

## Introduction

India and Japan, two nations with vast histories filled with rich cultural enigma, were linked with each other since the Vedic period when the Buddhist religion first set foot on this planet. The two nations used to trade with each other both directly and indirectly across the waters. During the First World War, both countries were allied, whereas in the next World War, they found themselves facing off against each other, India of course, under the British Empire's influence. Eventually, soon after that, a force from within India, the Indian National Army joined hands with Japanese forces in fighting against the British colonial forces. Thus began a somewhat cordial relationship between the two far apart lands.

Japan's stunning economic recovery from the aftermath of the Second World War highly impressed India. However, the relationship between both, up until 2014, had not been germane enough to foresee a path in the future. The return of Japanese PM Shinzo Abe and in 2015, the coming of PM Modi to power, may have marked a turning point. Both the nations have a rivalry with China and to counter its behaviour in the Indo-Pacific region they have decided to use the [QUAD](#) as a platform to enhance cooperation. Japan has also decided to tag along with India regarding its decision to not join the RCEP; it will only sign on if India does so as well. This indicates the growth in bilateral relations as well as Japan putting more value in India as a fellow member of the QUAD rather than chase after economic benefits from other nations. Apart from this, Japan's soft power is also starting to see a gradual increase in its influence on the Indian population.



Prime Minister Kishi with then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru/ Image source: The Hindu

## India-Japan: A brief historic overview

Historically, Japan and India have shared moderately friendly relations; neither too hot nor too cold. During the cold war period from 1947 to the mid-1980s, both countries, however, did not enjoy much interaction at all. It was only from the 1980s that a sudden increase in friendly relations was observed especially in the avenues of trade and technology.

Technically, the relations between the two lands can be traced back to ancient times when the teachings of Buddhism were first transferred from the Korean peninsula to Japan. India's North-Eastern region also lies geographically closer to Japan and as a result, multiple cases of migration have been recorded throughout the times. It is important to note that for than a millennium, despite there being a few ups and downs between the two nations, they have never become adversaries.

Japan started to emerge as a powerful force on a global scale during the period of the infamous Meiji Restoration in 1868. This was happening at a time when India was under the

colonial rule of the British Empire and disturbances caused by other Western powers. Japan, however, due to the rapid modernisation it underwent, started to challenge these Western entities, including the United States of America. This caused India to turn its head towards its East Asian neighbour in search of inspiration and hope. When it comes to India's struggle for and eventual attainment of independence, one could say that Japan's contribution can be observed in large proportions whether directly or indirectly.

After the end of World War II, Indian PM Nehru and the then Japanese PM signed a peace treaty and formally established diplomatic relations in **1952**. Following the devastating condition of Japan after the end of the war, both the nations engaged in trade; one of the most prominent being Indian exports of iron ore to Japan which aided in the latter's rapid recovery. In **1958**, India was provided with the first of the yen loan aids by the Japanese government and as of **1986**, has become the largest recipient of ODA loans from Japan. Post-2000, there has been multiple successful visits of leaders from both sides with the establishment of the "**India-Japan Global Partnership of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**" for the first time ever. Since then, relations have been going uphill in almost all sectors especially after the Indian government decided to upgrade its "Look East Policy" to the "Act East Policy".



Big Buddha or Great Buddhism in Japan at Kamakura city/ Image source: 123RF

## India-Japan: Amalgamation of Soft Powers

As it is already known, both nations do share a decent amount of cultural and religious history. This has had a profound influence upon the peoples of both nations for centuries and thus allowed amicable relations to keep on continuing. Currently, in modern times, Indians are becoming increasingly interested in Japanese culture. This could be attributed to the Japanese entertainment industry as most of their mainstream Television Series and cartoons have enjoyed tremendous popularity in India. Children who grew up with such entertainment sources have gone on to display interest in other sections of Japanese culture as well; for example, cuisine, music, literature and even education. This rising trend is interesting because traditionally, Indians have not been influenced at all by any particular East Asian culture.

In the present day scenario, it could be said that a particular type of pop-culture could be

held responsible for captivating the minds of Indian youths. Examples of this include the Anime industry, J-pop industry, Japanese game industry big shots such as CAPCOM, Square Enix, Nintendo and Sony. Japanese culture has, as of the 1990s, been labelled as “cool”; this is a perception that is actually being actively promoted by the Japanese government on a global scale as the “Cool Japan” initiative. An interesting area of collaboration could be seen in the long run when it comes to the merger of Indian mythology with Japanese animation studios, resulting in an even more massive soar of Japanese popularity amongst Indians. A growing bond between both the countries beyond just the formal governmental levels has been achieved. It holds a great deal of potential as far as the formulation of a powerful alliance capable of containing the looming Chinese threat within Asia is concerned. The Meiji Restoration period’s achievement had turned the Land of the Rising Sun as a literal role model for India. Despite being quite far away from the South Asian subcontinent as compared to China which actually lies right next door, the peaceful history that is shared between India and Japan is what created this unlikely harmony instead of with the Chinese.



