

India-Japan Relations and the Chinese Aggression in the Post COVID-19 Era

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The world at present is facing the worst global pandemic COVID-19. China's Wuhan emerged as the epicentre and as the virus spread across the world, it shattered world economies, imbalanced the fiscal markets and led to a severe shortage of healthcare facilities. Countries have been scrambling for medical supplies and trying their level best to support supply chains as China being the hub of manufacturing, shut down the factories inevitably halting the global supply chain, which has made countries rethink their dependence on China. Chinese aggression in the South China Sea and the East China Sea and its build-up of artificial Islands used as military bases has at present started an anti-China sentiment. India and Japan have also been victims of Chinese aggression in the past and now again, due to the above-mentioned reasons; India and Japan have yet again come closer in this disastrous COVID-19 time. In this context, the article traces down the evolution of the relations between India and Japan and point out Chinese aggressiveness with respect to India and Japan and further, identify the sectors of convergences in the post COVID-19 period between the two nations.



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Tracing the Evolution of the India-Japan Relationship

The robust relationship between India and Japan has evolved over a period of time. It is important to understand that this relationship started through the realm of long historical affinity and cultural associations and was further strengthened by the several visits of prominent Indians like Monk Bodhisena, Swami Vivekanand, Rabindranath Tagore, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, JRD Tata and Judge Radha Bindo Pal. The next phase of this relationship aimed to cooperate diplomatically and so, it led to the formation of diplomatic ties on 28 April 1952 with several high-level visits like that of Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi in 1957 and later in 1958, President Rajendra Prasad visited Japan. Economically too, the year of 1958 paved a way for greater cooperation as Japan provided yen loans to India.

In fact when India was facing the balance of payment crisis, Japan stepped in as a reliable friend and bailed India out of this situation. With the rise of China in 2000s, Japan was in the lookout for a trustworthy friend and India ticketed all the boxes and it led to a significant change in 2000 as it witnessed a qualitative shift in the relations between the two nations and established ‘Global Partnership’ when Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori visited India. Later in 2006, the status of Global Partnership further paved a way for ‘Strategic and Global Partnership’ highlighting the rapidly growing economy of India which would help Japan get benefits in their corporate sector and so, this became the driving force of this relationship. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was the Chief Guest at the 2014 Republic Day celebration and later Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit led the bilateral relations to be ‘Special Strategic and Global Partnership’. Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Japan in 2015 and together with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe resolved to transform the relationship between both the countries to a deep, broad-based and action oriented partnership with a broad convergence of political, economic and strategic goals and they announced ‘the Japan and India Vision 2025 Special Strategic and Global Partnership Working Together for Peace and Prosperity of the Indo-Pacific Region and the World’ a joint statement that would serve as a guidepost for the ‘new era in Japan-India relations’.¹

The next stage of evolution was in November 2016, when Prime Minister Modi visited Japan and together both the nations through India’s Act East Policy (AEP) and Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) transformed the India-Japan relations which determined the regional order and further paved a way for a ‘new era in the India-Japan relations’ aiming towards cooperation in peace, stability and prosperity in the region of the Indo-Pacific. Also, the Indo-Pacific

region needed to be free and open which was only possible with an unwavering commitment. Indo-Pacific needs to be inclusive and open to all along with abiding by the rule-based order, respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity among nations and ensuring the freedom of navigation and overflight, all in accordance with the universally recognised principles of international law especially the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and refraining from any threat or use of force.

The 13th Annual Summit was held on 28-29 October 2018 between India and Japan and this Summit aimed for a shared vision for the Future of India-Japan relations and 32 MoUs and Agreements were signed in sectors like healthcare, food processing, etc. This was by far the greatest level of interaction with any country and so, it was a clear give away that the relationships between India and Japan were growing in leaps and bounds. Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Japan on 27-29 June 2019 to participate in the G20 Summit and on the sidelines of this Summit, they discussed strengthening the cooperation between them through defence cooperation, bilateral cooperation in more countries like Africa and collaboration on investment promotion and further aimed for Japan's assistance to India for the coalition on disaster resilience infrastructure, fugitive economic offenders and anti-corruption measures and highlighted the infrastructural works done by the Japanese companies in the Northeast part of India.² Another path-breaking meeting was the first India-Japan 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meeting scheduled on 30 November 2019 and they focused upon the need to enhance their strategic depth in order to deal with the emerging challenges from other countries especially in the Indo-Pacific.

Therefore, the relationship evolution between India and Japan has grown continuously, but it is also important to understand the reason behind this evolution. India and Japan are geographically far and also, share no historical baggage which is rather interesting. Also, due to historical and civilisational ties especially due to Buddhism, the relationship has always remained calm and respectful of one another. China rise in the 2000s was a major reason why Japan's interest in India grew, also India is an emerging market and Japan wanted to make the best use of it. Japan realised that there was a need to push India to develop infrastructure and industries so that India could emerge as a manufacturing hub. Japan knew very well that if Northeast India is developed, it would open up a new route of trade and communication as it would open up the Southeast Asian markets connecting till Thailand which is a major ground of Japan's investment. Also, India is the heart of Asia especially the region of South Asia and has been constantly in conflicting border issues with China and

both India as well as China share brutal history of wars and tensions. Japan too sees China as a concern in the South China Sea and East China with regard to the Senkaku Islands. China emerged as a common bone of contention for both India and Japan and since the two countries emerged as trustworthy and reliable friends together, they aimed to strengthen their relationship vis-à-vis China.

