

6 India–Japan Alignment in the Indo-Pacific

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Upon independence, the newly independent and partitioned India refrained from the Cold War bloc politics and bandwagoning with either the US or USSR, under its non-alignment approach which remained a crucial part of Indian foreign policy much after the end of the Cold War (Chacko, 2014; Harshe, 1990). An erstwhile colonizer, Japan, restrained by US alliance structures, was forced into adopting a pacifist identity for coming decades (Sato & Hirata, 2008). Thus, as both India and Japan were emerging from the devastation of the second world war, their newly adopted identities rather supported a mutually amicable relationship during the Cold War. Independent India became among the first states to recognize Japanese sovereignty post Second World War and signed a peace treaty with it in 1952. Japan in 1961 recognized the need to firmly place Japan in Asian security architecture by declaring India and Japan as the ‘natural pegs’ (Ghosh, 2008; Jain, 2017: 14) of this system. While India supplied iron ore towards Japanese post-war reconstruction, Japanese loans and development aid to India became the base of their economic relations for the next few decades until the global geopolitics took another turn in Cold War period. But the relationship between New Delhi and Tokyo was far from stable.

The US–Japan alliance (as elaborated in the US–Japan Security Treaty) had put a constraint on Japan’s relations with India, which was engaged in border wars with neighbouring China and Pakistan and began spearheading the Non-Alignment Movement. Japan normalized its relations with China in 1970s, and India had been pushed out of Japan’s engagement in Southeast Asia, of which India was no longer considered a part (Horimoto 2015: 100, Jain 2017: 16). As India remained ideationally constrained by strategic neutrality while following a socialist model of economic growth, Japan’s alliance with the US and its free market-driven capitalist model pulled New Delhi and Tokyo in opposite directions politically as well as economically. Despite an improvement in ties in the post-Cold War 1990s, their relations further deteriorated with India’s nuclear tests in 1998, pushing Japan to suspend its Official Development Assistance (ODA) to India, only resuming it in 2000 after the US–India rapprochement (Lalwani & Byrne, 2019). When India opened its economy post-Cold War to foreign investment and globalization,

India–Japan relations then improved with growing trade and signing of several agreements to boost investment and development projects in India (Brewster, 2010).

However, bilateral ties picked an upward trajectory after 2014 when India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe elevated Indo-Japanese relations to a 'Special Strategic Global Partnership', typified by cooperation in technology, defence, space and nuclear energy (Basrur, 2017; Chhibber, 2018). After several decades, the states were aligning their respective strategic visions underpinned by development goals to assist the rise of India as an Asian power of substantial standing. Japan became the only state besides Russia to have regular bilateral summits with India. With an eye on regional geopolitics amid China's economic growth and strategic connectivity projects like Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that challenged US hegemony, India and Japan signed a 'Vision 2025' statement in 2017, outlining spheres of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, expanding India's role beyond the Indian Ocean and positioning Japan as a leader in response to regional security challenges (Rai, 2018).

Unlike the US that defined the Indo-Pacific as stretching from west coast of America to east coast of India in line with the reach of its newly named Indo-Pacific Command in 2018, India and Japan recognized the geostrategic region inclusive of the whole Indian Ocean encompassing the east coast of Africa. The New Delhi and Tokyo partnership gained ground beyond their respective territories as they launched joint development programmes in other Indian Ocean states, complementing their Indo-Pacific vision of it being a free, open and inclusive region with a rule-based order. However, the elevated bilateral relationship has suffered several bottlenecks in the context of their respective strategic relationships with China and the US. This chapter raises the following questions: How has India–Japan relation transformed over time into a resilient partnership? What are the strategic arrangements in the Indo-Japanese bilateral relationship that continue to thrive? and how have China and the US impacted the India–Japan relationship at the bilateral and multilateral levels?

