

# Indo-Japanese Relations: From Spiritual to Special Strategic & Global Partnership

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## Abstract

This article analyses the multifaceted dimensions of New Delhi-Tokyo bilateral relationship in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, encompassing the political & diplomatic, economic, defense & security and cultural cooperation. With the signing of a ‘peace treaty’ between India & Japan in 1952, the diplomatic relations between the two nations have been established. Both nations have close economic ties since 1991. They have strong defense and security cooperation since 2008. In the recent years the defense exchanges between the two nations have gained strength because of the issues of peace, security and stability in the Indo-Pacific Region. They have also very rich cultural linkages based on Buddhism since 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. Significantly, the recent meeting of the Indian Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi with his newly appointed Japanese Counterpart Mr. Shigeru Ishiba on the sidelines of the 21<sup>st</sup> ASEAN-India Summit and the 19<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit held at Vientiane, Lao PDR from 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> October 2024 has further strengthened the bilateral cooperation between the two the trusted and strategic partners India and Japan.

**Keywords:** India-Japan relations, Special Strategic and Global Partnership, Indo-Pacific Region, China Factor, Quad

## 1. Introduction

Japan, the “Land of Rising Sun”, is an archipelago nation in East Asia. It consists of about 6,852 islands with a total area of approximately 377,900 square kilometres. The four main islands that make up the substantial percentage of Japan’s total landmass are like; Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu and Shikoku. Japan is situated west of the Pacific Ocean in the Northern Hemisphere and shares maritime borders with Taiwan, Northern Mariana Islands, Philippines, Russia, South Korea, China and North Korea. It has the cost line of about 29,715 kilometres formed by the East China Sea, the Sea of Japan, the Sea of Okhotsk and the Pacific Ocean (Mandeep Singh, 2022). In fact, Japan is a civilizational partner of India and vital in India’s Look East, Engage East and Act East Policy (Titli Basu, 2014). In the wake of rapidly changing geopolitical scenarios of the Indo-Pacific region, India-Japan relations have great political, economic and strategic convergence. Today India and Japan share a “Special Strategic & Global Partnership”. It is one of the most dynamic bilateral partnerships between the two nations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Both nations are two natural partners of Asia-Pacific region. They are two key players committed for establishing security, peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. They share the common values of democracy, freedom, rule of law and respect for fundamental rights. Indo-Japan relations are mutually beneficially as well as complementary. (Mandeep Singh, 2022). Both India &

Japan are functioning and vibrant democracies. Both are aspirants for permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Both support a cooperative and comprehensive approach in order to combat the international terrorism as well as sea-piracy. In fact, over the years mutual trust has been strengthened with Japanese emergency support following the security dialogue on the 2+2 format; Malabar exercises; coast guards exercises; Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement etc. (Titli Basu, 2014).

However, at present, both nations face numerous problems like; national security, maritime security, regional economic disparity etc. In fact, these problems are emerging from the coercive and threatening behaviour of People's Republic of China in South Asia and South China Sea, thus intensifying close ties between the two Asian democracies India and Japan (Mohd Rizwan Alam, 2019). For example, in the recent years, China has intervened in the region of influence of India in South Asia through different activities and projects like; the One Belt One Road initiative (OBOR) of China and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (passing through the Indian Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir). China has also encircled and encroached upon the sphere of influence of India in the Indian Ocean by establishing its ports in Gwadar of Pakistan and Hambantota of Sri Lanka (Pavan Kumar, (2020). Additionally, on account of the unresolved border disputes both India and China have confronted many deadly military clashes ever since the Sino-India War of 1962. The recent military stand-offs along their contested boundary i.e. the Line of Actual Control (LAC) include the Galwan River Valley Clash in June 2020, the Pangong Sector Skirmishes in August and September 2020 and the Tawang Sector Clash in December 2022. In the recent years, following such deadly military clashes with China, India developed more close and strong relations with its Quad partners like; the US, Japan, and Australia (Prasanta Sahoo, 2024). However, most recently in October 2024 both India and China have reached an agreement on patrolling arrangements along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the border areas leading to disengagement of troops at two friction points namely Depsang and Demchok in the eastern Ladakh and a resolution of the issues that had arisen four years ago in the Galwan River Valley Clashes in 2020. Similarly, China's approach towards the South China Sea has also disturbed Japan. It is evident from the pages of history that China & Japan have been sharing bitter memories. For example, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century both nations have fought wars against each other. In the recent years, due to the coercive behaviour of China, Japan has increased its defense budget and also set up new military bases in order to tackle the national security threats.

From the above discussion it is important to note here that India and Japan have the common threats from China. Hence, they see China as their common enemy. In such a background, both India and Japan should follow the basic principles of Realism (a school of thought in International Relations) in order to contain the rise of China in the region. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is one of such initiatives taken by the four democracies: the United States, India, Japan and Australia (Anil Kumar Mohapatra, 2024). In fact, ever since its establishment in 2007 and revitalization in 2017, the Quad has emerged as an important platform to promote peace, stability, cooperation and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region, most importantly countering the growing influence and coercive behaviour of China in the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions and ensuring a free, open, and inclusive regional order. The recent Quad Leaders' Summit hosted by the US President Joe Biden, at Wilmington, Delaware on September 21, 2024 found all the Quad countries more strategically aligned than ever before in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In this summit, the Prime Minister of India Mr. Narendra Modi stated that a free, open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific is a shared objective of all the Quad partners, underlining that the

Quad is here to stay, to assist, to partner and to complement the efforts of the “Indo-Pacific nations” (Prasanta Sahoo, 2024). During this Quad Leaders’ Summit, the PM Modi held his bilateral meeting with his Japanese counterpart Fumio Kishida. Two leaders reviewed the multi-faceted relationship between India and Japan and also exchanged their views in order to strengthen the cooperation further, including defense and security ties and business-to-business(B2B) and people-to-people (P2P) collaborations. In such a background, it is here imperative to understand the history of the bilateral relations between the two Asian democracies India and Japan.

## 2. Historical Backdrop

India-Japan relations have a long history rooted in the spiritual affinity and strong cultural and civilizational ties. The origin of cultural linkages between the two nations can be traced back to the 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D when Buddhism, born in India reached to Japan via China and Korea and spread throughout the islands, thus establishing a permanent connection between the two nations. In Japan, Buddhism has become a major religion. It has brought the worship of many Hindu gods. The Shichifukujin or the seven lucky gods of Japan have their origins in Hindu traditions. The earliest documented direct contact of India with Japan was the ‘Todaiji Temple’ in Nara, where the consecration of the towering statue of the Lord Buddha was performed by an Indian monk Bodhisena in 752A.D. The Prince Shotoku Taishi (574 -622) was one of the most influential figures in the political, cultural and ethical spheres of Japan. Prince Taishi is regarded as the founder of Japanese nation and Buddhism in Japan. In fact, it was Prince Taishi who blended Confucianism and Buddhism into the mainstream of the political, social and ethical codes of Japan. In the early modern age, many prominent Indians who visited to Japan were like Swami Vivekananda, Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, entrepreneur JRD Tata, freedom fighter Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Rash Behari Bose and Justice Radha Binod Pal. Among these prominent Indian figures, Swami Vivekananda was the first to visit to Japan. In 1893, he made his journey through Japan to the World Religious Parliament, Chicago, US. The Nobel laureate Tagore visited to Japan for five times (three times in 1916, 1917 & 1924 and two times in 1929). In fact, Tagore’s visits revived the centuries-old connection between the cultures of India and Japan (Mandeep Singh, 2022). Because of the close contacts between Rabindranath Tagore and Japan, Visva Bharati University set up a Japanese Department in 1954 (Asima Sahu, 2024). Thus, it is found that there is vast and profound influence of Indian culture (Buddhism) upon Japan. From the ancient times to the current times, Buddhism has played a great unifying role between the two key Asian nations India and Japan.

### 2.1 Relations during the Cold War Era

After the end of the Second World War in 1945, the whole world was divided into the two power blocs like the Western Bloc led by the United States of America (USA) and the Eastern Bloc led by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), thus leading to the beginning of the Cold War also called ideological war (between Capitalism & Communism) (Prasanta Sahoo, et al., 2024). Japan was in ruins due to its defeat in the World War II and had to rebuild, while India was impoverished and diminished by the British rule. Both nations confronted may similar socio-economic challenges. During the freedom movement of India against the British rule, Japan helped the Indian National Army of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. After India’s independence in August 1947, the first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had gifted two elephants to Tokyo’s Ueno Zoo in 1949. In fact, it was a symbolic gift of Pandit Nehru for Japan’s good fortune and brought a glimmer of hope into the lives of the people of Japan. Japan was invited to New Delhi for the first Asian Games in 1951. Next year in April 1952, India and

Japan concluded a peace treaty and established their diplomatic relations (Anil Kumar Mohapatra, 2024). India supported Japan to be a member of the United Nations (UN) in 1952. In 1955, the leaders of both nations met at the Bandung Afro-Asian Conference (Indonesia) (Mandeep Singh, 2022). During the rebuilding of its economy after the devastation in the Second World War Japan was assisted greatly by India with the supply of the essential minerals, mainly iron ore. In 1957, Japan's Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi visited to India. Following his visit, Japan started providing yen loans to India in 1958. However, this relationship did not have much impacts as Japan was caught in the rivalry of the two power blocs ( the USA & the USSR) and was forced to align itself with the West power bloc , while India followed non-alignment as its best policy in order to maintain equal-distance from the two power blocs. Additionally, Japan also maintained neutrality when India had wars with China and Pakistan. Here it was found that the bilateral relationship between India and Japan was of low intensity until the end of the Cold War in 1991.