Image source: Nikkei

## India-Japan: Technological Dance

With the rise of China in recent years, truly like an awakening dragon, in fields such as defence technology, R & D, Artificial Intelligence, 3D Printing, Cybersecurity etc., Japan

finds itself in the red zone of all things with the possibility of being outshined by the former. For more than 60 years, Japan could boast of having the most technological and economic prowess in all of Asia. Now, it stands to lose its bragging rights in the spur of a moment. Here the question arises that how can Japan maintain its technological edge? It has abstained from maintaining its own military forces and only possesses the JSDF; clearly this puts it in a severely weak position in light of the Chinese aggression aimed at the Senkaku Islands. The answer to its dilemma lies with none other than India, another rising power in the Asian region, both militarily and economically.

India has had a history of developing its own defence technology. From developing its first fighter jet in the **1960s** to testing its own nuclear arsenal in the **1970s** to deploying its own internally developed battle tanks and warships in the **2000s** and **2010s** respectively, India has proven to be quite a formidable contender in the international arena by trying to catch up to the pre-existing great powers. As of **2017**, India has started recognizing the vitality of Cyber technologies being merged with traditional defence technologies, leading to the birth of Bleeding Edge military equipment such as the integration of AI in missiles and other ammunitions as well as radars to eliminate human error as much as possible. In its “**Joint Doctrine Indian Armed Forces**” publication, India has made it very clear that the acquisition of defence technology shall be treated as strategic resources from here onwards. In 2018, the Indian government had even pushed its “**National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence**”, highlighting the aforementioned point even further.

An area of collaboration for both India and Japan can be the joint development of technological projects, particularly in the field of AI and Robotics since India has displayed a vast amount of prowess in cyberspace and rocket technologies. AI and Robotics depend on the availability of highly skilled researchers and academics, an advantage that India boasts. In 2018, the “**India-Japan Cooperation on Digital Partnership**” was signed to promote joint production of AI tech and development of the Internet of Things (IoT).



Image source: PTI

## India-Japan: How Commerce Holds Yet Another Key

Japan's contributions to India's economic development has been pretty steady throughout the years but post-2017, it has entered a new paradigm; one with an increased strategic edge in the wake of aggressor states such as China and North Korea. Historically speaking, Japan's assistance has mainly been in the sectors of heavy industry and manufacturing. Only recently in 2018, has the country opened up its defence sector as well after PM Abe brought about a major constitutional change, allowing for its remilitarisation. This provides a lucrative opportunity for India to take advantage of as it has the potential of tying up with India's own "Make in India" initiative very well.

In a dynamic world that is now plagued by a devastating pandemic, India finds itself trying to counter China's growing dominance by entering into alliances such as QUAD and the

Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) while simultaneously attempting to balance its relations with the dragon through the means of SCO, BRICS and RIC Trilateral Summit. It is important to note that India, though it has started to move towards being a global power, still lacks in the department of major-power clout. Both India and Japan are similar in one particular aspect that neither of the two has ever truly amassed enough hard or soft power to be able to take on the international arena alone. Japan, on the other hand, has sustained itself and risen to its current level by forming alliances with almost all the major western powers; for India, this is still an ongoing process which will definitely take a couple of years more to be fully realized. As such, it would be in India's best interests to deepen its relations with Japan even further.

Since WWII, the bilateral trade between Japan and India has remained mostly sluggish with the current share of trade being 1.1% and 2.1% respectively. Despite the establishment of the Japan-India Economic Partnership Agreement enacted in 2011, the total trade between the two nations lies at approximately \$17.6 billion. Japan enjoys a consistent trade surplus with India and has done so over the decades. The horizontal market between the two countries has remained highly underdeveloped with signs of progress emerging very recently; the latest upgrades in the Indian manufacturing sector such as increasing workers' skills and improved quality control has led to the build-up of confidence in Japanese companies. Now they are being encouraged to gradually expand into other types of trade which include food items, stationery items, electronic appliances, IT components, pharmaceutical goods, sanitary goods and cosmetics etc. In the retail sector, Muji of Ryōhin Keikaku opened its first Indian outlet in Mumbai in August 2016, and Fast Retailing opened its first Uniqlo store in New Delhi in October 2019. Japanese smartphones and computer equipment will find heavy demand in the Indian markets given that they are sold at reasonable prices affordable by the majority. Moreover, Japan may be able to look towards India for agricultural imports taking into account its own weak sector owing to geographical limitations; the Japanese government has given Indian food safety standards the same value as it does to its own agencies.

## Conclusion

Both Indian and Japanese leaders have displayed happiness in recognizing the fact that Asia is indeed undergoing rapid developments and with the dawn of Globalisation 5.0 and rising multilateral trade mechanisms, a bright future presents itself to the Asian populace. The two nations share a vision of regional stability, peace and a platform for smooth economic cooperation. Japan views India as a strong contender/challenger to Chinese hard power and India views Japan as a major economic partner to do the same; both lie on the geographical



extremities of China, enabling them to counter the dragon simultaneously from each end. Therefore, a strong India is in the best interests of the Japanese and vice versa. To strengthen this alliance, both parties must engage in activities that go beyond the traditional heavy industries and military sector; priority must be given to the overlooked sectors as well such as trade in agriculture, light products, health care, education, daily needs supplies, infrastructural developments, traditional and pop-cultural integration etc. Then only will a greater sense of solidarity between the populations of both countries be achieved, resulting in a stronger alliance between the two respective governments.

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