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Managing China's rise in the Indo-Pacific: Japan's strategic engagement with India

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ABSTRACT

The article explains how Japan's strategic interests are converging with India against an assertive China in the Indo-Pacific. Japan has been pursuing a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) policy, which seeks to manage China's rise by deepening Japan's strategic coordination and cooperation with its closest partners through the Quad. Though Japan still values its bilateral relationship with the United States (US), its security partnership with India is part of Tokyo's persistent efforts to support the US-led rules-based international order. In order to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the Indo-Pacific region, Japan has been a strong supporter among the Quad to promote non-military cooperation, primarily focusing on infrastructure building, supply chain resilience and technological innovations. The article argues that Japan's strategic engagement with India is now an integral part of its wider national security posture as Tokyo has come to recognise New Delhi as an important balancer against Beijing. That the US has enhanced its ties with India in recent years has further facilitated Japan–India strategic convergence since it is aligned with American policy towards the Indo-Pacific region in an era of great power competition.

KEYWORDS

Quad; Abe Shinzo; Joe Biden; South China Sea; Indian Ocean; COVID-19

Introduction

Japan and India have come to realise the significance of cooperation in the fast-changing global geostrategic and geo-economic environment. The embrace of the "Indo-Pacific" concept in Japan's strategic discourse justifies Tokyo's urge "to stand up to the China challenge" by enhancing security ties with the United States (US) as well as building strong security networks with like-minded countries.[1] The coming together of India and Japan can thus be seen as linked with the China factor. In fact, Japan was one of the first countries to grasp India's potential for pressing forward many of its core diplomatic agendas.

In contemporary times, the term "Indo-Pacific" gained popularity in academic and strategic circles only in the 2000s. Through his historic speech in the Indian Parliament in 2007, former Japanese Prime Minister (PM), Abe Shinzo, was the real brain behind Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) Strategy, along with the emergence of

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the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and its subsequent revival.[2] Since then, many countries, including India, have adopted the term as a geographical manifestation of Asian regionalism, replacing the existing concept of the "Asia-Pacific". Though there is no unanimity regarding the definition of Indo-Pacific, a majority of analysts point to security and connectivity as twin pillars of the Indo-Pacific concept; it is viewed as "a security-oriented construct, focused on managing maritime interdependencies which span the Pacific and Indian Oceans."[3]

Beijing's increasingly aggressive conduct in the South and East China Seas, its willingness to militarise the border dispute with India and its desire to dominate sea lanes in East Asia have made Japan and India close ranks, displayed in the re-emergence of the Quad as well as Japan's participation in the Malabar naval exercises. Japan and India have almost similar views of the Indo-Pacific region, and they are enhancing their cooperation to provide an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This long-term convergence of interests has increased in the post-COVID-19 era.

This article seeks to understand how Japan's strategic engagement could manage China's rise in the Indo-Pacific. It addresses the following research questions: What strategic aims does Japan pursue in its alliance with the US? What are the key elements of Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy and how Japan's security concerns can be addressed by FOIP? How has Japan approached its relationship with India, and in what way is it related to its Indo-Pacific strategy? What limitations does Japan face in realising its FOIP objectives? Finally, how does Japan balance the ever-increasing economic ties with China with its geostrategic concerns?

Beginning with a discussion of the alliance partnership with the US to explore Japan's acceleration of its external balancing vis-à-vis China, the article illuminates Japan's FOIP Strategy. It briefly discusses the Chinese challenge and how Japan has broadly responded. It then narrows the lens to discuss Japan's evolving relationship with India, including the importance Tokyo places on its relations with India in the post-COVID-19 period, and the need for middle powers in the Indo-Pacific to coordinate their efforts. The concluding section draws together key points about the article and the importance of the Japan–India relationship to manage China's rise in the Indo-Pacific.

Japan–US alliance

The 1951 Treaty of San Francisco formally ended the Allied occupation of Japan. India, however, chose to sign a separate peace treaty with Japan in 1952. India's belief that Japan's sovereignty needed to be recognised separately dictated the Nehru government's choice and helped facilitate Japan's respectable entry into the global community. Alongside the San Francisco treaty, Japan signed a Mutual Security Treaty with the US that allowed American troops to remain on its soil. At the time, Washington was keen on using the alliance to strengthen its strategic presence in East Asia as China and the Soviet Union (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics [USSR]) were expanding their military capabilities in the Cold War environment. Japan's PM, Yoshida Shigeru, too regarded the US as a key ally for its security needs so the country could focus on economic reconstruction. In 1960, the treaty was revised, allowing Washington to set up US military bases on Japanese territory in lieu of a commitment to come to its defence in case of an attack. With this, the US military got its first permanent foothold in the Asian continent.[4]

The scope and intensity of the Japan–US alliance – one between former bitter rivals and forged under the circumstances of the Cold War – has grown by leaps and bounds even after the demise of the common external threat, the Soviet Union. Japan's alliance with the US has been key to the latter's security-related role in Asia, including its forward military presence. Further, Japan is considered a model American ally because it not only hosts a large number of US troops but also pays for their upkeep. However, the US demand to enhance the security burden has often been an irritating factor in the bilateral relations, making Japan uncomfortable. Particularly during the Trump administration's "America First" doctrine, the US–Japan security alliance was at a crossroads as the credibility of the alliance was questioned more than ever by both sides.[5] The Biden administration, however, is making attempts to mitigate the challenges caused by Trump's trade protectionism, indifference to allies and the ill-conceived détente with North Korea.

