

Keynote Speech : Towards Building a Multi-dimensional India-Japan Partnership

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Keynote Speech:

Towards Building a Multi-dimensional India-Japan Partnership

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At the outset, I would like to thank the organizers of this international seminar for extending to me the honour of delivering the Keynote Address. Both Nichibunken and the JNU are leading institutions that have made significant contributions to the understanding of Japan and its culture. I therefore consider it a honour to speak before this August audience.

Fifty seven years have passed since India and Japan signed a bilateral peace treaty and established their diplomatic relations. During this long period, though bilateral ties have witnessed several vicissitudes, there have always been strong currents of goodwill and warmth binding them together. Indo-Japanese relations have entered a new phase since 2000 when the two sought to fashion a global partnership. Until recently, their interests were primarily limited to economic matters, but today they are more diversified and encompass a wide range of subjects including nuclear disarmament, maritime security, energy cooperation, climate change, regional community building and UN reforms. The signing of a Declaration on security cooperation by India and Japan in October 2008 marked the culmination of a process that had started in 2000. Very few would have expected such an important development to materialize so quickly because until about ten years ago, India had hardly ever figured in any Japanese discourse on the emerging Asian security landscape. But today it is difficult to think of such security discussions in Japan without reference to India. There is a fundamental shift in the Japanese assessment of India's role in the shaping of a new Asian security architecture. One can also discern a major change in the mutual perception of each other's national interests and foreign policy goals. New convergences have tended to grow creating unprecedented opportunities for both to move in the direction of building a multi-dimensional partnership.

The path that both India and Japan had traversed for over fifty years was strewn with numerous pitfalls and yet the leaders of the two countries showed great wisdom and statesmanship to overcome those hurdles. Relations between Japan and India go back to the sixth century AD when Buddhism was introduced into Japan and it became a powerful vehicle of transmitting Indian influence. The Japanese acquired a great deal of knowledge about Indian culture and philosophy from China and Korea. Many Hindu gods and goddesses later came to be worshipped in the Buddhist rituals with Japanese names.

In the following centuries, Buddhism exerted a great influence on Japanese culture and religion. Even today, thousands of Japanese undertake a long pilgrimage to Buddhist monuments in India and Sri Lanka. Though both had very useful contacts, they were not as numerous as those between Japan and China. This address will not focus on the pre-war Japan-India relations and the significant contributions made by a galaxy of personalities from both countries like Rabindranath Tagore and Tenshin Okakura, who indeed laid the foundations of the future Indo-Japanese ties.

The evolution of Japan's post-war relations with most Asian countries was largely governed by two factors—the legacies of the war and the compulsions of the cold war politics. The impact of these factors was more severe in the case of Southeast Asian countries which had been militarily occupied by Japan. The prolonged negotiations for just and adequate reparations indicated the intensity of their antipathy to Japan. Cold war considerations further vitiated the resumption of normal relations. The early post-war Japanese diplomacy faced one of the most serious challenges in Southeast Asia. But South Asia provided a soothing contrast. Since none of these countries had experienced the crudities of the Japanese military administration, they could show a fair degree of objectivity and even sympathy for Japan's entry into the comity of nations. As a member of the Far Eastern Commission (FEC), India was involved in the formulation of policies for Japan and unlike most members of the FEC, it displayed a remarkable understanding of Japan's aspirations. It argued in favour of terminating the occupation as quickly as possible, because it believed that an unduly long occupation would be inconsistent with the Allied objectives of promoting democratic processes in Japan. It also strongly advocated that Japan should be encouraged to assume greater responsibilities in the international sphere and it therefore supported its entry into various global bodies.

During 1950–51, there was a major change in the policy of the US towards Japan and due to the compulsions of the cold war, it now wanted to speed up the peace settlement with Japan. While India was strongly in favour of a prompt settlement, it did not want the whole process to be influenced by the narrow cold war considerations. It argued that the re-emergence of Japan was an event of great significance for the whole of Asia and that any peace arrangement, apart from giving Japan a place of honour, should be comprehensive in order to make it durable. India did not participate in the San Francisco peace conference as it feared that the US-drafted peace treaty did not fully take into consideration the will and wishes of the Japanese people. Instead, India opted to enter into a bilateral peace treaty with Japan, and India was one of the earliest Asian countries to normalize relations with Japan. India's stand on the peace treaty appealed to other Asian countries like Burma and Indonesia which also opted for similar bilateral treaties. Within South Asia, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Pakistan, on the contrary, decided to sign the multilateral peace treaty. India's decision not to press its claim for reparations from Japan created a great deal of goodwill among the Japanese people.

