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About a hundred years ago, an Indian schoolboy was eagerly studying Japanese history, and more specifically, scanning newspapers to monitor the progress of the Russia-Japan war. The great Japanese naval victory at Tsushima filled him with joy and inspiration, because he thought that if Japan, an Asian country could defeat a strong European power like Russia, India could one day defeat Britain and win Independence. That Indian school boy was Jawaharlal Nehru.

By the time Jawaharlal Nehru became Prime Minister of a free India, Japan had been defeated in World War II and was unable to play the role model of Asian leadership. In fact for the five decades of the Cold War, there was minimal interaction between Asia's largest democracies, India featured rarely in Japanese media. I may be exaggerating, but Indira, the elephant in the Tokyo zoo had far more coverage in Japanese newspapers than Indira, the Prime Minister of India.

Not that India paid too much attention to Japan, either. Except for China and Vietnam, we had little interest in the vast region beyond the Brahmaputra in the east. There was a course correction in Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's time, but India still did not look as far east as Japan.

If India was guilty of dismissing Japan as a camp follower of the US, the Japanese in turn, perceived India as a chaotic, dysfunctional, desperately poor country, and not as a potential partner. The Japanese, nevertheless, extended generous economic assistance to us for which we are grateful.

In political terms, the Japanese regarded India as, in the words of Ambassador Enoki, more or less as a local power, always hyphenated with Pakistan. There was also a major contention, which ruled out closer bilateral relations: India's nuclear program. India's nuclear tests in 1998 marked the lowest point in bilateral relations. Japan suspended all political exchanges; even economic assistance was frozen for nearly three years. Japanese condemnation of India's nuclear tests was particularly harsh.

By hindsight, 1998 proved to be the turning point in Indian foreign policy. It did not take long for the countries, which had suspended their relations with India in 1998 to soften their stand and restore normal relations. Interestingly, the leader of the critics, the United States, did a dramatic u-turn and by 2001, the US President was describing India as a strategic partner of the United States.

There is a strong parallel in the way our bilateral relations with the US and Japan evolved, post-1998. Firstly, the symbolic breakthrough came in each case, through high-level visits. President Clinton and Prime Minister Mori both visited India in 2000. Neither of them stayed very long in power afterwards – but then the ice had been broken.

Secondly, an important role was played by high level emissaries who were successful in removing misunderstandings and creating a new level of trust. For India and the US, the emissaries were Jaswant Singh and Strobe Talbott. In the case of Japan, the dialogue was carried on, though not with the same intensity, between George Fernandes and his counterpart, Shigeru Ishiba.

Thirdly, as the dialogue progressed with the countries, the relationship with India was upgraded quickly from friendship to strategic partnership.

The Clinton-Vajpayee meeting of 2000 produced A Vision Statement while the 2001 Bush-Vajpayee meeting produced a declaration of Strategic Partnership. Similarly the Mori visit to Delhi in 2001 produced the Declaration of Japan-India Global Partnership. The Koizumi-Manmohan Singh meeting introduced a relationship with a strategic orientation. After the meeting between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Shinzo Abe in December 2006, the relationship became the Japan- India Strategic and Global Partnership.

The two countries have common global objectives, which reinforce their security cooperation:- access to energy resources; keeping the international sea lanes safe and free; fighting international terrorism and preventing the proliferation of WMDs.

As the then Foreign Secretary, I remember quite well the anxieties we had concerning the Mori visit. There were pressures on him not to make the trip. Similarly, there were pressures within India to put off the Clinton visit. We were also uncertain whether this new approach to India by Mori and Clinton would be sustained by their successors. Fortunately, the successors actually raised the bar to greater heights.

There has been a paradigm shift in India Japan relations in the past six years. What are the factors that have led the two countries to explore the uncharted route of a strategic partnership? Briefly, three reasons – Economic, Political and Strategic.

Economic

Japan is an economic giant on a declining curve. Japan is rich in high technology and flush with investible capital. India, meanwhile, is entering a high growth trajectory. Its growing economy is hungry for technology and investments. India has a young skilled and educated work force, which can supplement the graying segment of Japan's population. There is a clear complementarity here, which has enormous potential.