According to the US Department of State, approximately 55,000 American military personnel are currently stationed in Japan,[6] in addition to the thousands of civilians and family members. The US has also deployed some of its most sophisticated military assets in Japan; this includes the *USS Ronald Reagan* carrier and the F-35 joint strike fighter. Moreover, Japan procures more than 90 per cent of its defence imports from the US, which has sold the F-35 joint strike fighter, E-2D airborne early warning aircraft, the KC-46 refuelling tanker, the Global Hawk unmanned aerial system, the MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft, the AIM-120 advanced medium-range air-to-air missile (AMRAAM), UGM-84 Harpoon missile and SM-3 Block IIA ballistic missile defence interceptor missiles.[7]

Although the Japan–US security alliance has primarily been bilateral:

> Japan has long been trying to get more global in terms of its own self-appointed role as a supporter of the U.S.-led system. The United States has [also] been looking forward to seeing Japan go global for years without being seen too pushy or too imposing.[8]

After disintegration of the USSR and end of the Cold War, the fundamentals underlying the US–Japan alliance has come under greater scrutiny amid increased American pressure on Japan to "normalise". On the other hand, fears of abandonment have made Japan undertake necessary adjustments in its military role in the alliance. New security threats in form of the 1995 Taiwan Strait Crisis, North Korea's 1998 missile launch and the global war on terror have allowed Japan to offer logistical support to the US on distant shores, and thereby modify its role in the alliance system. Under the policy of "proactive pacifism", Japan's gradual militarisation towards a more proactive role in international security affairs through the collective self-defence paradigm was finally institutionalised under PM Abe Shinzo in 2014.[9] Abe played a critical role in recalibrating the US–Japan alliance partnership and improving Tokyo's global standing by building a close personal rapport with Trump, often at the cost of personal humiliation. Historically, Japan's handling of alliance with the US has shown that Tokyo has been adept in adjusting its policies in tune with the changes in America's domestic politics and international strategy, and this explains Abe's push for change in Japan's security posture amidst the uncertainties of the Trump presidency.[10]

Washington has a clear interest in reforming Japan's security and constitutional arrangements because it would further strengthen the their alliance.[11] The common

threat of China continues to drive the US and Japan closer together in pursuit of shared interests. Incidentally, Japan's movement towards constitutional revisionism and remilitarisation also serves the interests of those that feel threatened by China. There are many Asian countries, mostly in Southeast Asia and including India, which are facing the heat of China's unprecedented rise. Among others, the establishment of a National Security Council (NSC) in December 2013 has rectified a key anomaly in that the absence of a centralised body until then was seen as a symbol of Japan's apathy in strategic and security matters.[12] In conjunction with the establishment of an NSC, Japan's increase in defence spending, forging of new security partnerships across the Indo-Pacific and unveiling of the FOIP Strategy are clear manifestations of a new security posture. For all its flaws, the American-led system remains the most attractive to Tokyo simply because it is more effective than the one being offered by authoritarian China.

Historical resentments still linger in Asia and states in the region face many unresolved border disputes, like that between India and China, Japan and Russia, Japan and China and Japan and South Korea. North Korea's nuclear ambitions have further destabilised the region. However, the most significant regional uncertainty concerns the rise of China, whose geographical size, robust economic growth, military modernisation and determination to become great power cannot help but create unease among its neighbours. The expansion of China's BRI also enhances the geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca as a sea lane for natural resources. Although the US continues to proclaim its enduring interest in East Asia, it is being perceived in the region as a declining power. Against this backdrop, the significance of Japan–US relationship has increased in recent years, with Washington coming to rely more on Japan's supporting role in crafting American strategy towards a rising China.

After re-energising Japan's sluggish economy, rebooting the US–Japan alliance, making historic revisions in the Japanese Constitution and changing Japan's role in global affairs, Abe Shinzo stepped down from office in late August 2020. His successor, PM Suga Yoshihide, undertook a historic visit to Washington in April 2021, which received much attention in India as well.[13] During his first face-to-face meeting at the White House since taking office, President Joe Biden took advantage of the opportunity to fulfil his pledge to revitalise American alliances that had been relegated to the background under his predecessor Donald Trump. Their discussions revolved around China's recent belligerence in territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas as well as in the Taiwan Strait. Underlining the importance of working with allies and partners such as India and Australia through the Quad "to build the free, open, accessible, diverse, and thriving Indo-Pacific", Suga and Biden expressed concern about China's ambitions to dominate the development of the most advanced technologies, such as 5G, semiconductor supply chains and quantum computing.[14] Both indicated their resolve to continue the previous policy of pressure on Beijing to address economic malpractices, such as "violations of intellectual property rights, forced technology transfer, excess capacity issues, and the use of trade distorting industrial subsidies."[15]

By taking a lead in regional initiatives aimed at managing China's growing influence, Japan has been working hard to convince the US of the need to pay more attention to East Asia.[16] Tokyo believes that institutionalisation of the Quad could serve an important purpose of keeping the US fully engaged in the region. Abe helped boost Tokyo's security cooperation with both India and Australia, bilaterally as well as trilaterally. In Japan's

conceptualisation, India would be a key factor driving the success of free and open Indo-Pacific. On the other hand, deepening engagement with Japan is one of the key pillars of India's "Act East Policy".[17]

Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy and new security posture

Abe's 2007 speech in New Delhi was perhaps the first articulation of evolving a cohesive strategy for the Indo-Pacific maritime space. In August 2016, during his speech at Tokyo International Conference on African Development in Nairobi, Abe again remarked: "What will give stability and prosperity to the world is none other than the enormous liveliness brought forth through the union of two free and open oceans [the Pacific and Indian Oceans] and two continents [Asia and Africa]."[18] Clearly, Japan views the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean as integral parts of the Indo-Pacific region, which should witness military and economic connectivity of greater degree, including securing regional sea lanes. As China aggressively promotes the BRI and expands its military activities beyond the South China Sea, Tokyo is justified in framing a security strategy that encompasses the Pacific and the Indian Oceans.

China's coercive activities, particularly in the Senkaku Islands, seem to have decisively shaped Japan's policy discourse on the Indo-Pacific, allowing Tokyo to create an enabling domestic environment for revisiting Japan's post-war security posture. Just before becoming the PM again in December 2012, Abe had authored an article in which China stood accused of attempting to make the South China Sea into "Lake Beijing", which would allow "the People's Liberation Army's navy [*sic*] to base their nuclear-powered attack submarines, capable of launching missiles with nuclear warheads".[19] Abe asked Japan not to "yield to the Chinese government's daily exercises in coercion around the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea", since that would only help China "to establish its jurisdiction in the waters surrounding the islands as a fait accompli".[20] This warning sounds eerily similar to those concerning China's recent unilateral attempts to change the territorial status quo in India's Ladakh region.

Abe's Indo-Pacific formulation has gone a long way in facilitating India to consider the Indian and Pacific Oceans in a strategic manner.[21] The aim of Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy is to safeguard its strategic autonomy by having a favourable regional environment by expanding its options. While Japan's strategic priorities are mainly set by the US and China, its Indo-Pacific strategy is necessarily multilayered. Balancing China and keeping the US engaged in East Asia are the key components of Tokyo's strategy. Beijing's assertive measures, targeted at maritime expansion, endanger Tokyo's security interests in the East China Sea. Further, Japan believes that frequent Chinese incursions into its territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands, along with Beijing's extensive militarisation of islets, are undercutting the freedom of navigation.[22] In order to enhance its credibility, Japan has been engaging with regional Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-led multilateral organisations.

Despite several attempts by Tokyo to seek engagement with China to improve crisis prevention in the East China Sea, Beijing has refused to scale down its coercive posturing. By deploying various military and non-military instruments of statecraft, China's overall aim is to change the regional balance of power, with a view to achieving greater strategic ambitions over the East China Sea.[23] Given "Beijing's three-pronged attrition strategy toward

the Senkakus: normalizing Chinese presence; exercising law-enforcement rights; and taking over exclusive control,"[24] the Japanese push on the Quad is quite understandable.

Japan's policymakers may be averse to using blunt language to describe the challenges China poses to Japan's territorial interests, but there seems clarity in Tokyo regarding Beijing's revisionist tendencies and its persistent attempts to gain regional pre-eminence. When Rex Wayne Tillerson, the US Secretary of State in the outgoing Trump administration, met with Japan's Foreign Minister, Taro Kono, in late October 2017, revival of the Quad dominated the agenda. Alice Wells, the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia for most of the Trump administration, had accompanied Tillerson and remarked that the Quad that "the Japanese foreign minister discussed would be building on a very productive trilateral we have with India and Japan," and would also include Australia to offer alternative to countries in need of infrastructure and development without "predatory financing or unsustainable debt". She termed the Quad as "a natural progression and convergence of interests between democratic countries in the Indo-Pacific region".[25]

Suga Yoshihide, who assumed office in September 2020 after Abe's resignation, followed in the footsteps of his predecessor regarding Japan's foreign policy. Suga also believed that the concept of FOIP would foster peace, transparency and inclusiveness in the vast region. He undertook his first official tour, in October 2020, to Vietnam and Indonesia as the two ASEAN countries occupy a key position in the Indo-Pacific region.[26] While Vietnam is one of the claimants in the South China Sea territorial disputes with China, Indonesia's exclusive economic zone overlaps with China's nine-dash line. Suga's tour of the two Asian countries was seen by some analysts as "another reminder that the traditional U.S. 'hub-and-spokes' alliance system is transforming for the better" as Tokyo is reinforcing the FOIP vision promoted by Washington.[27] Before this visit, Japan had hosted the Quad meeting of the foreign ministers of Japan, India, Australia and the US on October 6, 2020, in which they "reaffirmed their collective vision of maintaining a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific".[28]

