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Japan and India

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Introduction

In 2014, Japan upgraded its relationship with India to a “Special Strategic and Global Partnership.” Japan now ranks its relationship with India—alongside Australia—as second only to that with the US, the only country with which it has a formal alliance. At the same time, the relationship between Japan and India in terms of their economic relations and the interaction and movement of people between the two countries does not bear comparison with Japan’s respective relationships with the US and Australia. Japan also has far more interaction with China, South Korea, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) nations in terms of the flow of commodities, people, and money. While Japan’s relationship with India may come under an impressive title, it is in fact only just beginning to take shape.

This article provides an overview of how the relationship between Japan and India has developed over the years—from a long period in which the two countries, despite having some affinity with each other, remained estranged, to the more recent shift toward working to enhance a strategic relationship. We will build on this to discuss the current developments and challenges in Japan-India relations.

The long period of estrangement

India has long been known as a country that is friendly to Japan. This sense of friendship grew through interactions such as the Japanese art historian and curator Tenshin Okakura developing a friendship with poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore; the revolutionary Subhas Chandra Bose fighting alongside Japanese forces in the struggle for independence from Britain and Germany; Justice Radhabinod Pal questioning the authority of the Tokyo War Crimes Trials and calling for not-guilty verdicts for the Japanese military and political leaders on trial, and Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister after independence, choosing to waive India’s right to receive war reparations from Japan, and donate the baby elephant Indira to Ueno Zoo. Moreover, due to the failure of Japan’s Imphal Campaign which meant that Japan never brought India under its control, the history between Japan and India presents no issues such as the negative legacies that Japan bears in its relations with many of the countries of South and Southeast Asia.

Despite this, Japan and India remained estranged for a long time in the Cold War era. India in the Cold War was certainly no enemy to Japan. However, India pursued socialist economic policies and non-alignment diplomacy under the Nehru administration, and once his daughter, Indira Gandhi, formed the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace,

Friendship and Cooperation in 1971, India's diplomacy took an increasingly more distinct slant toward relations with the Soviet Union. Seeking to represent the interests of the developing southern countries, India also often actively took the lead in delivering harsh criticism of the advanced Western nations at gatherings of the United Nations (UN), summit meetings with non-aligned nations, and other such forums. As a member of the club of advanced Western nations with its diplomacy grounded in its alliance with the US, Japan found India unapproachable. Japan and India also held only very few prime ministerial meetings and shared limited trade and investment, such that their bilateral relationship consisted largely of yen loans and other such assistance. The Cold War status quo acted as a barrier hampering Japan-India relations.

The collapse of the Cold War status quo should therefore have signaled the dawn of progress in Japan's relations with India. The Soviet Union was dissolved, and India, able to utilize the 1991 Gulf War as a catalyst for embarking on economic liberalization, was very keen for investment. The then Narasimha Rao administration did in fact adopt the Look East policy, under which it appealed to Japan to increase its investment. However, at that time Japanese enterprises were focusing their efforts on China, South Korea and ASEAN and had extremely little interest in India, a country that had only just liberalized its economy. Amid such developments,

India launched nuclear testing in 1998, and Japan invoked economic sanctions against India, putting a stop to any new official development assistance. This meant that, despite the end of the Cold War, the 1990s were a lost 10 years for relations between Japan and India.

The developments leading up to the Special Strategic and Global Partnership

It was the rapprochement between the US, Japan's ally, and India, that opened the door to the new era of Japan-India relations. The mid-1990s Taiwan Strait crisis and other such events had led the US to begin to sense a threat from China and explore the possibilities for cooperation with India. While imposing economic sanctions upon India in response to its 1998 nuclear testing, the Clinton administration launched a strategic dialogue with India's Vajpayee administration, and in March 2000, Clinton paid a historical visit to India as the first US president to do so in 22 years. Prompted by this development, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori also visited India in May of the same year and announced a "Global Partnership between Japan and India." Nevertheless, in the early 2000s, Japan's diplomacy and national security interests were almost exclusively focused on the fight against terrorism, its response to the Iraq War, and its issues with North Korea, meaning that its interest in India was limited.

