

# ISAS Brief

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## Beyond the Japan-India Symphony of Sentiments

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A symphony of positive sentiments was in ample display during the visit to Japan by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi from 30 August to 3 September 2014. This was his first foreign tour outside India's local neighbourhood of South Asia. Summit talks, such as Modi's with Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Kyoto and Tokyo on this occasion, are usually emblematic of choreographed diplomacy. Viewed in this perspective, the latest elevation of Japan's equation with India to the status of a "Special Strategic and Global Partnership"<sup>2</sup> can be viewed as a major diplomatic breakthrough in crafting a new label with potential rather than immediate impact.

Prior to Modi's diplomatic expedition to Japan at this time, the two countries were already linked by a simple "Strategic and Global Partnership". The genesis of that Partnership can indeed be traced to the diplomatic efforts that the two countries launched almost a decade ago when Junichiro Koizumi led Japan. Moreover, the latest summit between Abe and Modi has not produced any iconic strategic agreement in the form of either the much-discussed civil

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, Tokyo Declaration for Japan-India Special Strategic and Global Partnership, [www.mofa.go.jp/files/000050532.pdf](http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000050532.pdf) (Accessed on 2 September 2014)

nuclear pact or a new defence cooperation deal. However, the latest trend-lines in Japan's relations with India raise the prospect of a substantive strategic equation between the two countries, going forward. Abe's comments after his talks with Modi on 1 September and Modi's vigorous espousal of the Joint Statement he signed with Abe are pointers towards some form of strategic-political entente (different from a strategic-military alliance).

## **Asia's Emerging Arc of Power Politics**

Despite the caged expectations by Japanese and Indian realists, questions are aplenty about the diplomatic signals that Modi and Abe might have already sent to Beijing. China is a geographic and geopolitical neighbour of both India and Japan in Asia's emerging arc of power politics. Chinese President Xi Jinping and Abe are yet to establish any kind of *Modus Vivendi* in the historically tangled relationship between their two countries. In contrast, Xi, who has already held talks with Modi on the margins of a 'plurilateral' summit in Brazil a few weeks ago, is expected to travel to India soon for charting a Sino-Indian agenda under 'stable' political orders in the two countries.

Much has been made, especially in some Indian quarters, about Modi's brief and breezy, but powerful, sound-bite in Hindi during an address to Japanese and Indian business leaders in Tokyo on 1 September. With the alliterative charm of his Hindi phrases lost in translation into English, he said the prospects of the unfolding Asian Century would be shaped by the ideology of enlightened progress (*Vikaasvaad*) and not by the ideology of expansionism (*Vistaarvaad*). Modi, as prime ministerial candidate, had already accused China of expansionist tendencies. Fast-forwarded to the present, irresistibly attractive as a talking-point was the latest freelance-hype that Modi was now wooing Japan as India's friend – at the expense of China, seen as India's Himalayan and maritime rival. The latest freelance-hype was driven by simple cross-currents. Post-imperial Japan has long been known for its robust economic diplomacy, although Tokyo's critics have sometimes derided this as mere chequebook diplomacy. By contrast, China's neighbours have often been very critical of its alleged assertiveness in their shared neighbourhood of South China Sea and East China Sea.

The important point, however, is that the Chinese authorities, apparently mindful of the need for a viable relationship with India, have taken this latest freelance-hype in their diplomatic stride. Answering a related question, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Qin Gang said on

1 September: “We are following Prime Minister Modi’s visit in Japan. I would like to point out that both China and India are major countries that advocate and practice the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence, and follow the independent foreign policy”.<sup>3</sup> Implied in this response is China’s expectation that India, with its penchant for strategic autonomy in foreign policy, would not breezily make common cause with Japan in its suspected game-plans against China. On Xi’s likely visit to India, Qin said: “At the current stage, both sides are in close communication on relevant arrangements about the visit”.<sup>4</sup> For good effect, the Chinese Spokesman emphasised that Xi had in fact held “a pleasant meeting with Prime Minister Modi”<sup>5</sup> in Brazil on 14 July. In effect, this particular comment by Modi, with no specific reference to China, blew over as no more than a storm in the tea cup.

### **‘Special’ is New Indo-Japan Buzz Word**

As Beijing does not appear alarmed over the possibility of Japan-India strategic-political entente, what is the *real* significance of the new “Special Strategic and Global Partnership” between Tokyo and New Delhi? In a sense, bilateral strategic partnerships are dime a dozen in today’s post-Cold War inter-state diplomacy. In fact, India’s current state-to-state engagement with China is defined as “Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity”. However, India’s ties with Russia (and its predecessor, the Soviet Union), generally believed to be stronger than those between India and China, are today described as a “Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership”. In this perspective, the enhancement of the Japan-India engagement to the status of a “special” category does signify *a new dynamic in the emerging arc of power politics in Asia* (geographically, the arc runs from Tokyo to New Delhi through Beijing). It is now up to Xi, during his prospective India-visit, to place China at a geopolitical (not geographical) position of his choice in the likely arc of power politics in Asia.

