

Japan-India partnership key



By Brahma Chellaney

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JAPAN and India are natural allies because they have no conflict of strategic interests and actually share common goals to build stability, power equilibrium and institutionalised multilateral cooperation in Asia. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Tokyo this week offers an opportunity to the two countries to add real strategic content to their fast-developing relationship.

The ascension of Shinzo Abe as postwar - Japan's youngest prime minister has symbolised the rise of an assertive, confident Japan eager to shape the evolving balance of power in Asia. Faced immediately with the crisis triggered by North Korea's provocative nuclear test, Abe has pursued a pragmatic foreign policy while seeking to accelerate the nationalist

shift in policy instituted by his predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi.

India, for its part, has moved from doctrinaire nonalignment to geopolitical pragmatism, reflected in the greater realism it displays in its economic and foreign policies. It has come to recognise that it can wield international power only through the accretion of its own economic and military strength. A close strategic and economic partnership with Japan chimes with its vision of a dynamic, multipolar Asia.

Close ties with Japan is an objective dear to Singh, whose host in Tokyo is a friend of India. Abe, in his book, "Toward A Beautiful Country," published in July, declares that, "It is of crucial importance to Japan's national interest that we further strengthen our relations with India." Indeed, Abe optimistically states that "it will not be a surprise if in another 10 years, Japan-India relations overtake Japan-US and Japan-China relations."

To realise that scenario, Tokyo and New Delhi have to focus sustained attention on boosting their now-stagnant trade and building a multidimensional political relationship. The two also need to hold closer consultations on Asian economic and political issues, given that neither would like to see the emergence of a Sino-centric Asia.

Such is the international hype about China's growth that it is frequently forgotten that Japan remains the world's largest economic powerhouse after the United States, with an economy that is today double the size of China's, with only a tenth of the population.

Tokyo may not share Beijing's obsession with measures of national power, but Japan's

military establishment, except in the nuclear sphere, is already the most sophisticated in Asia.

Encouraged by economic recovery, with a 2 percent yearly Japanese growth translating into an additional output almost the size of the entire annual gross domestic product of Singapore and the Philippines, Japan is going through a quiet transition from pacifism to being a "normal" state. Today, even as it has reinvigorated military ties

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with the US, it is beginning to cautiously shape an independent foreign policy and rethink its security.

India has also strengthened its relations with America. But from being non-aligned, India is likely to become multialigned, even as it preserves the kernel of nonalignment - strategic autonomy.

A key challenge for both Tokyo and New Delhi is to manage their increasingly intricate relationship with an ascendant China determined to emerge as Asia's dominant power. Yet

to bolstering stability in Asia

it makes sense for Japan and India to play down the competitive dynamics of their relationship with Beijing and put the accent on cooperation. This is what Abe and Singh have sought to do.

An emphasis on cooperation also suits China because it is in accord with its larger strategy to advertise its "peaceful rise." China's choir book indeed has been built around a nifty theme: Its emergence as a great power is unstop-

also undergirds the need for a strategic partnership between Japan and India, both heavily dependent on oil imports by sea from the Persian Gulf region.

Mercantilist efforts to assert control over energy supplies and transport routes, and strategic plans to assemble a "string of pearls" in the form of listening posts and special naval-access arrangements along vital sea-lanes of communica-

released global-opinion poll by the Washington-based Pew Research Centre showed the high positive rating Japan enjoys in India, and India in Japan, reflecting their close historical and cultural ties.

An Indo-Japanese strategic partnership cannot now be expected to take off, given the foundation laid by an increasing number of high-level visitors. In the past year alone, Japan's chief of joint staff as well as the chief of each of the three self-defence forces has visited India, while India's defence minister and the navy and air force chiefs have been to Japan.

Their partnership should seek to build greater defence cooperation, intelligence-sharing and joint initiatives on maritime security, counterterrorism, disaster prevention and management, and energy security. To maintain a peaceful environment that promotes security and economic growth, Tokyo and New Delhi need to promote institutional cooperation in Asia.

In that context, Abe's idea of a four-sided strategic dialogue among Japan, India, Australia and the US deserves careful reflection. A constellation of democracies tied together by strategic partnerships can help build Asian power equilibrium.

In the emerging Asia, the two major non-Western democracies, Japan and India, are set to become close partners. Their strategic relationship would help adjust balance-of-power equations in Asia and aid long-term stability.

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table, and it is thus incumbent on other nations to adjust to that rise.

A strong Japan, a strong China and a strong India need to find ways to reconcile their interests in Asia so that they can peacefully coexist and prosper. Never before in history have all three of these powers been strong at the same time. China's emergence as a global player, however, is dividing, not uniting, Asia.

The sharpening energy geopolitics in Asia

tion, certainly risk fueling tensions and discord.

Before the US and India unveiled plans to build a global strategic partnership, it was Tokyo and New Delhi that agreed in August 2000 during Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori's visit to develop a "Global Partnership of the 21st Century."

Yet that proposal has moved forward rather slowly, even as India has overtaken China as the largest recipient of Japanese Overseas Development Assistance (ODA). A recently