



Research Paper

Resurgent Asia: A Glance into the Dynamic Bi-lateral relation between India and Japan with special reference to Indo-Pacific Sea

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ABSTRACT: *The paper would analyse India-Japan bilateral relation in the context of Indo-Pacific Sea and beyond. An attempt would be made to study the development of close ties between India and Japan to balance out the growing influence of China. A brief mention of the One Belt One Road Initiative will also be made in order to develop an understanding of international politics and this will be studied through the theoretical lens of realism, neo-liberalism and such other theories of International relations.*

KEY WORDS: *Bilateral relation, India, Japan, China, OBOR and Indo-Pacific Sea.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the post Second world war period, Japan was recovering from the defeat and India had just been able to gain its independence from the British empire. So, both the countries had their own share of issues to deal with and resolve. However, these two Asian countries shared cordial cultural relation as both the countries witnessed significant impact of Buddhism in their respective cultural orientation. Furthermore, the 1952 peace treaty signed between these two countries had a comforting effect on the ailing political relation between the two since India during the Second World war (then a British colony) had fought against Japan. Thereafter, India and Japan have gradually been able to develop their relation politically, strategically and economically. Such development of relation between the two was greased indirectly due to the strategic and maritime aggression of China in Asia and beyond.

II. DIPLOMATIC RELATION BETWEEN INDIA AND JAPAN

The bi-lateral relation took a positive turn in the post-1998 era with, then Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori visiting India in August 2000. It was after the visit that Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Mori decided to establish a "Global Partnership" between the two. (Mansingh,2007) Later in the year 2005, then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited India and in 2006 Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Japan. Such diplomatic visits led to the elevation of the bi-lateral relation from 'Global Partnership' to that of 'Global and Strategic Partnership'. The relationship further bloomed with the upgradation of the relation to that of "Japan- India Special Strategic and Global Partnership" during 2014 Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Japan and the two countries in 2015 announced the Vision 2025 Special Strategic and Global Partnership Working Together For Peace and Prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region and the World." In 2018, the Prime Minister's of both the countries committed to work towards ensuring a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." The official visits between these two nations have continued thereafter and the latest one being the 2023 visit of Japanese Prime Minister Kishida to India for a summit meeting with Indian Prime Minister wherein the leaders reiterated their commitment to develop their bi-lateral relation.¹One of the major factor that influenced the development of a cordial relation between these two Asian countries was the growing power of China and its escalating influence

¹ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/data.html> accessed on 6 April, 2023.

and presence in Asia and the Indian Ocean region. (Kaura,2016) Such a neo-realistic approach of friendship between India and Japan brewed majorly to counter the maximising presence of belligerent China.

III. SECURITY: A MAJOR CONCERN BETWEEN INDIA-JAPAN VIS-À-VIS CHINA

India and Japan both share territorial issues with the neighbouring giant China. China claims its rights over certain portions of Arunachal Pradesh (north-east state of India) and its close presence near the chicken neck corridor of India, Nathula border in Sikkim (north-east state of India) has often been a cause of irritation between India and China. Similarly, China claims Senkaku islands of East China sea which belongs to Japan. Such territorial claims has always roughened the relation between both India-China and Japan-China.

The development of strategic relation between India and Japan became well defined when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007 specified on the “Confluence of the Two seas” (Pacific and Indian Oceans). He laid down the vision for a “broader Asia” wherein the confluence of the two seas would symbolise ‘freedom and prosperity.’ Furthermore, Prime Minister Abe mentioned that the actualization of the vision would require both India and Japan to cooperate and work together. Later the two nations in 2006 signed the first bilateral defense cooperation agreement. Such developments with regard to Indo-Pacific Sea is indicative of the fact that the area is not merely a geographical domain rather it has strategic and political implications in international relations. This as such could have an allergic reaction to China since United States along with India, Japan and Australia seek to enhance trade facilities in the said area and aimed at establishing “Free and Open Indo Pacific”. Such a step would hinder Chinese agenda in the said area.