The cold war rivalry continued to exert a great influence on Japan's ties with South Asia in the following decades and the security alliance with the US proved to be a barrier particularly for the non-

aligned countries of the region. India which played a high profile role in the international fora as the spokesperson of the newly emerging Afro-Asian countries simply considered Japan as no more than a 'client state.' There was no proper understanding within South Asia that Japan did not have too many diplomatic options at that time to ensure its own security given its precarious economic conditions and virtual diplomatic isolation. Yet India and other South Asian countries supported Japan's participation in the Afro-Asian conference held in Bandung in 1955.

The 1960s witnessed a sea-change in the complexion of Japan's relations with Asian countries. Following Japan's normalization of diplomatic ties with most Southeast Asian countries, it quickly moved to build up long term economic partnerships with them. As the Japanese economy witnessed a dramatic period of high growth, Southeast Asia became a major market as well as a source of much needed raw materials. The Vietnam War brought into focus the convergence of Southeast Asian strategic concerns with those of Japan. From then on, Japan's interest tended to shift away from South Asia and towards Southeast Asia indicating a basic change in Japan's diplomatic priorities. Japan was, in fact, disenchanted with the political and economic scenario of South Asia. Politically, democracy was yet to strike strong roots in the region and issues like ethnic tensions, disputed border questions, the Kashmir tangle, economic backwardness, illiteracy, unemployment, etc, continued to heighten regional tensions. Economically, most South Asian countries pursued inward-looking, state oriented strategies that did not resonate well in Japan. Another development that caused extreme discomfort to Japan was the growing influence of the Soviet Union in the region. It suspected that by entering into a treaty of friendship with Moscow in 1971, India had virtually given up its traditional policy of non-alignment. Though Japan itself felt greatly concerned about the unfolding US-China rapprochement at that time, it did not properly see the implications of that for India's security. From the Indian perspective, in face of the Washington-Beijing-Islamabad axis, it was left with no other option but to get closer to Moscow. During the Bangladesh war, many in India were disappointed as Tokyo opted to support American policies without much consideration for the objective realities of the South Asian situation.

The global détente (1971-78) enabled Japan to broaden its foreign policy and there was considerable expectation that Japan would pursue a more assertive diplomacy. But unfortunately, the détente itself received a severe shock following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia (1978) and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (1979). These two incidents saw Japan strongly identifying itself with the Western bloc and extending economic and political support to the position taken by the ASEAN group against Vietnam. Japan was equally concerned about the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan as it feared that it would upset the military balance in South Asia. It strongly felt that the Soviet presence in Afghanistan coupled with its friendly relations with India could increase its leverage in the region. It considered Pakistan as vulnerable in view of its close proximity to Afghanistan and extended enhanced economic assistance to it in the following years. Pakistan came under the category of countries which were located close to 'crisis situations' and was considered important from a strategic viewpoint.

Post-cold war period: The end of the cold war brought about a major transformation in the economic and security policies of most Asian countries. Countries that had been constrained by the pressures of the cold war for decades started making appropriate policy alterations in order to catch up with the rapidly changing economic and strategic situation of the region. Ideology which had played a major role in the cold war period has now become irrelevant and a variety of new factors have come to govern relations among countries. Notwithstanding the importance of military power, the concept of security has come to be defined increasingly in non-military terms and issues like trade, technology transfer, investment, resources, environment and energy have assumed a new salience. In the place of the bipolar world, new centres of power have emerged. Have Japan and India made efforts to come to grips with the realities of this altered situation?

Unfortunately, when many positive developments were in the offing, the nuclear tests conducted by both India and Pakistan in May 1998 had the effect of putting the clock back. Tokyo found the South Asian situation quite tense in view of the strained relations between India and Pakistan and believed that the sub-continent could become an arena of nuclear race between the two countries. Japan took a tough stand by strongly criticizing the nuclear tests and suspended its economic assistance to both India and Pakistan. What further disappointed many Indians was the attempt made by Japan to link the nuclear question with the Kashmir dispute. It was only in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the US in September 2001 that Japan decided to resume its aid to the two countries. During this period covering more than three years, Japan's relations with India suffered severely since ODA was the core element of the bilateral ties. Further, both India and Japan had not devised adequate mechanisms for constant consultations. This was in contrast to what Japan had done in its interactions with countries like China, South Korea and ASEAN countries. It is because of this lack of adequate communication that mutual perceptions on a variety of issues including the nuclear tests and the Kargil War had been distorted.

