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Taro Kono's Visit

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Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono will undertake a visit to Pakistan on 3-4 January. As no Japanese foreign minister visited Pakistan after 2009, this will be considered a crucial move toward forging a strong diplomatic posture between the two countries. Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada visited Pakistan on 12 October 2009. There were no such level exchanges between the two countries in the past nine years. Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar visited Japan in 2012. Overall, the history of bilateral foreign minister level exchanges had not been so enthusiastic between the two countries that needs to be strengthened, given the fast changing regional scenario in South Asia and East Asia.

Apart from foreign minister level exchanges, high level visits at Government level have also been curtailed. The last high-level visit from Pakistan was undertaken in February 2011 when President Asif Ali Zardari visited Japan. The last visit by the Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi was undertaken in April 2005. There is dire need to revive the momentum of high-level exchanges between the two countries.

The gap of interaction between the two Governments at the highest level created misgivings and uncertainties in bilateral relations. Furthermore, Japan's tilt toward India and its nuclear cooperation with it also created doubts between Islamabad and Tokyo. Pakistan has also been developing close economic relations with China and it was not so positively viewed by Japan. During this period, the geo-economic landscape of Pakistan was changed under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and there was a dire need that Japan should also take part in the investment and infrastructure development in the all-inclusive CPEC. Japan has not strongly opposed the CPEC but it has also not supported the project. Japan has reservations and it sometimes expressed them. During the present foreign minister level meeting, trust with regard to the CPEC should be built.

Japan is now ready to cooperate with China on the global trade plan. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe says that meeting Asia's demand for infrastructure through cooperation will contribute greatly to the prosperity of Asian people. This statement is considered vital for the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and would enhance the possibility of Japan's participation in the CPEC's infrastructure development and investment.

Taro Kono will meet his counterpart Khawaja Muhammad Asif and others high dignitaries to discuss the various matters of bilateral relations as well as regional and international. Japan is an important player in international relations and Taro Kono's visit will provide ample opportunities to create better understanding and remove misgivings on a number of issues.

Regarding earthquake, floods, and terrorist attacks, Japan has always extended its fullest support and offered assistance to Pakistan. There is a security dialogue and also political consultation process at the foreign ministry level between the two countries.

Although Afghanistan has been a complex security issue, it has been the chief concern of discussions between the two countries for long. The meeting of the International Contact Group (ICG) on Afghanistan was held in Tokyo in May 2014 that was attended by over 50 countries and international organizations. The meeting discussed peace situation in Afghanistan.

As the security situation has not improved in Afghanistan, the China-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilateral dialogue was held in Beijing on 26 December where the three countries agreed to include the Taliban in the peace process. Japan has not given its reaction to this new development. There might be some American and Indian concerns. One has to see that how Tokyo would adjust its stance toward the trilateral dialogue to bring peace and stability in decades-long Afghan civil war?

Pakistan and China have also severe reservations on Trump's security strategy toward Afghanistan and South Asia that criticized Pakistan's role in Afghanistan and enhanced Indian role in that country. Hope that the visit will build strong understanding between Pakistan and Japan and would create consensus in approaching the issue in Afghanistan.

In the past, diplomatic interaction between Pakistan and Japan had been quite steady and unwavering. It was Pakistani Prime Minister Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardi who visited Japan in 1957 at a time when Japan was cut-off from Asia. Until then no leader from Asia visited Japan. Suhrawardi's visit paved the way for Japan to come back to the Asian fold. Within a month of this highly significant visit, Prime Minister Nubusuke Kishi was able to six visit Asian countries, which was seen as a great event in Japan by diplomats and business community. Given this background, both countries need to fully revive diplomatic momentum and build strong ties.

Bilateral economic relations also need to be expanded. Trade has been rather slow between the two countries in the past many years. It touched down around US\$ 2 billion. Japan's participation in Pakistan's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) recorded US\$ 45 million in 2017, making its share of Pakistan's total FDI 1.8 percent. The CPEC momentum, improved security situation, positive economic indicators are important factors in reinforcing strong economic bilateral ties between Pakistan and Japan in the foreseeable future.

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