Japan's FOIP policy, aimed at countering China' rising assertiveness, has also found reflection in Tokyo's official discourse on defence and threat perception. Against the backdrop of the US–China strategic competition, Japan seems to have concluded that its security environment is deteriorating fast. China is unmistakably the elephant in the room in Japan's new Defence White Paper for 2021, which has the stamp of Abe's proactive security policies.[29] The White Paper may be viewed in the context of Tokyo's continuing diplomatic efforts to champion a US-led rules-based international order. What is particularly noticeable in the paper is Japan's stance on Taiwan and the statement that "Taiwan is important for Japan's security and the stability of the international community." Noting the fast-changing military balance in the Taiwan Strait, the White Paper suggests Tokyo "pay close attention to the situation with a sense of crisis more than ever before", signalling a significant policy shift.[30] The previous defence white papers avoided controversy vis-à-vis China. For instance, the 2020 paper does not explain the importance of military balance between China and Taiwan to Japan's security. Since Japan is approximately 70 miles from Taiwan, China's potential attack on Taiwan, with an eye to integrate it with the mainland, will have serious ramifications on Japan's own security. The mention of Taiwan Strait in an official document assumes significance because Japan seems to have taken a firm public stance over the Taiwan issue realising the Biden administration's military support to Taiwan.[31]

The mood in Japan has shifted towards increased support for Taiwan, and the public statements by Japanese leaders tying Taiwan's security to Japan's own security interests indicate strong intent and resolve.[32] Also reflecting Japan's growing concerns about undesirable Chinese activities in the East China Sea, the White Paper asserts: "China has relentlessly continued attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by coercion in the sea area around the Senkaku Islands, leading to a grave matter of concern."[33] China's new maritime law of February 2021 that permits the Chinese Coast Guard to fire on foreign vessels for illegal entry into claimed waters, as well as demolish structures built by other countries on islands claimed by Beijing, has also annoyed Japan. The Defence White Paper observes that this law "includes problematic provisions in terms of inconsistency with international law".[34] The White Paper also discusses other security challenges, including North Korea's nuclear belligerence, and underlines some recent developments in Japan's defence technology in the new domains of space, cyberspace and the electromagnetic spectrum. Recognising that regional security challenges "cannot be dealt with by a single country alone", the White Paper endorses Japan's close partnership with Australia, India and European countries to uphold the regional order. Understandably, China was prompt to criticise the unusually bold language about Taiwan in the Japanese document. A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson asserted that "the Taiwan question is purely China's internal affair" and that Beijing "never allows interference in the Taiwan question in any form by any country".[35]

Japan's new PM, Kishida Fumio, seems to be following his predecessors regarding foreign and security policies. During his policy speech in early October 2021, he stressed the significance of the US–Japan alliance and the Quad, as well as FOIP.[36] Despite bringing in many new faces into his cabinet, Kishida has retained the ministers in charge of foreign affairs and defence, reflecting his intention to continue Abe's push to boost security ties with Washington and other Quad partners. The creation of a new position of economy security minister has received widespread attention as the appointee, Kobayashi Takayuki, has been involved in protecting sensitive technology from China.[37] Significantly, Kishida has also hinted at the possibility of Japan acquiring offensive missile strike capability, implying muscular military posture.[38]

The future of Japan's relations with China depends on a range of disparate factors, many of which cannot be predicted at the moment. The optimal scenario would be a combination of an economically and militarily resurgent Japan on one hand[39], and a China on the other that continues to be led by Xi Jinping, who has put the highest premium on a combination of economic development through the BRI and coercive diplomacy. Japan depends heavily on intertwined trade and investments with China. Tokyo's fear of economic coercion – manifested by China's sanctions against Australia – is not entirely unreasonable. However, as the Biden administration is strengthening America's historical alliances and forging new partnerships, Japan has the opportunity to work with India and other like-minded countries to dilute Beijing's power to economically punish.

Growing Japan–India ties

In the period immediately following the end of World War II, there was a brief mutual enthusiasm between Japan and India, especially as independent India's first government decided to forgo war reparations from Japan. Jawaharlal Nehru's "nationalist instinct

wanted to concede Japan" as an honourable nation, as well as win "over public opinion in Japan for supporting his peace initiative in the post-war world and in Asia in particular", while the Japanese government "welcomed India's goodwill as a springboard for their re-emergence in post-war Asia."[40] In 1958, India became the first recipient of Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA), with New Delhi also providing some vital raw materials such as iron ore to Tokyo.[41] Even though Japan had joined the World Bank in 1952, it became a founding member of the Aid India Consortium in 1958, which was initiated by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) to help meet the requirements of India's foreign exchange.

In the post-war period, Japan's strategy to befriend India was driven by five key factors: (i) the dissenting view of Judge Radhabinod Pal, the Indian judge on the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, that Japan was not guilty of war; (ii) India's refusal to attend the San Francisco treaty conference; (iii) New Delhi's sympathetic view which provided diplomatic leverage to Japan in negotiating with Southeast Asian nations; (iv) India's efforts that helped Japan integrate in regional and international organisations; and (v) its economic attraction as a trade partner.[42] However, the enthusiasm could not be maintained, and one of the main reasons was India's lack of capacity to meet Japan's demand. The emergence of Australia as a major supplier of raw materials also worked to India's disadvantage as the former was looking for new markets, which Japan provided.[43]

During much of the Cold War era, India and Japan kept a distance from each other despite the absence of major policy differences. The main reason of this aloofness was Japan's alignment with and dependence on the US as well as India's policy of non-alignment and friendship with the USSR. India's predilection for an autarkical economic system too made it less attractive for Japanese investors.

