

# ISAS Brief

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## Japanese Foreign Minister's Bhutan Visit: Enhancing the Bilateral Relationship

*The visit by the Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono to Bhutan from 22 to 24 June 2018 marked the first ministerial visit by Japan to Bhutan. It has to be seen in the wider context of Japan's overall foreign policy towards South Asia, particularly its 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' strategy.*

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Soon after taking over as Japan's prime minister for a second term, Shinzo Abe, in a major foreign policy statement, announced that "Japan is back",<sup>2</sup> signalling his intent to bring back Japan into the centre of things in the Indo-Pacific. As such, when Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono paid a visit to Bhutan from 22 to 24 June 2018, he was only following the foreign policy blueprint enunciated by his prime minister. During the recent visit, Kono was accompanied by the Japanese Ambassador to India, Kenji Hiramatsu (also in charge of Bhutan), as well as officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan and the Embassy of Japan in India.

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<sup>2</sup> "Japan is Back", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, 22 February 2013. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/us\\_20130222en.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/us_20130222en.html). Accessed on 30 June 2018.

## Significance of the Visit

Japan and Bhutan established diplomatic relations in March 1986.<sup>3</sup> Since then, the relations between the two nations have developed steadily. The recent visit was significant for several reasons.

First, it marked the first ministerial visit by Japan to Bhutan. Commenting on the visit, Bhutan's Foreign Ministry noted that, "the Japanese Foreign Minister conveyed the assurances of the Japanese government's continued support and assistance to Bhutan's Socio-economic Development in the 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan."<sup>4</sup> The nature of Japanese support and assistance to Bhutan shall be discussed later in this paper.

Second, during the Doklam standoff between India and China (over the Doklam region of Bhutan), Tokyo's stand was unequivocally in favour of India. The Doklam standoff began when China started constructing a road in a part of Bhutan (claimed by China) and India sent its troops in support of Bhutan. An Indian Ministry of External Affairs statement issued at the beginning of the stalemate notes that, "in coordination with the RGOB [Royal Government of Bhutan], Indian personnel, who were present at general area Doka La, approached the Chinese construction party and urged them to desist from changing the status quo. These efforts continue."<sup>5</sup>

In expressing Tokyo's support for New Delhi, the Japanese Ambassador to India stated that, "what's important in disputed areas is that all parties involved do not resort to unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force, and resolve the dispute in a peaceful manner."<sup>6</sup> Beijing was irked by these comments and asked Tokyo "not to make random comments

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<sup>3</sup> "Japan-Bhutan relations", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/bhutan/data.html>. Accessed on 28 June 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Bhutan), Press Release, 24 June 2018. <http://www.mfa.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Press-Release-24th-June-2018.pdf>. Accessed on 28 June 2018.

<sup>5</sup> "Recent Developments in Doklam Area", Ministry of External Affairs, 30 June 2017. [http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28572/Recent\\_Developments\\_in\\_Doklam\\_Area](http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28572/Recent_Developments_in_Doklam_Area). Accessed on 29 June 2018.

<sup>6</sup> "Doklam stand-off: Japan backs India, says no one should try to change status quo by force", *The Times of India*, 18 August 2017. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/doklam-stand-off-japan-backs-india-says-no-one-should-try-to-change-status-quo-by-force/articleshow/60111396.cms>. Accessed on 28 June 2018.

before clarifying relevant facts”.<sup>7</sup> During his visit, Kono “reaffirmed Japan’s commitment to Bhutan’s development and longstanding friendship based on the idea that the stability of Bhutan led to the peace and stability of the entire region.”<sup>8</sup> This is significant as the rise of China has been a major consideration in Tokyo’s foreign policy calculus in the region.

Third, Kono agreed that, “under a human resource development plan agreed to by both countries, Japan will provide ¥183 million (\$2.2 million) in grant aid to cover tuition and other expenses needed for 10 administrative officers to earn master’s degrees or doctorates in Japan.”<sup>9</sup> This is significant as Tokyo will continue to “provide strong support for Bhutan’s economic and social development even after Bhutan’s graduation from least developed country (LDC) status.”<sup>10</sup> This continued assistance programme shows Tokyo’s commitment to Bhutan’s development.

