

India's Foreign Policy towards Japan: Special Partnership amid Regional Transformation

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Abstract

India and Japan have upgraded their cordial relations to a special strategic partnership. The deepening of this relation is particularly evident since 2014, when Narendra Modi was sworn in as the Prime Minister of India, thus leading the nation to embark on a new journey of consolidating regional influence and establishing itself as a regional power amid the rise of China and regional transformations. India is very keen on furthering the special partnership with Japan, which not only allows Indian presence in regional strategic and security architecture, but also does not hinder the Indian autonomy. This paper, through the analysis of India's Japan strategy, security and infrastructure agreements, especially since 2014, seeks to address how India's foreign policy towards Japan has undergone changes to allow for India's greater role in Asia and what factors have led to these changes in India's Japan policy. The paper argues that realist perspective of balance of power in the backdrop of the rise of China as well as constructivist perspective of India's principle of non-alignment (despite strategic friendships), have been the base of India's Japan policy under Modi government, to pursue and promote greater Indian presence in geo-political and geo-strategic spheres. The paper analyses the India-Japan partnership as a response to emerging regional security challenges, explores the prospects of the partnership and charts the course of changing Indian diplomacy towards Japan.

Keywords: India-Japan, China, Modi, Abe, Indian diplomacy

India, the largest democracy of the world has actively maintained cordial relations with Japan mainly since the beginning of the twenty first century. Though their relationship majorly depended on ODA and FDI, it has expanded into an alliance of strategic nature which has surpassed the realm of quantifiable measures of economic progress. Today, the momentum and direction of India's policy towards Japan can be evaluated through the triad of attractiveness of India's political values,

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diplomatic ideals and foreign policy initiatives towards Japan as a special strategic international partner to India. This is clearly reflected in India's growing affinity towards Japan through various agreements and initiatives signed between the two countries and the increased elements of defense and security in these initiatives which mirror the affinity between Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Prime Minister Narendra Modi since 2014.

Indian Prime Minister Modi decided to visit Japan as the first nation outside India's immediate neighborhood, owing to his close relations with the Japanese counterpart Prime Minister Abe since 2002, when Modi was the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat. Japan became the largest donor of ODA to India in 2017 reaching over \$2 billion, with most of the funding for social and economic infrastructure. One key driving force behind the increased momentum of the Indo-Japanese partnership is the strong bonding between the leaders of the two countries- Prime Minister Narendra Modi who won a second term in 2019 with an even higher majority, and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who has been keenly aligning Japan's Indo Pacific strategy with India's Look East Policy.

An important factor in the evaluation of India's policy towards Japan is the rising regional influence of China in domains of defense, security, economy as well as politics. Beijing has been consistently strengthening its position in the Indian Ocean region, which is of grave concern to New Delhi. India has responded to growing Chinese assertion by launching a deeper partnership with Japan within its boundaries and beyond. A second factor is India's long-standing foreign policy ideal of non-alignment, which has guided the Indian foreign policy for decades. But the regional transformations and security challenges close to its land and seas has led India to revise the ideals underlying its decision making and diplomacy by forging closer friendships with nations such as Japan.

This paper seeks to analyze India's policy towards Japan in 2014-2019 to answer the two main research questions. First, how India's foreign policy towards Japan has transformed since 2014 under Prime Minister Modi given the rising influence of China. Second, how has India responded to these regional transformations by partnering with Japan given the constraints of its foreign policy ideal of non-alignment. The study of India's Japan diplomacy through the lens of economic, political and strategic perspectives along with India's diplomatic ideals as a factor help evaluate the underlying significance of the Indo-Japanese relationship under the Modi government.

The key arguments raised in this paper are three-fold. First, India's Japan policy which is a combination of geo-economic, geo-political and geo-strategic factors has been influenced by Chinese assertiveness in and beyond the Indian subcontinent. Second, though India still maintains a relatively cautious stance in its growing partnership with Japan, India's diplomatic ideal of non-

alignment has diluted considerably under Modi since Japan offers India an incomparable partnership that neither presses for strong open stance against any power, nor does it diminish India's strategic autonomy in any way. Third, Indo-Japanese cooperation in parts of Africa, South Asia and Iran, offers for India some new diplomatic avenues beyond its own borders to create a strong international presence for itself and elevate its bilateral partnership with a key nation like Japan in years to come. The succeeding section lays down the analytical frameworks for empirical analysis.

