



Ambassador of Japan to India Kenji Hiramatsu with Senior Editor Shubhajit Roy in The Indian Express newsroom. Praveen Khanna

‘In this very rapidly changing world, we need a real and trusted friend. And that’s India for us’

The Ambassador of Japan to India Kenji Hiramatsu talks about the ‘exponential increase’ in India-Japan ties, dismisses concerns about the Indo-Pacific Strategy, underlines the need for foreign workers in the face of a declining population, and hopes for more transparency in India’s regulations to help Japanese companies

SHUBHAJIT ROY: How has the relationship between India and Japan evolved in the past two-three years?

If you look at history, our relationship with India is the best now. Soon after I arrived in India, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited the country in December 2015. Since then, several events have taken place and many projects have been implemented — the high-speed railway project, the nuclear project, defence and security-related projects.

In 2014, your Prime Minister came to Japan with his ideas to promote our relationship through a strategic and global partnership. Since I arrived here, that vision has materialised into concrete projects. I see a lot of change in the atmosphere in my two-and-a-half years here, both in terms of business and government interaction. I see more ministers and high-ranking officials visiting Japan. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj visited Japan in March. There has been an exponential increase in cooperation and friendship.

In the future, I would like to see more projects. We have been emphasising on a few areas. One is security and defence. We participated in the Malabar trilateral (naval) exercise with India and the US. Every year, the level of the exercise has been growing. I would like to see more cooperation in technology transfer from Japan to India. Secondly, we have also been talking about supporting development in the Northeast region and enhancement of connectivity in surrounding areas in India. The third area is people exchange. I would like more Indian experts, engineers and workers to visit Japan to see our advanced technology. I hope more Indians learn the Japanese language. It will facilitate mutual understanding and create opportunities for Indian workers in companies.

SHUBHAJIT ROY: How do you see the Indo-Pacific Strategy unfolding? Is the longevity of the quadrilateral — India, Japan, Australia and the US — under question, given that Australia did not participate in the Malabar exercise. We also see some unpredictability in America’s position.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy is getting a lot of attention in this region. I think India shares our views on opening up the Pacific region. It is a good synergy. Every time the two prime ministers meet they reconfirm the importance of this strategy. We (India and Japan) share the same values in terms of freedom of navigation, unilateral trading system, democracy... One of the key elements of this strategy is to find ways to ensure that these basic values are appreciated and that they prevail.

Also, there are other countries who share these views. One is the United States. We are hoping to have more cooperation from ASEAN nations too. It is a very open strategy. Every country is welcome if they agree to the strategy and want to work together to have better infrastructure in the region. I think the Americans are on the same page. We have had longstanding trilateral dialogues with India and the US. We also have the Japan-US-Australia trilateral dialogue. Then there is the Japan-India-Australia dialogue. The (quadrilateral) part-

nership is a natural relationship among these countries. We hope and I am very confident that this quadrilateral dialogue will continue.

SHUBHAJIT ROY: Is the cooperation and dialogue aimed at balancing China’s assertiveness in the region?

We are not trying to counter a certain country. We are aiming for a more global, universal value that no country can contradict. The effort is to ensure that this basic value prevails in the region.

AVISHEK G DASTIDAR: What does Japan hope to gain through the high-speed railway project in India?

We are very pleased to support the high-speed railway project in India. Japan’s first high-speed railway was established in 1964. I was eight years old at the time. We saw a very bright future for it in Japan. We have a very renowned technology for strategic high-speed railway in Japan. We hope that the same can be achieved in this country.

We have decided to provide a very generous soft room for the project. However, this is not free unfortunately — there is 0.1 per cent interest rate on the loan, with a repayment period of 50 years (including 15 years of grace period). It is rare for us to have provided this kind of a generous term to an infrastructure project.

AVISHEK G DASTIDAR: The project has faced criticism from certain quarters for being too expensive.