Fourth, the Japanese and the Bhutanese royal families have always had a close association. In November 2011, the King of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, visited Japan in the aftermath of the Great East Japan earthquake which took place in March 2011. His Majesty conveyed “the sympathy and solidarity of the Bhutanese people towards those who suffered as a result of the Great East Japan Earthquake.”<sup>11</sup> This visit also marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and Bhutan. Last year, Japan’s Princess Mako undertook a week-long visit to Bhutan to strengthen ties between the two countries and between the two royal families.

Fifth, Kono also “requested Bhutan’s support on the issue of the abduction of Japanese nationals by North Korea. Bhutan’s Foreign Minister Damcho Dorji showed his

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<sup>7</sup> “China rebukes Japan for comment on Doklam”, *Times of India*, 19 August 2017. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/china-rebukes-japan-for-comment-on-doklam/articleshow/60127537.cms>. Accessed on 30 June 2018.

<sup>8</sup> “Japan-Bhutan Foreign Ministers’ Meeting”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/s\\_sa/sw/bt/page3e\\_000877.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sw/bt/page3e_000877.html). Accessed on 29 June 2018.

<sup>9</sup> “Japan agrees to train Bhutan’s civil servants, seeks support on abductions and sanctions”, *The Japan Times*, 23 June 2018. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/06/23/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-agrees-train-bhutans-civil-servants-seeks-support-abductions-sanctions/#.WzWbR9Uzapo>. Accessed on 28 June 2018.

<sup>10</sup> “Japan-Bhutan Foreign Ministers’ Meeting”, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> “State Visit of their Majesties the King and Queen of Bhutan to Japan”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, 21 November 2011. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/bhutan/visit\\_1111.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/bhutan/visit_1111.html). Accessed on 28 June 2018.

understanding in this regard.”<sup>12</sup> This is significant since Japan has been trying to garner support in the international arena on the abduction issue. According to Japanese government figures, 17 Japanese nationals were abducted by North Korea in the 1970s and 1980s. Although five of them were released in 2002, the rest are still believed to be in North Korean custody. Pyongyang, however, has insisted that the issue has already been “resolved”, claiming that it only kidnapped 13 Japanese civilians and the remaining eight are dead.<sup>13</sup> Japan has also been trying to drum up support in various countries so that sanctions on North Korea continue even after the summit between United States (US) President Donald Trump and the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore on 12 June 2018.

## **Japanese Assistance to Bhutan**

The Japanese government has been providing “assistance for self-reliant economic growth as well as improvement of standard of living by revitalising rural communities and strengthening social infrastructure and delivery of services in rural areas, which enables people to earn their own living.”<sup>14</sup>

Japanese assistance to Bhutan dates back to before the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between the two countries. In 1964, a Japanese agricultural expert, Keiji Nishioka, was sent to Bhutan to help Bhutan improve its agricultural sector. Japanese official development assistance (ODA) has contributed significantly to improving agricultural productivity and human resource development in Bhutan. The first ODA loan to Bhutan was extended by Japan in 2007 and since then it has been consistently providing aid to Bhutan.

The major areas of Japanese support to Bhutan include agriculture and rural development, economic infrastructure development (which includes road network development and improvement of rural electrification), improvement of social services (which includes human

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<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, Japan-Bhutan Foreign Ministers’ Meeting. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/s\\_sa/sw/bt/page3e\\_000877.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sw/bt/page3e_000877.html). Accessed on 13 July 2018.

<sup>13</sup> “Painful history of kidnapping of Japanese by North Korea”, *The Straits Times*, 6 November 2017. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/north-korea-kidnapping-of-japanese-a-painful-history>. Accessed on 29 June 2018.