The authors will use the realist-constructivist framework, which incorporates a realist emphasis on material factors and power together with incorporation of ideas for a complete understanding of global politics (Barkin 2003: 338). In other words, realist-constructivism does not compromise the realists' core focus on material interests and accepts the role of identities and norms to serve the material interests of states, in either scenarios of competition or conflict (such as inter-state) or cooperation (such as within an alliance) (Sato and Hirata 2008: 5–6). Employing a realist-constructivist perspective allows for a detailed analysis of the material as well as non-material aspects that impact the India–Japan relationship. Through the realist lens, the chapter examines the degree to which balance of power strategies are employed by the two states, in the backdrop of their relations with the US as well as China. The constructivist approach helps examine the key normative characteristics of New Delhi and Tokyo's foreign policies towards

each other and the impact of their foreign policy norms on their respective Indo-Pacific visions.

Collaboration in India's Strategic Locations

India's view of Japan as a reliable development partner was largely due to the complementary nature of Japanese capital when invested in India's resource-rich and labour-abundant economy. The India–Japan rapprochement and India's transformation to catch up on lost decades of progress came at an opportune time when Japan's relations with China on the security front were witnessing deterioration (Jain, 2010). This provided Japan with a way of diversifying its economic partnership in the medium term, which had been entwined mainly with China. Politically, it also coincided with India's move beyond the constraints of non-alignment to strategic autonomy and eventual multi-alignment as New Delhi embraced globalization, having balanced international relationships, and playing a greater role regionally and beyond.

India–Japan relations have received a great push through complementing objectives of New Delhi's Look East Policy and Japan's greater engagement policy towards South Asia towards the end of 1990s. However, the new millennium set the stage for improved bilateral relations between the two Asian democracies with the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori who signed the Global Partnership between Japan and India with his Indian counterpart Prime Minister Vajpayee (Chadha, 2020c; Yoshimatsu, 2019). As a result, bilateral trade picked up and Japanese foreign direct investment (FDI) into India increased during the early 2000s and New Delhi surpassed Beijing as Tokyo's largest ODA beneficiary in 2003.

Realizing the need to establish a security partnership with India that had been establishing itself as a regional economic power, Prime Minister Abe's 2007 speech in the Indian Parliament laid the foundations for strategic

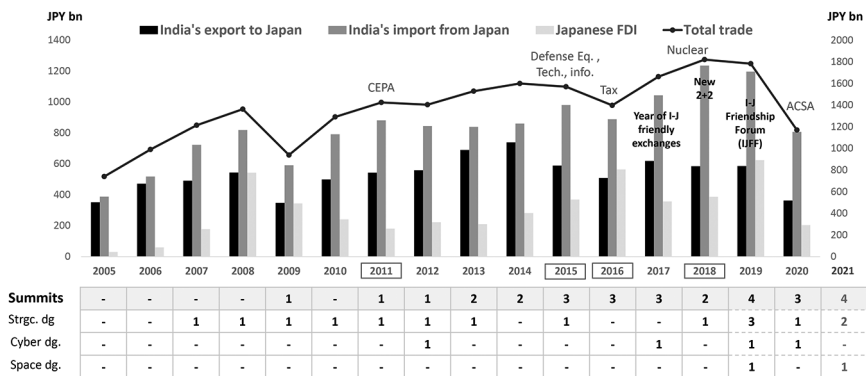


Figure 6.1 India–Japan relations (pre-pandemic): trade, FDI and strategic ties.
Source: adapted from Chadha (2020c)

cooperation among democratic states in Asia and the Pacific, leading to the 2007 edition of the US–India Malabar naval exercises off Okinawa that included Japan for the first time (Paul, 2012; Yoshimatsu, 2019). New Delhi and Tokyo also signed the ‘Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation’ in 2008, followed by ‘Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)’ in 2011 (Chadha, 2020a; MOFA Japan, 2011) under the leadership of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The impact of these agreements, among others, can be seen in Figure 6.1.

Japan was among one of the first states visited by the new Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, setting up the ‘Japan Plus’ division within the Ministry of Commerce to resolve grievances by Japanese firms operating in India, which had risen from 267 in 2006 to 1,156 in 2014 (JETRO, 2021; SAM & Co. and FICCI, 2020: 18). By November 2014, Japanese FDI worth \$17.6 billion in pharmaceutical, automobile and services accounted for 7.4% of the total FDI into India (Economic Times, 2014). The Modi administration changed the Look East Policy into the Act East Policy (AEP), which gave a boost to New Delhi and Tokyo’s infrastructure and connectivity projects in India’s vulnerable northeast, which is threatened by insurgency from neighbouring China, Bangladesh and Myanmar. These projects aim at linking the northeast to the rest of India as well as Association of South East Asian States (ASEAN) countries like Myanmar and Thailand.

Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister Abe signed an agreement to launch the ‘India–Japan Act East Forum’ in 2017, wherein several infrastructure projects including roads, highways, hydropower stations and bridge construction, were launched in India’s northeastern states of Meghalaya and Mizoram, along with forest managements and hydropower undertakings in Sikkim, Nagaland, Tripura, and Meghalaya (JICA, 2018). India’s engagement of Japan in its geo-strategically critical northeast had crucial implications for Indo-Chinese border disputes in the region and China’s launch of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For Tokyo, these initiatives marked the first time it had set foot in the area since the Japanese imperial presence in Battle of Kohima and Imphal against British India in 1944. Connectivity projects were also aimed at facilitating the movement of troops into India’s northeast amid increased Chinese presence close to the contested Line of Actual Control (LAC) and improving surveillance of insurgency activities across Bangladesh and Myanmar (Barua, 2020; Chadha, 2020b). Furthermore, Japan’s ODA loans that had been instrumental in railway and urban projects in Delhi were extended to other metropolises like Bengaluru, Mumbai, and Chennai in 2017 including the Mumbai–Ahmedabad High Speed Rail (Shinkansen) project and multi-modal transport network. India also made an exception by partnering with Japan towards laying optic fibre cables as well as installing a 15-megawatt diesel power plant on its strategically located Andaman and Nicobar Islands, vital to offset Chinese presence in Indian Ocean through its own network of ports in India’s strategic backyard (Bose, 2022; JICA, 2022).

India–Japan strategic alignment has also permeated defence agreements in past two decades. While the 2007 Quadrilateral summit among India, Japan, the US, and Australia was short-lived after Australia pulled out of the same later, the 2007 edition of bilateral US–India Malabar naval exercise included Japan. Tokyo and New Delhi also signed the Security Cooperation agreement in 2008, followed by the establishment of several diplomatic dialogue mechanisms at the level of security advisors, defence ministers and coast guards. Japan was permanently added to the US–India Malabar exercise in the Bay of Bengal in 2015. Alongside existing exercises JIMEX (biennial naval) and Sahyog-Kaijin (Coast Guards), more exercises were launched in all corners of India, including Dharma Guardian (in Mizoram in 2018), SHINYUU Maitri (joint air force exercise since 2019 in West Bengal), air anti-submarine naval exercise (2017 in Goa), and MINEX (mine counter-measure exercise in 2019 in Kerala). Further, a ‘Defense Equipment and Technology Transfer’ agreement was signed in 2015 between the two states alongside mutually agreed measure for protection of classified military information.

The establishment of the ‘India–Japan Defense Industry Forum’ in 2017 was aimed at pushing investments in the defence sectors of both states but which faced some domestic challenges in terms of achieving closer defence cooperation. For New Delhi, its defence industry is in a relatively nascent stage and military equipment is largely procured from partners like Russia, France, and the US (Wezeman et al. 2022: 7). For Tokyo, despite the signing of the 2018 ‘Civil Nuclear Arrangement’ with India, engagement with India (which is a non-signatory nation to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) has been challenged domestically. In terms of military action, issue like expanding the role of Japanese self-defence forces through an amendment of Article 9 of Japan’s constitution (which restricts it from waging war), or concerns over the degree of sensitive information-sharing with other nations also persist in Tokyo (Hatakeyama, 2021). On the investments front, despite being a preferred destination for overseas subsidiary of Japanese businesses, India’s lack of adequate infrastructure and bureaucratic delays in process have adversely affected India’s attractiveness for Japanese FDI in addition to the Covid-19 pandemic’s negative economic impacts.

Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Region

When the US unveiled its 2017 Indo-Pacific strategy as a counter to the China-led vision of world trade and sea routes under its BRI, Japan had pitched its Indo-Pacific vision of a free, open and rule-based order in the region. India announced the complementary vision of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) for the Indo-Pacific to practically engage in multi-alignment. But the region has been a rough terrain for the India–Japan partnership where despite partial successes of their collaboration, neither holds absolute diplomatic influence when compared with a stronger Chinese

presence. Though India shares close cultural and socio-political proximity in its neighbourhood dating for centuries and Japan has been a key ODA donor to several states in the Indian Ocean, the recent contestation in the region has uncovered several new realities. These include fault lines in India's relations with its neighbours and Japan's lack of political influence in the Indian Ocean states compared to the indispensability of China in the political and economic landscape of the wider Indo-Pacific.

The Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) was among the first India–Japan partnership projects announced in 2016 in line with their Indo-Pacific vision of bringing equitable growth, development and connectivity to the region, besides security interests. Against the backdrop of increasing Chinese investments in Africa, such as in Djibouti where Beijing established a military base in the debt-ridden state, India and Japan offered 'quality' infrastructure projects and skill development in Africa that kept people at the heart of their initiatives (Chadha, 2022). In this way, India announced \$10 billion in lines of credit and \$600 million in grants under the AAGC, while Japan was among the highest ODA contributors to Africa offered \$30 billion in investments in the region (Beri 2017: 3; MOFA Japan 2017: 117; Vivekananda International Foundation 2018: 9). The two states also offered development funds and infrastructure projects in key Indian Ocean island states like Mauritius, Seychelles and Comoros, each of which had undertaken Chinese development loans (Bhaumik, 2020; Chadha, 2020a). Since the Indo-Pacific included the east coast of Africa, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean for New Delhi and Tokyo, they also launched several projects in key maritime areas showing a deeper strategic convergence (Chadha, 2021b).

India–Japan ties can also be illuminated through their respective bilateral relations with a number of states in South Asia. In this regard, both India and Japan view Bangladesh as key to their Indo-Pacific visions of linking South and South-East Asia. New Delhi had extended LoCs (line of credit) to Dhaka worth \$ 862 million, followed by another in 2017 of \$ 2 billion and a subsequent pledged \$4.5 billion for infrastructure projects including railways, roads, airports, power, shipping etc. (Ministry of External Affairs, 2017). Japan, on the other hand, agreed to build Matabari port after cancellation of China-backed Sonadia port few kilometres away (Pearson 2015; JICA 2021: 5). In turn, the Maldives, an archipelago of over 1,200 islands in the Indian Ocean lies along the major sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in the region. After Maldivian President Yameen joined the BRI, the Maldives cancelled the Milan 2018 naval exercise with India, which initiated the return of New Delhi's helicopters and other military assets (Verma 2020: 160–161). But after the opposition leader Ibrahim Solih was elected President in 2018, India then offered \$400 million loans and \$100 million grant towards the 'Greater Male Connectivity Project', the largest infrastructure undertaking in the Maldives, alongside \$1 billion loan to payoff Chinese debt amounting to 25% of its GDP, and 80% of total foreign debt in 2018 (Kuronuma, 2018). Japan also opened an embassy in Maldives in 2016, began offering financial

assistance in 2020 such as a \$7.6 million grant towards strengthening Maldives National Defense Force Coast Guard and \$5.6 million towards assistance for fighting COVID-19 pandemic (Embassy of Japan in Maldives, 2020a, 2020b).

Sri Lanka has also emerged as the diplomatic battleground for India and Japan against China's increasing naval presence, undisclosed submarines in the Indian Ocean and huge infrastructure investments under the BRI such as the Hambantota port. Because of Sri Lanka's proximity to the Indian mainland and the importance of SLOCs for Japan, India and Japan partnered in Sri Lanka towards a \$250 million LNG import terminal in West Sri Lanka's Kerawalapitiya (Press Trust of India, 2017). In 2019, India and Japan also signed a trilateral agreement with Sri Lanka to develop and operate Colombo port's East Container Terminal, retaining a 49% stake. The Sri Lankan government unilaterally cancelled the agreements in early 2021 over domestic concerns of foreign ownership and offered development of the West Container Terminal at the same port to India and Japan in compensation (Press Trust of India, 2021). Elsewhere, for India, Myanmar is key to the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Kaladan multi-modal transport project and the Mekong–India economic corridor. Japan, on the other hand, had invested over \$1 billion in Myanmar in 2010s, with several Japanese companies operating in the Thilawa Special Economic Zone (JICA, 2020a; Japan Times, 2018). Both New Delhi and Japan also extended grants and medical assistance to battle Covid-19 pandemic in the country (JICA, 2020b). But after the 2021 military coup, the ongoing and proposed projects by India and Japan suffered an additional setback, with both states prioritizing their national interests and bilateral ties with Myanmar amid their diplomatic inability to exert influence in the state whose military maintains close ties with Beijing (Banerjee & Basu, 2021).

