

Japan's Growing Ties with Nepal

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Relations between Japan and Nepal have traditionally been strong. However, these relations have given a fillip in recent times, particularly by Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, of which Nepal has become an important part.

The ties between Japan and Nepal date back to the time when Buddhism spread from India and Nepal to Japan through China. However, in the modern times, the relationship was revived when a Japanese Zen Buddhist monk, Ekai Kawagichi, visited Nepal in 1899. It is also interesting to note here that the first batch of students dispatched by the then-Prime Minister of Nepal to a foreign country way back in 1902 went to Japan.

Diplomatic relations between Nepal and Japan were established in September 1956. This was followed by the opening of the then-Royal Nepalese Embassy in Tokyo in 1956 while the Japanese Embassy opened in Kathmandu in 1968.

In the recent times, Nepal has emerged to become an important part of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy which aims to [enhance connectivity](#) between Asia and Africa to promote stability and prosperity across the regions. It was in his famous 'Confluence of the Two Seas' speech that Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe [remarked](#) that "the Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity. A 'broader Asia' that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form."

The relationship between the two countries was cemented by visits of the members of the royal families from the two countries. King Mahendra and Queen Ratna of Nepal made their first state visit to Japan in April 1960 while in December the same year, Crown Prince Akihito and Crown Princess Michiko (the present Japanese Emperor and Empress) visited [Nepal](#).

Major Japanese-aided Projects

Japan is a leading donor in Nepal. It started an aid programme to Nepal soon after the establishment of its embassy in the country. Over the years, Japan has provided aid to Nepal in key sectors such as human resource development, social sector (health and education), agriculture development, economic infrastructure, environmental conservation and culture.

Some of the major Japanese-aided initiatives include projects to increase food production in Nepal; project to construct the new Kawasoti Sub-station (to provide reliable and quality electricity supply to the population in the eastern part of Nawalparasi District); project to improve the Kathmandu-Bhaktapur Road, a cultural grant to Nepal Television to improve television programmes; and grant assistance for grassroots human security, among others.

Japan has also dispatched technical experts in the field of non-formal education, agricultural extension, sericulture, and strengthening of monitoring and evaluation system, among others. Additionally, Japan has also dispatched four policy advisors in various fields to Nepal.

In the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in Nepal in 2015, Japan provided US\$8.4 million (S\$11.65 million) in assistance besides emergency relief supplies worth US\$210,000 (S\$291,000). Tokyo also dispatched 70 experts, including those from Japanese government agencies like the foreign ministry, the national police agency and Japan International Cooperation Agency. Japan has tremendous expertise in dealing with natural disasters and it sent rescuers, search-and-rescue dog handlers, communications specialists, physicians and field coordinators to Nepal, both in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake and subsequently.

Why Japan and Nepal Need Each Other?

As mentioned earlier, Nepal's importance to Japan has increased due to its location, as well as Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy and its non-participation in the Beijing-led Belt and Road Initiative. Being a landlocked country, Nepal has traditionally depended on India for its access to the sea. However, in September this year, Nepal signed an agreement with China on the opening of some ports in China to Nepalese products. Japan is keen to have Nepal on its side as it courts countries with its own connectivity initiatives.

In the light of Japan's falling population, there are also opportunities for Nepalese nationals to find employment in the country, especially in labour-intensive sectors like agriculture, as well as in such sectors as construction, electronics and healthcare for senior citizens. Many young Nepalese go to Japan to pursue higher studies and some settle down there. At the same time, young Nepalese are embarking on entrepreneurship initiatives and setting up businesses in Japan. Besides, Nepalese nationals have also set up various social organisations in the country to promote their culture, food and festivals and these have enjoyed a [good resonance](#) with the Japanese.

As Nepal weighs its international relations options, Japan has become a critical part of its outreach effort. In the days and months ahead, there is likely to be a further deepening of Japanese ties with Nepal with more exchanges at the government-to-government and people-to-people levels.

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