Bilateral relations started entering a new phase after 2000 following Prime Minister Yoshirō Mori's visit to India since many converging factors which had remained dormant for years began to manifest rather strongly in the unfolding new regional architecture. India's rapid economic progress following the adoption of reforms was one major reason for Japan to understand what an economically robust India could mean to the peace and security of Asia. The progress of liberalization programme convinced most Japanese leaders of India's commitment to free market economy. Second, the end of the cold war had also released India from its earlier ideological inhibitions and enabled it to embark on a multi-dimensional foreign policy that resulted in forging a closer economic and strategic partnership with the US. The signing of a civilian nuclear agreement between the US and India was considered a landmark that provided a new impetus to the Indo-US partnership. Third, the 'look east' policy initiated by India in 1991 produced ample dividends in forging closer links with East Asian countries including Japan, South Korea, ASEAN and China. In 1994 India became a full-fledged dialogue partner of ASEAN and joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996. India also participates in the annual ASEAN+1

summit meetings. In 2005 India became a member of the East Asian Summit (EAS) due to the strong support extended by Japan. Suspecting that China was keen to keep the EAS under its own influence, Japan acted speedily to broaden the geographical sphere of East Asia to include India, Australia and New Zealand. In the absence of the US, Tokyo believed that these three countries could balance China.

It was Prime Minister Yoshirō Mori who took the initiative to redefine the contours of the bilateral partnership. Mori believed that both India and Japan, despite their high international profiles, were far too deeply embroiled in their own narrow bilateral issues and ignoring several global issues which they could address jointly. He realized that the two countries had allowed their ties to be held hostage to a single issue relating to the nuclear tests. Mori urged both countries to understand their own potential, not by being bogged down in their bilateral problems but by working in the direction of building a global partnership that would enable them to address several key regional and global issues such as nuclear disarmament, UN reforms, maritime security, designing a more equitable global economic order and so on. In other words, he wanted to redefine and expand the horizons of the bilateral ties in light of the changing economic and security landscape of the region. It was indeed a timely call from Mori.

The idea of global partnership was carried forward subsequently by the top leaders of the two countries. The joint statement issued by the then Japanese Prime Minister Junichirō Koizumi and Manmohan Singh in April 2005 carried an eight point initiative which laid stress on expanded and comprehensive dialogue mechanisms at different levels. Bilaterally, they agreed to strengthen and expand the prevailing political and economic ties. At the regional level, they agreed to promote peace and security in Asia by contributing to regional cooperation in areas including maritime security, and energy self-sufficiency. At the global level, both expressed their strong resolve to cooperate in areas such as UN reforms, nuclear disarmament, energy security, counter terrorism and climate change.

The global partnership was expanded into strategic and global partnership in December 2006 following Manmohan Singh's visit to Tokyo. Both he and his Japanese counterpart Shinzō Abe emphasized the need for institutionalizing bilateral dialogues at multiple levels—holding annual summit meetings, strategic dialogue at Foreign Ministers' level; pursuing negotiations for the conclusion of an economic partnership agreement; cooperation in multilateral fora and cooperation in energy, environment, safety of sea-lanes, and so on. One dramatic result that flowed from all these persistent efforts was the signing of a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation by the two countries in October 2008. The fact that Japan had signed such an agreement only with the US and Australia considerably enhances its importance. A study of the Declaration shows that it embodies almost all aspects of the pledges made by the top leaders of the two countries since 2001. One prominent feature of the Declaration relates to the emphasis laid on the need for policy coordination between the two countries in regional affairs in the Asia-Pacific as well as bilateral cooperation in such bodies as the East Asian Summit, ARF and RECAPP processes. Until about ten years ago, as has been noted earlier, India hardly ever figured in any Japanese discourse on the emerging Asian security architecture. Regional and global developments have brought them together on

a platform where they address critical issues on which their national interests converge.

Besides forging several institutional mechanisms to strengthen their ties, it is very essential for them to add more substance to their partnership which still suffers from many asymmetries. For instance, the volume of their trade has just crossed the ten billion dollars mark, but it pales into insignificance if it is compared to Sino-Japanese trade or even Sino-Indian trade. Similarly, Japan's private investment in India is still too small to merit any attention in the global Japanese investment scenario. Successive prime ministers of both countries have provided a road map for expanding private investment in several fields and efforts should therefore be directed towards implementing it. Lastly, India has been the biggest recipient of Japan's ODA for several years now and Japan's assistance has made signal contributions in many sectors of Indian economy. It is useful to note that when Japan's overall volume of ODA has witnessed a steep decline in recent years, its aid to India has appreciably increased indicating the importance that it enjoys in Japan's calculus. But considering the several political controversies within Japan that muddle its ODA policy, it may be advisable in the long run for India to gradually shift to the next stage of seeking to build a partnership centred more on private investment than on official assistance.

