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## Foreign Pulse: Kyoto to Kashi

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From the magnificent capital of pre-modern Japan, Kyoto, to the everlasting epitome of India, Kashi (Benaras or Varanasi), Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe and Narendra Modi have drawn a line of connection that is unparalleled in touching the lives and psyches of ordinary people. As the two leaders raised their arms in unison toward the night sky along the banks of the Ganges last weekend, they symbolically linked the destinies of two partner cities that are metaphors of their respective glorious civilisations.

Everything from water and sewage to transport and building in Kashi is undergoing a facelift with Japanese knowhow in pursuit of Mr Modi's vision of a "smart heritage city", where historical aesthetics, ecological conservation and advanced technology go hand-in-hand the way Kyoto has been designed and maintained to universal acclaim. The message sent by the two leaders from Kashi is profound: we learn from each other and remake ourselves without losing our distinct identities. It is not globalisation of a cookie-cutter model where all aspects become standardised and every city looks like an uninspiring clone of the other. Rather, it is globalisation based on sharing of skills and ideas to preserve local uniqueness via inputs from abroad.

All aspects of the blossoming Japan-India partnership are turning out to be unprecedentedly “glocal”, i.e. robust forms of international cooperation shaping local transformation. Apart from the pairing of Kyoto and Kashi, Messrs. Abe and Modi are overseeing collaboration for superfast bullet trains that will revolutionise India’s land transportation system. Japan’s Shinkansen network of high-speed railways is legendary not just for velocity but for a spotless record in terms of safety and reliability. Shinkansen beat the rival China Railway High-speed (CRH) for the Mumbai-Ahmedabad sector, thanks to the former’s reputation for accident-free functioning, higher quality, workmanship and superior terms of low-interest and long-duration financing to India.

Although it will not be until 2023 when the first Japanese jet train starts operating and drastically cutting travel times and distances in India, it is worth the wait. As Mr Abe puts it, “Japan’s approach to business is to take time and to build things that have quality and meet India’s needs.” It is wise to scale up gradually but surely so that we move from the earlier marvel of the Japanese-constructed Delhi Metro to a broader life-changing experience across corridors of mobility in India. For a Japan whose economy has remained sluggish despite the strenuous efforts of “Abenomics”, helping India modernise is a win-win project which creates demand for its world-class products and services.

India’s infrastructural ramp-ups generate customer orders for Japanese firms, giving a much-sought push to Japan’s GDP growth which keeps stumbling every few quarters. Japan is thus not doing charity to poor India but gaining market access on an equal footing. There are still some remnants of overseas development assistance that Japan dispenses as aid to India, but the relationship today is fundamentally different from the giver-recipient mode of yesteryears. Mr Abe describes India as the “most attractive investment destination” based on the calculation that Japan gets vast material gains from being India’s best friend. Mr Modi’s pride in Japan allocating \$12 billion for the implementation of

“Make in India” is a reflection of the enormous enthusiasm he himself has seeded among Japanese businesses. Although Japan-India camaraderie began zooming even before

Mr Modi assumed the Prime Minister’s office, statistics reveal that in both bilateral trade and investment we had been barely wobbling along. Trade declined by 12 per cent in 2014 over the previous year and Japanese FDI into India had shrunk from \$6 billion to below \$2 billion by the time Mr Modi took charge. If these figures are now being corrected in the healthy direction, much credit goes to Mr Modi, who carved out a special window for Japanese investors and whose reforms have been described by Mr Abe as comparable to the speed and safety of Shinkansen.

That there is a distinct “Modi effect” in taking Japan-India ties to sublime heights is evident from the way New Delhi has pulled off a miracle in getting Tokyo to sign a memorandum on civil nuclear cooperation as a first step to a full deal. Owing to the catastrophic atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan has an ingrained opposition to nuclear weapons and an automatic deference to nuclear non-proliferation regimes. Since India became a de facto nuclear weapons power, carving out an exception for us and engaging in civilian nuclear commerce with us has been anathema in Japan despite its alertness to the larger importance of the bilateral relationship.

Vexing negotiations had been on since 2010, but it is only now that Japan has inched forward to giving India what the United States offered relatively quickly. Cuing the psychological enormity of the memorandum signed last week, Mr Modi commented that he “knows the significance of this decision for Japan” and reassured Mr Abe that India will honour its commitment to restrict nuclear commerce to peaceful purposes. The pace at which the ball is rolling under the stewardship of Mr Abe and Mr Modi suggests that Japan will conclude the ideologically painful but commercially and strategically necessary final agreement for nuclear cooperation in the not-so-distant future.

Japan is the only country designated by India as a “special strategic and global partner”, which is an upgrade over the clichéd “strategic partner” label that India has conferred on more than 20 nations. The emphasis laid by both Mr Abe and Mr Modi on the “global” dimension for securing the Indo-Pacific maritime region is the crux of the matter. Here, the discomfort both of us share about Chinese hegemony is one obvious driving factor. Another motivation is the business potential for India as a site for manufacturing Japanese submarines and aircraft, turning us into the first big market since Mr Abe lifted Japan’s longstanding ban on weapons exports.

China’s thoroughly anti-Japanese state-owned media has reacted harshly to burgeoning military cooperation between Japan and India by alleging that it would “make all peace-loving countries in the world feel worried”. But this bluster from Beijing is in itself a reason for us to celebrate the achievements of the Japan-India tag team in raising the quality of average people’s lives and deterring Asia’s takeover by a single power.

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