

# New Roadmap for Japan-India ties

## Purnendra Jain

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Japan today is showing extraordinary interest in India and nothing reflects this more strongly than Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to New Delhi in August. Moreover, Abe is the third successive Japanese prime minister to make such a visit and, starting this year, India is the only country with which Japan will conduct annual talks at the prime ministerial level.

Abe hewed to his foreign visits schedule and made a week-long trip to Indonesia, India and Malaysia - beginning 19 August despite political uncertainties in Japan and his weakened position as prime minister following the Liberal Democratic Party's dismal performance at the July House of Councillors elections. Recognising strategic competition for energy security, Abe signed a bilateral free trade agreement with Indonesia, the largest supplier of liquefied natural gas to Japan. In return Japan guaranteed Indonesia liberal access to its markets for a range of Indonesian products including farm produce - rice exempted.

Abe also visited Malaysia on his way back to Japan from India. There he met with Malaysian counterpart Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi and the two leaders issued a joint statement aiming for further improvement in their already strong bilateral economic, trade and investment ties. In the statement Malaysia offered support for Abe's "Cool Earth 50 plan", a proposal that aims to halve global emissions by 2050.

Yet the most important visit was Abe's stop in India. Long on the periphery of Japan's Asia vision, the rise of India in Japanese political consciousness reflects a recent and rapid change of vision as Tokyo is keen to engage India in a comprehensive way. Calling it a "paradigm shift", the Japanese Ambassador to India, Mr Yasukuni Enoki, stated that "the Japan-India partnership is (now) the most important" within the framework of Japan's Asian diplomacy.



Abe and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in India

Independent India aspired to be in Japan's close company and there were close interactions between the two for a time but soon the two nations drifted apart, due mainly to Cold War politics. Japan became a close ally of the United States while India opted to go with the non-aligned movement albeit with a clear politico-strategic leaning towards the Soviet Union. India also sought Japan's understanding in times of political distress such as the Sino-Indian border war in 1962 and during its wars with Pakistan. Japan though, preferred to be neutral on such occasions and left New Delhi frustrated.

When India tried to court Japan for trade and investment, especially in the 1980s and early 1990s, Japanese businesses focused instead on Southeast Asia and especially China; India mattered little. India was too distant. The strong image of India being poor, wracked with religious-ethnic violence, domestic political turmoil and conflict with neighbouring states encouraged Japanese to look elsewhere.

Even though India was disappointed with being low in Japan's priorities, the two nevertheless remained good friends. There was no bitterness in the relationship until India's nuclear testing in 1998. This act soured an already weak relationship when Japan imposed economic and diplomatic sanctions on India and Tokyo criticised New Delhi's nuclear act at every international forum possible, including the United Nations.

### **Unfolding of a new chapter**

Although Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro opened a new chapter in the bilateral relationship through his visit to India in 2000 and Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro took the relationship to a new height, Abe can be regarded a far and away the most India enthusiastic Japanese leader. Even before he became prime minister, Abe recognised the

importance of India in his book - "Towards a beautiful country: A confident and proud Japan" (*Utsukushii kuni e: jishin to hokori no moteru Nihon e*). This view reflects the new geo-strategic environment in Asia. China now looms large in Japan's strategic calculations and from Tokyo's perspective India - the world's second most populous nation that is projected to grow economically - is easily seen as a counter balancer.

For India too, Japan remains a country of great interest. There is a huge pro-Japan store of good will and India is excited about the realisation of long-awaited closer ties. Unlike many other Asian countries that express concern arising out of Japan's wartime behaviour, India carries no such historical baggage. Except for the 1998 nuclear incident, there have been no major points of disagreement or concern. For this reason Prime Minister Abe was given the rare honour of addressing a joint session of the Indian parliament - a privilege accorded to only a very select few visitors. Not even George W. Bush and Hu Jintao were accorded this honour when they recently visited India. Opposition to Bush's role in Iraq and China being a non-democratic country was too strong in certain quarters of Indian society. For the Japanese leader, there was spontaneous unanimity.

Abe titled his speech *Futatsu no umi no majiwari* ("Confluence of the Two Seas") after a book authored by the 17th century Indian Mughal prince Dara Shikoh. Although an unsung hero who was out-manoeuvred and ultimately executed by his younger brother, Dara was first and foremost an intellectual who strived to bring the people of different faiths together. Among his many books is the famous *Majma ul-Bahrain* (The Mingling of the Two Oceans) in which he noted the similarities between Hindu and Sufi concepts and teachings.

### **Asia Redefined and reconfigured**

In this speech Abe introduced the idea of a “broader” or “expanded Asia” (*kakudai Ajia*) constituting Pacific and Indian Ocean countries that share the common values of democracy, freedom and respect for basic human rights. According to Abe, “By Japan and India coming together in this way, this broader Asia will evolve into an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the United States of America and Australia”. Although the “C” word was not mentioned, the speech clearly expressed the message that Beijing’s repressive regime and its poor human rights record do not qualify China to be a member of such a group.

While Abe’s message is certainly music to the ears of many in India, New Delhi is not about to embark on a zero-sum game against Beijing as it also wants to engage China both economically and diplomatically. On the other hand, New Delhi’s interest is to win Tokyo’s support for its nuclear deal with the US and to seek greater Japanese trade and investment. Similarly, although some public intellectuals in Australia, India and the US enthusiastically endorse Abe’s idea of a quadrilateral framework, these nations’ officials and political leaders are cautious as all of them wish to keep China engaged. Beijing increasingly casts such a value-based grouping as a “gang of four” trying to “encircle” China. Some Chinese analysts have called the proposal a product of “Cold War mentality”; while others have commented that “any attempts to make China a rival or contain China will not work.”