India's Japan policy: Under the constraints of Chinese might and Non-alignment policy

Rapid economic growth through its policy reforms has brought India's importance in achieving Asian peace and security, into the limelight. India-Japan relations have been analyzed by scholars through various angles. One of these is the significance of Japan in India's Look East or Act East policy (Bajpaee, 2017; Lee, 2016; Wojczewski, 2016), wherein it has been argued that India's leadership has sought to "Japan's place at the heart of India's Look East Policy" with the successful conclusion of "Special Strategic and Global Partnership" between India and Japan in September 2014, this is more of an outcome of expanded relations between the two sides since 2000s than a standalone outcome of India being proactive in the recent past towards partnering with Japan. Another aspect in the past studies is the prominence of India-Japan relations in fostering economic, security and infrastructure growth in India over a couple of decades (Sahoo & Bishnoi, 2016; Jain, 2016; Yoshimatsu, 2019a; Brewster, 2010a). The authors have highlighted that since India, Japan and China comprise most of the geopolitical issues in Asia, Indo-Japanese collaboration would not only elevate India as a potential economic power against China but would also curb China's expansionary moves. India's foreign policy towards Japan has seen the onset of various infrastructure development projects including the flagship Shinkansen project, Prime Minister Modi's industrial acceleration programmes viz., Make in India, Skill India, Digital India etc. India's rigorous engagement with Japan and USA shows the relevance of the China factor into India's changing foreign policy (Ishibashi, 2018; Paul, 2012; Basu, 2016). India's invitation to Japan in its security-sensitive projects, like in Andamans and northeast India, has elevated Indo-Japanese relations to a new strategic level from a former close economic relation (Jain, 2018; Ahuja et al., 2018; Boon, 2016; Saint-Mézard, 2016; Chaudhuri, 2016). The authors have concluded that Modi's Indian Ocean policy is very reliant on support of Japan.

The past scholars have theoretically and empirically examined the India-Japan relationship from the Indian foreign policy perspective mainly as a dire need for India's economic development and security objectives. Though India has never come to the fore front with its capability to be an Asia power hub, constant friction with seven decade-old rival neighbor Pakistan along with Chinese threat on land and seas has led India to shift its foreign policy stance towards countries like Japan in

search of greater cooperation that extends beyond economic gains and transcends into security concerns.

In this regard, there is a shortcoming in the approach and focus of the previous literature in three aspects. Firstly, in the past research India's security needs have been highlighted with the underlying idea that they are a part of the larger framework of bilateral economic ties India has with Japan such as in Jain (2018), Ahuja et al. (2016), Sahoo & Bishnoi (2016) and Garge (2016). There are fewer studies such as Brewster (2010a) that focus on India's policies towards Japan exclusively as an instrument of pushing India's defense aims and geopolitical objectives in the Asian region in the backdrop of India's rise as a potential power in Asia. Secondly, from a theoretical perspective, past studies are relatively weak in identifying India's ideational approaches to foreign policy. Past research has maintained focus on realist and liberalist perspective to analyze India's changing foreign policy stance, but not constructivist. Jain (2018), Ahuja et al. (2016), Garge (2016) and Chaudhuri (2016), have all mainly focused on economic and security objectives, and their arguments are more material and utilitarian in analytical focus, which is centered around the material power of India-Japan strategic partnership. Brewster (2010a; 2010b) and Wojczewski (2016) have examined the norms and ideals Indian foreign policy has long maintained since Nehruvian times. But no recent research particularly considers the approach to study India's foreign policy stance towards Japan in light of these ideational factors. Thirdly, with India gaining prominence on the international front, India's rising power as against Chinese increased influence in Asia has not been covered by literature. There are very limited studies that highlight how India could establish itself as a potential Asian power by drawing from the strength of India-Japan ties to serve the needs of the two economies and address the contemporary security concerns.

In order to address these shortcomings, this paper analyzes the policy development of India's policy towards Japan since the swearing in of Prime Minister Modi in 2014 in light of its relations with China. In that aspect the paper explores the Indian strategies in partnering with Japan under two frameworks: the realist framework of balance of power in Asia and the constructivist framework of India's foreign policy ideal of non-alignment.

Realism as a theory of international relations explains the nation state as being the center for all decision making in a country. Within the realist thought, the balance of power theory which basically is a theory of equilibrium among great powers, is based on works of Thucydides, Hobbes and Rousseau, and have been extended into classical realist theory by Carr (1964) and Morgenthau (1963). The theory suggests that possession and concentration of military and material capabilities with the great powers is kept in check and balanced out due to major powers trying to survive and maintain their supremacy in the international system, thus restoring equilibrium. According to the theory, the balance can be achieved through internal military capacity building (when economic

wealth is transformed into military prowess), forging counterbalancing alliances, ‘passing the buck’ of balancing to other state, etc. India’s shift in its policy stance towards Japan from economic progress to the building of military capabilities showcases this realist aspect of foreign policy. The theory is helpful in explaining why China’s potential competitor, India is striving to mark its presence especially in the Indian Ocean region, through diplomatic measures such as aligning with Japan to safeguard its economy, security and autonomy-all soft balancing indicators.

