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Evolution of Strategic Relation: Changing Dynamics of India-Japan Relations

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The book, *Changing Dynamics of India-Japan Relations: Buddhism to Special Strategic Partnership* (Pentagon Press, 2017) authored by Shamshad Ahmad Khan, mainly focuses on deepening Japan-India relations in the fields cultural, political, economic and security, especially maritime security, trade as well as energy. It pays special attention to the recent Nuclear Deal between Japan and India. Further, the book extensively examines the China factor in Japan-India's thriving relation. Undoubtedly, cultural and religious linkages have played an important role in fostering the bilateral relations even when there were no stronger political and economic relations between the two Asian nations. The author attempts to trace these connections, in the opening chapter, giving an overall aspect of India-Japan relations. It begins with the arrival of Buddhism in Japan and the visit of Bodhisena the Indian monk to Nara in 730 AD via China.

In next chapters, the author tries to trace the revival of age-old cultural link between the two countries, and attempts to examine Japan's support to India's freedom struggle. The book investigates that how economic and diplomatic relation between Japan and India has been thriving in 21st century. A greater change in the two countries' relation has taken place after December 2006 when the then Indian Prime Minister Mr. Manmohan Singh visited Japan. India's premier Mr. Singh and his Japanese counterpart Mr. Shinzo Abe together released a joint statement towards India-Japan Strategic and Global Partnership. The leaders recalled the ancient bond of the two nations and affirmed, "that India and Japan are natural partners as the largest and most developed democracies of Asia, with a mutual stake in each other's progress and prosperity." *¹ The statement had reflection of what Prime Minister Abe had just written in his book, *Towards a Beautiful Country* (July, 2006). Shinzo Abe, the then Chief Cabinet Secretary of Japan who became prime minister on September 2006, had identified India as a pivotal partner and described how Japan could advance its "national interests" by strengthening "ties with India." Abe had speculated, "it will not be a surprise if in another decade Japan-India relations overtake Japan-US and Japan-China ties" (p.64).

Given the layers of relations between the US and Japan, it is difficult to envisage that Japan-India relation will overtake the Japan - US relations in the near future. But it cannot be denied that the bilateral relationship between Japan and India has deepened faster than expected. It is one of the most talked about relationship in the Asia-Pacific. A book comprehensively analysing this emerging partnership encompassing all the aspects of the bilateral relationship was missing on the shelves of our libraries. Khan's book, written during his post-Doctoral

Fellowship supported by Japan Foundation at Keio University, partially fulfils the gap in the existing literature. The author, an awardee of the Nakasone Yasuhiro Award (2011), has been associated with various institutes in Japan and India. Such as, the Slavic Research Centre, Hokkaido University, the Institute for Developing Economies, the Japan Institute of International Affairs, and Keizai Koho Center Tokyo as well as Indian think tanks; Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, the Indian Council of World Affairs and so on. His experiences at these institutes and think tanks are very much reflected in this book. As of now, it is one of the most comprehensive books on the bilateral relationship of Japan and India. More, importantly it is very up-to-date book in this domain covering the bilateral relations up to early 2017.

The succinctly written book has been divided into eight chapters viz. 1. India-Japan Relations: Tracing the Cultural & Religious Roots, 2. Prelude to a New Partnership: India-Japan Relations from Meiji Restoration to the End of World War II, 3. India and Japan: The Cold War Shadow on the Two Asian Democratic Crescents, 4. India-Japan Relations: Evaluating the Impact of Strategic Partnership, 5. India-Japan Politico-Economic Engagements, 6. India-Japan Cooperation and their Quest for a Rule-Based Order, 7. India-Japan Nuclear Cooperation: Between Economic Gains and Ideal Principles, 8. Conclusion and Policy Suggestions.

In all the chapters, the author follows a uniform pattern where he looks into the debate in both Japan and India at the official level, the media, think tanks and at academic circles. He then gives out impartial and very independent conclusion in all the chapters commensurate with his expertise in this field. The author suggests that any modern debate and discussion or even evaluation regarding India-Japan relations dwells too much on the strategic and security aspects of the relationship, or even the economic and political aspects for that matter. He questions the veracity of that chain of thought, especially from the Indian side and makes a very relevant observation that “.....literature on India-Japan relations from the Indian scholars in recent times has laid more emphasis on political and economic aspects of the relationship. They have either given less importance to cultural factor or have totally missed this factor in their discourse” (p. xxiii). And perhaps this has intrigued the author to write this book covering all the aspects such as Cultural, Economic and security issues in their bilateral relationship.