The high-speed railway will provide a lot of benefit to the people of India in the form of a very stable and safe transport system. It will create a lot of job and business opportunities in the region. The project will be very beneficial to the local people and will also bring in Japanese technology to the railway sector. The money used for the project will be well spent.

AVISHEK G DASTIDAR: Earlier, as per the assessment of the Japanese team, the deadline for the project was 2023. The Indian government wants it completed a year earlier — in 2022. Is that possible?

As per the timeline, the project is slated to be completed in 2023 and we are working on that assumption. I know of the Indian government’s request to advance it to sometime in 2022. We are talking and discussing... But can we do this? Not completely but to some extent. But we haven’t yet decided what we can complete by 2022 and then 2023. The important thing is that this is a highly complicated and sophisticated system and safety matters most. We have to ensure that the system is operational in a verified manner and that all the safety measures are applied.

RAVISH TIWARI: Growing up, we had a brush with Japanese technology in the form of the Sony Walkman. Today, the consumer electronics segment has changed and we do not see any new innovation coming out of Japan.

There is more competition in the world today and there are new players in technology. In Japan, we are proud of our manufacturing sector — how to make a differ-

WHY KENJI HIRAMATSU

In his two-and-a-half years in India, Ambassador Kenji Hiramatsu has been at the centre of several big policy decisions. A career diplomat, Hiramatsu has been instrumental in the implementation of



the high-speed railway project and has also been closely following the civil nuclear co-operation between the two nations. He has been the architect of many security strategies in the Japanese foreign ministry

ent technology and assemble it to produce a high-tech product. The products from Sony and Japanese cars are a product of this long tradition of manufacturing.

(On innovation) Several Japanese scientists have received the Nobel prize in science, technology, biology and physics. This is pure science. In terms of applied science, maybe we should ponder more. With the combination of advanced applied technology and our traditional manufacturing culture, we can do great things. Maybe we are lagging behind in the IoT (Internet of Things) segment, in the field of information technology... We are putting a lot of emphasis on ways to have more innovative ideas in our StartUps and IoT business. I am confident Japan is making a comeback. Japan has also been putting a lot of emphasis on the AI (Artificial Intelligence) business and will continue to be a leader in the field.

SHUBHAJIT ROY: We know from latest data that Japan’s population is falling below the replacement rate. Also, there is almost no immigration.

Yes, our population has started declining. We have a new policy on how to have more babies. That is one part of our policy. It will take some time for the population to increase. It is a huge challenge. I think no country has experienced such a phenomenon before. Germany, South Korea or even China will face this situation sometime soon. We have to ensure that we have a good standard of living — we have to maintain it and improve it. One way of doing this is to make better use of human resources. We hope that even after retirement people can be more



involved in their (respective) industries. The second element is human empowerment. Japan is putting a lot of emphasis on how to have more women at the workplace even after marriage and children. We are giving them a lot of incentives and providing them better childcare facilities. In this way we can have a better workforce in the coming years. But this might not be enough.

Immigration has been a big issue for many years. I have to say there is no conclusion at this moment but it is obvious that we need more workers coming to Japan, especially in the manufacturing and service sector. We have already put in place a system to invite more foreign workers by providing them internship and training opportunities through the TITP — Technical Intern Training Programme.

SHUBHAJIT ROY: Are you open to a skilled professionals programme from a country like India? Say, an H1B visa or a similar programme?

We have started receiving Indian engineers to Japan under TITP. I haven’t checked but 15 Indian workers will go to Japan to have this training for three years, which may be extended to five years. This is still a very small number. The whole policy is geared towards having more skilled labour. We have started a new scheme to give permanent residency permit. If you stay for three years, satisfying some criterion as high-skilled labour, then you can get permanent residency. The government of Japan aims to recognise 20,000 foreign nationals as highly-skilled foreign professionals by the end of 2022 and will give them preferential immigration treatment

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when they apply for the permanent residence status.

ANIL SASI: One of the initial decisions by the two governments, sometime in October 2014, was to set up a Japan Plus desk to facilitate investment flows from Japan.