Moving away from realism’s underlying materialism, constructivism states that while ideas and processes define the social construction of identities and interests, these ideas and processes create a structure of their own which is ideational (not material) and influences the international actors. Since identities are representations of an actor’s understanding of who they are, which in turn signals their interests, identities constitute interests and actions. Norms are standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity (Kratochwil, 1999). These norms and principles help build identity of a state, since they become the defining characteristic of that state. India’s policies have underlying principle of non-alignment principle that has been the foundational guide to India’s policy towards rest of the world and has given India the identity of a non-aligned state. Born out of the need to maintain strategic autonomy and sovereignty as a nation during Cold War, the principle of non-alignment as a compass of state’s foreign policy was meant to distance the foreign policy of nations hurt by imperialism in the past, from the two blocs of the capitalist West and the communist Soviet. Non-alignment has since then become the Indian stance in its dealings with large and middle powers to maintain cordial relations with other countries without forging formal “alliances” with them. However, the changing power-dynamics in the world involving the US, medium-powers like Japan and Australia, as well as new emerging powers like China have pushed India to revise its strategies and step into more active engagement with countries such as Japan that share similar challenges and aspirations as a potential regional power. The theory would help to study if India has retained its traditional ideal of non-alignment or shifted its foreign policy stance to engaging with several powers under a multi-aligned policy.

The paper analyses India’s Japan policy in three steps. First, it describes India’s foreign policy towards Japan and traces its evolution from 2014 till 2019, encompassing strategic, economic and defense domains to track India’s partnership with Japan under the Modi government. Second, the paper discusses the impact of the increasing Chinese influence in Indian Ocean region to analyze whether it has pushed or held back growth in Indo-Japanese relations. Thirdly, the paper examines to what extent India has based its Japan policy on the ideal of non-alignment and what are its effects on the policy. The scope of analysis is the period of the first Modi administration (2014-2019).

Policy Development

India is facing a conundrum in the currently active, assertive and aggressive international political theatre which has necessitated more assertive foreign policy for India in order to establish a leadership position for itself along with securing its land and seas. In that sense, India feels compelled to engage with China because of a variety of reasons- both countries share land borders and aim at keeping them secure and stable, both nations are growing at a fast pace and competing for a stronger position economically and politically. The key policy measures India undertook with Japanese support was in the spheres of economic development, strategic infrastructure, defense and an extended collaboration in other countries.

First, India signed the India-Japan Civil Nuclear Arrangement with Japan during Modi's November 2016 visit to Japan. India had already secured Japanese support for entry into Nuclear Suppliers Group, as mentioned in the India-Japan Vision 2025 statement. The deal came into force in July 2017, making India the first country to enter such an arrangement with Japan despite not being signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Also, this came immediately after India failed to get entry into the elite 48-countries' Nuclear Suppliers Group, which controls the export of nuclear material and technological know-how, due to the Chinese objection against India and support for Pakistan (Press Trust of India, 2019). India overcame this threat by signing the iconic deal with Japan to secure its economic and energy needs. Second, India chose to offer to have its bullet train project through Japan instead of China in 2015 for 81 percent of the total cost being financed by the Japanese government with a \$13.8 billion soft yen-loan at 0.1 percent rate of interest, successfully outbidding the Chinese proposal for the same project. The project is important for Japan since it lost bids against China for similar projects in Indonesia and Thailand, so India's decision to choose Japan as its development partner was received well in Japan with Hiroshi Hirabayashi, the former ambassador of Japan to India and author of *India: The Last Superpower* stated that "India is not Indonesia or Thailand. It is a great nation, totally autonomous...It does not need to submit to Chinese pressure."

India pushed for Japanese investment and collaboration in the geo-strategic region of North East India which also contains the disputed state of Arunachal Pradesh, a state claimed by China as "South Tibet." India's north-east comprises eight states which account for about eight percent of India's landmass. The region, which is relatively less developed economically than the rest of the country, holds extreme geographical, political as well as strategic importance for India due to its borders with Bangladesh, China, Myanmar, Nepal and Tibet. Abundance of natural resources and history of secessionist movements in the North-East Indian region have made it even more crucial for India to integrate and connect the region with not just the rest of India but also with neighboring countries of Myanmar and Bangladesh to boost economic development and achieve security

objectives. Of the five loan agreements signed during Modi's visit to Japan in October 2018, three were for projects in the north-eastern region, namely JPY5.5 billion for reconstruction and modernization of a hydroelectric power station in Meghalaya, JPY25.5 billion for better connectivity between Dhubri, Assam and Phulbari, Meghalaya through construction of a 20 km bridge making it India's longest bridge, and JPY12.3 billion for a sustainable forest management project in Tripura. India and Japan decided to establish Act East Forum in September 2018, to lead development projects for this region and offer a platform for India-Japan collaboration under India's Act East Policy and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy. This project is part of the larger Indo-Japan corridor for the Indo-Pacific region extending to eastern Africa under the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor. This is also significant due to both Japan and India's non-participation in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The north-eastern India neighbors Bhutan, Nepal, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, and is geo-strategically important for India's connectivity to ASEAN.

