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JAPAN AND INDIA AS PARTNERS FOR THE PEACE AND STABILITY OF ASIA

Hiroshi Hirabayashi

India - a giant elephant finally awakened - is destined to become a player of exceptional importance in the international community in the years ahead. In the Asian theater in particular, where numerous elements of insecurity persist, it is expected to become a guarantor of peace and stability. This will be more effective if India strengthens its partnership with Japan, an increasingly proactive contributor to this end.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

First, India is located at the critical southern front of the Eurasian plate, which contains to its north two big powers, Russia and China. The political ambitions and not-so-democratic behaviors of these two countries are causes of apprehension in their neighborhood. India is also well positioned to secure the long sea lanes stretching from the Strait of Malacca to the Persian Gulf through the Arabian Sea. The Indian Navy and Coast Guard are playing a growing role, in cooperation with the US Seventh Fleet, in maintaining maritime security in this important and vast ocean, which might be called the present-day maritime Silk Road. Luckily for all the beneficiaries of these sea lanes including Japan, India and the US are great advocates and practitioners of democracy, an important factor in peace and stability. Meanwhile, Beijing appears to be endeavoring to come out into the Indian Ocean by extending its sphere of influence through Pakistan and Myanmar. No country will ever succeed in containing China's ambition, but India and the US will at least be able to play a part in neutralizing its impact.

In the past several years, the Japanese and Indian coast guards have been conducting joint exercises to enhance their capabilities to cope with piracy and illegal trafficking in drugs and other materials. Security cooperation between these two countries is also intensifying through an increasing number of mutual visits and joint maneuvers between Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) and the Indian Navy. Japan prohibits itself from projecting its armed forces to far-away sea lanes under the current legal framework but does permit their use in some operations having international blessings. These include missions in the Arabian Sea, where MSDF vessels provide fuel to naval vessels of the US, the UK, France and others fighting against Al Qaeda.

Second, as two of Asia's credible and internationally recognized democracies, India and Japan bear responsibility for bringing about stability in this region. Long-established Asian nations with traditional wisdom and deep understanding of the complex situations of their neighbors, both countries should be capable of inducing other Asian countries to transform themselves into more

democratic societies in an Asian way, namely a gradual approach that fits the local context of each country. Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso has talked about building an “arch of freedom and prosperity” stretching from Northeast Asia to Europe through Southeast and South Asia. I regard India as Japan’s most valuable partner in promoting this concept in these regions.

Third, Japan and India are the first and third largest economies in Asia respectively. Although India’s economy is lagging behind and its pace of growth is slower than that of China, its steady and increasingly accelerating growth and industrialization are another factor for peace and stability in Asia. Added to Tokyo’s economic clout, a greater role for New Delhi in regional economic development and social stability, including the fight against terrorism and other crimes, should be welcomed. The two economies, complementary rather than competitive, promise harmonious economic interchanges and will bring beneficial by-products to the region. After all, peace and stability depend largely on economic development.


These observations have led me to the following policy prescriptions.

First, India and Japan should set out in concrete terms the political, economic and other goals of their “strategic global partnership” announced by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his Japanese counterpart, Shinzo Abe, during Mr. Singh’s visit to Japan in December 2006. The two leaders should work on this issue during Mr. Abe’s visit to India scheduled for this summer.

Second, India should strengthen its commitments to East Asia indicated in its “Look East” policy. Working with Japan, India should make efforts to convince China and other skeptics in the Association of the South-East Nations (ASEAN) to accept India’s involvement in the political framework of the East Asian Summit as well as in the existent ASEAN + 3 (Japan, China and South Korea) to form an ASEAN + 4 forum. Such efforts will encourage democratic and value-oriented approaches when Asian countries work toward regional groupings. For its part, Japan, which maintains most cordial relations with each and every country in South Asia, will have to play a more proactive role in SAARC (South Asia Association for

Regional Cooperation).

Third, India and Japan, two legitimate aspirants to permanent seats on the UN Security Council, should redouble their efforts to persuade China and other Asian neighbors to accept their cause. Particularly, they must try to convince Beijing that the world, particularly Asia, has a better chance of achieving peace and stability if the three Asian heavyweights work closely together. China for its part should be reminded of the need to act as a responsible partner if it wants to obtain not only prosperity but also a place of honor in the concert of nations. Its objection to the entry of Japan and India into the UN Security Council has no justification. Should Beijing persist in its objection despite overwhelming international support for these two countries, the result would be serious harm to its own broad interests worldwide. It would be far preferable for China to engage itself with the other two major powers in Asia, and thereby help establish a useful and powerful “troika” for the peace and stability of the region.

Fourth, India and Japan should work together in their strategic “global partnership” to tackle global and transnational issues such as the fight against international terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the preservation of the environment and the prevention of global warming, and the eradication of infectious diseases. India, as a big brother to its neighbors, bears a special responsibility in the fight against global warming which, without the commitment of increasingly bigger polluters, would endanger the survival of Bangladesh and the Maldives, for example. As one Japanese warlord told his three sons in the Warring States Period of the 16th century, three arrows bound tightly together are far stronger than three single arrows on their own. 

Hiroshi Hirabayashi is a councilor of The Japan Forum on International Relations. He is expected to become the president of the Japan-India Association soon. He served as Ambassador of Japan to India between 1998 and 2002.