

27 February 2012

# Japan and India: Making Up for Lost Time

India and Japan have had their historical ups and downs as ideology and technology prevented them seeing eye to eye. Now, wariness of China and common interests in the Asia-Pacific region are bringing Japan and India together.

By Rupakjyoti Borah for ISN

---

Though this year marks the [60th anniversary](#) of the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Japan, the two countries have ties going back far longer, to the time when Buddhism made its way from India to Japan. India did not claim any reparations from Japan following World War II and refused to attend the San Francisco Peace Conference in 1951, signing a separate peace treaty with Japan the following year. However, all this bonhomie began to fade away in India's post-independence era as Japan became an American ally and India tilted towards the erstwhile Soviet Union.

It was only in the post-Cold War era, following India's economic liberalization and the enunciation of its "Look East Policy" that India and Japan began to re-engage with each other; the "Look East Policy" aims to revive India's historical ties with countries of Southeast and East Asia. However, relations were set back once again when India conducted a series of nuclear tests in May 1998, bringing a swift and strong response from Japan.

It was the then Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori's landmark visit to India in August 2000 that marked the beginning of a new chapter in Japan-India ties with a foundation for a "Global Partnership in the 21st Century" being laid. Since then, [bilateral relations](#) have moved at a fast pace, with the establishment of a Strategic and Global Partnership in December 2006 and the issuance of a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in October 2008. The countries now conduct an annual summit at the prime ministerial level, reflecting the importance accorded to the relationship by the two countries.

## The China Factor

Shared concerns about China are one of the factors - maybe even *the* factor - encouraging the strengthening of emerging ties between India and Japan. Around five years ago, India, Japan, the US and Australia set up a new institution - the "Quadrilateral Initiative" - but it proved to be a stillborn enterprise, partly due to concerns about annoying China. Though the Initiative may have been seen to have failed, it nevertheless sowed the seeds of growing cooperation between these four democracies; angering China may still not be top of anyone's agenda but China's aggressive moves, especially in the South China Sea, have many of its neighbors worried.

India now has interests in the Sea, having signed oil exploration deals with Vietnam in October 2011; India and Japan's recent reiteration of their commitment to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and other relevant international maritime law now assumes greater significance in the wake of China's assertive actions. Water is not the only area of contention, as India also has unresolved land border issues with China, over the (currently) Indian province of Arunachal Pradesh. It has therefore been steadily ramping up relations with countries like Vietnam and Japan - which also have tensions with China - in what could be interpreted as a pre-emptive diplomatic iteration of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'.

Japan has also realized that better relations with India will help it offset China's growing might. In September 2010, when a Chinese trawler rammed into Japanese Coast Guard vessels off the coast of the disputed Senkaku island group, relations between China and Japan plunged to a new low. China unofficially stopped the export of rare-earth metals to Japan (rare-earth metals find application in many high-end electronic items). Smarting from that incident, the [Joint Statement](#) issued at the end of Japanese Prime Minister Noda's 2011 visit to India mentions that "Indian and Japanese enterprises would jointly undertake industrial activities to produce and export rare earths at the earliest" in a move directed at challenging the Chinese monopoly. Japan and China have heavy historical baggage weighing on their relationship and while interaction may now be mostly civil and cordial, memory still casts a long shadow.

### **The Importance of Asia-Pacific**

Japan and India are both part of the East Asia Summit (EAS) and India appreciated the leading role Japan played in it gaining membership. India is continuing to strengthen its economic and strategic ties with countries in Southeast Asia, many of which see a democratic India as a bulwark against an authoritarian China; here, Indian and Japanese interests converge. With Myanmar taking incremental steps towards democracy for example, India's role in the region will increase even more given its historical ties and geographical proximity. From a more pragmatic economic perspective, Japanese companies are seeking to invest in Myanmar as it opens up its economy after decades of isolation.

As the United States gets ready for a shift in emphasis to the Asia-Pacific region, there will be even more opportunity for the three countries to cooperate. With India now going for American military hardware, there is a growing interoperability between their armed forces. In a sign of increasing cooperation in the maritime arena, Japan and India will hold their [first ever bilateral naval exercise](#) later this year. India conducts naval exercises with a host of Southeast Asian nations and Japan could further benefit from India's interoperability with these navies by participating in future multilateral exercises.

India is also a crucial partner for Japan in the fight against piracy because of its strategic location. India had showcased its strength in the fight against piracy when in November 1999, the Indian Coast Guard and Navy successfully [rescued a Japanese-owned vessel](#), the MV Alondra Rainbow, after it had been hijacked by pirates; this incident marked a big shift in Japan-India maritime ties.

### **Energy and Economy**

[Bilateral trade](#) is expected to reach \$25 billion by 2014, a significant increase from current levels of around \$11 billion. With a faltering economy -- especially in the wake of the big earthquake and tsunami of March 2011 and subsequent floods in Thailand (where many Japanese companies have factories) -- India represents a huge and critical market for Japanese companies. What may be surprising is that India has been the largest recipient of Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) since the fiscal year 2003-04. Japanese ODA to India was not reduced even after the March disaster last year, a clear sign of Japan's steadfast commitment to India's economy and the

relationship in general.

In spite of the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear catastrophe, the two sides have reaffirmed the importance of civil nuclear cooperation and negotiations are continuing on an 'Agreement for Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy.' Japanese companies would undoubtedly like to enter the nuclear energy market in India, even more so following the Indian government's announced intention to ramp up nuclear energy production; for this to happen, India needs Japanese 'nuclear know-how'.

It should not be forgotten that while nuclear power provides some of Japan's energy requirements, it is still heavily dependent on energy supplies from the Middle East. The Indian Navy has a formidable presence between the Straits of Hormuz and the Straits of Malacca, helping to keep key sea lanes of communication operational; provoking or upsetting India in this regard would therefore be very unwise indeed.

Given their roster of shared interests and concerns, it is perhaps only natural that India and Japan will continue moving closer to each other, even though they may not agree on every issue. Japan realizes that Japanese businesses are over-dependent on China and would hence like to diversify -- especially to countries like India that have huge markets with untold potential; feeding the symbiotic relationship is India's need for access to high-end Japanese technology as its economy logs an impressive rate of growth.

For both India and Japan, better ties present a win-win situation -- and considering mutual concern over China, an opportunity they cannot afford to pass up.

---

Dr Rupakjyoti Borah is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at the School of Liberal Studies, Pandit Deendayal Petroleum University, Gujarat, India. He has been a Visiting Fellow at the Centre of International Studies, University of Cambridge. The views expressed are personal.

---

## **Publisher**

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

---

Creative Commons - Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported

---

<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?id=138149&lng=en>

---

ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland