

# INDIA, CHINA AND JAPAN TRILATERAL RELATIONS ON ASIA'S SECURITY AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

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**Abstract:** India, China and Japan are the three most influential nations of the Asian continent. Both India and China are considered as the two Asian giants in terms of their geographical size, population, economic development and military power. Japan on the other hand is the most developed nation of Asia in terms of technology and economic power. Hence the relationship between these three countries is very important for the Asia's peace and security. While China and Japan's relationship has been historically strained due to various factors. But the relationship between India and Japan has significantly grown stronger due to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's outreach efforts with his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe over the past two years. On the other hand India's relationship with China has certain challenges like border disputes and diplomatic issues. Hence this paper will examine the scope and importance of India, China and Japan's trilateral relations in shaping the future of the Asia.

**Keywords:** India, China, Japan, Trilateral Relations, Asia.

The continent of Asia which is the largest of the seven continents in the World, has the potential to become the most economically and strategically powerful region in the Twenty First Century. Asia consists of more than half of the global population and because of this the region will play a very crucial role in shaping the future course of globalisation. The nations of the Asian continent are currently the world's fastest growing economies, have high military expenditure, possess rich natural resources and have the most important geo-strategic locations. This makes Asia the key player in the future global development. The key to Asia's development in the Twenty Century largely rests upon its three most powerful nations which are India, China and Japan. The destiny of Asia in this century will be shaped by the triangular relationship between these three nations. The trilateral relationship between India, China and Japan will restructure the geo-strategic balance of power among the nations of the world. The cooperation between these three nations will help to anchor peace and prosperity in Asia.<sup>1</sup>

While both India and China are the two Asian giants in terms of their geographical size, population, economic development and military power. Japan on the other hand is the most developed nation of Asia in terms of technology and economic power. At present Japan is undergoing a transformation from its pacifist foreign policy to a more assertive one. The reasons for this transformation are because Japan currently aims to be self-reliant in defending itself from the threats to its national security from North Korea and securing its national interests in the East China Sea from China. As China, India and Japan scramble for strategic advantage, they are transforming relations between and among themselves in a way that portends closer strategic engagement between New Delhi and Tokyo. While on the other hand there is sharp competition between China on one side and Japan and India on the other. Geographically India and China have their borders across the Himalayas, while Japan and China are separated by seas. The interests of the three powers are getting intertwined to the extent that the pursuit of unilateral solutions by any one of them will disturb that peaceful diplomatic environment on which their continued economic growth and security depends. The governments of India, China and Japan should ensure that the competition amongst themselves does not slide into a strategic conflict. Only if these three nations relations become strong they would be

able to reconcile their interest in Asia so that they can peacefully coexist and prosper.<sup>2</sup>The peace and prosperity of India, China and Japan would bring a positive transformation in the Asian continent.

The complexities of the India, China and Japan's tri-lateral relations are too intricate to be analysed in a simplistic fashion. The interdependence of these three nations contributes to peace independent of the effects of trade, democracy, interest and other variables.<sup>3</sup>Therefore in order to understand the complexities and significance of the three most powerful Asian nations in the Twenty First century, it is necessary analyse India, China and Japan's the bilateral relationship with each other. Firstly from an Indian perspective it is very important to understand the security and political implications of India's relationship with both China and Japan to India's national security.

### **India's Relationship with China**

Both India and China are the two ancient civilisations of the world having a glorious past, a dynamic present and a promising future.<sup>4</sup> Geographically with India and China being the neighbouring nations who share a long land border across the Himalayas, it is a fundamental fact that a good bilateral relation is a necessity between them for mutual benefit for both nations. The cultural exchange between both India and China dates back to the ancient past with many prominent examples like the spread of Buddhism from India to China and maritime trade with the Chola Empire. In modern history as India gained Independence in 1947 the new Indian government's aim was to maintain cordial relations with newly established Peoples Republic of China under the leadership of Mao Zedong. In fact India was among the first countries to give Peoples Republic of China diplomatic recognition. India wanted to revive its ancient friendly ties with China. In 1954, the China and India concluded the five principles of peaceful co-existence under which India acknowledged Chinese sovereignty in Tibet. The five famous principles of the Panchsheel Treaty were as follows:

- Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty.
- Mutual non-aggression.
- Mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs.
- Equality and mutual benefit.
- Peaceful co-existence.