Elsewhere, India and Japan have been increasingly engaging with ASEAN states since 2010, offering development assistance (such as with Thailand and Cambodia), while also engaging in joint exercises and offering military equipment such as submarines, boats, and military training to the region (in Indonesia and Vietnam) (Chakraborti & Chakraborty, 2020; Liao & Dang, 2019). New Delhi and Japan share the view that their development assistance and security enhancement in the Indo-Pacific can augment equitable growth in the region and maintain peaceful rule-based order. Thus, while for India, Indo-Pacific is a partnership mechanism, which enables it to engage with other regional powers in issue-based alignments to play a larger security role, Japan sees the Indo-Pacific as an opportunity to forge security arrangements with other states beyond its waters to overcome its relative absence from regional security affairs since the end of Second World War.

Both India and Japan have respectively embraced the free and open Indo-Pacific vision as their own core strategy in the region. While Japan has been increasing its military roles despite maintaining certain degree of its post-World War Two pacifism, it has adopted a unique role of playing the

facilitator of regional cooperative mechanisms. India has moved beyond its Cold War non-alignment into a proactive space where it practices multi-alignment as it cultivates its partnerships with all states through multi-lateralism or bilateralism. India's principled foreign policy approach is thus, complementary to Japanese multilateral initiatives, in a way that they absolutely converge at best, and remain non-conflicting and different at worst. This dynamic between Japan and India can support and straighten their relationship in the long run with the commitment from both sides to deepen this partnership through mutual acceptance and encouragement of each other's strategic roles in the Indo Pacific.

The Beijing Challenge and the India–Japan Response

Japan re-established diplomatic relations with China in 1972, after its occupation of parts of China under Imperial Japan. Thus, Japanese relations with China have been overshadowed by Japanese 'guilt' and China gradually rising from economic backwardness to surpass Japan as an economic power. India's relations with China, on the other hand, have been oscillating between rivalry and friendship ever since the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations between them in 1950. As shown in Chapter 5 of this volume, these have involved longstanding territorial disputes concerning Tibet, Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh. The first decade of the 2000s saw increased engagement between India and China towards resolution of the border disputes. Sikkim was recognized as part of India in 2003, followed by establishment of strategic partnership between India and China in 2005 as well as reopening of border trade after four decades of economic isolation. But the dispute over Arunachal Pradesh continued.

In 2000, after opening its economy to globalization and liberalization, India established strategic relations with the US and Japan, with the latter diverting its ODA loans from China into India. In 2004 China overtook the US as Japan's largest trading partner. After the 2005 anti-Japan protests in China over Tokyo's efforts to rewrite part of imperial history, FDI from Japan that was concentrated in China began flowing into other growing economies like India (Horimoto, 2015). By 2007 Japan had also become cautious about China's assertions over the Senkaku Islands in East China Sea, territorial claims over the whole of South China Sea which holds some key SLOCs, and growing presence in the Indian Ocean (Midford, 2015; Sato, 2017: 247–250). Despite Chinese protests over the 2007 Quad summit and Malabar Exercise involving India, Japan, the US and Australia, Tokyo continued to push for greater engagement with India that emerged as a regional economic hub and was embracing a new mode of strategic autonomy. China also expressed concerns over the 2008 'India–Japan Defense Cooperation Agreement', but Japan and the US supported India on its territorial sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh with an Asia Development Bank (ADB) loan for the region's development in 2009 despite Chinese protests.