While Indo-Japanese partnership has matured into a major factor in the fashioning of a new security framework for Asia, it is important for both countries to emphasize that it is not directed against any third country. China views the evolving Tokyo-New Delhi closeness with considerable suspicion and it has voiced its misgivings in no uncertain terms. Finally, cordial ties between India, Japan and China constitute a key determinant for regional and global peace and for the emergence of Asia as the political and economic centre of the new global order. They are deeply involved in many multi-layered mechanisms intended for promoting economic and security cooperation in Asia. Japan's trade and investment links with China are massive and so is the prospect of India's with China. The future directions of their relations will exert tremendous influence on the role of Asia as a whole in international politics.

Lastly, the full potential of the bilateral partnership cannot be realized unless the two countries understand the importance of the long cultural ties that have bound them together. It was again Prime Minister Yoshirō Mori who, while launching the global partnership, articulated the need for harnessing the cultural dimensions. It is heartening to note that since then the top leaders of the two countries have vigorously pursued his initiative. For instance, in 2005 in their eight point formula, both Koizumi and Manmohan Singh underlined that cultural factors and stronger people-to-people contacts would create the right environment for carrying forward the vision of global partnership. Both agreed to work together to promote Japanese language studies in India with a target of 30,000 learners at different levels by 2010. They understood the importance of setting up new centres of Japanese studies in Indian universities and Japanese language teaching cells in different Indian Institutes of Technology. India has now become a target country for the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme. Both have agreed to

sponsor the visits of 5000 people between the two countries over the next three years in fields like the Japanese language, technology and youth interaction. Have they been able to achieve these targets?

According to the available statistics, there are more than 11,000 Japanese language learners in India now. This figure marks a dramatic jump by 50% from the 2003 figures when the number of learners was only around 5000. Though there has been a marked increase in the numbers, they still constitute too negligible a percentage considering the huge population of India. The number of institutions offering teaching and research on Japan is too small though there is a great deal of enthusiasm among the Indians to study the Japanese language. The Japan Foundation has played a significant role to disseminate knowledge on Japan, but it alone cannot take care of the rising demands. Unfortunately, private companies, both Japanese and Indian, have still not developed the tradition of funding academic institutions. Even a country like Sri Lanka, whose population is so small, has done well to have about 9,000 Japanese learners in 2006. Most of the ASEAN countries have also registered significant growth in the number of Japanese language students as well as the number of Japan related institutions. One should keep in mind the enormous difficulties these countries faced in organizing Japan-related activities. But the situation has markedly changed since then. Indonesia has about 273,000 students and 1080 institutions oriented to Japan. Similarly, interest related to Japan has increased phenomenally in Australia. There are about 366,000 Japanese learners with about 1700 institutions. The level of interest in the Japanese language studies is driven by economic, political and cultural factors. It has been empirically proved that cultural affinity is one of the strong factors driving Japanese private investment. Japan's close business and commercial links with ASEAN countries have undoubtedly generated greater needs and compulsions for these countries to learn the Japanese language.

Interest on Japan in India depends crucially on the level of economic and political interactions between the two countries. The current 'boom' is certainly linked to Tokyo's expectations from an expanding economy with so many incentives for Japan. Though the present size of Japan's investment in India is still not large, it has already generated a new dynamism in India's interest in Japan. The number of Japanese companies operating in India has consistently increased and one source puts it at 475 in 2008. The question one may ask is whether the current 'boom' mood is going to be sustained irrespective of the fluctuations in the bilateral economic relations. In other words, will the prevailing level of interest concerning Japan continue as a true recognition of the intrinsic values that the two countries cherish deeply? The present favorable environment has to be properly harnessed with a clear vision for the future. Though commercial or business factors have considerably contributed to the spread of the Japanese language, it will be wise to relate its future to fostering a long term fusion of business, academic and cultural interests. As Kazuo Ogura says, the world is changing rapidly under the impact of globalization and even the complexion of Japanese studies has changed considerably. The motives governing the study of Japan have also been replaced by new considerations. Increasing emphasis is now being placed on inter-disciplinary and comparative studies rather than on area studies per se. In

these changing times, it is imperative to factor the linguistic and cultural aspects into building a truly multi-dimensional India-Japan partnership.