Such growing relation was further accelerated with the pacing military development of China. It was understandable to both India and Japan that their collaboration was essential to balance out the increasing influence and aggression of China. In 2014, India made its stand clear by inviting Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as the Chief Guest on the Republic Day celebration at New Delhi. A year later Japan committed to funding India’s first ever high speed railway and the two also agreed on joint measures to secure classified military information. Such initiatives were directed towards ensuring safe and easy transfer of defence equipment’s between the two nations. These commitments were boosted further with both the nations signing a bilateral civil nuclear deal, which aided the supply of fuel, equipment and technology for nuclear power from Tokyo to India. The agreement also facilitated the Japanese company Toshiba to establish nuclear power plants across India and also sell nuclear reactor parts and equipment’s throughout India.(Lynch III and Przystup 2014).

The issue encircling the Indo-Pacific region erupted as a result of the active Road and Belt Initiative of China in 2013 which aimed to bring about infrastructural development in vast regions like South-east Asia, South Asia, Middle East, Africa and Central Asia. Several countries were included in Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, however India despite falling in the same region was kept out of the group. So, India on the other hand was being given prime importance by United States led Indo-Pacific group along with Japan and Australia. Some argue or perceive the Indo-Pacific campaign as an act against the growing influence of China and that the concept is very huge and vague but as the United States Department of Defense define the Indo-Pacific as a “theatre of rivalry with revisionist policies most particularly China, that the United States now perceives as seeking regional hegemony as a stepping stone to global preeminence.” (Medcalf, 2019)

The question that arises is Why is Indo-Pacific region so important? Why is United States taking the lead? What strategy has Japan adopted towards India?

The concept as mentioned above may seem vague and vast yet it is to be understood that the Indo-Pacific sea lane has been of paramount importance for trading and diplomacy since the mid-1990’s itself. The sea lane was being used not just by China and India but also several other countries to transport oil from the Middle East and Africa. It is also a known fact that the sea lanes are economically viable and also secured compared to land routes and for growing economies like India, such trading routes would be of prime significance. This as such would lead to economic competition with China and it is an obvious situation in international arena that a powerful China could create discomfort for other countries in Asia and beyond. Infact in the context of the Indo-Pacific region, the three major countries United States, India and Japan would be at the receiving end of the discomfort caused by Chinese aggressive agenda. The situation would be such that “the interests and action of a powerful state in one part of the region affect the interests and actions of other powerful states there.” (Ibid.)

United States has in the past enjoyed a powerful position in both the Pacific and Indian Ocean until the increase in Chinese assertiveness in the said sea lane. Specifically stating, United States along with Australia, Japan have been witnessing strong Chinese interference in the Pacific Ocean and similarly, India on the other hand along with United States has been facing the same in the Indian Ocean. It is with such a scenario that the Indo-Pacific ‘Free and Open’ campaign was initiated by United States led group of nations.

Can such developments be seen as an issue of “security dilemma” between the nations?

It may be understood that the security dilemma triggered by China is one of the major factor in bringing India and Japan diplomatically closer to eachother. The major areas of cooperation between these two nations have been political, security and economics in the 2000’s. Several assumptions have been made with regard to the development of close bilateral ties between India and Japan, however in the context of Indo- Pacific issue it has

been understood that power enhancement of China on one hand and the weakening power of United States created a sense of insecurity. Such insecurity compelled the two nations to develop ties with each other in order to balance out the growing power of China. The Japanese had recognised the fact that India could be a “crucial balancer” against Chinese power. (Yoshimatsu,2018)

Yet again on the other hand, there has been argument that Japanese strategy is not to be understood as absolutely anti-China since it cannot be negated that Japan has supported China’s “One Belt One Road Initiative”² and so Japan could choose to maintain cordial ties both with United States and China. As the realists claim that the states are “rational” and would do what serves their self-interest. But irrespective of what the underlying self-interest may be it has been witnessed that the Indo-Pacific issue has led to the development of cordial bi-lateral relationship between India and Japan.