China launched the BRI (including the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road) in 2013 and established its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to finance infrastructure projects connecting China with Europe and the Pacific through the South China Sea. Japan under Prime Minister Abe did not join the initiative as it threatened Japan's regional leadership by placing China at the centre of regional connectivity and installed the AIIB against existing institutions like the ADB (Iida, 2018: 2–3). In 2015, Japan expressed the need for cooperation with China through engagement between the ADB and the AIIB, as well as between Japanese infrastructure projects and the Chinese BRI, however, Beijing maintained that Japan should cooperate with China through the BRI framework (Iida, 2018). Japan did not join the BRI due to its opaque terms such as concerns of governance of projects as well as debt sustainability concerns in the recipient countries of Chinese loans.

Meanwhile, India refused to join the BRI due to sovereignty issue and territorial disputes with China after the Depsang standoff in Aksai Chin (in Jammu and Kashmir) in 2013. Despite several summit meetings with Beijing, New Delhi also began raising concerns over Beijing's assertion in the South China Sea and protested over the presence of Chinese troops in Chumar across the LAC and also that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passed through India-claimed and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Refusal to join the BRI marked yet another policy convergence between India and Japan. India and Japan launching of the AAGC in 2016, in line with India's SAGAR vision, was further designed to counter China's encirclement of India's maritime boundary and to enable Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. In 2016, Japan also took steps to introduce security laws that allowed it the right to collective self-defence without violating its Constitutional provisions (Sato 2017; Kumar 2018: 31).

Overall, New Delhi and Tokyo have pursued soft balancing approach in their cautious stance towards the BRI and aggressive Chinese foreign policy in the region, while also trying to cooperate with China in their separate ways. China's emergence as a large security player in the region is a threat to Indo-Pacific norms and security visions of Japan and India. To that measure, the Indo-Pacific collaboration for India and Japan is a measure to ensure their strategic presence in the region. China's bilateral partnerships with New Delhi and Tokyo, despite territorial disputes between India–China and island disputes between Japan–China, imply that India and Japan understand each other's issues but face limitations in disengaging from China completely. But more important implication of this triangular relationship is that neither Japan, nor India seek each other's commitment towards disengagement from Beijing but engage in complementary strategies towards the economic giant. Despite mutual threat perceptions of Chinese aggression and military visibility, Japan seeks to engage with China through various multilateral institutions and cooperative mechanisms. On the other hand, India's multi-engagement is underpinned by its acceptance of multipolarity in the inclusive

Indo-Pacific which can accommodate the peaceful rise of both India and China.

India's Strategic Autonomy and Japan's Alliance with the US

The US has played a critical role in security of the Asia-Pacific, a region that has some key SLOCs that account for over half of the global energy trade. While at the end of Second World War, Japan agreed to an arrangement to be a US ally in Asia and a base for American interests and policies in the region, post-independence India struggled to resist becoming subservient under another power after its colonial experience (Atanassova-Cornelis & Sato, 2019). India's launch of the Non-Aligned Movement further distanced it from the Western powers, while drawing it closer to the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Several events in the last three decades of the twentieth century set the ground for tumultuous Indo-American relations, where relations with China were prioritized, and hence the US established its alliance with Pakistan which served as an intermediary between Sino-American talks and engagement (Sisson & Rose, 1990). Subsequently, the US assisted Pakistan in the 1971 Bangladesh War of Independence, while India placed an emphasis on non-alignment and strategic autonomy from either the US or Russia. However, India–Russia defence relations, and India's socialist economic model, and the 1998 nuclear tests by New Delhi that made it a nuclear power in the region, further deteriorated India's relations with the US and Japan which imposed economic sanctions (Limaye, 2006: 225–248). Pakistan's geostrategic location also served the US interests in the Middle East, as well as US interests in Afghanistan in later years.

While Japan was the only nation to assist India in its foreign exchange crisis in the early 1990s, overall contemporary India–Japan relations shadowed the trajectory of India–US relations (Limaye, 2006: 225–248). US President Bill Clinton eventually lifted economic sanctions against India (introduced as a result of the 1998 nuclear tests) and visited India in 2000 after two decades of diplomatic vacuum, followed by the Japanese Prime Minister who signing the 'India–Japan Global Partnership' agreements months later (Verma, 2020: 187–188). In turn, the India–US Strategic Partnership agreement in 2004 made way for the 2006 'India–Japan Global and Strategic Partnership'. The next year Japanese Prime Minister Abe delivered his 'Confluence of Two Seas' speech before Indian Parliament and launched his proposal for a Quad forum.

