

Abe In India: Japanese Prime Minister's latest visit reflects growing multidimensional synergies

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With Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe landing in India tomorrow for his latest trip to this country, it's time to review ties between New Delhi and Tokyo. There's no denying that the India-Japan relationship is experiencing a strategic convergence. And the catalyst for this is no doubt an assertive China. Beijing today is using its financial muscle and diplomatic heft to further its economic and strategic interests in Asia and beyond – whether it is through moves in the South and East China Seas or its One Belt One Road initiative of transnational connectivity. This has necessitated a response from countries like India and Japan to balance China's rise and protect their own strategic interests.

It's in this frame that the India-Japan relationship needs to be viewed today. Japanese exports to India have been steadily rising over the years, as have Japanese investments. This is only logical since Japan has long had a significant presence in Indian business and industry. Thus, business-to-business connections between the two countries are well established and continue to grow. Now a strategic layer is being added to the bilateral equation. And pursuant to this Japan's investments in critical Indian infrastructure sectors such as railways – a la the Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train project – industrial corridors and smart cities become vitally important. After all, if India and Japan are to become a veritable strategic combo in Asia, India can't lag behind on the development front to China.

And once this strategic combo gets going, it can certainly transform the development paradigm in this part of the world. A good example of this is the proposed Asia Africa Growth Corridor. The latter is being touted as India and Japan's alternative to the Chinese Belt and Road initiative and seeks to boost human and infrastructure capacities in Africa. But unlike the Chinese initiative that follows a top-down model and relies on government-to-government collaborations, the India-Japan corridor will focus on projects that are locally owned, collaboratively designed, sensitive to the environment, and wholly need-based. In other words, the corridor will follow a bottom-up approach. This is indeed welcome because India's solo efforts at providing alternatives to the Chinese Belt and Road initiative – like Project Mausam – have been disappointing. Infusion of Japanese financial resources and advanced technology through the Asia Africa Growth Corridor can change this.

But there's a third level that needs to be added to the India-Japan relationship – cultural. Ordinary people-to-people contacts between the two countries and assimilation of each other's cultures have been hitherto limited. Beyond Japanese cars, bullet trains and electronic goods, there's little that the average Indian knows about Japan. This needs to change if India and Japan are to forge a high-level partnership that goes beyond the economic and strategic dimensions. We need many more exchanges of popular cultural products – literature, food, music, etc – so that ordinary Indians and Japanese can understand each other's way of life, thinking, philosophy and history. A good place to start would be to popularise Japanese musical instruments and manga comics in India, while giving better play to Bollywood movies – through dubbings – in Japan. It's only when the business, strategic and cultural layers of the India-Japan relationship operate in unison will the two countries realise the true potential of their partnership.

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