

POLITICS OF SOUTH ASIA

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INDIA AND JAPAN

Assessing the
Strategic Partnership

Edited by
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Politics of South Asia

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Rajesh Basrur · Sumitha Narayanan Kutty
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Assessing the Strategic Partnership

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PREFACE

The India–Japan strategic partnership ties Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s “Act East” policy with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s push for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” Both countries view the other as central to their efforts to meet the strategic challenge posed by China. Their response pairs a growing defence relationship and a joint infrastructure and connectivity drive for enhancing regional integration in competition with China’s Belt and Road Initiative. How will these interactions play out bilaterally and in their defence triangle with the United States and the resurgent Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the ‘Quad’)? What challenges lie ahead and how sustainable is the India–Japan partnership? The volume explores these questions through the framework of the under-analyzed concept of “strategic partnerships,” which fall short of alliances and are characteristic of an interdependent world wherein states find the option of going to war with a strategic adversary unfeasible.

This volume is the product of a workshop convened by the South Asia Programme of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). The editors would like to thank Ralf Emmers, David Envall, Arpita Mathur, C. Raja Mohan, Bhubhindar Singh, H. K. Singh and Sinderpal Singh for their critical feedback on draft papers presented at the workshop. Two anonymous reviewers provided valuable comments. We are grateful to Anit Mukherjee for his support from inception to completion of the project and to Rohan Mukherjee for helping us refine its content. We also extend our gratitude to the RSIS events team, steered by Farik

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Singapore

Rajesh Basrur
Sumitha Narayanan Kutty

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Conceptualizing Strategic Partnerships

Rajesh Basrur and Sumitha Narayanan Kutty

Abstract The India–Japan “special strategic and global partnership” has been described as one that will define the Indo-Pacific and shape the Asian century. This introductory chapter introduces the reader to a brief history of the growing relationship, defines the hitherto inadequately explored concept of “strategic partnership” in a post-alliance world, explains the objectives, design and relevance of the book and outlines the distinguishing features of the chapters to follow.

Keywords India · Japan · Strategic · Partnership

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s visit to India in September 2017, highlighted by his country’s \$17 billion commitment to build a high-speed rail line, elicited speculation about the possibility of an emerging alliance between the two countries. This is widely viewed as being in response to the rise of China and the apparent diminution of American

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commitment to and presence in the region.¹ How accurate are such assessments? We argue that they point correctly to the direction that the relationship between New Delhi and Tokyo is taking, but that they miss the true nature of the India–Japan “strategic partnership,” a phenomenon very different from an alliance and one that is symptomatic of interstate politics in a fast-changing world.

The India–Japan “special strategic and global partnership”² has been described as one that will define the Indo-Pacific and shape the Asian century. Under Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Japanese counterpart, there is much expectation of change. In Modi’s view, no other strategic partnership “can exercise a more profound influence on shaping the course of Asia and our interlinked ocean regions.”³ The bilateral relationship has gathered momentum in the past decade, driven by Indian and Japanese anxieties regarding China’s rise and the distinct challenge it presents to them. Political and defence consultations between the two countries have been institutionalized at the highest level and Japan is the first country with which India has set up a “2+2” dialogue involving their foreign and defence ministries.⁴ Defence cooperation, strategic dialogue and the strengthening of economic ties have proceeded apace. Highlights of this growing cooperation include Japan’s joining of the annual Malabar naval exercises between India and the United States as a regular participant in 2015, its commitment to

¹See, e.g., C. Raja Mohan, “The Case for Alliance,” *Indian Express*, September 14, 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-case-for-alliance/>. From China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs came a more critical comment following the same line of thinking. See Sutirtho Patranobis, “China Has a Message for India and Japan: Form Partnership, Not Alliance,” *Hindustan Times*, September 14, 2017, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/china-has-a-message-for-india-and-japan-form-partnership-not-alliance/story-HEygMJnZgSZOHxdvhrWaHI.html>.

²Joint Statement on India and Japan Vision 2025: Special Strategic and Global Partnership Working Together for Peace and Prosperity of the Indo-Pacific Region and the World, Ministry of External Affairs India, December 12, 2015, <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/26176> (accessed April 25, 2016).

³Media Statement by Prime Minister with Japanese Prime Minister in New Delhi, Ministry of External Affairs India, December 12, 2015, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=133117> (accessed April 25, 2016).

