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Political Realignment in Tokyo: Impact on India-Japan Relations

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India-Japan relations seem to be in a state of uncertainty under the new Hatoyama government. Yet, thanks to many overlapping concerns and opportunities, bilateral ties are likely to progress well. Both sides must reaffirm their commitment to each other soon.

IN A JOINT statement released during Indian Defence Minister A.K. Antony's recent visit to Tokyo, India and Japan expressed their "determination to take forward bilateral defence exchanges and cooperation in a meaningful way in 2010". The visit came a few days after the inauguration of the new Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government led by Yukio Hatoyama. What does this new political chapter in Japan imply for relations with India? There seems to be some uncertainty clouding bilateral relations given the scant interest shown towards India after the installation of the DPJ government.. It is critical for the new Japanese administration to articulate its policy and approach towards India, even as New Delhi has to make its 'Look East' policy more effective.

Strategic Partnership and the DPJ

There are compelling factors and opportunities which will sustain the 'Strategic and Global Partnership'. Areas of common concern include maritime security, United Nations Security Council reform, peacekeeping activities, environmental protection and energy security. India is now only the third country to have a defence agreement with Japan apart from the US and Australia. Both are watching the rising might of China with caution and circumspection. From this perspective, it can be ascertained that the trajectory of India-Japan relations is firmly set and demands concerted implementation of the roadmap already drawn out.

The DPJ's expected posture towards New Delhi initially remained puzzling, considering that India did not even find a mention in its 2009 election manifesto. Prior to elections in Japan, former DPJ Vice President Seiji Maehara in a meeting with Indian Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna in July 2009 termed the India-Japan relationship as "extremely important". The party's 2005 election manifesto had already acknowledged India as "a nucleus of Asian economic development". India did not find a mention in the first policy speech by Hatoyama in the Diet. But his recent statement on Japan's Asian

diplomacy in Singapore made a mention of his intent to “accelerate EPA negotiations with...India”, referring to the proposed Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between the two countries. The Japanese prime minister also expressed his readiness to “work more closely together” with many Asia-Pacific countries, including India in countering piracy.

Positive Foreign Policy Indicators

Some positive indicators for India emanate from the DPJ government’s initial foreign policy direction. One, an Asia-oriented policy naturally translates into a focus on building ties in the region. Though the spotlight is on ameliorating ties with China and South Korea – pivotal in view of their close geographical proximities, India remains an attractive partner at the same time, most importantly as a balancer of China and an attractive economic opportunity.

Two, Hatoyama’s goal of an East Asian Community will bring the two sides together. The principles of inclusiveness and open regionalism envisaged by Japan in its vision of the EAC have eroded the traditional geographical contours of East Asia to include countries like India. Hatoyama has echoed his support for the principle of ‘open regionalism’ in his speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2009. Earlier, the DPJ manifesto of 2005 had argued that the EAC should “never become an exclusive institution”. India will be important partner when building a full-scale East Asian Community. It may be noted that the party was headed at that time by Katsuya Okada, who is now the foreign minister. Okada is bound to have considerable influence in the formulation of foreign policy and could be expected to ensure that Japan does not lose sight of India.

Looking Towards the Future

A multitude of opportunities and overlapping concerns provide a base for both governments to build on. It is imperative for the Hatoyama administration to elaborate clearly on its policy towards India, which has until now found only a passing mention in policy speeches. Both sides need to ensure there is no gap in the now regular high-profile exchange of visits by their heads of state. From the Indian side, there is a need to give more impetus and substance to India’s ‘Look East’ policy to make it more robust. This has to be ensured, most importantly through encouraging economic enmeshment by developing infrastructural facilities as well as cultivating a favourable investment and trade climate.

In the political and strategic arena, renewed joint Indian and Japanese efforts are critical for the proposed expansion of the UN Security Council. Hatoyama has stated his intention to “engage actively in the intergovernmental negotiation on Security Council reform”. Other priority areas are maritime and energy security and environmental conservation. On the economic front, the EPA should be concluded soon. The two sides aim to achieve a bilateral trade figure of US\$20 billion by 2020. Talks are also underway for the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Railway Corridor Project, estimated to entail an investment of US \$45-50 billion. At the ground level, public opinion in India has recognised Japan as a reliable friend of India. A poll commissioned by Japan’s ministry of foreign affairs revealed that as many as 76% respondents in India view current ties as being friendly or very friendly.

There is also an eight fold initiative by the two countries to boost bilateral ties. The areas agreed in 2005 include enhanced high-level exchanges; comprehensive economic engagement; enhanced security dialogue; science and technology initiative; people-to-people contacts; and cooperation in the UN and other organisations. This initiative provides the overarching paradigm for stronger ties. Divergences like those on the nuclear issue and lack of Japanese investment in India remain to be worked upon.

Considering that a new government has taken over in Japan after an era of one-party dominance, a reaffirmation of the commitment to build on ties has to be made by both Tokyo and New Delhi, even as they have to ensure the smooth building of ties.

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