### **Economics and Trade**

Abe did not disappoint his Indian host on the economic front. He expressed willingness to fast track the proposed Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with India to boost a bilateral trade which totalled about \$7 billion in 2006, only one third and rising of the approximate \$25 billion India-China trade in 2007. Given their hitherto poor bilateral trade (which until

very recently hovered around \$4 billion) prospects for rapid growth are limited even now. India and Japan are aiming at only modest growth, seeking to lift two-way trade to about \$20 billion by 2010.

It is notable that Abe’s entourage consisted of over two hundred leaders from business and trade in search of opportunities. Reflecting this as a major highlight of Abe’s visit was Japan’s support for a proposed \$90 billion infrastructure project to build a freight and industrial corridor between Mumbai and Delhi, connecting the financial and business capital to its political capital. Government and private funds from Japan are likely to provide one-third of the cost and the project is scheduled to commence next year. The industrial corridor is a mammoth project and first of its kind in India. Japan is seriously interested in contributing to it as much as possible, for the lack of infrastructure such as roads, ports, and transportation facilities have often been cited as major hurdles for Japan’s investment in India. Last year, this investment totalled a mere \$540 million, a little over 3% of total foreign direct investment. The level of Japanese investment is expected to rise as India improves its infrastructure.

When asked about his support for India’s civilian nuclear agreement with the US, Abe responded diplomatically saying that Tokyo is, “carefully considering” its effects on the global non-proliferation regime. Although most media commentators were supportive of Abe’s response in view of Japanese domestic sensitivities, Asahi Shinbun lambasted Abe for being vague and demanded an unequivocal declaration “that no concessions can be made on the issue of nuclear proliferation” While India understands Japan’s predicament, from New Delhi’s perspective Abe’s response was a little disappointing. This was particularly so because India’s prime minister is himself facing hostility, even from some of his own coalition partners. Japan’s endorsement of the India-US

nuclear agreement would have given Prime Minister Singh a much-needed booster.

Perhaps as a consequence, Abe's "Cool Earth 50" initiative has received a lukewarm response. Singh merely stated that the initiative should "receive serious consideration". Yet on the nuclear issue Japan will remain cautious at least until such time as the US-India accord gets the final nod from both countries and international formalities, including International Atomic Energy Agency's inspection regime, are in place. From Japan's business perspective, however, building nuclear power plants in India would mean great opportunities, as Japanese companies are world leaders in this area.

### Abe's date with history

In a curious move, while in India, Abe travelled to Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, an unusual destination on the itinerary of visiting foreign dignitaries. But for Japan Bengal has a special historical meaning. At least three prominent figures from this eastern state have had close connections with Japan. In the early 20th century, the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore visited Japan and wrote his famous travelogue "Journey to Japan". While Tagore praised Japan's rise as an industrial power in the 19th century, he was later critical of Japan's rising nationalism in the 1930s and did not endorse its advances in China. Around the mid 1940s, Subhash Chandra Bose, and Judge Radhabinod Pal were two other figures that became well known in Japan. While these leaders are frequently mentioned in the context of India-Japan relations and their role in generating goodwill bilaterally, it was the first time that a Japanese prime minister made them so salient politically.



Abe in front of a photograph of Bose

Judge Pal is still regarded highly by Japanese leaders and a monument dedicated to him stands on the premises of the Yasukuni Shrine. Millions of war dead, including some Class A war criminals are enshrined at Yasukuni and visits to it by Japanese leaders often give rise to heated criticism from elsewhere in Asia, notably China and Korea. There seems to be a sentimental aspect to Abe's approach to history, partly related to his upbringing. As a child, Abe was very close to his maternal grandfather Kishi Nobusuke, who was jailed as a Class-A war criminal suspect but was not indicted. Kishi served as Japan's prime minister in the 1950s and was also the first prime minister to visit India in 1957. Within this context, Abe held a brief meeting with the son of the late Radhabinod Pal and acknowledged the dissenting role played by his father at the Tokyo trial in rejecting all charges against Japanese leaders.

During his brief visit to Kolkata Abe also met with distant relatives of Subhash Chandra Bose. Known in Japan as Chandra Bose, Bose was a nationalist leader who, with assistance from Japan in the 1940s, fought against the British to liberate India from colonialism.

Abe is often accused of following a nationalist agenda and his meetings with the relatives of the two anti-colonial leaders sympathetic to Japan have raised eyebrows in China and South Korea. Beijing and Seoul have repeatedly criticised Tokyo for its attempt to whitewash its wartime history and Abe's newfound admiration for the Japan-friendly Indian nationalist leaders has not been received kindly by Japan's neighbours.

Abe's visit to India came exactly fifty years after Prime Minister Kishi's visit to New Delhi to address the nation from the rampart of the historic Red Fort at the invitation of Prime Minister Nehru. Although the huge good-will generated through Kishi's visit did not produce long-term tangible results, the Abe visit is another landmark in Japan-India ties set to strengthen and prosper. Japan-India relations,

hitherto outside the international relations framework, will undoubtedly now appear in discourses dealing with geo-political strategies and regional order in the Asia Pacific.

Whether or not Abe continues as prime minister, the new momentum created in India-Japan ties is likely to continue. With any changes in government and political leaders in either country, the pace of development may slow down, but it is unlikely to be reversed as both Japan and India have finally recognised their shared aspirations and the mutual benefit of closer ties.

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