

Abe's auspicious visit

Will propel bilateral ties to new height

THE upward thrust to the traditionally deep rooted Bangladesh-Japan relationship has been quite noticeable, particularly since Shinzo Abe took over as Japan's prime minister for the second time in 2012. We are certain that the trend will receive an even greater momentum by his visit to our country

Japan has been not only a longtime friend but also a time tested one offering us its unstinted support despite its facing economic crunch at times; we notice with deep gratitude that there was no pull back in its level of support even after the devastating tsunami in 2006.

The fact that Japan attaches great significance to furthering development cooperation between the two countries through the visit is borne out by the very composition of Prime Minister Abe's entourage. As many as 50 executives from top companies of Japan involved in varieties of activities are accompanying him to Dhaka. And the first meeting he and his team had was with the business leaders of Bangladesh. And that, we are certain, will help advance the "Japan-Bangladesh Comprehensive Partnership" even further.

In our march towards a middle income country, friends like Japan have been important and indispensable partners. And Japan shares with us the view that Bangladesh must diversify and seek newer markets for its products, particularly to the East, including Japan, to attain that status. For that Japan's support for our rapid growth is vital. And to encourage Japanese investment, which is imperative for our growth, we must do all we can to remove the bureaucratic rigmaroles to facilitate Japanese investors who are willing to invest in Bangladesh in a big way.

Unwarranted rise in prices

Activate monitoring mechanism

BY what has been reported in this newspaper, we are taken aback to see the unusual hike in prices of produce, and that too coming from regions relatively unaffected by recent floods is rather inexplicable. The excuse put forward by merchants that supply of vegetables has been curtailed due to the natural calamity does not hold up in the face of facts. How are consumers to deal with a rise in prices of essential food items to the tune of up to 50 per cent on certain popular vegetables in the span of a week? Needless to say, consumers other than the upper class are feeling the pinch to the fullest.

Although we are fully aware that the recent floods have created some problems with the supply chain of vegetables to the capital city, surely it does not warrant a kind of spate in prices that is being observed. How can the price per kilo of chilli rise threefold from Tk40 per kilo to Tk120 per kilo within seven days? Obviously, there has been withholding of supplies at wholesale level to create an artificial shortage at retail level. One may ask precisely why the authorities have no effective kitchen market price monitoring cell to prevent traders from taking consumers for a ride. That syndicates are behind manipulation of pricing is old news. The current spurt in prices should serve as an early warning for the government to continuously keep tab on prices and intervene when necessary to protect consumers' interest.

Knot it with Japan

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

JAPAN has always been a true friend of us for well over four decades. In particular, Bangladesh has been one of Japan's largest aid and development partners, but couldn't we have obtained more from Japan than what we have as friends?

The biggest lesson missed perhaps is: how a war torn country like Japan turned into an economic powerhouse. Surprisingly, Apart from the two massive red circles from the flags of Bangladesh and Japan almost nothing stands common in between the two countries.

Japan the world's largest electronics goods industry and third largest automobile producing nation would have invested in many of the related sectors long ago if we could have ensured a business friendly environment.

Coupled with an entourage of some 50 top executives belonging to a variety of commercial sectors Shinzo Abe's visit has more of an aroma of a business visit , behind which he is reported to be seeking Bangladesh's support for a non-permanent seat for Japan at the UN. But as it's widely understood it's investment that the Japanese have foremost in their minds. If that's so, let's hope we have prepared ourselves in advance. Given the sheer size and enthusiasm of the business entourage team we need to make sure that the visit not ends with only high hopes and MoU signings, but with confirmed specific investment deals.

It's believed that Japanese proposals may include financial supports for linking Dhaka with Matarbari near the port city of Chittagong, establishment of an industrial zone and an industrial park amounting to large sums, but much out of this investment horizon still remains unexplored.