<sup>14</sup> “Country Assistance Policy for the Kingdom of Bhutan”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 2015. <http://www.in.emb-japan.go.jp/files/000320208.pdf>. Accessed on 29 June 2018.

resource development, employment generation, improvement of education service and healthcare service) and good governance (consisting of decentralisation and improvement of information equity).<sup>15</sup>

In light of its experience in dealing with natural disasters, Japan has also committed US\$8.6 million (S\$11.7 million) for the installation of emergency mobile network in Bhutan and an agreement to this end was signed between the Gross National Happiness (GNH) Commission of Bhutan and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) (Bhutan) in December last year.<sup>16</sup>

Japan has also provided loans under the “re-construction of bridges on primary national highway no. 1” project, which aims at replacing three existing bridges on Wangdue-Trongsa highway with permanent bridges which can carry heavier loads. For this purpose, JICA has provided a grant aid of ¥1,956 million (S\$23.7 million).<sup>17</sup>

## **India’s Ties with Bhutan and Impact on Japan-Bhutan Ties**

India has had time-tested ties with Bhutan. Their ties are guided by the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed in 1949, which was revised in February 2007. Bhutan was the first country that India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited after he took office in May 2014. The ties between the two countries were severely tested by the Doklam incident. Fortunately, the standoff ended with both India and China pulling back their troops to their original positions.

It is also worth noting here that while Bhutan-Japan ties are very robust, Bhutan has no diplomatic relations with China – it is the only one of China’s neighbours not to have diplomatic ties with it.<sup>18</sup> Tokyo has always been at the forefront of infrastructure

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<sup>15</sup> “Outline of Japan’s ODA to Bhutan”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, September 2009. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/region/sw\\_asia/bhutan\\_o.pdf](https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/region/sw_asia/bhutan_o.pdf). Accessed on 29 June 2018.

<sup>16</sup> “Japan commits US\$8.6m for installation of emergency mobile network”, Passang Dorji, *Bhutan Broadcasting Service*, 20 December 2017. <http://www.bbs.bt/news/?p=86878>. Accessed on 28 June 2018.

<sup>17</sup> “Two bridges open on the Wangdue – Trongsa highway”, *Kuensel*, 2 February 2018. <http://www.kuenselonline.com/two-bridges-open-on-the-wangdue-trongsa-highway/>. Accessed on 29 June 2018.

<sup>18</sup> “Is Bhutan drawing closer to China, and what can India do about it?”, *South China Morning Post*, 29 August 2017. <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2108804/Bhutan-drawing-closer-china-and-what-can-india-do-about>. Accessed on 29 June 2018.

development in various parts of the world and Bhutan is no exception. Japan has decided not to join the Beijing-backed Belt and Road Initiative (formerly called One Belt One Road) and has been looking at playing a more proactive role in the field of infrastructure development through such initiatives as the ‘Partnership for Quality Infrastructure’. In addition, it has concerns over China’s growing influence in the wider Indo-Pacific region and has been promoting its own ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific Concept’. In addition, it is a part of a resurrected ‘Quad’, along with India, the US and Australia.

## **The Road Ahead**

While Japan’s ties with Bhutan are on the upward trend, there are, however, several challenges impacting their relationship.

First, both Japan and Bhutan do not have an embassy in each other’s countries. Official representation is probably necessary for them to further strengthen their relationship. They will need to scale up their diplomatic ties.

Second, it remains to be seen how far Bhutan would be willing to push the envelope with Japan, given that its overtures are likely rouse sensitivities in China. As it is, the relations between Bhutan and China have been affected by the Doklam incident last year.

Given the uniquely Bhutanese concept “which measures prosperity through formal principles of the GNH and the spiritual, physical, social and environmental health of its citizens and natural environment”,<sup>19</sup> Japan’s assistance to Bhutan has been tremendously helpful for the Himalayan Kingdom. The Japanese foreign minister’s visit to Bhutan clearly indicates Japan’s strategic interest in Bhutan. It is also indicative of the fact that, moving forward, Japan’s interest in Bhutan is likely to grow even further.

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<sup>19</sup> “Gross national happiness in Bhutan: the big idea from a tiny state that could change the world”, Annie Kelly, *The Guardian*, 1 December 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/01/bhutan-wealth-happiness-counts>. Accessed on 29 June 2018.