

Soaring India-Japan Ties: The Road Ahead



India-Japan relations have recently acquired great momentum in the context of a rapidly changing global order. The old system of powerful countries dominating regions is breaking down, replaced by a need for collaboration and broader partnerships. Globalization has led to competition and a focus on national interests, with trade and technology becoming strategic tools. New challenges like pandemics and disregard for international law require reform of the UN and a multipolar Asia that promotes openness and rules.

Five core areas for India-Japan cooperation emerge against this perspective. There's great investment potential, particularly in manufacturing, under India's "Make in India" initiative. Collaboration in advanced technologies like semiconductors and clean energy can be transformative, requiring a skilled workforce. Both nations can work together on green initiatives, leveraging Japan's logistics expertise and India's clean energy focus. Robust infrastructure development is crucial, offering opportunities to collaborate on India's east-west corridor projects. Additionally, India and Japan can collaborate on development efforts in other countries. Finally, shared security concerns like maritime safety and cyber threats necessitate joint efforts, potentially leading to expanded defence cooperation.

Both India and Japan are developing expertise in cutting-edge fields, and are now collaborating through the revived Quad grouping on military exercises, investments, and technology. They have found a common cause in the Indo-Pacific region against China's ambitious moves, such as the Belt and Road initiative which has awakened a sense of urgency among other Asian powers, urging them to seek a new framework for regional security.

Their strategies – India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) – echo a shared vision. They recognize the need for a partnership that transcends mere military concerns, a strategic alliance built for the challenges of the future.

Japan sees India as a vital player in the security architecture of the region, offering both financial aid and cutting-edge technology to address critical infrastructure needs. This renewed commitment was solidified when in 2023, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida unveiled a fresh plan for the FOIP during his visit to New Delhi.

Under former Prime Minister Abe, Japan revitalized the QUAD and introduced the FOIP concept, both aimed at upholding a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. Abe's FOIP strategy stemmed

from his earlier visions of “The Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” and “Confluence of the Two Seas.” These ideas rested on three pillars: establishing the rule of law, ensuring freedom of navigation and trade, and fostering economic prosperity through better connectivity. Additionally, Abe sought peace and stability by actively engaging with partner countries in the region.

Japan also extended a helping hand through Official Development Assistance (ODA) via the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). This program supports human resource development and infrastructure projects in partner countries. JICA’s latest plan focuses on the FOIP initiative, fostering future leaders, addressing environmental concerns, and bolstering Japan’s economic standing. The EPQI and ODA initiatives promote “quality” and “sustainable” infrastructure development, a stark contrast to the BRI, which has been criticized for saddling countries with debt.

Building on Abe’s groundwork, Prime Minister Kishida unveiled new FOIP initiatives in 2023 during his visit to India. These initiatives focus on upholding peaceful principles and promoting prosperity, addressing regional challenges collaboratively, fostering multi-layered connectivity, and expanding security cooperation across air and sea domains. Moreover, Japan intends to revise its ODA guidelines to further strengthen collaboration with regional partners on the FOIP.

India and Japan have forged a strategic partnership focused on safeguarding maritime security and strengthening ties with regional players, particularly members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). A key aspect of this collaboration is the development of India’s Northeast region, which serves as a crucial link between India’s Act East Policy and Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision. Notably, the Japan-India Vision 2025 identifies this region as a pivotal area for enhanced cooperation.

The Act-East Forum serves as a platform for joint initiatives in connectivity, renewable energy, and environmental protection, playing a vital role in deepening bilateral relations. Furthermore, the partnership extends to addressing shared concerns in the South China Sea, with both nations advocating for upholding international maritime law and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight. This collaborative approach underscores the strategic significance of India-Japan cooperation in the broader Indo-Pacific region.

India’s strategic location, particularly the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, is recognized by Japan. Through its Official Development Assistance (ODA), Japan supports infrastructure projects in this region, bolstering India’s surveillance capabilities and regional connectivity. This collaboration extends beyond borders, with the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) fostering economic ties between the two nations and Africa.

India has emerged as the largest recipient of Japanese ODA in South Asia since 2005. As a Japanese government agency, JICA plays a pivotal role in funding projects spanning education, transportation, and renewable energy in India. This partnership extends to high-speed rail projects, dedicated freight corridors, and industrial corridors. The India-Japan Digital Partnership and the India-Japan Industrial Competitiveness Partnership exemplify their commitment to economic collaboration in critical areas like digital trade and semiconductor supply chains.

Recognizing the urgency of climate change, both nations are collaborating through ventures like the Asia Energy Transition Initiative and discussions on joint credit mechanisms for renewable hydrogen projects. Defence cooperation flourishes with the Agreement Concerning Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services, facilitating joint military exercises and fostering closer ties between their armed forces. The 2+2 ministerial dialogue format underscores their intention to expand collaboration into space and cybersecurity.

India's economic and military potential, combined with Japan's expertise in large-scale projects, creates a formidable force against emerging threats in the Indo-Pacific. Both nations actively contribute to regional maritime security through bilateral and multilateral exercises like Shakti, Varuna, and MALABAR. Their participation in various multilateral platforms, including the QUAD, G20, and ASEAN, reflects their shared commitment to a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific. Additionally, their leadership roles in G20 and G7 in 2023 positioned them as champions of the rules-based order and multilateralism in the region.

India and Japan have been working together with the US and Australia in trilateral settings (India-Japan-US and India-Japan-Australia) for over a decade. These dialogues initially focused on broader economic goals and avoiding confrontation with China. However, all four countries now share concerns about China's growing assertiveness and its impact on the rules-based international order. This convergence led to the revival of the Quad (India, Japan, Australia, and the US) in 2017. The Quad promotes a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) to counter China's economic and military influence. While not a formal military alliance like NATO, the Quad members conduct joint military exercises (like Malabar) and share intelligence, building a foundation for future cooperation.

Beyond material benefits, the Quad strengthens India's position as a regional leader. It aligns with India's desire to be a "net security provider" by working with partners like Japan. Both Japan and India see each other as crucial partners in this network-based approach to a changing global order. With strong ties and no major conflicts, the India-Japan partnership is expected to keep growing.

The relationship between India and Japan has grown closer in recent years, especially due to shared concerns about China. This is evident in their participation in the Quad, a group of countries that includes the United States and Australia. The future of the India-Japan partnership looks bright. Both countries are committed to working together on security issues and economic development. India's strategic importance in the Indian Ocean gives it leverage in its relationship with Japan and other Quad members.

In conclusion, India and Japan recognize the growing significance of the Global South in their foreign policies. India championed the concerns of developing nations during its G20 presidency and became their voice, while Japan seeks to offer alternative economic partnerships to reduce the Global South's dependence on China. This strengthened partnership between India and Japan presents a united front in the evolving Indo-Pacific theatre. Through collaboration on infrastructure development, economic ties, defence cooperation, and regional stability, they aim to create a more secure and prosperous future for the region – Anjali Sehrawat. **(Vietnam Times)**

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