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India and Japan: Strategic Partners

The two help themselves and geopolitical stability

India and Japan have dialogue at the summit level on an annual basis. Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is in India for this year's summit. The focus of attention is a bullet train. But it would not be individual projects that catch the Chinese eye, but the coming together of two poles of Asian power in broad-based solidarity that combines finance and armed strength, high-quality engineering and the ability to deploy it in third countries minus overbearing external benefactors, and projection of a decent counterweight to China's rising power in the region.

India and Japan are joining hands to develop the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, a series of infrastructure projects that would enhance trade and well-being in Africa and Asia. Not so coincidentally, it would stand alongside China's ambitious One Belt-One Road project. The Indo-Japanese venture's aim is to create local ownership of the projects undertaken, not just in a financial sense, but also in terms of local involvement in design, management and execution. Japanese firms would find markets for their expertise, high-end engineering products and services; India's goodwill as a third-world champion from the time of struggles for decolonisation to the striving for development would crystallise projects and ease execution. The result would stand as an alternative to aggressive Chinese projects that bring in hordes of Chinese workers and equipment and leave behind a huge financing obligation whose precise contours are yet to crystallise. The Malabar naval exercise — jointly undertaken by the navies of India, America and Japan — also sends out a signal that there is no power vacuum for China to move into as it rises as a power. It is a signal that China's stated aim of a peaceful rise calls for negotiation and accommodation, not unilateral action.

Of course, Indo-Japanese cooperation is also about bilateral gains. If India does not execute with speed and efficiency internal projects sponsored by China, that would derail much more than a bullet train project. Success would facilitate Indo-Chinese cooperation as well.

Fidget Lessons on Educating Indians

The fidget is a simple toy comprising a central weighted disc and paddle blades whose effortless spinning has been helpful for children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. But the fidget toy has come to have a much broader appeal. It has, in a short span of time, come to account for a sizeable share of global toy market. The fidget toy is a simple and imaginative product. It was not conceived of in India. Nor are other toys that capture the world's fancy.

Key to unleashing the power of imagination is the education system. Economic disruption in every age can be traced back to innovations, be it the steam engine or the electric bulb or the internet. Now, given concerns over the resource constraints and planetary limits, imagination and innovation have become ever more important. The Indian education system needs to move away from the current system of rote learning, sans regard for analytic and critical thinking. It also needs a cultural shift, moving away from a world view that sees questioning as subversion of order to one that encourages questioning of norms. Imagination and innovation might not easily be taught but can be inculcated by emphasis on questioning, creativity and analytical thinking. This will require changes in pedagogy, and the manner in which teachers function in a classroom. The teacher must evolve from being the manager of students.

The Indian mind has shown its dexterity in the way it adapts. The practice of jugaad borne from the need to make do with fewer resources is good example of this dexterity. But it is no longer enough to adapt. India needs to move beyond this if it is to emerge as a leader and create value. Reforming the classroom is the first and most important step if India is to transform into a nation of innovation.

Japanese fusion food is a global hit, and Ahmedabad could now join the party

Japarati or Gujupanese Fare, Anyone?

As old friends Narendra (Modi) and Shinzo (Abe) met in Ahmedabad again with hefty delegations of officials and businesspeople in tow, it was not surprising that there was fusion afoot. And, well, acook. Among the nibbles apparently laid on for this Indo-Japanese prime ministerial powwow — besides classic favourites of the host, handvo and undhiyu — were dhokla maki and khichdi sushi. While the uninitiated may pucker up at the thought of besan (chickpea flour) and seaweed in symphony, the two VIPs are lucky their meal was not dished up by another visiting celebrity, Chef Gaggan Anand from Bangkok. He not only has just Japanese-style emojis on his menu cards, he has been known to turn dhokla or khandvi into mousse with coconut nitro "snow" and curry leaves. While the two PMs are obviously all for technology — the bullet train, after all, is a major part of the Ahmedabad agenda — whether the two would have been able or willing to stomach such radical creativity is moot.

However, Japanese fusion food is becoming increasingly popular in major cities across the globe, with ramen burgers and sushi burritos leading the way. The Peruvian-Japanese melange called Nikkei food is already a cult gastronomic genre, so this week's Japarati or Gujupanese experiment could put Ahmedabad on the cutting-edge cuisine map too.

JAZZ BY THE BAY — Progressive policies and acceptance of failure will drive innovation

A Chip Off the Silicon Valley

Milind Deora

I'm writing in from Silicon Valley, which never ceases to amaze me. It is a self-contained universe of novel ideas and inspired innovations that are gradually transforming and revolutionising the world as we know it.

The Valley's stature as the breeding ground for technological genius stems from the values extolled and embraced by California. It has fostered a culture of innovation that rewards bold, unconventional ideas, and creativity in developing new products.