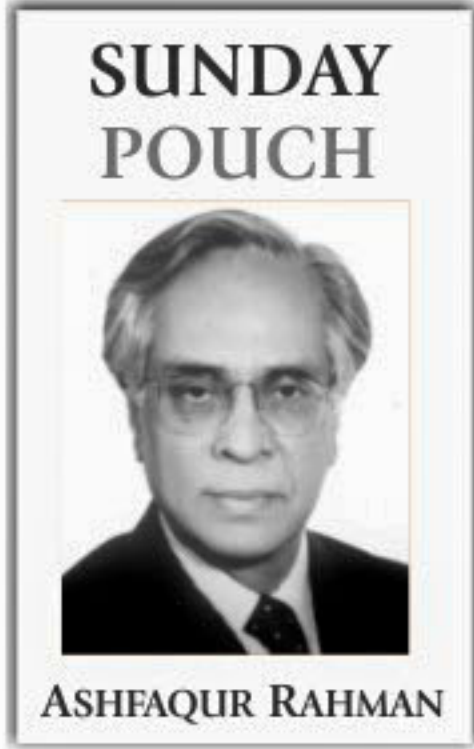
In spite of having a friend like Japan it's rather unfortunate that we have progressed so little in making cars, not for exports, but at least for our domestic market. We should seek Japanese technical and financial assistance in terms of producing low cost and environment friendly automobiles. We need to think beyond the lines of only Japanese investments, and focus more deeply on how we can thrive in creating joint-venture business schemes.

Who knows, Toyota's future target market in South-East Asia may appear more viable and profitable from having a manufacturing plant located in Bangladesh than in Japan's Aichi? Potentials for a joint electronic industry should be explored. Moreover, the prospect of Bangladesh workers recruitment in Japan has never been untapped.

The potentials of Abe's visit with the many of the Japanese business executives is huge, but it's largely up to us to ensure that Bangladesh is an ideal destination for Japanese investments.

A quote about contemporary Japan seems most appropriate during Abe's visit and that is - "Japan never considers time together as time wasted. Rather, it is time invested." The Japanese way of investing has begun.

Was Abe's Dhaka visit a strategic game changer?



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

IN a few hours Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan leaves our shores to fly to his next destination, Sri Lanka. In the past twenty hours in Dhaka, he covered a lot of ground to talk and listen to the economic and commercial requirements of Bangladesh. In the end Abe has signed agreements that should keep her counterpart, our PM Sheikh Hasina, as well as the people of Bangladesh happy for the next two years at least. Also investment in Bangladesh will allow Japan to find a low cost destination for its investments abroad and free it from the investments she has been making in China which is becoming more expensive. Bangladesh is appreciative of Japan's gesture, not only for investments by Japanese private sector, but also the Japanese government, in Bangladesh's infrastructure. Japan is surely going to help us to create a true industrial base.

But the visit of Abe to Dhaka after only a few months of Sheikh Hasina's visit to Tokyo is quite interesting. Is there something more that analysts are reading into this visit? What is really happening in the politico strategic sphere that has perhaps prompted Abe to make the quick return trip to Dhaka? Of course, there was the question of the non permanent seat in the UN Security Council for which Japan and Bangladesh were the two candidates from Asia. And Sheikh Hasina gave Abe the good news.

Let us be quite clear. Japan is quite at unease with China and its emerging economic and military strength. Not only is China flexing its muscles over its claim over certain islands close to Japan but Japan is also seeing how the security environment is fast changing in the South China Sea.

Recently, Indian PM Narendra Modi went on a lightening trip to Tokyo and deepened ties with Japan if in case India has to confront China at any time. Abe, according to the Japanese press, 'is following up in his South Asian overdrive to place Japan in Bangladesh -- one of the world's promising emerging markets and investment destinations'. It is aiming to deepen its relationship with Dhaka ahead of China. It wants to expand 'comprehensive partnership' with Dhaka which he signed when Sheikh Hasina was in Tokyo. The visit of Abe to Dhaka is to cement those ties in more concrete form through trade and investments as well as building industrial infrastructure.

But let us go back a little in time and try to understand why the sudden move by Japan to grab the strategic space. It all began when President Obama a few years back called for a gradual withdrawal of its military assets from the Middle East and move them towards Asia. Obama felt that that there are vital interests at stake in Asia, especially China's emerging clash of interests with her neighbours like Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Philippines and even India. He thought that gradually a coalition of the willing with Japan, Australia and India as well as a few others could straddle Asia and keep China at bay. The US could conveniently stay in the background with its military assets to give these countries the backing they need.

However, in 2013 an important meeting was held of the



Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan (center) with other officials during his visit to Dhaka.

that China would come forward to ensure that greater benefits and gains will flow from China's development. China of course cautioned that those neighbours who will remain hostile to China or oppose it will face sustained periods of sanctions and isolation.