Another important collaboration between India and Japan is in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, an archipelago of 572 islands, which form a key location for India in the Indian Ocean region due to its proximity to Myanmar (22 nautical miles) and Indonesia (90 nautical miles). India partnered with Japan to develop a 15-megawatt diesel power plant in the South Andaman Island. This is one instance of Indian foreign policy shift since India has been rejecting any proposals for foreign assistance in the strategic islands of Andaman & Nicobar.

The meeting between the defense ministers, Japan's Itsunori Onodera and his Indian counterpart Nirmala Sitharaman, organized at New Delhi on August 19-20, 2018 was very crucial for two reasons. One was the agreement to kick-start negotiations on ACSA (acquisition and cross-servicing agreement) for their armed forces to allow mutual exchange of food, fuel, ammunition, and equipment. In that meeting, India also agreed to have Japan's Air Self-Defense Forces participate as an observer in the next joint air drills by U.S. and Indian forces which are aimed at restricting Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean region (Kuronuma, 2018).

On the international front, India has been quick and keen in partnering with Japan on key projects such as in Iran, Sri Lanka and Africa (through the Asia Africa Growth Corridor). The case of Sri Lanka is particularly interesting since it is almost like a contest arena for India as China has already established an assertive position on the island country's takeover of Hambantota port. In December 2017, Sri Lanka officially handed over its Hambantota port on a 99-year lease to China, over non-payment of over a billion-dollar loan Chinese loan for construction of the port which proved to be unprofitable. This came months after China officially opened its military base in Djibouti in August 2017. India considers Sri Lanka's strategic location as its backyard and is alarmed at growing Chinese influence in the region. As a result, India has been trying to counterbalance China's growing influence in Sri Lanka through not just Trincomalee port but

another project for co-development of Colombo port with Japan (announced on May 28, 2019), in which India has nearly 70% of its transshipment business.

India's policy towards Japan in the recent times is being partly, if not largely, affected by increasing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean region and abroad (Jaishankar, 2018). India has responded in a mixed way to ensuing disputes with China. The border dispute close to North-East Indian borders has seen more aggressive stand-off from both sides, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been seen as a credible threat due to its closeness to disputed Kashmir territory and India completely refused to be part of the ambitious Belt and Road initiative by China fearing the alleged String of Pearls² Chinese strategy of building military bases in Indian Ocean (MacDonald, Donahue, Danyluk & Hamilton, 2004). India's circumspect response to it has been to strengthen its own presence in the Indian Ocean region. The key observation regarding these developments is Indian foreign policy stance towards Japan, in which India has found an ideal partner for economic development, a strategic partner for infrastructure projects in India and in larger Indian Ocean region and African sub-continent and a congruent partner in terms of diplomatic ideals that stand for rule-based order in larger Indo-Pacific. However, it is a subject of analysis as to how India has liberated or constrained itself due to its non-alignment identity.

Analysis: The China factor in India's Japan policy

India had been cautious about Chinese "anti-piracy" activities in Indian Ocean since September–November 2014 docking of China's Song-class submarine in Colombo port, Sri Lanka. Besides, there was an increase in the number of China's naval ships reported approaching India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands around the same time—all indicating towards China's string of pearls strategy coming to practical play. In fact, a prominent 'open-seas' presence had been highlighted as a necessary step in Beijing's 2015 defense white paper. In such a scenario Japan is the ideal partner, not just for Indian ambitions in expanding its prowess in the seas but also for conducting joint defense and maritime exercises.

The Malabar exercise of 2015 was different from all earlier versions that were restricted between US and Indian navies only. Japan had just been given an observer status and had been trying to upgrade itself to a full member in the strategic maritime exercise. Chinese Foreign Ministry responded, "Our position is very clear. It is hoped that the relevant country will not provoke

² String of Pearls is a geopolitical concept introduced by US Department of Defense in 2004, regarding China's alleged geo-economic and geo-strategic aims in the Indian Ocean region through Chinese military and commercial infrastructure along its sea lines of communication from Chinese mainland to Port Sudan in the Horn of Africa, and is a threat to India's regional power, trade and national security.

confrontation and heighten tensions in the region,” showing that Beijing regards Exercise Malabar as the military manifestation of a trilateral alignment between Washington, Tokyo and New Delhi, directed at containing China. Just months before the 2015 edition of Malabar exercise, a Chinese Type 041 Yuan-class submarine was reported to be in the Indian Ocean for a week at Karachi, Pakistan raising concerns in India regarding possible infringement on its littoral. India agreed to trilateralize Malabar exercise of October 12-19, 2015 and add Japan as an official permanent member in the exercise for the first time.