This tide was turned by the anti-Japanese rioting across China in spring 2005. The unrest prompted the narrative of China as a threat to also take hold within Japan. Wary of the developments in China, Japan began to seek rapprochement with India in earnest, and while visiting India shortly after the unrest in China, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi reached an agreement with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to give the global partnership a strategic orientation. This was the beginning of a system of annual reciprocal prime ministerial visits, and during Prime Minister Singh's visit to Japan in 2006, Japan-India relations were formally upgraded to a strategic partnership, ensuring that cooperation between the two countries also applies to the region in which they hold influence.

The first Shinzo Abe administration, which sought to create an "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" in Eurasia under what it referred to as the principle of values diplomacy, focused the key to its initiatives with India on developing a four-country framework between the democracies of Japan, the US, Australia, and India. In 2007, the four countries held meetings of their senior government officials and joint naval exercises. However, China furiously opposed these developments, of which it perceived itself the clear target. Ultimately at that point in time the four-country framework met a natural end when its advocate Prime Minister Abe, as well as the conservative leaders US President Bush and Australian Prime Minister Howard, withdrew.

Despite this, there was no change in the underlying tone of bilateral relations between Japan and India, which focused on progressing their strategic relationship in light of the developments in China. While Japan saw a change of government from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), the DPJ government pushed ahead with the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation that had been formed during the LDP administration and launched negotiations for cooperation on nuclear power for civil use. With increasing tension surrounding the Senkaku Islands as a result of the 2010 fishing trawler collision incident and other such developments, Japan also agreed with India to pursue cooperation in maritime security including the safety and freedom of navigation.

The second Abe administration, which subsequently retrieved power from the DPJ, set out not only to develop bilateral relations, but also to revive the previously derailed four-country framework. Abe and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who took office in 2014, had an especially good rapport, due to them both being nationalists and at the same time economic reformists. When Modi chose Japan as his first destination to visit outside of South Asia after taking office, Abe extended him a warm welcome, even taking an entire day to show him around Kyoto. Modi's agreement to raise Japan-India relations to a special strategic partnership, on a level with Japan-Australia relations, was also

taken as a signal of support for Abe's vision for Japan, the US, Australia, and India to form what he termed a "security diamond." Consultations under the four-nation framework were in fact held in 2017 for the first time in 10 years. The naval exercise Malabar began to be practiced as a four-country exercise in 2020, and the framework became established as the Quad, with regular leaders' summits since 2021.

Developments in the bilateral relations between Japan and India included India adopting Japan's bullet train system for its high-speed railway between Mumbai and Ahmedabad in 2015, and the following year Japan responding by forming an agreement with India for cooperation in nuclear energy for civil use, despite concern from the Japanese public given India's position as a nuclear-armed power outside the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. There were also marked developments in the field of national security. In addition to the signing of an agreement on defense equipment and technology transfer, an agreement on information protection and an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), the 2+2 meetings of foreign and defense ministers have been routinized, and joint India-Japan exercises have been implemented across the military in the army, navy, and air forces. In the field of diplomacy and national security, Japan now appears to effectively rank India as a quasi-ally.

The deterioration of India's relations with China and development in its expectations toward Japan

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted countries around the world to close their borders, and the stagnation in the distribution of goods and the movement and interaction of people between Japan and India naturally also impacted upon their relations. The movement of people between the two countries was, aside from certain exceptions, brought to a halt not only in terms of diplomacy between the leaders of state, but at every level. This period also saw the resignation of Prime Minister Abe—who had served as the key proponent for strengthening the strategic relationship with India—in September 2020. The assassination of former Prime Minister Abe in July 2022 during an election campaign event also even prompted concerns for the future of Japan-India relations.