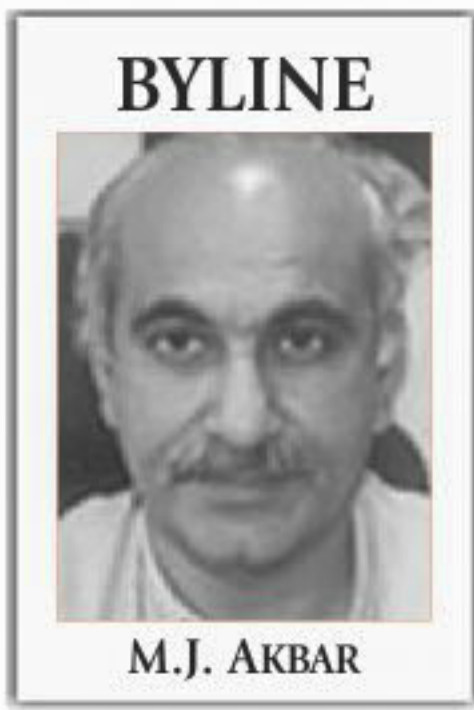
China has realised that the US 'pivot to Asia' has disturbed China's strategy in Asia. China regrets especially Japan PM Abe's visit to Yasukuni shrine and accused him of continuously 'irritating its neighbors' by attempting to downplay its 'fascist' history and revise its pacifist constitution to make overseas deployment of soldiers possible.

It is in juxtaposition to the new Chinese foreign policy towards her neighbours that has urgently pushed the Japanese PM, among other reasons, to make overtures to countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

The critical test of our diplomacy is to see whether we can keep both our powerful Asian neighbours, China and Japan, equally content. Also how our other giant neighbour India will view this tripwire diplomacy by Bangladesh. Of course we have certain geostrategic advantages which we have to selectively and deftly play with to keep hostilities away. But for the moment let us work with whichever big neighbour comes our way and hold our hands and help us prosper. So PM Abe's Dhaka visit cannot be assessed as a strategic game changer for Japan. It has to wait a bit longer to understand the complex ways in which our diplomacy moves.

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September will sparkle in history of Indian diplomacy



M.J. AKBAR

THERE are many ways of travelling from India to America. One of them is via Japan. That indeed is the quickest way to the richest parts of USA, the west coast; and the only option if you are headed towards the heart of America's strategic presence in the Pacific, Hawaii.

The Pacific, overlapping the Indian Ocean, is far closer to us than the Mediterranean or the Atlantic. Our popular, and policy, reflexes so far have been so embedded in attitudes formed during the British Raj that we have stopped thinking of the Pacific as the bridgehead to anywhere. Japan, China, Australia and America are Pacific mercantile and military powers.

This quadrilateral is at the top of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy. September 2014 will sparkle in the history of Indian diplomacy. Modi began the month with a triumph in Japan. He returned to welcome Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, with whom he signed a significant civil nuclear deal that will permit the sale of Australian uranium to India. Within two days the leaders built a rapport that will prompt a quick return visit to cement a vital relationship. In the third week of September, Chinese President Xi Jinping will arrive in Delhi to add important building blocks to investment as well as security cooperation.

When in the last week of September Prime Minister Modi goes to the White House, India will not be a supplicant nation. America will converse with an empowered India.

All sides are never equal in any multilateral partnership, but harmony is essential for the careful construct to hold. India and Japan may have stronger bonds than India and China, but the three Asian giants know that they have much to gain by maximizing complementary strengths and minimizing conflict zones. It is this matrix that can turn the 21st into an Asian century.

For those few in Delhi who also want to "Look West", my suggestion is: Don't. Unless you are looking for trouble. If the east is vast with economic opportunity, the immediate west, beginning with Pakistan, has become a wasteland bloodied by multiple civilian wars, and a base to terrorist clans that have only one mission: to spread chaos within the civilized world in the name of frenzied

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theocracy. Terror is Pakistan's principal export; and now there are other forces in borderless countries itching to compete in the violence stakes.

For decades Pakistan has done everything it could to smother economic cooperation with India, even as it fortifies a wall that blocks India from Afghanistan and central Asia. India no longer has time to fritter on a catastrophe disguised as a country.

India may not be alone in reaching such a conclusion. Pakistan's oldest ally, China, has delinked India from Pakistan. Xi Jinping has cancelled the Pakistan part of his south Asia tour because of the "security situation". Left unsaid is that this threat is seeping into China through its Muslim-majority Sinkiang province. China has a future to build for its people, and Pakistan is not present on such a route map.