While India is not against the infrastructure development in Asia for growth, it is certainly cautious about the strategic implications of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as it has put participating nations in debt traps and also does not respect the territorial integrity of other countries. The Japan-India Act East Forum (JIAEF) has as its policy priority, resilient infrastructures in North East India through its projects on enhancing connectivity as well as the technical cooperation of “Capacity Development Project on Highways in Mountainous Regions (JIAEF, 2018).” The constant underlining of the significance of North-East India’s development and connectivity for India and Japan’s role in the same was clear in Prime Minister Modi’s statement in November 2016, “India-Japan’s partnership is of great substance and purpose which rests on the strong pillars of India’s ‘Act East Policy’.” Indian Foreign secretary, S. Jaishankar also stated that Japanese investment into the northeast “would give legs to our Act East policy.” This statement had in its backdrop the geo-economic and security-led move by India when it had twice refused to participate in or promote China’s BRI because of mounting Chinese interference close to its borders such as the infringement of Indian sovereignty due to China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passing through disputed Kashmir territory as well as Chinese growing presence in Indian subcontinent, such as in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives etc. through infrastructure development. The other geo-strategic and security-led was the 73-day standoff in Doklam area between Indian and Chinese soldiers that began in June, 2017 which led to the Ministry of External Affairs in Indian issuing a warning statement, “Such construction would represent a significant change of status quo with serious security implications for India.” India’s push to move Indo-Japanese relations beyond bilateral sphere to more geostrategic, geo-political and geo-economic realm was clear when the 12th India-Japan Summit was organized in India in September 2017, just weeks after the Doklam stand-off ended after ten weeks of military engagement between India and China. In a lengthy joint statement, India and Japan said deepening security links was paramount and included research into unmanned ground vehicles and robotics and the possibility of joint field exercises between their armies. In addition to the above, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands joint-infrastructure development by India and Japan is not just a domestic economic development project funded by Japanese ODA but has various geo-strategic objectives. Andaman and Nicobar Islands lie alongside western tip of Malacca Strait and act as an entrance to the Indian Ocean. India is clearly concerned about Beijing’s growing presence in the Indian Ocean region and considers it as a

threat, which were illustrated by China's successful win over domestic turmoil in Maldives as well as upper hand over 99-year lease of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka. Additionally, India is wary of the feared Chinese "string of pearls" strategy with ports such as in Sri Lanka and Maldives as its "pearls" to surround the Indian peninsula. More than the infrastructure development itself on the islands by Japan including power, communications and optic fiber cables in Bay of Bengal, the Indo-Japanese collaboration in Andaman and Nicobar Islands has a lot of symbolic value. It is a reassurance to other countries in ASEAN region who are struggling with claims against China in the South China Sea. The strategic position of these islands in the Indian Ocean region provide an alternate military base to India, as a counter to the "string of pearls" route charted out by China in the Indian Ocean Region. The key is that India is finding in Japan a partner to build its frontiers and connect the otherwise secluded regions of the country.

The India Japan bilateral summit meeting of October 2018 was crucial for laying the foundation stone of the two nations' strategic and defense cooperation in the field of sharing military bases through the Acquisition and Cross Service agreement (ACSA) which would permit Indian navy to use Japanese base in Djibouti and Japan's navy to access Indian base in Andaman and Nicobar Islands. In their joint statement release after the summit, the two countries announced the beginning of negotiations for the ASCA (Gady, 2018). The agreement is important since India has been concerned about increasing Chinese naval presence in the Indian ocean, apart from its base in Djibouti where China has a strong hold. The ASCA would ensure greater cooperation between Indian Navy and Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces that would be able to share defense capacities, fuel and ammunition under the agreement.

An example of geo-political and geo-strategic move of the India-Japan relations is New Delhi's successful endeavor to influence Bangladesh's decision to choose Tokyo for development of its Matarbari project. Bangladesh had sought China's assistance in building a deep-sea port at Sonadia in 2010 and was on the verge of signing the contract with Chinese state-owned China Harbor Engineering Company Ltd., a few months after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Beijing in July 2014, but Bangladesh called off that project and awarded the development of Matarbari port to Japan. Bangladesh Planning Minister A.H.M. Mustafa Kamal said that "some countries, including India and the United States, are against the Chinese involvement" in the [Sonadia] project (Kumara, 2015). Hasina's government has had good relations with India and this turn of events has a much larger history than evident, under the Modi government in India. In 2014, India ended a three-decade old dispute with Bangladesh over 25,000 sq km strategic resource-rich area in the Bay of Bengal, by accepting the UN Tribunal ruling in Bangladesh's favor, for which New Delhi was praised internationally and more so in Dhaka. The move showed new Prime Minister Modi's focus on building closer regional ties in the region. To secure deeper ties in the region, India won bids to construct power

plant in Bangladesh, which was reported in Indian media as a “second setback” for Beijing, following the failure of a long-planned Chinese deal with Bangladesh to build the huge Sonadia deep-sea port near Chittagong, Bangladesh’s major port (Ruff, 2016). India used its influence to make Bangladesh government award the Matarbari port to Japan which subsequently led to the cancellation of the Sonadia project with China, to cut-off Beijing’s string of pearls route (Brewster, 2018). While Japan has the technical expertise and financial muscle, it is India’s influence in Bangladesh that is the major obstacle in the way of Beijing’s ambitions in the Bay of Bengal.