This has been facilitated by a combination of factors. Firstly, California has an illustrious ecosystem of universities that produce copious amounts of relevant, cutting-edge research, which is critical to fuel innovation in any context.

Secondly, the liberal ethos of California does not allow discrimination on arbitrary grounds such as gender and race. It cares about the potential of an idea, and the ability of an individual to execute it.

Thirdly, it has managed to create and sustain a culture of intelligent failure. Calculated risks when potential rewards justify it are healthy and, indeed, the fundamental basis of innovation, and are, therefore, encouraged. The failure of an intelligent idea does not doom the future of an individual; it does not end careers; it does not deter banks from lending to a failed entrepreneur, nor investors from believing in their ideas.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Indians flourish and excel in this environment, but India itself has so far been unable to emerge as a formidable player in global innovation. In juxtaposition to the culture of Silicon Valley, we continue to discriminate along the lines of gender, religion and other arbitrary criteria, essentially throttling ideas.

We have also failed to establish universities and a system of education that is capable of and conducive to producing the quality of research that is a prerequisite to transformative innovations, despite the robust culture of startups that we're witnessing in India now.

FILE PHOTO

Next stop, Silicon Valley

Failure is Fail-Safe

Lastly, India continues to stigmatise failure, and a corollary of that is the stigmatising of risk-taking behaviour. Entrepreneurs are, therefore, scared to test new ideas, and lenders are apprehensive to invest. During the first e-boom in 2000, for instance, many who had intelligent ideas failed and had to go back to family businesses or pursue alternate careers as their past failures forced them out of participation in the second internet boom a decade later.

This is perhaps why we've only been able to scratch the surface of what we can potentially achieve in the tech space. While we might have been able to attain efficiency in terms of building world-class labour arbitrage service providers, our investment in research and development and enhancing product capabilities is severely lacking.

Individuals like Sundar Pichai and Satya Nadella are heading disruptive companies in disruptive spaces. While Silicon Valley has fostered the culture of innovation in an open and democratised fashion, China is leapfrogging this process to capture global markets in an almost state-interventionist manner. China's economic and strategic interests are aligned, and it uses its protectionist policies to its advantage.

China has utilised its massive population base of one billion people to establish global companies in terms of scale. Apart from creating and nurturing its markets, Chinese investors have a massive stake in India's e-commerce and digital payments systems.

While the models of Silicon Valley and China are disparate, they have one thing in common: neither of them is a space of conflict.

It is a fact that technological innovation flourishes in periods of war and conflict. This is because the copious investment in defence and military technology percolates and is transferred to civilian technology. Both Rolls-Royce engines and German engineering were perfected during the World War 2.

To put India's performance in the tech and military space into perspective, a comparison of India's DRDO and America's Darpa, both formed in 1958, is illuminative. While Darpa essentially invented the internet, DRDO continues to produce tanks that are 20 years late and guns that don't fire, while its list of "innovations" include mosquito repellent and berry juice.

The three aforementioned models are essentially how countries have managed to foster innovation. India isn't fighting any wars and investing heavily in defence technology, so that model is immediately disregarded. We cannot replicate China's model either.

Instead of leapfrogging the culture of innovation, then, we should focus on creating one. India needs to find its sweet spot, and the Silicon Valley model is our best bet.

Not Throttle, Full Throttle

The government has a key role to play in this process: one, it needs to be proactive in overhauling regressive social policies, and two, it needs to reconsider its policy of banning activities that it doesn't approve of, because it smothers intelligent innovation and pushes operations underground.

We, therefore, need to create a niche for ourselves in pursuit of the Silicon Valley model and its culture of innovation. That niche is the fostering of a fair society that is conducive to a free flow of ideas, one where ideas and execution are paramount and discrimination on arbitrary grounds is non-existent, where intelligent failure is encouraged and scalable innovation is not only rewarded but becomes a mainstream exercise.

The writer is former minister of state for IT & communications

In juxtaposition to the culture of Silicon Valley, we continue to discriminate on gender, religion and other arbitrary criteria, essentially throttling ideas

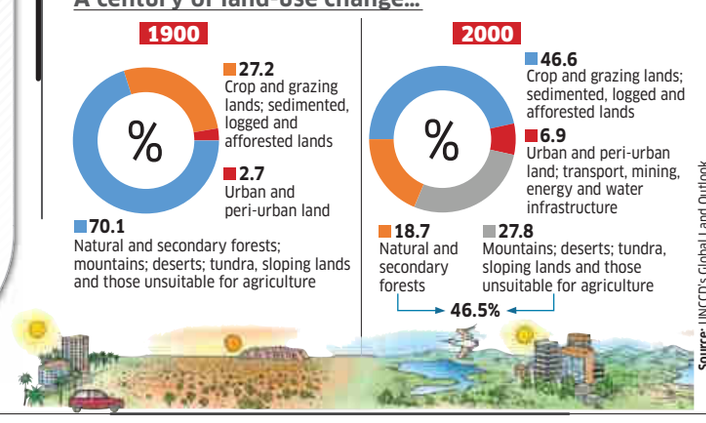
WIT & WISDOM

"It is not love that should be depicted as blind, but self-love."
Voltaire
Philosopher