With the end of the Cold War and the balance-of-payments crisis, New Delhi adopted economic reforms, which was favoured by Tokyo. Thereafter, PM P.V. Narasimha Rao announced the "Look East Policy" (LEP), emphasising bilateral alignment with Southeast Asian countries for greater economic engagement and institutional partnerships. The LEP subsequently acquired more strategic considerations as it expanded to countries other than ASEAN members, such as Japan and South Korea.[44] However, the positive turn in Indo-Japanese ties received a severe jolt with India's nuclear tests in 1998, which saw strong criticism from Japan. Tokyo believed that nuclear tests amounted to a betrayal of its anti-nuclear stance. The Japanese PM, Hashimoto Ryaturo, froze all aid to India, except humanitarian aid, for three years, and also announced economic sanctions. Japan even co-sponsored with US a statement condemning India at the G8 summit in Birmingham. According to S. Jaishankar, the main reason the relationship stumbled is to be found "in the duality of a Japan reconciling its Asian character with its Western interests" and Japan's impatience in accepting not only "the Western narrative on non-proliferation but also the hyphenation of India-Pakistan and the accompanying analysis of Jammu and Kashmir."[45]

This friction did not last long and during his August 2000 visit to India, PM Mori Yoshiro proposed a "global partnership" between the two countries. The US President Bill Clinton's March 2000 visit to India, the first US presidential visit to India in two decades, likely prompted Mori to do the same. Following the visit of the Japanese PM, "Japan–India relations dramatically improved in tandem with US–India relations. Thus, the US has been both a push and pull factor in Japan's India policy."[46]

The Indian PM, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, visited Japan in December 2001. Just after his return, the Indian Parliament was attacked on December 13, 2001. While many world leaders expressed concern, no leading Western country condemned it as a terror attack. However, the visit of the leader of Japan's opposition, Hatoyama Yukio, on January 10, 2002, was a game changer. Besides visiting the site of the Parliament attack, he went to Srinagar to lay a wreath at the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly building that was attacked by a suicide bomber in October 2001. Hatoyama told journalists that terrorism could not be described as freedom struggle as "Terrorism is terrorism in any form."[47]

Bilateral ties were upgraded to a "global and strategic partnership" by Abe Shinzo and Manmohan Singh. Japan also lobbied for India's inclusion in the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005, despite Chinese opposition. The sixtieth anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries saw PM Noda visit India in 2011, during which he signed a "Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement".[48] In 2014, Modi and Abe elevated the bilateral relationship further to a "special strategic and global partnership". This unique bilateral relationship is driven as much by economic complementarity as by their shared concerns over China's rise.

India's distinctive geography gives it a major commercial and geostrategic location astride the sea lanes of communication between West and East Asia.[49] China's emergence as Asia's regional powerhouse is seen by New Delhi, Tokyo and many others as negatively impacting their security interests, allowing them to view Asia's security architecture in broadly convergent terms.[50] China's military modernisation has also raised concerns in New Delhi. According to Shivshankar Menon, India's former National Security Advisor:

> People's Liberation Army (PLA) is now the transformed product of two decades of double-digit budgetary growth, the building of hard infrastructure to support the military, and military reform under Xi Jinping to convert it into an expeditionary force. China has modernized its nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile forces into a more capable second-strike force and developed medium range ballistic missile and cruise missile capabilities and systems that are altering the regional military balance. The PLA is now an instrument for power projection, tasked to fight short, intense, high-technology wars in "informationized" conditions, outside China's own territory, dominating its periphery.[51]

This has huge ramifications for not just India and Japan's security, but that of the whole Indo-Pacific region.

Thus, India's relationship with Japan "could be the cornerstone of a larger coalition" of like-minded countries to resist China's growing might.[52] Japan has used its FOIP Strategy as a lynchpin to develop deeper trilateral cooperation among the four Quad countries. The Malabar naval exercise may also be seen as a part of collaboration under the Indo-Pacific vision. The navies from the four Quad countries held the second phase of Malabar during October 12–15, 2021, after conducting the first phase in the Philippines Sea in late August.[53] Japan joined the Malabar exercises as a permanent member in 2015, while Australia was invited in 2020. In terms of scope and complexity, bilateral naval cooperation between India and Japan has increased further. Japan and India held the fifth edition of the Japan–India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX), which commenced in January 2012, in the Bay of Bengal in the first week of October 2021.[54] As the maritime space is vital to counter China's ambitions, it is important for the navies of India, Japan, Australia and the US to keep increasing their interoperability.

It needs to be mentioned here that despite Tokyo's attempts to pursue stable diplomatic relations with China during 2016–18, when Japanese strategy demonstrated a shift "from pure balancing to hedging comprised of multiple policy options including soft balancing, engagement, and economic-pragmatism", Japan did not hesitate in offering subtle support for India's stance over the Doklam border stand-off with China in June–August 2017. Hiramatsu Kenji, former Ambassador of Japan to India, said that all parties concerned should not seek to "resort to unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force, and resolve the dispute in a peaceful manner."[55] This statement may appear diplomatically innocuous, but "could be interpreted as giving support to India because the Indian government had accused China of changing the status quo by force."[56]