## 2.2 Relations Post Cold War Era

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, India adopted the Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization model (New Economic Policy) that provided a vast market for the Japanese products and the old relationship of trust between the two nations revived. In the same year, India introduced its 'Look East Policy' (now known as the 'Act East Policy' since 2014) in order to improve relations with the ASEAN and other East Asian countries. However, the nuclear tests in Pokhran in 1998 by India disturbed the bilateral relationship between the two nations India and Japan again. Following the nuclear test of 1998, Japan imposed sanctions against India as a punitive arrangement. The Japanese Diet found these tests as a threat to the very existence of humanity. Japan froze grants-in-aid for new projects, suspended Yen loans, disallowed Tokyo as a venue for India Development Forum and put stringent regulations on technology transfer. Japan suspended the Official Development Assistance (ODA) to India. India was the biggest receiver of the Japanese ODA from 1986 to 1998 except in 1990. Japan also suspended the economic assistance for three years and all kinds of political contacts between the two countries. Following the historic visit of the Prime Minister of Japan Mr. Yoshiro Mori to India in August 2000, the diplomatic and economic sanctions imposed by Japan against India were lifted and their bilateral relationship came back to normalcy. During this visit the Japanese Prime Minister Mr. Yoshiro Mori and his Indian counterpart Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee established the "Global Partnership" between the two nations, thus gaining a new trajectory in the bilateral relationship in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In 2006, Indian PM Dr. Manmohan Singh visited to Japan. His visit to Japan was so significant because he and his Japanese counterpart Mr. Shinzo Abe upgraded the bilateral relationship from a "Global Partnership" to a "Strategic and Global Partnership". In addition, after becoming the Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi visited to Japan in September 2014. During this visit the PM Modi and his Japanese counterpart Abe further elevated the bilateral relationship to a "Special Strategic and Global Partnership".

## 3. Different Aspects of Indo-Japanese Relations

India and Japan relationship have different aspects ranging from political & diplomatic relations to cultural relations. They are discussed below.

### 3.1. Political & Diplomatic Relations

As discussed under the point 'Relations during the ....', the political and diplomatic relations between the two key Asian nations India and Japan started with the signing of their 'Peace Treaty' in April 1952.

There have been regular India-Japan annual summit meetings in each other's capitals since 2006. Because of the cordial political relations and the regular high level political engagements of the political leaders between the two nations, their bilateral relationship has been elevated to a "Special Strategic and Global Partnership" since 2014. In 2015, the Japanese PM Shinzo Abe visited to India and held bilateral meeting with the Indian PM Narendra Modi. In this meeting two leaders resolved to transform the India-Japan "Special Strategic and Global Partnership" into a deep, broad-based and action-oriented partnership, thus reflecting a broad convergence of their long-term political, economic and strategic goals. Both leaders also announced "Japan-India Vision 2025" to work together for peace and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region and the World. In May 2023, the PM Modi paid a visit to Japan to attend the G7 Summit in Hiroshima and held bilateral meeting with the PM Kishida. In September 2023, the PM Kishida visited to India to attend the G20 Summit and held bilateral meeting with the PM Modi. During this bilateral meeting, both leaders discussed their priorities for their G7 & G20 Presidencies, mainly in bringing the aspirations of the Global South to the fore. In addition, the PM Narendra Modi's most recent bilateral meeting with newly appointed Japan's Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba on the margins of the 21<sup>st</sup> ASEAN-India Summit and the 19<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit held at Vientiane, Lao PDR from 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> October 2024 has further strengthened the bilateral cooperation between the two nations in different areas, including infrastructure, connectivity and defense. During this bilateral meeting both Prime Ministers have reaffirmed their commitment to a peaceful, safe and prosperous "Indo-Pacific region", recognizing India & Japan as the indispensable natural partners of Asia.