The US foresaw the need to launch connectivity projects in Asia, linking Central Asia to East Asia. Obama's refocusing on Afghanistan after withdrawing US troops from Iraq aimed at multi-lateralizing the post-conflict reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan to shift the cost onto other stakeholders (Mann, 2013). However, since the US proposal of building a 'Silk Road' in 2011 was accompanied by necessary economic-political reforms,

several Central Asian states preferred unconditional Chinese loans and thus their support for the Beijing backed One Belt One Road or BRI initiative (Clinton, 2011a, 2011b). The US pivot to Asia also led to the launch of trilateral US–Japan–India dialogue at ministerial level. Thereafter, the Indo-Pacific as a geostrategic concept of free, open and rule-based vision gained international political weight against the China-led BRI which aimed to link Chinese markets with the rest of the world through China-financed infrastructure development. After the signing of the ‘US–India Joint Strategic Vision for the Indo-Pacific’ in 2015, Japan and India signed the ‘India–Japan Vision 2025’ agreement, instating Japan as a regular member of the Malabar exercise in 2015 followed by 2016 ‘India–Japan Civil Nuclear Agreement’ (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017; Jung et al., 2020).

The US’s proactiveness laid the groundwork for Indo-Japanese relations to flourish post 2000 but especially since 2011. However, India has been wary of US-led alignment arrangements since Cold War. Despite improved strategic and military ties with Washington, New Delhi has shown reluctance in being a US balance against China in the Indo-Pacific or even accepting increased the US presence in its maritime neighbourhood due to apprehensions over US dominance as well as its relations with Pakistan. Hence, India’s strategy has been to form issue-based alignments for national interests while prioritizing strategic autonomy. Though this has not had a major and direct impact on the growing Indo-Japanese relations, US policies towards Asia in general has impacted India’s relations with US rivals like Russia and Iran, both of which are India’s strategic partners for trade in military equipment and energy respectively. For example, US sanctions on Iran have restricted India from engaging in oil imports from Tehran while also jeopardizing India’s Chabahar port investments in Iran, which is crucial for India’s trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia (Chadha, 2021a; Teja, 2015; Zahid Shahab & Bhatnagar, 2018).

The US initiative towards the resurgence of Quad in 2017 did not culminate into anything more than a consultation mechanism till 2020, since all four states continued to issue separate statements, wherein India was careful not to mention China but only cooperation and joint initiatives. It was only at the 2021 Quad meeting that a joint statement was launched declaring a rule-based maritime order in the East and South China Seas, alongside joint initiatives to combat the Covid-19 pandemic with vaccine manufacturing by India, with support from other states (Rej, 2021; White House, 2021). The Indo-Pacific, including the Quad mechanism within it, has a huge strategic and symbolic value. In the present geopolitical order, it allows like-minded states to collaborate towards deterring China from belligerence while also offering the other smaller states an alternative route to development partnerships. Its significance has increased during the pandemic since dealing with the health crisis and manufacturing massive vaccination supplies would be a daunting task unless states collaborate in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. However, India has been very cautious in its engagement in trilateral and

quadrilateral arrangements in the Indo-Pacific to balance its relations with China, thus refraining from joining several initiatives like the Blue Dot Network or achieving depth in trilateral frameworks, such as the US–Japan–Australia triad (Goodman et al., 2020; Sarkar, 2020; United States Department of State, 2020).

While India has responded to China's presence in the Indian Ocean by signing the 'Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement' with the US for strategic information sharing, and 'Acquisition and Cross Servicing' agreements with all members of the Quad, India–Japan do not hold the same official position over US Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the Indo-Pacific (Hindu, 2020). The US presence in Japan is crucial to Japanese security amid threats from China or North Korea, and hence Japan has not protested the most rigorous openness of the seas advocated through US FONOPs (freedom of navigation operation) in the South China Sea and elsewhere despite the US not being a signatory of the United Nations Convention on Law of the Seas. India on the other hand holds important strategic autonomy and territorial sovereignty to signify itself as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean region, which it considers to be its strategic backyard. Therefore, India strongly protested the 2021 US FONOPs close to Lakshadweep archipelago, an undisputed Indian territory (Peri, 2021).