There was, however, no change in the trend toward strengthening Japan-India relations. A key factor behind this appears to have been India's ever-growing expectations toward the West as its relationship with China deteriorated. The Modi administration had initially hoped to pursue the development of trade and investment with China as a means of stimulating India's economy. However, after China blocked India's application for membership

of the Nuclear Suppliers Group and calls for UN sanctions on the head of a Pakistan-based terror organization, and India boycotted Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a standoff between Indian and Chinese forces in the Doklam plateau between China and Bhutan in 2017 caused the mood in India to become predominantly wary of China. Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, a military confrontation between India and China in the Galwan Valley in the Ladakh region resulted in 20 Indian fatalities, which prompted India to boycott Chinese products and adopt other such approaches in a distinct shift toward shaking off Chinese influence in its economy.

Despite its increasing tension with China, India was reluctant to form an alliance in military terms—whether with the US or Japan—due not only to the risk of such an alliance intruding on its strategic autonomy, but also the danger of provoking China. India takes the stance that however much it seeks to cooperate with the Quad, its relationship with the Quad does not directly address the threat that India faces from China on the ground, because the interests of the other three members—Japan, the US, and Australia—have, from the start, been focused on the Indo-Pacific maritime region. Seeking to secure concessions by playing the card of strengthening cooperation with the West is becoming an ever less effective diplomatic and political move for India in the face of an increasingly confident

China under Xi Jinping.

India's expectations toward the Quad—and toward Japan, as a country that is particularly limited in terms of the weapons and other such military assistance it can provide—are therefore focused on forms of non-military cooperation that may assist it in its response to China. This firstly means infrastructure development in and outside of India and means of tackling debt issues that will serve as alternatives to China's BRI. Given that the fully Chinese-funded project to develop the Port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, at India's doorstep, became ensnared in a debt trap and had to be ceded to a Chinese enterprise on a 99-year lease, there is a growing expectation upon Japan to provide such high-quality infrastructure under financing that is transparent and repayable.

One of the signs of this was the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, a collaborative vision announced by Japan and India shortly after India boycotted China's BRI. However, the reality of that vision was not all positive. Following the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, the Modi administration sought to rival the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor by pursuing the development of the port of Chabahar in Iran and seeking to establish an International North-South Transport Corridor joining Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Russia, and in doing so it also sought the cooperation of Japan. Although the then-Abe administration was keen to cooperate,

Japan-India cooperation was derailed as the US Trump administration withdrew from the nuclear deal and resumed sanctions against Iran. In Sri Lanka, following the resignation of China-friendly President Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2019, Japan and India were jointly commissioned to develop the eastern terminal of the Port of Colombo. This agreement was, however, scrapped when the former president's younger brother, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, took power, and the project was ultimately entrusted to a Chinese enterprise.

Of the infrastructure projects underway between Japan and India, the key focus should surely be given to the project to strengthen connectivity with ASEAN by improving the roads and other such infrastructure in northeast India and Bangladesh. Facilitating the distribution between ASEAN, home to a number of overseas locations for Japanese enterprises, and India and Bangladesh, with their large populations of young people and remarkable economic growth, is anticipated to have significant benefits for Japan as well. Within India also, the development of infrastructure at the border close to China is considered advantageous in terms of military mobilization. While the project is in that sense clearly a win-win proposition, a sense of uncertainty surrounding the project is developing due to the coup d'état in February 2021 and ongoing military rule in Myanmar, India and Bangladesh's foothold joining them with ASEAN.

The second form of non-military cooperation sought by India is assistance with redeveloping supply chains to avoid dependence on China. Military offensives by China related to the de facto border, the Line of Actual Control, have led to growing anti-Chinese sentiment in India, and while the Modi administration has proclaimed its aspirations for an "Atmanirbhar Bharat"—a "self-reliant India"—imports from China have, far from declining, actually continued to increase. When the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic struck in spring 2021, India, facing the collapse of its medical care system, was forced to rely on oxygen concentrators and ventilators produced in China. India's efforts to redevelop supply chains are also motivated by the fact that its domestic production of smartphones—a commodity owned by most Indian citizens—is, despite some progress, ultimately reliant on China for parts such as semiconductors, displays, and sensors, as well as the rare metals that serve at the raw materials for those components.

