

Japan's Expanding International Engagements And Alignment with India

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Introduction

The Indo-Pacific is witnessing a complex interplay of competition

and collaboration driven by the requirement for maritime connectivity and security. Two discerning trends that have emerged in this tumultuous multitude are the increasing international engagements of Japan and its strategic alignment with India.

Japan's engagement with independent India commenced with the signing of a peace treaty on 09 June 1952. Japan was one of the earliest foreign aid contributors to India with its Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) that commenced in 1958 and has consistently provided financial assistance to India over the decades. The bilateral relationship suffered a setback with the 1998 nuclear explosions undertaken by India. However, the relationship has since been restored and has traversed a remarkable trajectory due to the confluence of mutual strategic interests.

Restoration of Bilateral Relationship

The restoration of India-Japan ties, post the nuclear explosions by India in 1998, occurred with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori's visit to India in 2000 when the countries reached an agreement to establish a "Japan-India Global Partnership in the 21st Century"¹. The next major watershed in the bilateral relationship occurred with the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to India in April 2005 when the two countries announced an "India-Japan Partnership in a New Asia Era"². It was agreed that summit-level (Prime Minister-level) talks will be held annually alternating between New Delhi and Tokyo.

This commitment has been adhered to till date except in 2012 when Japan held unscheduled parliamentary elections.

Since 2005, the India-Japan partnership has enjoyed bipartisan political support in both countries. The bilateral relationship has moved in tandem with the India-US relationship and it is not a coincidence that it has flourished with the increased US interest in India as a stabilising factor in Asia. The security relationship between India and Japan has also been driven by shared concerns about the rise of China.

In December 2006, Prime Ministers Manmohan Singh and Shinzo Abe elevated the relationship to a “strategic and global partnership”.³

Japan’s Expanding Strategic Horizon

For Japan, the post-war period has been characterised by two constants – consensus on a pacifist foreign policy and a security guarantee provided by the USA. However, in the last two decades, Japan has perceptibly shifted from its reticent posture to pursue a more proactive foreign policy and create wider defence response options. A turning point came in 2001 when Japan provided troops for logistic support during the US campaign in Afghanistan. The shift may not be decisive but the contours of an incremental evolution are clearly visible.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has consistently sought to set the agenda with concepts such as the “arc of freedom and prosperity” proposed by his foreign minister in 2006.⁴ During his visit to India in August 2007, he delivered a speech on ‘The Confluence of the Two Seas’ to a joint session of the Indian Parliament in which he spoke of the “dynamic coupling” between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans as seas of freedom and of prosperity, and the idea of a “broader Asia”.⁵ He also spoke of the need for the two countries to “ensure that it broadens yet further and to nurture and enrich these seas to become seas of clearest transparency”. He mentioned about incorporation of USA and Australia in this endeavour “spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean”. He urged the “two democracies, Japan and India, to carry out the pursuit of freedom and prosperity in the region”. For security of sea lanes, he mentioned the need to “together bear this weighty responsibility by joining forces with like-minded countries”.

During Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Japan in October 2008, a "Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between Japan and India" was signed.⁶ Japan has signed such a security declaration with USA (April 1996), Australia (March 2007) and United Kingdom (August 2017).

Japan's Initiatives under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has endeavoured to further alter the post-war *status quo* with a more robust policy with internal reforms and greater engagement with the world. In 2012, he mooted the idea of a "Democratic Security Diamond" to "safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific"⁷. Under his leadership, Japan created a National Security Council (NSC) in 2013. Two strategic documents were adopted on 17 Dec 2013 – National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defence Program Guidelines (NDPG). The NSS identifies India and China as the primary drivers of change in the balance of power. The NDPG reiterates that Japan will strengthen its relationship with India "in a broad range of fields, including maritime security".⁸

In April 2014, Japan amended policy, by declaring the 'Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology', to enable it to export military hardware and technology⁹.

On 30 May 2014, in his address at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Prime Minister Abe stated that "Japan intends to play an even greater and more proactive role than it has until now in making peace in Asia and the world something more certain"¹⁰.

In 2015, the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) Charter was replaced with the Development Cooperation Charter that seeks to provide ODA on a strategic rationale¹¹. The Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI) initiative was launched in May 2015 with a commitment of \$110 billion funding by the Japanese government and Asian Development Bank for international infrastructure development over the next five years¹².

In September 2015, Prime Minister Abe managed to push legislation through Parliament that authorised overseas combat missions for the military under limited circumstances when all peaceful options are exhausted and not intervening would

threaten “the lives and survival of the Japanese nation”¹³. Military cooperation with ASEAN countries has been enhanced through the Vientiane Vision of 2016¹⁴. The activities undertaken include provisioning of equipment and maintenance support, training of personnel, joint exercises and anti-piracy measures. On 03 May 2017, in a video message delivered on the 70th anniversary of the Constitution, Prime Minister Abe reiterated his plan to revise Article 9 by 2020¹⁵. The constitutional provision, however, by all accounts, has widespread public support and amending it will not be easy.