An important element of Japan's balancing efforts, aimed at encouraging Beijing to play a more responsible regional role, involves strengthening the American alliance system through the Indo-Japanese partnership..[57] Having agreed to establish a 2 + 2 dialogue mechanism of regular consultations between foreign and defence ministers,[58] Abe and Modi decided to strengthen maritime domain awareness in their meeting in October 2018, and also began to negotiate the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA). This is aimed at facilitating joint manoeuvres, including three-way exercises involving the US Navy, in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Japan hopes to project its rising naval power in the Indian Ocean, which would also allow Japanese vessels to secure access to Indian naval facilities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands near the Malacca Straits.[59] Clearly, the manner in which Japan has been developing strategic ties with India in the Indo-Pacific shows its trust in mini-laterals. The Japan–American–India (JAI) trilateral partnership is complimenting the India–Japan–Australia one, and may be seen at supporting alternative ways to boost Quad cooperation.[60] To a certain extent, the Quad, in its current form, is an expanded mini-lateral of the existing various security bilaterals and trilaterals among its member states.[61]

In order to counter China's rising geo-economic presence, Japan has taken keen interest in infrastructure investment, kick-starting diplomatic initiatives and external partnerships. This has resulted in Tokyo presenting a unique idea of "quality infrastructure" as a strategic tool to expand infrastructure exports.[62] India seems committed to work closely with Japan in its vision known as "Partnership for Quality Infrastructure" (PQI).[63] India and Japan are keen to explore synergies between the Act East Policy and PQI.[64] The India-Japan Act East Forum, which as established in December 2017, has emerged as a key platform in promoting bilateral cooperation to boost connectivity within India's north-east region and its neighbouring countries.[65] Also, Japan signed the ACSA with India in September 2020, which is seen as a sign of growing convergence of interests between the two sides.[66]

In addition, several recent developments indisputably underscore the growing convergence of interests between Japan and India. For instance, Japan joined hands with India to launch a development project, the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), in 2017, in order to increase connectivity and cooperation between the Asian and African continents. The AAGC seeks to provide a mechanism for India and Japan to invest in infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific region from East Asia to Africa, and this is seen as a response to China's BRI.[67] Although the AAGC is way behind the BRI in many respects because of India's own infrastructural needs, lack of financing capacity and the exclusive

investment focus of AAGC in only maritime regions, it remains a significant step towards providing infrastructure finance to a region critical to the Indo-Pacific.[68]

The infrastructure cooperation by Quad's member states in the context of economic competition between the US and China has not escaped Beijing's attention. According to some scholars, China has come to recognise that the Quad countries, which understand "the urgency of limiting China's dominance in infrastructure investment in the region, have been making efforts to constrain China's economic development inside and outside of its territory".[69] In order to counter the potentially negative impact of these efforts on China's overall trade strategy, its decision makers are responding by partially fixing the debt trap of the BRI.[70] What makes investments from Japan particularly attractive is that, unlike their Chinese counterparts, they not only comply with international standards of good governance and environmental sustainability but also create more job opportunities for the local populations.

Post-pandemic scenario

From the perspective of global peace and prosperity, the Indo-Pacific is now the most important strategic, yet geographically extensive and politically diverse, space. The region contains emerging powers, geopolitical hotspots and overlapping economic partnerships, along with risks of conflict. Besides, the growing rivalry between the US and China seems to have aggravated many of these geopolitical and geo-economic tensions. This trend seems to have further accelerated in the COVID-19 pandemic era. New Delhi's relationship with Beijing witnessed a sharp downturn on account of the border stand-off at Ladakh in June 2020, which has injected an element of uncertainty in the viability of their long-term ties. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that the changing geopolitics and geo-economics of the post-COVID-19 world is likely to bring Japan closer to India. During their phone conversation on September 10, 2020, Modi and Abe agreed that strong partnership between their countries would play a "critical role in charting the course for the global community in the post-Covid world," while reaffirming that the leadership change in Japan would not affect the upward trajectory in bilateral ties.[71] The ACSA was signed just two days before the Abe–Modi e-meeting, and has led to further strengthening of bilateral defence ties between Japan and India.

Since Abe was the most important proponent of the Quad, there were some doubts following his exit in September 2020 whether the Quad would survive. These apprehensions have proved misplaced as Abe's successor and the leaders of other Quad countries have been supportive of the framework.[72] Japan and India have the potential to play a greater role in concretising the Quad, should some of the domestic challenges be sorted out and their respective diplomatic strengths be exercised to the fullest.

Due to economic upheavals caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries have become sensitive to the risks of overdependence on China in their supply chains, particularly in the areas of medical care and 5G communications. Tokyo has now taken the lead in launching the India–Japan–Australia trilateral initiative for ensuring supply chain resilience in the Indo-Pacific, with the expectation to accelerate economic and diplomatic decoupling from China by the Quad governments; this, however, seems difficult to achieve in the near future. During their first virtual meeting on the issue in early September 2020, ministers from the three countries expressed their determination to "take a lead

in delivering a free, fair, inclusive, non-discriminatory, transparent, predictable and stable trade and investment environment."[73] They also invited other countries in the region with similar views to join the resilient supply chain initiative, which has been viewed as adding an economic pillar to the existing political and strategic pillars of the Quad.[74] Thus, in April 2021, the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) was launched by India, Japan and Australia for building resilient supply chains in the Indo-Pacific region. The three countries "acknowledged that the Covid-19 pandemic was having an unprecedented impact in terms of lives lost, livelihoods and economies affected, and that the pandemic had revealed supply chain vulnerabilities globally."[75] The primary objective of SCRI is to reduce dependence on China's vast supply chains in the Indo-Pacific.

