

For India and Japan, both symbolism and substance

The visit of Japan's emperor and empress to India is shortly to be followed by one from its dynamic new prime minister, showing how this is an indispensable partnership

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In the midst of Asia's economic promise and security challenges, there is perhaps no other major power equation like that between Japan and India. Shared liberal-democratic values, economic potential and an absence of historical grievances underpin their growing bilateral ties and regional convergences. The recently concluded state visit of the Emperor and Empress of Japan, and the forthcoming visit in the New Year of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, point to both the symbolism and the substance of an "indispensable" partnership which enjoys bipartisan support in both countries and is unlikely to be affected by the outcome of India's general election next year.

During his first term in office in 2006-07, Mr Abe had welcomed India into a redefined "broader Asia" and recognised India's role in an Indo-Pacific era. Having secured a second mandate a year ago, he has again lifted the profile of the bilateral relationship through the state visit. The significance of this rare gesture has been inadequately registered by the Indian public and media, not to talk of a distracted leadership. Domestic issues appear to have drained our historical sense and geopolitical purpose alike. Nevertheless, with their inimitable charm and grace, the imperial couple expanded goodwill and understanding between Asia's leading democracies.

When the current phase of deepening India-Japan ties began in 2006, India was riding high as a fast emerging economy and Asian power, while Japan, Asia's leading power for a century, appeared enfeebled by deflation and irresolute national purpose. As the charismatic Japanese leader returns to New Delhi in January 2014, these national circumstances stand dramatically altered. Abe will find India in reverse gear, with a crawling economy and diminishing national ambition at home and abroad.

It is remarkable what a difference a year of determined leadership can make. Shrugging off the widespread presumption of Japan's secular decline, Mr Abe has led domestic transformations that will ensure its future vitality. With "Abenomics", economic buoyancy has returned and Japan will be the fastest growing developed economy this year. Mr Abe's bold assertion that "Japan is back" and will never be a second-tier power has given new meaning to Japan's strategic posture, restored its global relevance and signalled more vigorous contributions to the security and geopolitics of Asia. In line with rising public recognition of dangers confronting Japan, this month has witnessed major developments in its security policy: the setting up of a National Security Council, passage of a national secrecy law, unveiling of a national security strategy and revision of national defence policy guidelines.

India should applaud these changes.

The most significant geo-strategic phenomenon in Asia today is not an uncertain US rebalance but the reality of China's unrelenting assertions of military power to alter the status quo in the East China Sea and establish virtual domination over the South China Sea. As China seeks to displace the US and establish its regional hegemony, Japan has become the focus of its coercive actions and self-serving rhetoric of historical grievances. China's peaceful rise has become a fading dream and its frequent transgressions — from which India is not excluded — indicate the perils that await if Asia slips into unipolarity.

India conferred legitimacy to a post-war Japan by concluding a separate peace treaty with it in 1952 and becoming the first country to accept Japan's overseas



President Pranab Mukherjee (second from right) and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (extreme right) with Japan's Emperor Akihito (second from left) and Empress Michiko during the imperial couple's visit to India early this month

development assistance. As Prime Minister Abe faces motivated criticism — from China and South Korea, among others — of his efforts to restore Japan's status as a "normal nation", India should welcome Japan's desire to contribute to regional and global security, long circumscribed by self-imposed restrictions. Since 1945, Japan has scripted the path of constitutional democracy and resolute pacifism from which it has never deviated. PM Abe's current plans for modest increases in defence spending, and possibly future adjustments to Japan's traditional interpretation of collective self defence, are all the more necessary as the reassurance of American power in Asia recedes.

So what lies in store from Mr Abe's forthcoming visit?

India and Japan would do well to re-energise their under-performing economic engagement by reviewing their bilateral CEPA and ensuring time-bound implementation of ongoing megaprojects (the Delhi-Mumbai dedicated freight and industrial corridors). As an adjunct to the Bengaluru-Chennai corridor, India should enlist Japan's support for building vital gateway infrastructure along its eastern seaboard. And by leveraging PM Abe's diplomatic initiatives in Southeast Asia, India and Japan can operationalise ERIA's Mekong-India Economic Corridor and collaborate on connectivity projects in Myanmar.

Given India's growing reluctance to embrace regional trade pacts, Abe should encourage forward thinking on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Hopefully, India too will realise that growth-inducing trade agreements are intended to blunt the opposition of domestic vested interests and provide impetus for economic reform.

With recent progress in negotiations, chances are that a civil nuclear cooperation agreement can be announced during the Abe visit.

Two years after a nominal relaxation of Japan's restrictions on defence trade and technology exchanges, the Japanese bureaucracy remains caught in a time warp and has not taken note of the recent India-US agreement to share the highest defence technologies as "closest partners". If Japan proceeds to lower defence cooperation barriers with the UK, Australia, and even Poland and Turkey, leaving India for later consideration, it is unlikely that Japan's "commercial" offer of the US-2 amphibian aircraft for the Indian Navy will materialise.

India's renewed Look East Policy now has a counterpart in Mr Abe's overtures to Asean, facilitating increased coordination on Asean-led regional architecture and collective efforts to ensure the freedom of overflight and maritime access in accordance with international law.

Finally, given the evolving power dynamics in Asia, it will be self-defeating for either India or Japan to allow a Chinese veto on the natural progression of India-Japan relations. Maintaining and asserting the inherent multipolarity of Asia and establishing a robust India-Japan partnership as a cornerstone of regional strategic stability must assume primacy for both countries in the face of China's growing intimidation of neighbours.

The forthcoming visit of Shinzo Abe presents an opportunity that neither India nor Japan can afford to miss.

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