Strategic Alignment with India

During Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Japan in September 2014, the relationship was elevated to a “special strategic and global partnership”¹⁶. Both sides also agreed to establish the ‘India-Japan Investment Promotion Partnership’. As part of this “special strategic and global partnership”, during Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s visit to India in December 2015, the Vision 2025 for the Indo-Pacific region was unveiled¹⁷.

Japan and India have sought to counter the assertive behaviour of China by mobilising opinion on values such as “peaceful, open, equitable, stable, rule-based order”, “open global trade regime”, “freedom of navigation and over-flight”, compliance to international norms and laws and peaceful settlement of disputes. As part of this move, Japan announced the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” in April 2017¹⁸. The India-Japan Vision 2025 for the Indo-Pacific region unveiled in 2015 also presents these values.

Maritime Security Cooperation

The maritime security cooperation is driven by economic and strategic factors. With its energy sources located in West Asia and dependence on sea-borne trade, the security of the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) is of utmost importance to Japan. However, the assertive behaviour of China in the South China Sea, non-traditional security threats and the extended lines of its sea lanes has created anxiety in Japan. India’s east-bound sea trade has been increasing over the years and hence, India too is concerned about its sea lanes to the Pacific.

The catalyst for maritime cooperation was provided by rescue from hijackers of the Japanese freight ship MV Alondra Rainbow by the Indian Navy and Coast Guard in 1999. The Coast Guards of the two nations concluded an agreement for cooperation in 2000 and have conducted bilateral exercises since then. Both countries are also involved in the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP).

The first trilateral naval exercise between USA, Japan and India was held in April 2007 in the western Pacific Ocean. The India-US naval exercise 'Malabar' is conducted annually and Japan was included in it in 2007, 2009 and 2014. In 2015, it was decided that Malabar would henceforth be a trilateral naval exercise between USA, Japan and India. The bilateral Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) has been conducted annually since 2012. Bilateral and trilateral maritime security dialogues are also conducted between USA, Japan and India.

This bonhomie has, however, not translated in transfer of any defence technology or equipment till date. Stalemate continues over India's procurement of Japanese US-2 amphibious aircraft and diesel engine submarines.

Connectivity and Infrastructure Development

The unbridled ambition of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has necessitated a response to provide an alternative to the nations of the region. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) is one such alternative announced jointly by India and Japan in May 2017¹⁹. Both countries have also affirmed their commitment to infrastructure and connectivity projects with a special emphasis on the development of India's northeast region and increased connectivity between India and Southeast Asia.

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is supporting construction of highways in North East India²⁰. The India-Japan Act East Forum was launched on 05 Dec 2017 to provide a platform for India-Japan collaboration under the rubric of India's "Act East Policy" and Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy"²¹. The Forum will identify specific projects for economic modernisation of India's North-East region including those pertaining to connectivity, developmental infrastructure, industrial

linkages as well as people-to-people contacts through tourism, culture and sports-related activities.

Japanese ODA has financed numerous major infrastructure projects in India that include the Bombay High Deep Sea Drilling Project, Visakhapatnam harbour, Cochin Shipyard and New Delhi Metro. The visit of Prime Minister Abe in September 2017 saw the unveiling of the high speed rail project, incorporating *Shinkansen* technology, between Mumbai and Ahmedabad being undertaken with Japanese assistance. The other major infrastructure projects being undertaken with Japanese assistance include the Mumbai-Delhi Dedicated Freight Corridor, Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC), Chennai-Bengaluru Industrial Corridor and development of Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Trade and Investment

Intuitively, India and Japan seem complementary to each other for trade and investment. India is a developing country that requires capital infusion and technological know-how for infrastructure development, prosperity and growth. With its large and young population, it provides a ready availability of labour and market for consumption. Japan is a developed country that is capital surplus and possesses cutting edge technological know-how. Its ageing and declining population means that it requires new markets to sustain its economy. However, trade and investment has not matched this potential although Japan is the fourth largest foreign investor in India.

A Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) was signed on 16 February 2011 and came into effect from 01 August that year. It covers trade in goods and services, investments, intellectual property rights and other trade related issues. Although it seeks to reduce tariffs and provide Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status to each other, numerous barriers still remain.

Cooperation in Restricted Sectors

In May 2012, both countries agreed to jointly extract rare earth minerals in India²². Rare earth minerals are essential for manufacturing electronics products and Japan is heavily dependent on China for it. During the diplomatic row of 2010,

China had restricted the supply and hence, Japan desires to diversify its sourcing.

The India-Japan Civil Nuclear cooperation agreement was signed in November 2016 and came into force in July 2017. This will enable foreign nuclear reactor manufacturers to enter the Indian nuclear energy market. All the major manufactures are either owned by Japanese companies or source technology from them.

Conclusion

One of the primary factors in the trajectory of India-Japan relations has been the increasing international engagements by both nations in recent decades. Japan, especially under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, has become more proactive in its foreign policy. With economic development, India's radius of strategic interest has also been expanding. The greater engagement between India and Japan has also become imperative due to the concurrent phenomenon of the rise of China. India and Japan are important players in the evolving security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region. Their bilateral relationship is a significant factor in maintaining the Asian power equilibrium.

Endnotes

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