Political

After the end of the Cold War, India and Japan find themselves on the same side of the political divide. The barriers of the Cold War and especially the "psychological fence" defined by Ambassador Enoki, have come down. The two countries have discovered their common values – Democracy and the Rule of Law – and are reaffirming their proximity as ancient civilizations. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has aptly described India and Japan as 'civilization neighbours.'

Strategic

The two countries have common global objectives, which reinforce their security cooperation:- access to energy resources; keeping the international sea lanes safe and free; fighting international terrorism and preventing the proliferation of WMDs. Both are eager to join regional and global security networks. Both have a common interest in preventing a hostile, hegemonic power from emerging in the neighbourhood.

The strategic partnership will be manifested in three layers: 1) bilateral, 2) regional and 3) global.

Bilaterally

- The leaders have pledged to hold annual summits and meetings on the sidelines of global meetings; regular meetings between key Cabinet Ministers on both sides; a strategic dialogue at the Foreign Ministers' level; and regular policy dialogue between India's NSA and his Japanese counterpart.
- There will be closer defence cooperation including joint military exercises.
- Steps will be taken towards a comprehensive economic partnership, including negotiations for a bilateral Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA)/Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA).
- There will be a Business Leaders Forum, on the lines of a similar body set up with the US.

Regionally

Both countries will be working closely on the East Asia Summit (EAS) framework. There is a hint in the joint statement that this regional outreach may widen to include other like-minded countries in the Asia Pacific region. Para 46 in the joint statement keeps the possibility open for new groupings like the Tsunami coalition, which comprised of India, Japan, US and Australia.

Globally

Both countries have declared themselves ready to take part in the highest decision making bodies of the world. The common goal is to join the UNSC as permanent members, which has been referred to in the joint statement of December 2005.

Likely Roadblocks

Joint statements are drafted by diplomats who skilfully use language to create an optimistic outlook. We need to read between and outside these lines to see if there are likely roadblocks in the path of Indo-Japanese strategic partnership. Let me speculate on a few of these issues:

Japanese constitutional changes:

The LDP Government, under the leadership of Koizumi and Abe has launched an initiative to amend the Japanese constitution, especially Article 9, so that Japan can possess armed forces like any other sovereign country and play its rightful role as a global power. How this can be achieved and how soon is open to speculation.

Indian politics and economics:

Closer relations with Japan have not been a political issue in India so far. However, Japan's alliance with the US may become a contentious issue especially with the Left partners of the government.

India's economic procedures are still a formidable barrier to Japanese investors. The strategic partnership will not go very far unless it is reinforced by a more robust economic relationship.

The China Factor

Japan perceives China's rise as anything but peaceful. Despite the fact that Japan and China are each other's principal economic partners,

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there are concerns about China's escalating military budget, its growing maritime presence in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, its reluctance to settle the Senkaku Islands dispute and its aggressive claims to an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the East China Sea. Japan is determined not to permit China to emerge as a hegemonic power in the region. While officially China is not described as a threat by the Government of India,

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many within the strategic community here share the same concerns which the Japanese have about China emerging as a hegemonic power. For the present, China is a subject of common

strategic interest to both countries. However, should either country drift towards a state of conflict with China, the response of the other is unpredictable.

The US factor:

It is important to bear in mind that while Japan is a military ally of the US, India is a strategic partner. Should the requirements of an alliance force Japan to support a certain course of US foreign and security policy, India will not feel bound to do the same.

Conclusion: The future of the Indo-Japan Partnership?

Let me conclude by indulging in almost pure speculation.

The end of the Cold War has created an atmosphere of freedom, almost of promiscuity for countries seeking new relationships. Thus, India can develop close relations with Israel, China or

Japan without disturbing its older friendships. We are assured by scholars like Henry Kissinger and his disciples in India that the unipolar world is being replaced by a more classical balance of power system. Kissinger has prescribed that in the 21st century, six powers will hold the global balance - the US, Europe, Russia, China, Japan and India. Today, we have the freedom to be friends with all.

The seeming flaw in the Kissinger hypothesis lies in the fact that a perfect balance cannot be ensured since the six are of unequal size and strength. Hence, it is likely that they will balance each other through clusters of like-minded countries. The US, Europe and Japan already form a powerful cluster along with Australia, Southeast Asia and some of the West Asian states.

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