⁴Kiyoshi Takenaka, “Japan and India Vow to Boost Defence Ties during Summit,” *Reuters*, September 1, 2014, <http://in.reuters.com/article/japan-india-investment-modi-idINKBN0GW15520140901> (accessed April 26, 2016).

invest in building the high-speed railway mentioned above, the signing of a civilian nuclear agreement permitting Japan to export nuclear materials and technology to India in 2016, and joint initiatives on infrastructure development projects from the Asia-Pacific to Africa.

EVOLUTION OF INTERESTS

The India–Japan relationship has been witness to many decades of divergent trajectories, particularly during the Cold War. The two countries were in separate camps and in no way strategically aligned: Japan prioritized its security alliance with the United States, while India remained non-aligned and friendly with the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War signalled the tentative beginnings of a new interest in each other. Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao launched the country’s “Look East” policy, which created a window for bilateral interactions to expand. However, the nuclear tests conducted by India in 1998 meant a decade of lost opportunities. Japan reacted harshly to the tests and imposed sanctions. Additionally, Tokyo stayed neutral on the India–Pakistan Kargil conflict the following year, refusing to condemn Pakistan’s violation of the Line of Control in Kashmir.

In the twenty-first century, the relationship has seen rapid movement forward. With the United States pushing for close ties with New Delhi, Tokyo could not afford to be left behind. The further rise of China’s economic and military might and its increasingly tough posture in Southeast Asia spurred mutual interest in shaping outcomes in their shared neighbourhood. India was now looking beyond its traditional preoccupation with South Asia, while Japan was doing the same with respect to its alliance with the United States.⁵ New Delhi was also determined it would no longer remain a reactive power, but one that would “influence events abroad” rather than be “pushed by them” by building political and personal relationships.⁶ India has since forged strategic partnerships with a range of countries from China and Russia to the United States and Japan, reflecting a hedging strategy. At the same time, Japan has gradually shed its post-Second World War aversion to playing

⁵David Brewster, “The India–Japan Security Relationship: An Enduring Security Partnership?” *Asian Security*, 6, 2 (2010), pp. 95–120.

⁶C. Raja Mohan, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India’s New Foreign* (New Delhi: Viking/Penguin, 2003), p. 263.

the role of a significant stakeholder in regional strategic politics and is increasingly focused on being a “normal” major power.⁷

Simultaneously, the United States has sought to reduce its costs as a guarantor of regional stability in Asia by building a closer strategic relationship with India and encouraging a trilateral linkage between these two and Japan. The US “pivot” or “rebalance” towards Asia—motivated by the rise of China—is closely linked to the new US–Japan–India nexus. Cooperation between India and Japan “helps reduce gaps that would otherwise emerge” in US policy towards the Asia-Pacific at a time of “declining U.S. military resources and rising commitments in the Middle East and Europe.”⁸

While the US has a long-standing alliance with Japan, the new strategic warmth between it and India, and similarly between Japan and India, has taken the form of “strategic partnerships.” But what exactly are strategic partnerships? What do they facilitate and what are their limitations? The next section discusses their chief features.

DEFINING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

While much is made of “structural change” in terms of the global distribution of power—primarily, the effect of the rise of China and its challenge to the post-Cold War dominance of the United States—a deeper systemic change has been given less attention.⁹ Power itself is not what it used to be: the possession of material attributes of what we know as “power” no longer translates directly into a capacity to use it as an instrument of foreign strategic and economic policy. This is by no means a new phenomenon. At least two kinds of power were—under certain circumstances—visibly constrained in the twentieth century. Nuclear weapons reversed the relationship between war and politics. The very notion of “Cold War” highlighted a fundamental transformation of the

⁷ Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan’s Re-Emergence as a ‘Normal’ Military Power*, Adelphi Paper (London: IISS and Routledge, 2005), pp. 68–369.

⁸ Richard Fontaine, “Where Is America in Japan and India’s Plans for Asia?” *The National Interest*, December 28, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/where-america-japan-indias-plans-asia-14741> (accessed May 1, 2016).

⁹ See, e.g., Mark Beeson, “Hegemonic Transition in East Asia? The Dynamics of Chinese and American Power,” *Review of International Studies*, 35, 1 (January 2009), pp. 95–112; Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy. China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011); Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).