Land Degradation

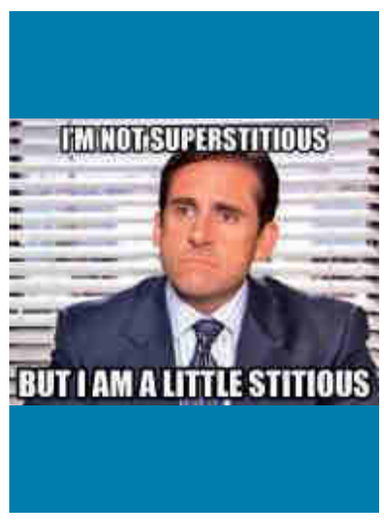
A third of the planet's land is now severely degraded thanks to a doubling in the consumption of natural resources over the last 30 years, according to a new UN report, which estimates that some 15 billion trees and 24 billion tonnes of fertile soil are lost each year...

A century of land-use change...



Source: UNCCD's Global Land Outlook

MEME'S THE WORD



NUCLEAR-ARMED NORTH KOREA

Launch Negotiation Missile

Yusuf T Unjhawala

North Korea has successfully tested a hydrogen bomb, leaving no doubt about the advancement and maturity of its nuclear weapons programme. The test is a major escalation in the tense East Asian region. North Korea twice tested the Hwasong-14 intercontinental-range ballistic missile in July that puts the US West Coast within range. They have also tested other ballistic missiles, the latest of which it fired over Japan.

Experts doubt the technological capability of North Korea to make miniature warheads to fit into a missile. However, Pyongyang will continue to test its ballistic missiles to increase the efficiency and also perfect the re-entry vehicle.

The countries most threatened — South Korea, Japan and the US — were swift to condemn the test. US President Donald Trump offered to sell more advanced weapons to South Korea and Japan to deter North Korea. The US has already started to deploy the terminal high-altitude area defence system in South Korea.

The situation can worsen as there are voices within South Korea and Japan to exercise the nuclear option. Both these countries have advanced nuclear industries. Japan reportedly is just a screwdriver away from becoming a nuclear weapons state should it choose to tread that path. The US under President Trump has started to lose the trust of its allies who feel the US, which provided a security umbrella through the Cold War, won't stand by them. In fact, during his election campaign, Trump had said that US allies should take more responsibility for their own security and indicated that Japan and South Korea should have their own nuclear weapons.

Sooner or later, Japan and South Korea will turn that screwdriver and become overtly nuclear. Besides the rogue regime in North Korea, they also face the expansionist China that stakes claims on vast areas of land and sea in East and South China Sea. China, which has troubled relations with Japan, established an air defence identification zone of Japanese island of Senkaku that Beijing claims as its own.

China played a crucial role in North Korea's advances in nuclear weapons. It supplied Pakistan with nuclear know-how and enriched uranium, and is said to have conducted a test on Pakistan's behalf in 1992 in Lop Nur. Pakistan collaborated with North Korea, giving it nuclear bomb design in return for missile technology. China was complicit in this trade, and miscalculated the strategic harm its proliferation will cause.

As Japan and South Korea look at ways to deter Pyongyang by stationing US nuclear weapons and missile defence or take the extreme step of developing their own nuclear weapons, it is China that will stand to lose the most. China was the only nuclear power in East and Southeast Asia until a decade ago. It could soon end up with three neighbours on its east with nuclear weapons that blunts its deterrent, forcing it to get into an arms race.

The US is likely to remain engaged in the region, and has now threatened to impose economic sanctions on China if the latter does not implement the new sanctions regime against North Korea.

North Korea's move has a bearing on India's security due to the historic cooperation between Pyongyang and Islamabad in nuclear and missile development. Not only can North Korea provide its latest warhead designs but also with longer-range missiles. No surprise that India, which has maintained a line of communication with Kim Jong-un, condemned the test.

North Korea's advances in nuclear weapons technology is a reminder that the world is better off without more countries getting nuclear weapons. There are many in India who want to share nuclear weapons and missile technology with Vietnam as a counter to China doing so with Pakistan. It is best that the nuclear genie is kept firmly inside and not let loose as we never know which way the regimes lean, creating security nightmares.