China - the Common Concern

Chinese aggressiveness has been paramount in recent times, but the rise of China started in 2000s and Japan found India as a trustworthy friend as India proves its metal as a reliable partner. The world at present is dwelling in the mayhem of the Coronavirus Pandemic and since, China's Wuhan emerged as the epicentre, anti-China sentiment. Meanwhile, Chinese aggressiveness in the South China Sea and East China Sea and harassing countries like India, Taiwan, the Philippines and Vietnam has made the bonhomie between India and Japan as India possible. India's active engagements with the Quad has only strengthen the cause of the Indo-Pacific. Most importantly India has been actively promoting Japan's goal of Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and that has further strengthened their relations. It is important to trace the irritant that India and Japan face from China which would further help to find the common points of convergences in the post COVID-19 period.

The year 2020 marks 70 years of diplomatic ties between India and China but this relationship has been mark with several cracks like the 1962 border war, 1967 Sikkim skirmishes, 1987 Sumdoromg Chu Valley skirmish, and 2017 Doklam standoff. Despite all contentious issues, both countries have attempted all possible methods of rapprochement while adoptinig hedging strategy resulting in regional instability. China's aspiration for supremacy and its strategy of power politics plays the game of 'divide and rule'; it doesn't consider India as equal and wants to dominate the whole of Asia.

India, on the other hand, feels that it is a major power in the region of South Asia and has the capability of being a regional power and eventually establish itself as a global partner. China has been using the string of pearls strategy to encircle India by using ports as a way to keep a tab on India and has been constantly propping up Pakistan to play the balance of power. China's Belt and Road (BRI) passes through India's territory of Gilgit-Baltistan which is objectionable to India as it is a violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor projects in Kashmir is also objectionable for the same reason.³ The trijunction Doklam issue between China, India and Bhutan has also been a major concern for India as there was a

confrontation between the Indian and Chinese troops as China was constructing a road and this action purely portrayed China's assertiveness⁴.

China seems to be concerned about India's ties with the United States and its Indo-Pacific strategy in which India plays a major role. Also, in recent times, Chinese maritime aggressiveness in the Indian Ocean is a major cause for India.⁵ Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese troops have had a confrontation with the Indian troops. It is important to understand China's aggressiveness in the times of the global pandemic.

The Japan and China relations have a long history of hot and cold interactions. Japan has very patiently dealt with its immediate neighbour and has always tried to maintain peace and stability in the region of East Asia but China's aggressiveness in the South China Sea and East China Sea along with the Senkaku/Diaoyu conflict has left Japan rather doubtful of China's intentions. China has been aggressively building artificial islands and setting them up as full capacity military bases. China's Wuhan emerged as the epicentre of the COVID-19 and that disturbed the supply chains of Japan as most of the manufacturing factories were in China so Japan has decided to reduce its industrial plans in China and have moved industries back to Japan or to other Southeast Asian nations. All this was being done as their affects felt in the economic sector and there was a need for a stable industrial growth along with flourishing supply chains and wanted to remove its heavy reliance on China. On 05 March 2020, the 36th Council on Investments for the Future was held at Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Office where he said: "as for those products with high added value and for which we are highly dependent on a single country, we intend to relocate the production bases to Japan."⁶ Japan due to the coronavirus spread had to delay the Tokyo Olympic Games and the country was already facing an economic slowdown and now it has reached the brim of recession and so, it needs to concentrate to reshape its old conservative regional coordination which has promoted internalisation, adhered to multilateralism and expansion of free trade zones and so, they aimed towards their own prioritization in the sectors of economic and trade cooperation.⁷ Japan has always been a kind neighbour to China and has always valued the historical linkages, but China's seaming aggressiveness is extremely disturbing for Japan. Moreover, Japan has time and again walked the tight rope between the U.S. and China and has always been left disappointed with China's behaviour.

Convergences in the Post COVID-19 Period

The relation between India and Japan during the pandemic has grown considerably. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe

have discussed the situation and have agreed to cooperate in tackling COVID-19 spread in their respective countries and also discussed the post COVID-19 relations where they decided that “India-Japan special strategic and global partnership can help develop new technologies and solutions.”⁸

With the outbreak of the pandemic, Japanese factories in China have been badly hit and Japan has decided to move out its factories from China. This move has been supported by the Government through an economic stimulus of 2.2 million dollars, where 220 billion yen has been given to help shift out the factories back to Japan and 23.5 billion yen has been given to other Southeast Asian nations. Since Japan is diversifying, India appears to be one of the most sought after investment destination which was proved in a survey done by the Japanese manufacturing companies in collaboration with the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), where India was ranked second in 2017.⁹ This paved a way for India as a prime destination for Japan. The tariff war between the U.S and China is another issue for Japan as it is a trading partner with both and due to the tightly roped dynamics between the U.S and China, Japan gets stuck.¹⁰