In another geo-strategic move, India developed the Chabahar Port in Iran as parts of India’s Indo-Pacific strategy to increase connectivity in the region. Though the talks between Iran and India to develop Chabahar had initiated in 2003, owing to India’s keen interest in bagging a civil nuclear deal with US as well as America’s strict sanctions on Iran led to delays till May 2016, when a formal deal was signed between India and Iran for Chabahar Port development during Prime Minister Modi’s Tehran visit in May 2016. Being only 72 kilometers away from the Chinese-backed, Pakistani port of Gwadar, which is seen as a key “pearl” in the Chinese Maritime Silk Route, the project is seen as a strategic play to limit the influence China seeks to gain and wield through its Belt and Road Initiative. Chabahar also allows the bypassing of a Pakistani bottleneck in terms of India-Afghanistan connectivity, which is crucial for both India and Afghanistan to secure their economic trade, transportation, energy needs as well as unrestricted flow of material aid by circumventing Pakistan. Japan’s interest in the Chabahar port gave a strategically favorable edge to India who wanted to keep Pakistan or China out of Chabahar port construction. In July 2018, Japan expressed alacrity to build an industrial complex in Chabahar (Parashar, 2018). Given that Japan is can potentially not be a part of Chabahar project in event of US sanctions on Iran (such as in April 2019), India’s involvement of Japan is key to secure India’s partnership with Japan in Central Asia which is quintessential to India’s energy, geo-political and geo-strategic moves.

Another geo-economic and geo-strategic project is AAGC (Asia Africa Growth Corridor), launched in India in May 2017 by Modi and Abe as an Indo-Japanese effort for intercontinental connectivity between Asia and Africa. It is a symbol of synergy between India’s “Act East Policy” and Japan’s “Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure.” Though the AAGC is by far only on paper and has quite often been termed as an ambitious vision, AAGC was jointly announced right after India refused to take part in the Chinese international forum in Beijing for BRI to which India had objected regarding the CPEC. AAGC is thus a strong alternative of financing and growth to under-developed and developing countries in Africa, who had so far been dependent on Chinese funding for development. AAGC maritime corridor could also be a legitimate India-Japan partnership to better integrate the economies of South, Southeast, and East Asia with Oceania and Africa.

India-Japan cooperation has extended beyond their domestic boundaries into the strategic regions of the Indian Ocean, as demonstrated by the initiation of infrastructure projects undertaken jointly by India and Japan in Sri Lanka through the development of East Container Terminal of Colombo Port as well as Trincomalee port in east Sri Lanka. India's interest in development of Sri Lanka's Trincomalee port, in joint construction with Japan has geostrategic implications not just due to the India-Japan partnership in port development in Indian Ocean but also due to their joint countering of the Chinese BRI. In a statement by India's foreign secretary S Jaishankar on July 12, 2018, he stated that India will help in development of both Colombo and Trincomalee ports in Sri Lanka (Chaudhary, 2018). Unlike the previous Mahinda Rajapaksa regime in Sri Lanka, the current regime in Colombo since 2015 showed a more balanced approach between India and China, by giving India a stake in Hambantota airport, Colombo port project and a key expressway. India, in collaboration with Japan, then announced the infrastructure and connectivity projects in the island country. The Trincomalee port is especially important geo-strategically, since the 99-year old handover of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka to China after failure to pay off debt by the former to the latter. With Chinese influence on the rise in Indian Ocean region along with its interest in ports in Maldives, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh, retired Adm. Jayanath Colombage of Sri Lanka stated that "We welcome anyone, only they shouldn't come with the intention of harming anyone, especially India." The Trincomalee port, considered to be one of the best deep-water natural harbors in the world, is also the gateway to Bay of Bengal which is of extreme importance geo-strategically and geo-economically to South and East India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar. May 2019 saw the signing of the plan to co-develop Eastern Container terminal of the Colombo port in Sri Lanka, between India and Japan. Although the involvement of India since the beginning of talks became a cause of uproar and internal political turmoil in Sri Lanka, which led to the dismissal and the reinstatement of its Prime Minister. The involvement of India and Japan in the project is being seen as a big development aimed at neutralizing the growing influence of China, which has poured money into the South Asian island nation under its mammoth BRI plan.