IV. ECONOMIC RELATION BETWEEN INDIA AND JAPAN

Since the mid-19th century India and Japan have opened their economic ties with each other. The development of economic ties was eased with the availability of complementing factors like young labour in India, advanced technology in Japan, hardware in Japan and software in India. (Sato,2013).

India-Japan economic ties began after the 1950’s. It was in post-world war II phase, that the development of economic relation between India and Japan from the importing of cotton to importing of iron ore was witnessed (Raj and Ambrose, 2014). India has been a recipient of Japan’s Official Development Assistance (ODA) in 1958 and one of the major contributions of Japan in the infrastructural development of India has been the establishment of Delhi Metro. Since 2003, India has been the largest recipient of Japan’s ODA in South Asian region. Japan as such has been a development partner for India. (Baruah, 2016)

Japan had been the second largest destination for India’s exports accounting for a little over 6 percent in the year 1995. However, the figure declined gradually leading to India’s exports in Japan falling below 2 percent. The main export items from India to Japan are iron ore, metal products, marine products, raw materials and chemical products. On the other hand, the items imported from Japan into India are machinery items, iron and steel accounting, chemical products. In 2011 India and Japan signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the aim of boosting the economic interaction between the two. (Joseph and Bera, 2011)

As per the data available, Japan’s bilateral trade with India amounted to US\$20.57 billion during the 2021-2022 financial year. Japan’s exports to India were 2.35% of India’s total imports and India’s exports to Japan were 1.46% of India’s total exports. In the Financial year 2021 India exported 4,508 commodities to Japan in FY2. In the financial year 2021, the major exported items from India to Japan included mineral fuels, mineral oils & products; bituminous substances; mineral waxes and organic chemicals. Major exported items from India to Japan include marine products petroleum products etc. during April-November 2022.³

Furthermore, India imported 4,359 commodities from Japan in FY21 and imports from Japan to India stood at US\$ 14.39 billion in 2021-22. India’s imports from Japan in the financial year 2021 included nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances; inorganic chemicals; compounds of precious metals, or rare-earth metals, radioactive elements or of isotopes. India’s imports from Japan included residual chemicals and allied items, iron and steel etc. during April-November 2022. (Ibid.)

The economic relationship between the two countries have been one of the primary focus and with the acceleration of Chinese influence through its “One Belt One Road Initiative” the two nations seem to understand the need of the hour. So, India and Japan continue to strengthen their bilateral ties with each other and have bifurcated their areas of cooperation from economic, strategic to that of health, environment management, rural development too.

V.CONCLUSION

India and Japan share not just economic and strategically oriented ties with each other but the basis of their relationship is rooted in the rich heritage of Buddhism and its ideals. The deepening of such cordial relationship between the two is pertinent considering the Indo-Pacific issue. The leaders of both these countries aim to cement the bi-lateral ties by engaging in the military aspect as well. Infact in the year 2022, these two countries held a “two plus two dialogue” wherein focus was made on security and defence cooperation. Thus, the future of this bi-lateral relationship can be assumed considering the words of former Japanese Prime Minister Late Shinzo Abe “A strong India benefits Japan and a strong Japan benefits India.” However, it would be interesting to observe China’s strategy to tackle such growing ties in the neighbourhood which in the long run could collaborate to weaken China’s grip and influence.

² China plans to build a corridor of infrastructure projects across both land and sea routes connecting Southeast Asia to Europe, popularly known as the Belt and Road Initiative (B&R).¹⁰ The project is divided into two parts: a continental road (the Belt) and a sea route known as the Maritime Silk Road.

³ <https://www.ibef.org/indian-exports/india-japan-trade> accessed on 10 April, 2023.

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