Modi will carry some news from the immediate west of India when he talks to Obama: bad news. Al Qaeda, which did not die along with its founding father Osama bin Laden, has declared formal Jihad against India, along with a host of other nations. Those who provided sanctuary to Osama continue to provide a safe haven for his remnant disciples, so it would be unwise to dismiss this threat as a gesture from a desperate maverick in search of rhetorical relevance. Al Qaeda feels sufficiently reinvigorated to open yet another front in the multi-pronged proxy war that has been waged against India ever since 1947. The malevolence and intensity of this proxy war varies, but never its purpose.

Obama might seek passing comfort in distance; he leads a nation that is tired of carrying the international military burden, after having secured its frontiers. India does not have that luxury. The interesting variable is that Beijing has sat up to think. The Chinese do not reveal their worries readily, but they cannot hide the growing fret-lines anymore. When Prime Minister Modi's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval visits Beijing in the coming days for preparatory talks, he will -- hopefully -- be discussing more than tensions along the Himalayan border between India and China. Al Qaeda might, in fact, be the weak link in terrorist chains nurtured within the homeland of terror. Other, stronger, and even more vicious groups have emerged within the Sunni south-west and west Asia.

The message from India, Japan, Australia and hopefully China is that we will not permit the commanders of chaos to prevail. We want the joy of a garden, not the ghosts of a graveyard.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Tigers' awful performance

Tigers faced horrible whitewash by the West Indies recently. It seemed their confidence level came down to zero. It is clear that it will take ages for them to bounce back from this disgraceful condition.

We know practice makes a man perfect, but this doesn't apply to our Tigers as they can't capitalise on practice. They have faced eleven defeats out of twelve ODIs recently. I can't figure out what has made them so vulnerable. Fortunately, they are getting everything they need to prepare themselves for playing good cricket. But it seems they are playing just for the sake of playing, not for winning. What we see during a match is the players' irresponsibility and insensibility. They fall apart like a house of cards as soon as they start batting. They can't play with patience and logical temperament. Time has come to find out what is going wrong.

Susanta Paul
Mirpur, Dhaka

A step to control judiciary?

Impeachment of judges of Supreme Court has become a new issue of debate. The government recently took initiative to restore the original constitutional provision to impeach judges of the Supreme Court, claiming that it is one of the basic features of Westminster type democracy which we follow. The reasoning provided by the government is correct but problem lies elsewhere. Do we really follow Westminster type democracy?

Our constitution states that "all power belongs to the people" (art.7), but can people exercise their power at all? Parliament is said to be the centre of all national issues but the reality is the opposite. Members of Parliament as the representatives of people legislate law, but they hardly discuss the issues of public interest in parliament. Each and every decision comes from one person, the Prime Minister. People wonder if impeachment of judges is a new step to control the judiciary.

S. M. Shariat Ullah
University of Dhaka

Unfortunate, shocking!

That ATM Shamsuzzaman's son has been sentenced for life by a Dhaka court for killing his brother has saddened us. To think that a successful media personality like him also has a son who is a drug addict like in many other ordinary families of Bangladesh! Where is society heading?

Arif Mujumder
Baridhara, Dhaka

Comments on news analysis, "BNP: a party for the supremo," published on September 1, 2014

Roni Rahman

With regard to January 5 elections, BNP's failure to make its activists active at field level and inspire people to generate mass movement against the one-party-run election is mostly due to its organisational incompetence and detachment from greater civil society. It's not that BNP did not have popular support. They just did not have the framework needed to materialise something into action. Ultimately, it is not so much of defeat for BNP, it is rather a defeat for democracy in the country. The country as a whole suffers when there is no viable opposition to the government's harmful actions such as building Rampal power plant, Padma bridge corruption, gagging the media and freedom of speech etc. An unaccountable and omnipotent government can never be good for the country.

"Fakhrul sued for calling AL 'killer party'" (September 2, 2014)

Mahmud Hassan

It's a shame that the leaders of our country used this term 'killer'. The PM called Zia family killers and threatened to throw them out of the country. Two days later, the BNP leader returned the courtesy by calling PM a killer. There should be a sense of decency.

"4 secys guilty" (September 3, 2014)

Sayed Rahman

Such incident is tarnishing the image of our country.

"Tortured by BSF", man dies in Satkhira" (September 1, 2014)

Abdur Rahman

How long will the Bangladeshis be tortured and killed by the BSF? Is our government blind? What is the result of so many meetings?