Khan opines that one simply cannot ignore the fact that when Japan and India had almost no links during Japan's self-isolation, it was the cultural and religious connection (read Buddhism), which kept India alive as a country of rich culture and heritage in the Japanese hearts and minds. It is in this respect that the very first chapter of the book traces the cultural and religious roots of the relationship from which, the relationship has evolved and transformed into a special strategic and global partnership as it is termed today in the official documents.

As a reader, I found three aspects in the book very fascinating, viz. a) Japan's help to Indian

Revolutionaries during India's freedom struggle, b) The China factor in Indo-Japan Relations, and c) The Nuclear Deal 'conundrum'. The author brings fresh perspectives into all these three facets and by giving domestic and media reactions, challenges the popular media narrative on them. He takes a look into these issues both historically and in the context of contemporary times and gauges its capacity as to how it impacts ties between the two Asian democracies. He traces the visits of Tagore to Japan which the latter made during 1916 to 1929 and notes, "Tagore's writing and speeches in Japan remains an important source to understand the post-Meiji interactions between India and Japan" (p.12). The author suggests that Tagore, although in awe of Japanese culture and national spirit, questioned Japan's expansionism and even labelled it similar to Western colonialism when he engaged Japanese intelligentsia during his visits. During his two lectures, that the author has succinctly analysed, Tagore forewarned Japan not to emulate Western way of expansionism as it goes beyond the Asian spirit and ideals. But among his hosts there were few takers of his views. Khan writes, "...Tagore proved to be prophetic as Japan's expansionist policies brought disaster for Japan...." (p. 14).

It is a widely accepted view that Japan was assisting Indian underground revolutionaries to uproot the British rule from India. But Khan suggests that Japan too had vested interests in supporting the Indian cause. He emphasises, "Japan considered that to create new order in Asia free from Anglo-American Alliance, it is important to drive out British out of India...." (pp.36-37). To substantiate, his claims he digs deeper into the texts of agreements signed between Japanese officials and the Indian Independence League (IIL) various and various orders issued to Japanese Imperial Army regarding how to delicately handle the Indians and Indian Prisoners' of Wars who joined the Indian National Army, a military wing of the IIL.

It is generally believed that the present India-Japan relation is a by-product of the Rise of China. The author is among the select group of thinkers who refuses to view growing "India-Japan Strategic partnership" only from the prism of the China factor. Japan's renewed interest in India stemmed from the fact that it wanted India to be the protector of its commercial interests in the Indian Ocean, which was marked by the event of India's rescuing its *Alondra Rainbow* vessel from pirates in the Indian Ocean. Now with an ever assertive China with whom Japan has been entangled into various conflicts in the East China Sea and the Senkaku islands dispute, Japan wants India to play a bigger role in the region and balance China's hegemony. It goes without saying that Japan's 'fear' of China is also aided by diminishing US's influence in the East Asian region which happens to be the core Japan's security policy. However, Khan cautions India's policy makers against joining any Japan led or US led bandwagon to encircle China, where it is sure to antagonize the Chinese dragon. He asserts, "Beijing had viewed Tokyo's security partnership with New Delhi, as a mechanism to 'encircle' China..... The strategic doctrine which gives lots of importance to India.....has deepened Chinese doubts further" (p. 80). The author points out that there are several issues where interests of both India and China converge, and sometimes even in opposition to Japanese interests.

For example, both India and China want to put an end to American and Western domination of banking and financial institutions and that is why India took active part in the setting up of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which, incidentally, Japan did not join. However, he also acknowledges India's fine balancing act as he notes "There is a tendency, in both Indian media and Chinese media, to overplay the China factor in India-Japan relations, but sufficient attention has not been paid to India's engagement with China and a fine balance its foreign policy planners are trying to maintain vis-à-vis China and Japan" (p. 72).

The author in this book also questions the efforts of Japan and India in their quest of a 'rules-based order'. He says, "...there is no uniformity on views among Indian and Japanese strategic thinkers whether to forge a new order with or without China" (p.149). He suggests that India and Japan are nowhere equals as Japan is a developed while India is a developing country and urges Japan to do more in respect to bringing India to global high tables like the Nuclear Suppliers Group, Asia Pacific Economic-Cooperation, Wassenar Group, etc. India is ready to align itself according to the new global order, but it must take care of its own interests and is seeking greater participation and say in shaping the newly emerging global order. This is where, the author suggests, Japan has to step up its efforts beyond mere 'commitments' and bring India to the high tables.