This sense of danger was reflected by Prime Minister Modi's emphasis that India particularly prioritizes the pillar of supply chain resilience, as he declared India's participation in the pillars of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) other than trade, at the Quad Leaders' Summit in Tokyo in May 2022. Within its relations with Japan, the US, and other nations—whether in the context of bilateral relations or within the Quad framework—India consistently

places emphasis on initiatives toward strengthening supply chains, in particular those primarily handling important and emergent technology.

India's response to the Russian invasion of the Ukraine

For Japan and the other advanced Western nations, it is the discourse on common values and interests that has formed the premise for strengthening strategic relations with India. It is the argument that, as a country that prizes freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law just as the nations of the West do, India also shares the same interests as the West in terms of confronting the threat that China, an authoritarian nation with contrasting values, poses to safety and order in its growing prominence. This message can be interpreted from leaders' statements and summit documents, whether they be related to Japan-India bilateral relations or the Quad framework.

India's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022 flies directly in the face of the validity of such discourse. India avoided criticizing Russia and has continued to maintain a neutral standpoint at every opportunity—bilateral relations, the Quad, and the UN. Not only refusing to participate in the Western-led economic sanctions upon Russia, but India also began to purchase large quantities of discounted

Russian crude oil and fertilizer.

Given that India was in the process of developing closer relations with the West, its stance has prompted shock and disappointment. However, such shock and disappointment reflect our lack of understanding as to just how important a partner Russia still is to India as a nation. As touched on above, however much India may seek to develop its relations with Japan and the US, there is no way that Japan and the US can provide a military response to India's security concerns, given that it is also in nature a continental nation. India is also dissatisfied with the advanced nations of the West due to their lack of concrete measures to address the poverty issues of the Global South, such as the rise in prices of crude oil and food that have accompanied the war. With such issues to consider, India is unable to abandon relations with Russia as its longtime partner on the other side of China.

Conclusion

As we have seen, India's geopolitical and economic interests do not always coincide with those of Japan and the other countries of the West. There are also the additional concerns posed by the retreat of democracy in India, an increasingly pronounced phenomenon under the Modi administration, in particular the pressure and regulations placed upon minorities, the media, and civic groups. This is resulting in an increasingly conspicuous alienation of India from the

West in terms of values as well. The civic society, media, and political assemblies of Europe and America are becoming growingly critical of such issues and have on occasion officially expressed their concerns at the leader of state and foreign minister level.

Japan adopts a contrasting approach to tackling such issues. In his policy speech at the Indian Council of World Affairs during a visit to India in March 2023, Prime Minister Kishida praised India as the “world’s largest democracy” and recognized how India has implemented its politics based on election and debate. This is not only the truth, but also a seemingly clever approach in the sense that it avoids the kinds of potentially condescending rhetoric adopted by the countries of Europe and America. It is also understandable that Japan would on that basis call on India, as the leading figure of the Global South, to develop a free and open international order based on the rule of law.

However, if this means turning a blind eye to the growing authoritarianism within India, it is surely questionable as a mid- to long-term strategy for Japan. If non-liberal democratic values are allowed to take root and such systems become the norm in India, a country that is undoubtedly becoming the third

superpower in economic and military capability, the concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) will be nothing but pie in the sky.

Japan must address this by drawing on its strengths as the only member of the G7 aside from the North American and European countries. As a fellow nation of Asia, Japan must first praise India for having accepted a liberal democratic political framework based on elections and debate, without adopting a condescending tone. On this basis, Japan needs to, as a minimum, work with India to reconfirm the importance of such values and convey the need to live up to such values together. While further developing relations with India in the desired economic areas, we need to pursue a strategy that will prevent the emergence of a second China and to bring India back as much as possible to the ideal type of liberal democracy.

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