties between the two countries.

Space Cooperation

Once again, in a first of its kind, the 2008 prime ministerial Joint Declaration makes a specific mention about cooperation between the two respective space organizations of India and Japan. "Cooperation will be conducted between the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) and the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) in the field of disaster management." On face of it, this is simple and straightforward cooperation for disaster management. However, when seen against the background of ongoing exchange of views through an already established Joint Commission on Trade in Advanced Technologies (which has held several rounds of discussions already), its potential implications

are much larger. For instance, both India and Japan have serious concerns the ballistic missiles pose to their security, and both have plans to develop defences against missiles. Whereas Japan is already a close partner with the U.S. in the development of Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) and soon to deploy these systems on its Kongo class destroyers, India has been evaluating various options, including the U.S. If New Delhi were to seek Washington's assistance- the recent Mumbai attack by Pakistan-based terrorists and India's limited options are likely to add urgency to take a firm decision on going ahead with missile defense deployment- Japanese connection is unavoidable, for Japan is tasked to make certain crucial subsystems of the American BMD.¹⁶

The other facet India-Japan space cooperation is the possible sharing of experiences, technologies, joint research, and information. The civilian use of space is irrefutable so also its military utility although only a few powers have major space programmes. Since both India and Japan have expansive, advanced space programmes, and it is no secret that both use space for military purposes as well, cooperation in this field can be mutual beneficial.

Conclusion

India-Japan strategic relations began in earnest only after these signed the 8-point initiative during Prime Minister Koizumi's visit in 2005. Nevertheless, by the end of 2008 when Prime Minister Singh went to Japan for the annual summit meeting, the progress in fashioning a multi-faceted strategic partnership is indeed astounding in such a short span. It should be remembered that the bilateral strategic partnership is not limited to defence/military field alone but covers a much broader canvass- from global to regional to bilateral. There is no denying that improved India-U.S. relations and worries about East Asian security have had their share in bringing India and Japan closer, yet one should not underestimate the

potential that existed all along. This could not materialise primarily because of the cold war political environment. The commonality of interests and shared concerns on a number of issues have further helped to forge the strategic partnership.

Of various dimensions of the strategic partnership, the most discerning related to their cooperation in working together to ensure that current transition that East Asia is experiencing is smooth and any future regional order is devoid of conflicts and mutual acrimony. Both India and Japan have strong stakes in East Asia and hence it is incumbent on them to work together. On the bilateral level, the three issues, among others, that prominently have figured are maritime security, cooperation in nuclear-related issues, and space cooperation. Considerable progress has already been made on the maritime front, but on the other two issues there is broad recognition that the potential is huge and that it would be mutually beneficial. The India-Japan strategic partnership is poised for a take off and its implications are likely to be considerable.

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NOTES

¹ See Joint Statement, *Towards Japan-India Strategic and Global Partnership*, signed during the Indian Prime Minister's visit in December 2006, at <http://meaindia.nic.in/declarestatement/2006/12/15js01.htm>

² <http://www.mea.gov.in/speech/2005/04/29js01.htm>

³ <http://www.mea.gov.in/pressrelease/2006/01/04pr01.htm>

⁴ Quoted in *Times of India*, January 16, 2005.

⁵ It is interesting to note that in an unusual initiative to gauge the public perception, the Japanese embassy in New Delhi commissioned a public opinion survey in May 2000 at the behest of Japanese government. About 47 percent of respondents observed that the nuclear tests strained relations between the two countries, an overwhelming 94 felt that relations would improve. Despite the acrimony, Japan was the 'most liked' country ahead of the U.S. and an overwhelming majority ranked Japan as the first country they desired to visit. There could not have been a better indicator of goodwill in India for Japan. <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-pacific/inida/survey/2000/index.html>, accessed on July 25, 2000.

⁶ www.embassyofindiajapan.org/word/events/2006_01.doc

⁷ http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/pmv0810/joint_d.html

⁸ Strong India-Japan ties key to Asian security architecture: P.M., Press Trust of India, October 21, 2008, <http://www.business-standard.com/india/storypage.php?tp=on&autono=48257>

⁹ Nayan Chanda, “After the Bomb: India is Forging Ties with Japan and Vietnam as it Seeks to Establish Itself as a Player in Regional Security”, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 13 April 2000.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See for instance, Tomoda Seki, “A Japan-India Front”, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 25, 2000.

¹² See, *The Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between India and Japan*, October 2008.

¹³ Kyodo News, “Japan says India's nuclear issue different from N. Korea's” March 3, 2006

<http://asia.news.yahoo.com/060303/kyodo/d8g3ra8g0.html>

¹⁴ Kyodo News, September 9, 2008, <http://www.japantoday.com/category/politics/view/japan-backs-us-india-nuke-deal>

¹⁵ *The Japan Times*, September 8, 2007, <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20070908f2.html>

¹⁶ For a detailed analysis on this, see G V C Naidu, U.S. Ballistic Missile Defense: Perspectives on India-Japan Cooperation, *Strategic Analysis*, January-February 2007.