The nuclear deal that P5+1 sealed with Iran, which stops Tehran from developing nuclear weapons, assumes bigger importance and a template. President Trump, who is against the deal and wants it scrapped, will be well advised against it as a nuclear Iran will destabilise the entire Middle East as other countries will follow suit. This includes Israel that is thought to have nuclear weapons but not tested them.

As for North Korea, it is better that the world accepts the reality of it being a nuclear weapons power and forgets about denuclearising it. Kim seeks security of his regime and recognition. Imposing sanctions and trying to isolate Pyongyang has not worked. Getting to the negotiating table is the only option to prevent any catastrophe.

FILE PHOTO

The plan shouldn't bomb

The writer is editor, Defence Forum India

Citings

Financial Future

ECKART WINDHAGEN

Financial globalisation is surprisingly robust. Financial markets remain deeply interconnected, but with a different profile. The global value of foreign investment as a percentage of GDP has been steady since 2007, at around 180%, and now stands as an absolute figure at more than $130 trillion.

Globally, 27% of equities are held by foreign investors. That's up from 17% in 2000. And 31% of bonds are foreign-owned, up from 18% in 2000. Only lending has declined as a share of GDP, and we also see reasons to believe that the system is likely to be more stable than it was before the crisis. In cross-border capital flows, there's now less debt, which is intrinsically volatile. And there's more foreign direct investment and equities, which are less volatile.

Today, FDI and equities account for two-thirds of cross-border capital flows, compared with just one-third before 2007. What should make the system more stable, overall, is the fact that financial and capital account imbalances have dropped, from 2.6% of GDP in 2007 to 1% of GDP in 2016. And the US-China share is down by half. But, of course, there are still significant risks, and there is no room for complacency.

Gross capital flows, particularly cross-border lending, remain volatile. In the last five years, more than 60% of developing countries, and over 70% of advanced economies, have had either a large decline or a surge or reversal or recovery in cross-border lending each year.

From "Financial Globalisation Hits a More Stable, Inclusive Stride"

the speaking tree

Service Before Self

PRANAV KHULLAR

The simple words, "Serve, love, give, purify, meditate and realise" became the watchwords of Swami Sivananda's Divine Life Society, encapsuling the entire corpus of Vedantic tradition. "Meditation will come by itself ...," he would say. "What is essential is to purify the inner consciousness first, and a prerequisite to that is to serve first."

His concept of the divine life revolved around a strong ethical base, without which meditation would be limited to being a superficial exercise. This emphasis on the development of an ethical culture as an essential stepping stone towards understanding of the inner Self, translated itself into passionate social service. This, Sivananda believed, would ensure a sense of vairagya in the aspirant, awakening him to a different dimension of reality, wherein the suffering of the less fortunate would propel him faster to his spiritual goals.

The passion to serve manifested itself further in his efforts to disseminate knowledge to all through his writings. Sivananda wrote pamphlets, monographs, booklets, letters, books and bhasyas, flowing from his practical and simple approach to life, conveying great spiritual truths with simplicity. His interpretation of ancient texts always prodded one to practice, which alone makes those truths come alive for a sadhaka.

His teachings were aimed at intense self-effort, which he felt to be the key to success in all endeavours, spiritual or otherwise. His unique DIN (Do it now) principle exemplified his focused and pragmatic approach to spirituality and life, both.

Chat Room

CEO Salaries and Nation's GDP

Apropos 'Restructure, Not Cap, CEO Remuneration' (Sep 13), indeed, such caps are ineffective and counterproductive, but CEO remuneration in any country must have a relationship with its GDP and per-capita income. In our enthusiasm to catch up with the western world, let us not further widen the gap between our minimum and maximum wages. As it is, the chasm is mind-boggling, and any escalation in the same is a recipe for social unrest.

KRISHAN KALRA
By e mail

Educate Youth on Heritage

This refers to 'Host the Great India Show' by Neeraj Kaushal (Sep 12). The changes needed to promote tourism can come when our own people, especially the youth, are educated and made aware of the diversity and richness of the country's heritage. It's extremely important to be accommodative and inclusive as a society to make India a thriving tourist destination. Better roads, telecom infrastructure, air connectivity and maintaining law and order will enthuse foreign visitors, help job creation in the sector, bring in more foreign exchange and boost the economy, overall. The tourism industry will also have to adapt to the rising demands of discerning visitors.

PRANAVA GUPTA
Ujjain

Don't Condemn the Bullet Train

The Mumbai-Ahmedabad High-Speed Rail project is a big milestone for the country and will spur similar projects on other routes and corridors. Let's not condemn the project as elitist, as had been done when the Rajdhani trains were introduced. We must have high-speed trains with complete safety, and projects such as these are fine as long as they are financially viable. But the Railways also needs to find innovative ways to fund its modernisation plan without leaning too much on resources from the exchequer.

PARTHASARATHY SEN
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