The first summit of Quad leaders, held virtually on March 12, 2021, was also received positively in Japan. The summit was held about a year-and-half after the Quad was upgraded to the level of foreign ministers in September 2019 and clearly reflected the desire of members to present a united front to key challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, including China's assertiveness. An editorial published after the summit in *The Japan Times* captured the enthusiasm when it stated that the holding of summit must:

> quiet fears that the forum would be just a talk shop, unable to provide concrete deliverables that would improve Indo-Pacific security. The establishment of three working groups – on vaccines, climate change and emerging technologies – shows that those governments have a sophisticated understanding of regional security and recognize the need for a realistic and appropriate division of labor to get the most from each member.[76]

At the height of the second wave of COVID-19 in India, Tokyo came forward to provide vital assistance to New Delhi for fight against the pandemic. In April 2021, Modi, in a telephonic conversation with his Japanese counterpart, Suga Yoshihide, thanked him for Japan's help in dealing with the ongoing second wave of COVID-19. According to the statement, the leaders also "highlighted the importance of close India–Japan co-operation to overcome these challenges, such as by working together to create resilient, diversified and trustworthy supply chains, ensuring reliable supply of critical materials and technologies, and developing new partnerships in manufacturing and skill development."[77] In January 2021, Japan agreed to provide a loan of 50 billion Yen (₹3,468 crore) to help India to ease the socio-economic impact of COVID-19.[78]

A few limiting factors

There are, however, a few structural barriers to the extent Japan can expand the ambit of its security, constitutional constraints on the use of force being the most important. Japan is authorized to use force only when confronted with existential threats and it must use minimal force to achieve its goals.[79] Although attempts are being made to reconceptualise these defence limitations with Abe's realist reinterpretation of Article 9, there is unease in Japanese society regarding overtly nationalist postures, even if the Chinese and South Korean criticism of Abe's nationalist policies are brushed aside.[80] As argued by an observer, "if Abe wants to bring Japan's defense cooperation with the 'quad' countries beyond what it is already doing, he may be met with considerable domestic resistance."[81] It seems fair to contend that it would take a while for the Japanese citizens to internalise the Quad's rationale.

There is also a view gaining currency in Japan to revisit its nuclear option in the wake of North Korea's growing nuclear capabilities, China's intensified maritime presence near Japan and increasing military assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, as well as Tokyo's diminishing confidence in Washington's ability to protect.[82] Notwithstanding America's extended nuclear deterrence for its security, South Korea has also witnessed a similar nuclear debate.[83] However, if both Japan and South Korea take the nuclear path, it would have serious consequences for the region; hence, the US would not be inclined for its two key East Asian allies to have their own nuclear arsenals. Beijing's effort to protect North Korea's political stability has resulted in strengthening of the trilateral relationship among Washington, Tokyo and Seoul. Therefore, if the security situation deteriorates due to failure of North Korea's denuclearisation, it would be difficult for the governments in Tokyo and Seoul to skirt public demands for a serious rethink on the issue. For Japan, often described as a "de facto" nuclear state, its technologically is so advanced that building a nuclear weapon within a year is not difficult.[84] Moreover, the public support for Japan's nuclear armament is likely to grow with the rising military threat from China.

However, given the deep economic interdependence between Japan and China, it is not easy for Japan to pursue an overtly anti-Chinese policy. Jaishankar rightly argues that trade has always been a key factor in determining Japan's strategic calculations, and if "India is looking to hedge on its security needs, Japan's similar predicament arises more in the economic domain. This is not going to be easy, particularly with pressures on global supply chains and controls on emerging technologies."[85] Thus, despite misgivings about China's intensions, Japan's unwillingness to force a complete break with China is understandable. Some observers draw attention to the fact that "Tokyo has always avoided aggressively presenting its FOIP vision as a containment strategy towards China. Tokyo has so far refrained from securitising its relations with its big neighbour, despite its concerns about China's foreign policy ambitions and the domestic political changes in the country."[86] This is understandable as Japan has deep economic linkages with China. It underlines the huge challenge of managing a relationship which is characterised by security concerns and economic interdependence. However, Japan is not alone in facing this dilemma; India and Australia have to balance this imperative as well.

On the other hand, India's ability to pursue a more ambitious role in the Indo-Pacific will face constraints if its economy does not recover fast after multiple setbacks induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Should the Indian government fail to boost the national economy, another slowdown will restrict New Delhi's ambitions to secure a respectable place in regional and global order, and undermine its freedom to manoeuvre. Not only will a long period of sluggish growth undermine India's capacity to commit greater resources to the Indo-Pacific region, it might weaken its credibility in Japan's eyes.

A new trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the US – the AUKUS – has understandably generated a lot of attention. This new security grouping is likely to strengthen other mini-laterals in the Indo-Pacific, besides enhancing Australia's naval deterrent capabilities. The formation of the AUKUS is an acknowledgement among leading Anglosphere democracies that China is now the main strategic competitor to the democratic world.[87] Coming against the backdrop of an unusually hasty and unilateral withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan, the AUKUS would assuage widespread concerns across the Indo-Pacific about America's

regional commitments and convey Washington's willingness to invest heavily in enhancing the defence potential of its allies through the sharing of highly sensitive technology.[88] This opens new opportunities for both India and Japan to step up their security cooperation with the US.