The Indo-Pacific, is thus, a geopolitical rationale for the US to wield its supremacy and influence in the region, not only against China but also against any other state that aims to be a regional power. Japan sees itself as a US ally and the fulcrum of US policy towards Asia, and thus an indispensable part of the Indo-Pacific geopolitical order (Sato, 2019, 2020, 2021). But India's view of the Indo-Pacific has been a work-in-progress: it has progressed from being New Delhi's last resort amid geopolitical frictions and deteriorating security situation in its neighbourhood, to a soft balance against Chinese aggression, and now an opportunity for India to assert its strategic autonomy and carve a space for its ambitions in the region which it sees as being inclusive and multipolar. However, India maintains reservations over accepting the nature of Indo-Pacific as a containment measure against China.

Conclusions: Emerging Geopolitical Challenges and Evolving Collaboration

India's gradual move from non-alignment to multi-alignment has created a welcome space for strategic partners like Japan to assist India's rise as a regional power. India–Japan alignment is exemplary for its depth and scope of cooperation among two states not bound by formal alliance or treaty. The two states, over the years have recognized areas of mutual action and coordination, with an emphasis on infrastructure development, investments and economic growth. A re-emerging Japan's technological and financial capabilities have complemented multi-aligned India's large growing market and young population. The two states have also effectively cooperated in defence

and strategic geographies of India. However, a recent economic slowdown in India, exacerbated by bureaucratic delays and then the pandemic, has decelerated Indo-Japanese trade and investments.

In a broader perspective, while India–Japan relations have been welcomed by the US, the defence engagements and security cooperation have alerted China. New Delhi and Tokyo have partnered in port development and infrastructure projects in Indian Ocean states, as well as in several Africa and Southeast Asian countries, offering a ‘quality’ alternative to the Beijing-led BRI that has left several states debt-ridden. Despite challenges in economically disengaging from China, the complementarity between India’s multi-alignment, and India–Japan FOIP (Free and Open Indo-Pacific) cooperation allows enough space to accommodate any divergence in their respective policy preferences in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific.

The US has been a great influence in the formation and trajectory of India–Japan relations, owing to the US–Japan security alliance, which puts Japan as America’s pivot to Asia. But for India, strategic autonomy is crucial for its policy of issue-based alignments. This also reflects in India and Japan’s objectives and vision for the Indo-Pacific, where they share the Quad platform and agree on the nature of the threat from China but view the geopolitical frictions differently. India views the Indo-Pacific as a partnership mechanism, which enables it to engage with other regional powers in issue-based alignments to play a larger security role. On the other hand, Japan sees the Indo-Pacific as an opportunity to forge security arrangements with other states beyond its waters to overcome its self-imposed restrictions on the right to collective defence. The US and its partners such as India and Japan aim to balance against China’s rise, but the role of Quad has been limited as a joint policy platform. However, the pandemic has offered a new window of opportunity for India and Japan to cooperate not only mutually but also with the US and Australia towards regional prosperity, while also signalling collective symbolic deterrence to China.

New Delhi and Tokyo have largely refrained from their distinct positions on geopolitical challenges to hinder the upwards trajectory of their collaboration. At present, their special strategic partnership thrives, not only on absence of vastly opposing ideologies or territorial disputes, but also on mutual recognition of their valuable roles as economic powers and security providers in the Indo-Pacific region. Emerging challenges in and beyond their immediate neighbourhoods, such as the global pandemic, eroding democratic rule in Myanmar or Russia’s attack on Ukraine in 2022, call for clear positions of the two states on these issues and their ability to reckon long-term impacts of these events on regional and global security architecture. At the same time, for as long as India and Japan can continue to prioritise national interests in line with their distinct identities, norms and principles such that they remain non-conflicting with their mutually shared values and visions, the partnership would remain potent to steer the course of Indo-Pacific peace, prosperity and security.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP18K01494.

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