Analysis: (Non)-Alignment and India's policy towards Japan

India's Japan policy is being increasingly affected by the increasing Chinese influence and India has been striving to balance the Chinese power along with balancing the threat from Chinese naval expansion in the Indian Ocean region. In the realist perspective, Chinese influence should have made India more proactive in pursuing strategic security partnership with Japan, however, some cases defy the anticipated India proactiveness and are exceptions to the realist theory. That can be explained by India's strong and resolute foreign policy ideals that guide the foreign policy of India towards Japan-non-alignment. Non-alignment is basically the foreign policy ideal of orientation towards autonomous

and independent decision making in pursuing international relations as well as domestic developments, without owing allegiance to any foreign power at the cost of own sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Though India has gone ahead since 2014 partnering with Japan on various strategic, defense relate and economic projects, there are certain instances where India has defied the strength of its friendship with Japan and paused or slowed initiatives to avoid being seen as a Japanese ally against another power. The non-alignment ideal is very clear in in India's policy towards Japan in two main ways—either by refusing to openly ally with Japan through formal commitments or by taking a long precautionary period of time to decide the future course of action despite constant Japanese push.

The evidence of this is the fact that despite carefully building a security partnership with Japan in order to counter Chinese influence in the Asian political theatre, India has been very cautious about not mentioning China particularly either in its verbal communication through ministers or written documents such as joint agreements or statements signed with Japan regarding infrastructure development in North East India, port development in Indian Ocean countries or Asia Africa Growth Corridor initiative. India's clear refusal to mention China as an antagonist in any of the joint statements with Japan is a sign of India not being an ally of any nation in order to gang up against another.

This was also evident for a long time in India's policy towards Japan when despite Japan's consistent efforts for elevation of India-Japan 2+2 dialogue to ministerial level, India remained reluctant to let the form expand beyond vice-minister level engagement. The dialogue that kick-started in 2010 at the vice-ministerial level, was proposed for upgradation by Japan ever since but India was hesitant to do so owing to New Delhi's careful stance of not threatening Beijing, and India cited hindrances in finalizing a date for such meetings as a reason for the delay. It was not until April 2018, when the informal Indo-Chinese Wuhan summit concluded well and India's softer stance towards China showed signs of improving relationships, that India decided to reconsider its policy towards 2+2 dialogue with Japan. India's attitude softened this year as its relationship with China improved following a summit between its leaders in April. India has valued the principle of balanced diplomacy, hence India's reluctance to Japan's urge for upgrading 2+2 was not a surprise. It was only during Modi's 2018 Japan visit that he agreed to upgrade the 2+2 to defense and foreign minister level.

India is likely to continue to resist getting engaged in any South China Sea related conflict involving China and Japan due to its policy of not forming any alliances against China. It has been a complaint of the Japanese that though Indian Navy always shows alacrity for greater maritime ties, they are very slow in action or committing to anything that seems anti-China (Patranobis, 2014). Thus, India is unlikely to participate multiple times in any patrols in South China Sea with Japan to avoid angering China. India also did not comment on China's defense white paper in 2019, since it did not want to comment on Chinese perspective regarding maritime affairs.

In a clear illustration of its cautious and domestic-oriented decision making despite the deepening bilateral relations with Japan, India decelerated the negotiations regarding purchase of defense equipment from Japan in 2016 and again in 2018, before it was finally agreed in the second half of 2019. The potential purchase of the Japanese Shinmaywa US-2i Aircraft (potential deal initiated 2014) and Soryu class submarines by India had been symbolic of a step further in the Indo-Japanese defense ties. In April 2018, an MoU was signed by Indian company Mahindra Group and Japanese company ShinMaywa Industries Limited to manufacture the U2 amphibian planes in India, but no deal was reached in the India Japan bilateral Summit meeting of October 2018 (Ayappan, 2018, April 11; Gady, 2018). Soryu class submarines are one of the most sophisticated technologies that exist in maritime defense domain and Japan has been very selective in not sharing the technology even with countries like Australia. However, despite this exclusive opportunity offered to New Delhi, both purchase deals showed no signs of fructification even after several years of bilateral discussions, mainly due to high cost of the sophisticated Japanese defense equipment as well as non-fulfillment of “Make in India” clause wherein, the Japanese equipment needed to be manufactured in India to boost domestic production of defense goods (Singh, 2017 September 10). Rejecting the first of its kind defense deal with Japan showed that India's reluctance in not rushing too fast into projecting too close Indo-Japanese defense ties, something that has always caught China's attention. This also shows India's attitude regarding Indo-Japanese relationship, which primarily bases itself on India's growing economy that finds a good investor and FDI source in Japan. Though no official statements have been released for the deal, the deal was finally on track in 2019 with Japan agreeing to not only lower the price of the aircraft but also committed to manufacturing them in India through transfer of technology for potential export to other countries in future (Siddiqui, 2019).

In his first visit to Japan as the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi asserted that growth and development in India offered immense economic prospects to Japan in conjunction with reinforcing global democracy, regional stability and prosperity (Modi, 2014). That has become one way for India to reinforce its identity as not a non-aligned but a multi-aligned nation in the recent past. Modi has been very careful and tactical in articulating the idea of multi-alignment through political discourse as well as cultural diplomacy.