Yes, that’s an important initiative. In 2014, the Japanese PM announced that we’ll have 3.5 trillion Japanese Yen investment flowing to India in five years... In 2017, the investment from Japan to India touched 7 billion US dollars. (In 2016, it was around USD 7.4 billion.)

RAVISH TIWARI: There are two elephants in every diplomat’s room — the US and China — with Japan somewhere in the middle. How do you see a retreating United States and an assertive China?

I have been in diplomacy for many years. So I have been dealing with China and the US for many years. This is a very important moment that China is getting bigger and getting more friends in the region. The US is a very prime power in the world. From the Japanese point of view, our alliance and relationship with the US is fundamental for security in the region. We think that the Japan-US alliance is the cornerstone in the Asia-Pacific region. At the same time, we’d like to have a better relationship with China. China is getting more influential in terms of military, business and economy. We have a substantial business and investment relationship with China and we have to make sure that we have a stable relationship with China. This is a challenge we are facing. But fortunately, our relationship with China is now improving. We have some difficulty as people, but this year, we had Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visiting us in April. We also had a trilateral meeting with leaders of China, South Korea and Japan. Also, the Chinese PM visited us after eight years. So things have been improving. China needs stable conditions with its neighbours. I think the same thing is happening with India too.

At the same time, our most important security relationship is with the United States. In this very rapidly changing world, we need a real and trusted friend. And that’s India for us. I hope the same from India too. We have no controversies or issues, and we share the same kind of view with regard to our relationship in this region.

RAVISH TIWARI: Why haven’t China and Japan managed to get rid of their historical baggage the way Japan and the US have?

Like other countries, we have a long history and history has not always been kind. We really want to have a forward-looking relationship with China.

AMRITH LAL: How does Japan see China’s One Belt One Road project?

We hope this project follows responsible debt practices and respects the environment. If this project is implemented under this philosophy... I understand that countries like India and some others have

concerns about the project.

SHUBHAJIT ROY: During the Doklam standoff, you were the only ambassador who came out and publicly supported the Indian stand. Looking back, what prompted you to take that step?

What I said was the long-standing principled position of Japan. I said territorial issues should be resolved based on international law. I don’t think I said anything wrong.

SANDEEP SINGH: Japanese manufacturing companies have been at the forefront of many of the major economic changes that India saw. But we do not see any big retailers from Japan coming to India and profiting out of the consumer boom in India.

Yes, our investment has been concentrated in the manufacturing sector, especially automobiles and the automobile-parts sector. But I think the area of investment is expanding to include areas such as services and the medical sector, among others. We have MUJI, which is a renowned Japanese retail sector company providing sophisticated but simple products such as stationery, furniture etc. They have their stores here. Soon, a textile company (UNIQLO) will come to India.

AJAY SHANKAR: What is the feedback you have been getting from Japanese companies in India?

We appreciate the reform measures taken by Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s administration — GST etc. Compared to the earlier times, the investment situation has improved. We see more improvement in infrastructure development, roads, electricity and water supply. We have some concerns and we hope that infrastructure is better in the future. Government regulations are getting better. Some companies, however, are still having some difficulties with regulatory and tax issues. So I keep reminding the officials and the government to expedite the procedure and to become more transparent with regulations.

SHUBHAJIT ROY: What is the status of the nuclear cooperation between India and Japan?

The civil nuclear cooperation agreement happened in 2015 when our Prime Minister came to India. The signing of the document took place in 2016 when your PM came to Japan. This agreement became effective sometime last year. We had one meeting a couple of months ago. We arrived at something concrete but at this moment I cannot tell you much.

SHUBHAJIT ROY: Japan has been a victim of terror in the past few years.

It shows that Japan is not immune to terror. We are mindful that we have to get more information, we have to collaborate with countries like India to make sure that Japanese citizens are not affected by terror. We have the Olympics and the Para Olympics in 2020 and many people will be visiting the country. We have to be more careful.