Lastly, it is Khan's chapter on the Nuclear Agreement between Japan and India which makes the book a standout, as it is a very recent happening with India and Japan having finalized an agreement in November, 2016. Japan is the only country in the world which has faced the wrath of nuclear weapons, and India, being a non-signatory to the NPT, Japan found it extremely difficult domestically to stitch together any form of nuclear deal with India, albeit civilian. This was seen in Indian quarters as a big achievement and it speaks volumes of the growing trust and the special relationship between the two Asian partners. But the author analysing the reactions within Japanese media and peace groups argues that the Japanese people are still apprehensive about the nuclear deal. He has also analysed the text of the bilateral agreement and he interprets that both have put lots of riders on each in terms of use of nuclear technology as well as termination of the civilian nuclear cooperation.

Also, in the concluding chapter which includes policy suggestions, the author argues that though Japan and India have concluded so many agreements and have made so many commitments some of these are still to put into practice. The author, drawing conclusions from the comparative studies conducted by Indian researchers on India's strategic partnership with other powers points out that the researchers have given lower grades to India's strategic partnership with Japan while they have given high points to India's strategic partnership with Russia, the US, UK and Germany. The author points that it is mainly due to low level of people to people relations and technological cooperation between Japan and India as compare to other partners. The author in this regard suggests the need to strengthen people to people ties between India and Japan and close cooperation between the two countries' educational and

research institutions.

Although Khan has assiduously discussed the latest development between the two nations and cast light on the cultural link between the two countries after Meiji restoration, he has not given sufficient space to the discussion of pre-war trade and un-official cultural relation between the two countries. For instance, India's trade with Japan was not even one percent in 1877, which with the effort of Indian industrialists and traders went up to 12% by 1917. Mr. J.N. Tata of India's one of the oldest industries Tata, which is regarded as India's Mitsubishi, along with his son had visited Japan during 1889-90 to get support from Japanese industrialists to develop spinning industry in India. Mr. Tata had even attempted to open a new shipping service between Japan and India. Many Japanese had shown special interest in India and together with these traders, they established Japan-India Club (1902) with an objective of promoting friendship between the two countries. On the other hand, in the beginning of twentieth century, many Indian scholars from India's princely states: Mysore, Hyderabad etc., too attempted to develop good relation with Japan. Books (e.g. Visvesvaraya, *Reconstructing India*, 1920; Masood, *Japan and its Educational System*, 1923. etc.) on Japan and its educational system were written and published in India. These show India's attempt to reach out Japan and learn from the then Asia's only developed nation. The cultural and trade relation between the two Asian countries that developed more on economic and political reasons should also be taken in to account. Considering these aspects of the pre-war period, would take the book beyond the traditional style of looking at the history of Indo-Japan's relation.

It is not a secret among the scholars that the post war Japan's foreign policy has been greatly influenced by America's, which had also affected her relation with India. It was apparent until late 20th century when one finds Japan closer to Pakistan in comparison to her relation with India. In 21st century, China is getting closer and closer to Pakistan and India to America, would this result in a greater conflict in the region? America has its own interest and calculation in south Asian region; it is significant for the readers to know that how America's changing policy would form Indo-Japan's relation. A deeper analysis of these points is needed. Furthermore, with the visit of Indian premier Dr. Manmohan Singh in 2006, the two countries have already established strategic partnership, the author should have defined the phrase *Special Strategic Partnership*, in distinct words and much deeper analysis of Indo-Japan relation could have been done.

In conclusion, however, it can be said that the author exudes the lucidity and fluidity while discussing various aspects of Japan-India relations and this makes the book easy to read and comprehend issues. This book contains various maps, tables and statistics, which the readers may find very useful. This book can be useful for academicians, students and even officials as they could get many new perspectives on this still evolving relationship. In a nutshell, the book has brought the author recognition as a promising Indian Japanologist.

- * 1 <http://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/6368/Joint+Statement+Towards+IndiaJapan+Strategic+and+Global+Partnership> (accessed on 18/10/2017)