Under cultural diplomacy is the unique and first-of-its-kind symposium series instated through the collaboration between India and Japan called “Samvad,” meaning dialog in the ancient Indian language of Sanskrit. Samvad symposium was conceived as an idea in 2015 under Modi-Abe initiative to facilitate discussion among Asians on conflict avoidance, and philosophical and cultural heritage of the main Asian religions of Buddhism and Hinduism. Among the four conferences held so far in the Samvad framework in New Delhi (2015), Tokyo (2016), Yangon (2017), the 4th edition held in Tokyo (2018) was themed on “Shared Values and Democracy in Asia” with scholars from India,

Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and China. Modi and Abe stated in the series that democracy was not a western concept but a shared value in India and Japan. In fact, Modi and Abe published an India-Japan Vision Statement celebrating and highlighting the achievements over the course of 2014-18 in the Indo-Japanese partnership and SAMVAD made it to the top focus in the statement as follows:

The India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership, firmly rooted in history and based on common values is the mainspring for advancing the two countries' shared strategic objectives and achieving peace, prosperity and progress to realize a better future for the people of the two countries. As the two Prime Ministers resonantly elucidated in the series of SAMVAD dialogues, the universal values of freedom, humanism, democracy, tolerance and non-violence, which have been shared between India and Japan throughout a long history of academic, spiritual and scholarly exchanges, not only constitute the basis for the India-Japan bilateral relationship but also underscore the principles for the two countries to work together for the benefit of the Indo-Pacific region and the world at large. (MEA, 2018)

Though India seems to still follow the cautious path of partnering with other countries beyond economic and trade realm, its partnership with Japan has certainly transcended the clutches of non-alignment significantly, but not entirely. Japan is a comfortable partner for India, who is beginning to take more drastic decisions in the regional space of Indian Ocean. Unlike the Cold War era where India chose to be a non-aligned nation, defining its own foreign policy independent of the West or Soviet, the objectives of non-alignment seem to have changed for India since 2014 under Modi government that has redefined the non-alignment principle as a tool of exercising strategic autonomy and caution, instead of its former meaning of distancing from the large powers in the emerging global multipolar political order.

India's Japan policy can be reviewed under this ideal to explain India's reluctance in aligning with Japan despite the promise of influence the special partnership can offer to India. New Delhi's aversion to any formal alliance with Japan against the perceived threat from China's rising influence close to its land and ocean territory is not a new policy but Modi government's decision to still partner with Japan in a mutually beneficial partnership to realize mutual aspirations of rising to act in the face of regional political and security challenges. It is a strategy India is likely to follow not just with Japan, but also with other middle powers for strategic reasons by engaging in projects and yet waiting long enough to avoid any obvious sign of formalization of the "alliance" with one particular country to enrich its capabilities. This fresh hint of foreign policy ideal for India is more akin to a multi-alignment principle and a circumspect policy stance. The non-alignment as a foreign policy ideal is much more diluted than ever before in the diplomatic history of independent India due to the proactive stance of Modi administration since 2014 to address the security and political needs of the changing power

dynamics in the Indian Ocean and close to Indian territorial borders but at the same time, India is maintaining a highly cautious stance to avoid being seen as economically or militaristically bandwagoning against China. Thus, despite being engaged on multiple levels with Japan, India's foreign policy stance is cautious as well as symbolically mildly "non-aligned" till it fully allies with Japan and the US to counter China. In that respect, India's Japan policy can also be assessed as that of bold partnership with non-alignment in the undercurrent.

Concluding Remarks

Despite a strong and vigorous India-Japan economic partnership, the bilateral relationship has been functioning much below its capacity in terms of eco-political security and defense initiatives. More initiative is needed to achieve the unrealized potential of several decades of missed opportunities where the countries could have jointly collaborated and progressed. India-Japan relations could deepen with strategic efforts like first, employing Japanese ODA in Northeast India, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and other such strategic spots in the Indian Ocean region close to Indian land and maritime borders, second, engaging more intensely through defense forces of navy, air force and army of the two countries and third, by showing greater commitment to supporting each other in the international issue concerning each other.

However, there is room for complications on the Indian foreign policy side such as first, India would have to leave behind strategic autonomy and sovereignty in its foreign policy rhetoric to engage more actively in defense sales and arms production/procurement. Second, India would face a challenge garnering support from Japan for taking a pro-India stance regarding the threat from Pakistan. Third, India's non-alignment strategy, though diluted, would continue to hold it back from being very engaged with Japan in its vision for greater participation of India in the security related joint decisions since India is unlikely to commit to any long-term military alliances.

Nevertheless, the ever-expanding vistas for the Indo-Japanese partnership in new arenas such as in India's geo-strategically important states, west coast of African continent and in the outer space exploration can potentially provide a new dimension to the age-old India-Japan bonds. In that sense, India is moving very tactically to secure Japan's partnership in fields where the two countries have complementary fortes. These avenues for partnership will create a strong counter to China. Moreover, it is a clear opportunity for India to spring up and play a larger role globally.

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