The AUKUS is a particularly positive development for India, which has shown discomfort in militarising the Quad. India, a crucial player in the geopolitics of the Quad – as without it the Quad would lose credibility in Asia – remains extremely wary about formally joining a military pact despite abandoning the non-alignment rhetoric.[89] Meanwhile, Tokyo might be feeling let down by Washington's unwillingness to expand AUKUS to include Japan, but Japan's defence industry seems unprepared for the depth and breadth of security cooperation that is required for an AUKUS-like partnership.[90] If Japan is keen to create a similar security framework with the US, its defence establishment must undertake necessary reforms.

Need for middle power coalition

In order to explain the behaviour of emerging powers, international relations (IR) literature uses the term "middle power". There is, however, little consensus on what constitutes a middle power in global politics. Andrew Cooper has identified four different types of middle powers: "geographic" – a state located between two great powers; "normative" – state which acts as honest broker or trusted mediator in crises; "positional" – a state whose power is relative to both great and small states; and "behavioural" – a state that can engage in "niche diplomacy".[91] Therefore, one may define a middle power as a country which is neither great nor small in terms of its power and influence. The concept of middle power has been refined further to enhance its explanatory power. In contrast to traditional middle powers, which are seen as wealthy, stable and egalitarian, emerging middle powers are defined as:

> semi-peripheral, materially inegalitarian and recently democratised states that demonstrate much regional influence and self-association. Behaviourally, they opt for reformist and not radical global change, exhibit a strong regional orientation favouring regional integration but seek also to construct identities distinct from those of the weak states in their region.[92]

As the world enters a new Cold war – a geopolitical contest between the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia – the final outcome of this emerging divide is likely to be decided by four middle powers, namely, India, Japan, Iran and Turkey, which "have the capacity to project power regionally, build alliances, and support (or disrupt) the strategies of international powers pursuing their interests in the region".[93] The US-allied middle powers have become increasingly vulnerable to China's coercive diplomacy as Beijing is attempting to weaken their support for the US-led regional security order. Recent examples include China's economic coercion and aggressive policies against Australia, South Korea, Canada and India. China's threats and the US–China strategic rivalry require a new form of middle power diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific states which are considered as middle powers – India, Japan, Australia and South Korea – need to strengthen effective regional cooperation and thereby shape future regional order in the Indo-Pacific.[94] In fact, these middle powers are already cooperating to manage changing regional dynamics. The Biden administration seems interested in pushing these middle powers further to bolster their ties with one another.

Conclusion

As the US–China strategic competition intensifies, middle power countries, such as Japan, India and South Korea, need to play more active roles in order to ensure stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Gradually but surely, India has become salient in Japan's strategic vision. The fast-changing global circumstances are pushing both countries to find common ground. Both Japan and India are increasing their partnership through multi-layered engagements – economic, security and cultural – with the countries in the region. There are obvious complementarities between India and Japan's economic objectives: Japan's technology and investment has the potential to help India upgrade its infrastructure and manufacturing sector, and India's growing consumer market and investment requirements offer immense opportunities for Japan's economy.[95] However, it is the strategic dimension of the relationship that is the most significant.

Partnering with countries such as India makes sense for Tokyo given the focus of Japan's FOIP Strategy. The Japanese leadership has been courting India as an economic and security partner to counter China's influence. The changing nature of maritime security and trade relations in the Indo-Pacific as well as China's rising assertiveness in the South China Sea and on the Ladakh border have propelled Japan to come closer to India. Tokyo wants New Delhi to assume larger profile in maintaining the balance of power in the Indian Ocean, countering Beijing's expansionary policies in the region. Since both Japan and India depend hugely on sea trade for sustaining their economies, while strongly committed to respecting freedom of navigation and uninterrupted commercial interactions, they remain united in their stand that outstanding disputes in the Indo-Pacific region should be resolved without resorting to threats or use of force. However, the test of this evolving partnership will be the extent to which Japan commits to assisting India in the event of a crisis.

Abe Shinzo's policies led to a stupendous growth in Tokyo's geopolitical assertiveness, which has positively impacted Japan's relationship with India. Abe was a strong advocate for closer India–Japan relationship, and pushed the democratic world to institutionalise initiatives like the Quad. Kishida Fumio seems to be following Abe's policies, and his government's push to scale down its dependence on China and diversify supply chains constitutes a great opportunity for India. The US has not been as central to India's foreign policymaking as it has been for Japan. Tokyo is also aware of New Delhi's traditional penchant for strategic autonomy, but believes that India's closer partnership with the US alliance system is possible and necessary. Japan has, therefore, fostered new regional frameworks to complement those focused on the US. As Tokyo and New Delhi recognise the huge significance of an enhanced strategic role that the Japan–America–India trilateral strategic relationship can play in the Indo-Pacific for ensuring regional and global peace, Japan is likely to press the Biden administration for a robust American presence, while also accelerating the momentum of joint military exercises in all the three branches. This would further enable Japan and India to play bigger role, in close association with the US, to ensure peace and stability in the emerging global geopolitical architecture.

Summing up, Japan's policy towards India has shown a gradual evolution since the end of the Cold War, particularly since 2010. Like most recent developments in Japan's security activities, the Indo-Japanese relationship has become part of a longer-

term strategy premised on enlarging the ambit of Japan's relationship with other middle powers to aid the "rules-based international order". There is a growing recognition that Japan should cooperate to build connectivity infrastructure inside and outside of India.

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