Pending China’s definitive response to the new dynamic of Japan-India “special” ties, their bilateral and “global” content should be assessed. The “global” aspect of the evolving Indo-Japanese equation is essentially one of serious dialogue on issues of global commons such as

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<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang’s Regular Press Conference on September 1, 2014, [www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/t1187254.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1187254.shtml) (Accessed on 2 September 2014)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

climate change, nuclear non-proliferation, trade and development, counter-terrorism, and a few other issues. Implicit is the fact that India and Japan, which do not see eye to eye on each and every issue of global commons, tend to believe that the two countries, as major powers, should nonetheless seek to narrow differences and create international consensus. Such a shared belief is nothing really new in the Indo-Japanese dialogue. So, the new “special” *gilding of an existing partnership* pertains to the bilateral aspect of the Indo-Japanese ties.

Three aspects of Indo-Japanese bilateral ties are particularly relevant to this discussion – defence cooperation, economic engagement, and the possibility of a civil nuclear pact. Abe was forthright on defence issues after his talks with Modi. In televised comments, in Modi’s presence, Abe said: “We agreed to resume comprehensive security and defence cooperation; [we] agreed to initiate defence-equipment [-related] cooperation discussion, and also to further promote cooperation in maritime security”.<sup>6</sup> It is clear, therefore, that the defence component of the India-Japan equation is a matter of future-perfect discussions between the two sides. For the present, as Abe indicated, the process of Japan selling amphibious aircraft to India for maritime security purposes is still alive – with positive prospects. The sub-text here includes the question of joint manufacture of this high-tech and dual-use aircraft that has civil-military applications.

### **‘Dramatic’ Focus on Economic Bonds**

On the economic dimension of the overall Japan-India ties, Abe spoke of the possibility of “dramatically increasing Japanese investments into India”.<sup>7</sup> Waxing eloquent, Modi elucidated the “strategic” dimension of the “partnership” in purely economic terms. This is in line with the reality that only an economically strong India can play an international role. Modi’s exposition of this reality was as follows: “Japan will [now onwards] play an increasingly important role in India’s economic transformation and development. ... Prime Minister Abe ... has announced his intention to realise 3.5 trillion yen, or USD 35 billion, or [Indian] Rupees 210,000 crores, of public and private investment and financing to India over the next five years. ... A successful India and a successful Japan will be of benefit to both

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<sup>6</sup> Abe’s comments [through interpreter], as monitored during his televised media availability with Modi in Tokyo on 1 September 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

countries. Even more, the relationship will be a force of peace, stability and prosperity in Asia and the world”.<sup>8</sup>

Modi sees the “global” dimension of the partnership as being based on a conviction, which he stated as follows: “We [India and Japan] are the two oldest democracies in Asia and among its three biggest economies. Our relationship is not only regional in its framework, but will have a global impact. This is because if the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an Asian century, then Asia’s future direction will shape the destiny of the world”. The partnership acquires a “special” status because “the importance and priority that we [India and Japan] will both give this relationship will see a qualitative increase”<sup>9</sup> under the Modi-Abe leadership.

On the move for a bilateral civil nuclear pact, which could emerge as the defining aspect of the Japan-India relationship in the future, Abe sounded upbeat. He said: “We [Abe and Modi] have instructed our officials to accelerate the negotiations with the goal of early conclusion of agreement so that we may strengthen [the] strategic partnership”.<sup>10</sup> A top Japanese official had told this author a few years ago that nuclear-pacifist Tokyo’s decision to negotiate an agreement with India in the sensitive domain of peaceful uses of nuclear energy was based on at least two critical considerations. These were identified by the official as (1) the growing “importance” and relevance of India to Japan, and (2) the Japanese aim of drafting New Delhi into the global nuclear non-proliferation mainstream.

True to Japanese sensitivities on nuclear issues, Japan’s Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, speaking on 2 September, said Japan would negotiate “energetically” but also “carefully” a civil nuclear pact with India. However, no forecast could be made about when the accord would be concluded, he emphasised. Obviously, a range of other issues, too, crowd the Japan-India agenda of actual and potential cooperation. Overall, Modi will have to delicately balance India’s “special partnership” with Japan and New Delhi’s sensitive neighbourliness with China in the emerging arc of power politics in Asia, where the United States is still a dominant player.

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<sup>8</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Remarks by Prime Minister at the Joint Press Briefing with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan, September 01, 2014 (It is unofficial translation of text from Hindi to English), [www.mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?23966](http://www.mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?23966) (Accessed on 1 September 2014)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Same as in Note 6 above