### 3.2. Economic Relations

Today, both nations have vibrant economic engagements since. The bilateral trade relations strengthened in 1991, when India adopted the Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization model (New Economic Policy), thus providing a vast market for Japanese products. The economic relations between the two nations have significantly expanded and deepened over the years., particularly after the signing of the India-Japan CEPA (Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement) in 2011. As of November 2024, among the five largest economies of the world, Japan and India rank the 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> positions respectively after the US, China and Germany. As of early 2024, India-Japan bilateral trade was valued at approximately USD 20 billion. In fact, the economies of the two nations are complementary to each other. Japan is a developed economy, while India is a developing one. India has a big market with enormous amount of business and investment opportunities for Japanese investors and businessmen. Notably, India's major exports to Japan include engineering goods, petroleum products, chemicals, agricultural products gems etc. while major Japanese exports to India include machinery, automobiles, electronics, steel products etc. Many Japanese automobile industries like Yamaha, Toyota, Nissan, Honda, Maruti Suzuki and are active in India. Similarly in the electronic sectors too, there are several Japanese firms like Sony, Panasonic, Canon, and Sharp that have invested huge money and have manufacturing units in Indian market. In fact, Japan sees India as a key partner in its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy and many government initiatives like "Make in India" and "Atmanirbhar Bharat" align with business interests of Japan. As hinted under the point 'Relations Post....', India has been the largest recipient of the Japanese Official Development Assistance over the past decades. Delhi Metro is the most successful example of the Japanese cooperation through the utilization of the Official Development Assistance (ODA). The high-speed train is a key development in India for which Japan has extended financial support. Moreover, Japan has also played a significant role in other sectors of India's development like the environment, power and transportation (Mohd Rizwan Alam, 2019).

### 3.3 Defense & Security Relations

India- Japan defense and security relationship is the center piece of India-Japan Special Strategic Partnership. In the recent years, both nations have been strengthened their defense cooperation, driven by the shared concerns over the regional peace, security and stability, mainly with regard to the growing influence of China in the Indo-Pacific region. India and Japan hold regular joint military exercises in order to improve interoperability and foster closer defense relations. For example they have conducted their first land based joint military exercise, that combined India's "Dharma Guardian" Exercise with the Ground Self -Defense Exercise of Japan. Both nations have signed several MoUs or agreements for defense cooperation such as the "Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation" in 2008, "Memorandum of Defense Cooperation and Exchanges" in 2014, the "General Security of Military Information Agreement in 2015, the "Implementation Arrangement for Deeper Cooperation in 2018", the "Cyber Security Agreement" in 2019 and the "Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement in 2020". There are also key initiatives of security and defense dialogue between the two nations such as the Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting ("2 + 2" Dialogue), annual Defense Ministerial Dialogue, Maritime Dialogue and Coast Guard-to-Coast Guard Dialogue. Japan has also shown its interests in exporting more advanced defense technologies to India, including missile defense systems and radar technologies. In addition, several defense companies of Japan are increasingly exploring opportunities with the defense manufactures of India under the "Make in India" initiative. Above all, India-Japan defense cooperation is evolving rapidly because both countries recognize the significance of the mutual security in an increasingly uncertain world.

### 3.4 Cultural Relations

In the 'historical backdrop', a reference was made regarding the cultural linkages between India and Japan. Indo-Japanese cultural relations have a long history dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D, when Buddhism spread from India to Japan. Buddhism has a great influence upon the Japanese culture. Trade along the Silk Route facilitated early cultural exchanges between the two nations. Coming to the modern times, they have signed the "Cultural Agreement" in 1957, thus establishing cultural exchange programs. Today, the growing importance of the Yoga and the Ayurveda and much interest in Bollywood films in Japan and gaining readership of Japanese literature and influence of Japanese movies in India have enhanced the cultural relationship between the two nations. The recent cultural ties between the two nations have flourished, reflecting strong mutual interests in strengthening ties across various domains that encompass arts, heritage, education, and tourism. In 2022-23, both nations have organized a series of cultural exchanges, festivals and exhibitions for commemorating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their diplomatic relationship. Events such as the Indian Festival in Japan and Japanese Festival in India have also provided platforms in order to showcase the traditional art forms, performances, cuisine and films from both nations. Moreover, both nations continue to collaborate through the Japan-India Cultural Centre in New Delhi, hosting a wide range of cultural performances, film screening and educational seminars on traditional Japanese culture and modern Japanese arts. Above all, India and Japan give importance to each other's traditions and have invested in promoting cultural understanding as a part of their broader diplomatic goals.

## 4. Conclusion

The above discussion manifests that India and Japan relations have a long history that dates back to the ancient times. Bilateral ties however were at low level until 1990s. But from 2000 onwards bilateral

relations improved significantly. Today, India and Japan share a “Special Strategic and Global Partnership”. Both are the oldest democracies in Asia. Both are threatened by the coercive behaviour of the Peoples Republic of China in the “Indo-Pacific region”. For their common security concerns, they have come closer to deter China. In this context, the Quad is a strong initiative. In 2024 Quad Leaders’ Summit hosted by the United States, it was found that all the 4 Quad countries (India, the US, Japan and Australia) were more aligned than ever before in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, seeking the “Indo-Pacific region” “where no state dominates and no state is dominated”.

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