Japan chooses to have a bankable friend which India is because of China’s hot and cold behaviour and uncertainty in the future; Japan has greatly invested in India over the last few years and also, the labour costs in India are far cheaper compared to China. With the economic crisis due to the spread of the virus, Japan would choose a stable, bankable India. According to 2018, 1,442 Japanese companies registered in India and most of these companies comprised of the manufacturing sector and several projects for the manufacturing industry was set up like 12 Japan-India Institutes of manufacturing and a Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) in India were set up and 161 TITP interns were sent to Japan to work in jobs in sectors like machining, construction, factory sheet metal work, machinery and metals, automobile repair and maintenance, care-worker, welding and cultivation agriculture.¹¹

Many Japanese companies have already invested in various Indian sectors of automobile, chemicals, textiles and renewable energy and have already reaped benefits. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has undertaken many industrial as well as infrastructural projects like water supply in Guwahati, the road network in Assam-Meghalaya and many other projects in northeast India with emphasis on forest management and agricultural development. Also, infrastructural projects like the Japanese Industrial Townships (JITs), Japanese Bullet Trains System ‘Shinkansen’ project, the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor, Western Dedicated Freight Corridor (DFC) of the Indian Railways

and in the south, the Chennai-Bengaluru Industrial Corridor (CBIC)¹² all paves a way for not only infrastructural development but also it will help boost the economy and transportation industry. Therefore, all these above-mentioned projects make India an attractive destination for manufacturing for Japan in the post COVID-19 period which would also help India's Flagship initiatives like 'Skill India', 'Make in India' and it would also help to promote local products which would help 'Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan' or Self-reliant India Mission.

The spread of COVID-19 has led to a severe shortage of healthcare facilities and essential medicines. India has supplied hydroxychloroquine to most countries in the world and this humanitarian gesture has been appreciated globally. Japan's Fujifilm Holdings Corp was successful in producing Avigan, an anti-viral to treat COVID-19. India is now the new Chairperson of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and India has succeeded Japan. All the countries at present want an inquiry against China and why China didn't warn the world about COVID-19. Also medical research teams from India and Japan can cooperate and work towards developing a vaccination to treat coronavirus. Also, Ministry of AYUSH has brought in many ways to boost the immunity and through its flagship initiative 'Ayushman Bharat' lays emphasis on the use of Ayurveda and practice yoga for a holistic mind, body and soul which would also help tackle and treat stress-related issues in the times of the COVID-19.¹³ Secondly, Taiwan was supposed to be made a part of World Health Organisation but China objected and called Taiwan, its own territory and there was no need for Taiwan to separately be a part of the WHO. India at the moment is diplomatically on high-level global interaction and has achieved the name of being the pharmacy of the world for its kindness of sending and supplying essential medicines to treat COVID-19. After assuming the Chair of the Executive Board of WHO, India will have to take a difficult decision and if India agrees to run an inquiry on China. This would worsen its relations with China; but since India is an active part of the Quad backed by the U.S., India's decision would only benefit its relations with the U.S. and Japan.

India and Japan as part of their India-Japan Digital Partnership, can work towards the development of science and technology and focus on harnessing a digital economy which should be supported by Indian as well as Japanese companies. Their focus should be on Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, fin-tech, healthcare, consumer, education, robotics, automation and business to business software and invite Start-up companies for ideas in these sectors. This would also benefit the Start-Up India initiative. India has developed a mobile app 'Aarogya Setu' COVID-19 internal tracing system in India for the benefit of their citizens and along with that India has developed an

electronic platform SAARC COVID-19 Information Exchange Platform (COINEX)' and this has helped to exchange information and provide tools for health professionals about Coronavirus along with facilitating several online training resources and e-learning module. This can also be shared with Japan in their fight to combat COVID-19. Since India is an 'emerging technological hub' it can pave the way for institutional exchanges in research and development emphasising on Artificial intelligence and set up many laboratories which would help identify new technology in medicine, equipment, arms and ammunition, space technology and together India and Japan can aim to cooperate in the post COVID-19 era.¹⁴

Satoru Nagao, Visiting Fellow Hudson Institute, views that under COVID-19 crisis, there will be new move where the key feature would be the US demand is de-coupling from China and this would be done as a result of the vital information being hidden by China on the COVID-19 spread to the countries like the US, Japan, Australia. Nagao further quoted that the US allies in Europe would rethink the relation with China and since relocating the factories from China would be a major pillar of this understanding, India would be a major destination and if this tendency would continue, then the Japan-India-U.S. should collaborate and prepare bigger funds for the companies to relocate their factories from China to India and therefore, could be a new achievement for Japan-India-U.S. cooperation.¹⁵

Conclusion

The convergences between India and Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic would lead to greater collaboration not only among them, but also among their regional partners which would culminate in an intra-Asian forum in future. To face and neutralize Chinese aggressive posture, India and Japan could further strengthen their relationship among themselves as well as with the United States.

Notes

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