It was during this treaty that Indian side of delegation presented a frontier map to the Chinese that included the Mc Mahon line and the Chinese side did not object. Here the First Prime Minister of India famously promoted the slogan '*hindichinibhaibhai*'. But ironically the relations between the two Asian giants soon soured with the Chinese invasion of Tibet, or officially termed in China as the Liberation of Tibet which was a military campaign by the People's Republic of China against independent Tibet after months of failed negotiations. This eventually resulted in the incorporation of Tibet into the People's Republic of China. China treated India's concern with Tibet as expansionist, but India's concerns were in fact sentimental and culturally as Buddhist Tibet had been under influence of Indian culture for many years. The PRC leader Mao Zedong was humiliated by the reception the Dalai Lama obtained in India when he fled there in March 1959. After this point tensions steadily increased between the two nations when Mao implied that the 1959 Tibet uprising rebellion in Tibet was caused by Indians. This eventually was the breaking point of the 1962 Sino-Indian War which became a watershed event in the bilateral relations between India and China. The 1962 war is the underlying factor due to which there is a constant suspicion by India about the Chinese economic and military development.

In the Twenty First Century China's rapid economic and military development has generated concern and mistrust not only on India but also nations like United States, Japan and Vietnam. China is following a two-pronged strategy in which it attempts to reassure its neighbours of its peaceful intentions, even while simultaneously it is involved with huge military expenditure.<sup>5</sup> India on the other hand has also witnessing rapid economic growth and advancement in the military capability over the last decade. Both India and China are members of BRICS which is a five member associations of fast developing nations of the World that includes Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. The New Development Bank was established in 2015 jointly by both India and China along with the other three BRICS nation for reducing their financial dependence on international financial organisations like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) which are dominated by the Western Nations. After Mr. Narendra Modi became Prime Minister of India in May 2014, the Chinese President Xi Jinping visited India on September 2014. In this bilateral meeting

between these two Asian Giants had signed 12 agreements, in China will be investing 20 billion dollars in India's infrastructure over the period of five years. Under the bilateral investments plans, China pledged to undertake the following initiatives: <sup>6</sup>

- Assisting India in modernising its railway system with state of the art high speed links and upgraded railway station.
- Establish industrial parks in Gujarat and Maharashtra.
- Provide more market access to India to products like pharmaceuticals and agricultural technology.
- Increasing co-operation in trade, space exploration and civil nuclear energy.

### Challenges in India-China Relations

Despite several constructive developments in the bilateral relationship between India and China in the past couple of years, there are some major challenges that undermine the complete harmonious relationship between the two nations. The last six decades of India-China relationship has witnessed more of mutual mistrust and suspicion than friendliness and cordial atmosphere. The main challenge has always been to bridge the difference of opinion from both sides and reconcile on a number of sensitive issues including the Sino-Indian border dispute.<sup>7</sup> As mentioned before, the 1962 Sino-Indian War has sown the seeds of suspicion between the two nations, which still has lasting negative impact even in the Twenty First Century. Apart from this there are a number of unresolved disputes between India and China which have become the negative factors that hamper their peaceful co-existence and joint development. Such negative factors are as follows:

- The unresolved border continues to be a point contention between India and China. While India officially recognises the McMahon Line as its border with China. But China refuses to accept that the McMahon line as the international border between the two countries. The McMahon line was established in 1914 Shimla Accord signed by Britain who then governed India and the Independent state of Tibet. But after China annexed Tibet, it refused to identify the McMahon line as the official boundary between it and India. Apart from this there are continued border trespassing by Chinese troops into the Indian Territory, to which India has protested strongly through several flag meetings and diplomatic visits. Adding to that China is undertaking heavy construction and infrastructure development activities near the international border. This has raised suspicion with the Indian strategists about China using the infrastructure near the border for aiding its military forces during times of conflict with India.
- The China-Pakistan Nexus is another very important concern for India in its bilateral relationship with China. Pakistan has been one the biggest security threat for India since its independence. Pakistan is the main reason behind the decades of insurgency in Kashmir and terrorist attacks in other parts of India. China has always supported Pakistan both monetarily and militarily. At present as the United States is gradually reducing its support to Pakistan, its reliance on China has increased exponentially. Recently China was the main country which had blocked India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) at the behest of Pakistan. Despite the fact that China is itself facing threat of religious extremism in its Eastern Province of Xinjiang, it has refused to recognise many terrorists based in Pakistan who orchestrate terrorist attacks in India. Apart from this China is involved in several infrastructure projects in the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) which India has strongly objected. The financial and military aid given by China to Pakistan is directly threat to India's national security.
- The on-going South China Sea (SCS) dispute has become another point of contention between India and China. In the strategically important SCS where huge volumes of maritime trade passes through, China is aggressively claiming ownership many islands situated in the region that genuinely belongs to the Southeast Asian nations like Vietnam and Philippines according the internationally accepted United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Furthermore on July 2016 the International Arbitral Tribunal passed the verdict in the favour of Philippines and dismissed China's claim in the SCS. But China has refused to accept the international tribunal's verdict and has further intensified its naval patrols and building of military bases in the islands of SCS. India with its 'Look East Policy' and 'Act East Policy' clearly understands the importance of freedom of navigation in the SCS as large amount Indian maritime trade passes through the region. Furthermore the Southeast Asian nations like Vietnam and the Philippines have exponentially enhanced their military ties with India to counterbalance China in the region. Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his recent visit to Vietnam has signed several important defence agreements to



counter the Chinese aggression in the region. Other extra-regional actors in the SCS dispute like USA and Japan also see India as an effective counter balance to China dominance in the region. China has lodged strong protest against India's involvement in the SCS dispute.

➤ The Chinese construction of dams to divert the Brahmaputra River might fuel another major disagreement between India and China. There has been much concern shown by India, when China announced the construction of three dams in the Brahmaputra River in 2013. Despite the diplomatic protest by India, China is keen to divert the waters from the Brahmaputra.<sup>8</sup> So far this dispute is in a very nascent stage and it very early to analyse the extent to which this dispute might escalate. But as both India and China have massive population and are developing at a rapid rate, it is certain that both nations would require large water resources to fuel their development and population. Hence the Brahmaputra River dispute can potentially escalate into a full borne water crisis between India and China.

These four factors are major barriers that obstruct the development of a mutual bilateral relationship characterised by complete trust between India and China without any suspicion. Therefore it is very necessary that these four problems must be resolved swiftly by both nations. The solution to all these problems rests more with China than India. Hence China must recognise and respect the McMahon line as its legitimate border with India. Also China must refrain from any border violations that might initiate tensions between both nations. Most importantly China must realise that terrorism is unilaterally a threat to all nations and should stop all economic and military aid to Pakistan. China must identify Pakistan as a terrorist State which essential for global peace and security. Regarding the SCS dispute China should respect and abide by the rules of the international law and guarantee freedom of navigation for diffusing tensions in the region. Finally both India and China must formulate a fair and efficient water sharing treaty to avoid any future confrontations over the Brahmaputra River.

### **India-Japan Relations**

The India-Japan relationship is a very important component in the concept of Strategic Triangle of India, China and Japan in Asia. The bilateral relationship between India and Japan has a long history rooted in spiritual affinity and strong civilizational ties. In the Twenty First Century both nations have carried on the positive legacy of the old association which has been strengthened by shared values of belief in democracy, individual freedom and the rule of law. Historically India's earliest documented direct contact with Japan was with the Todaiji Temple in Nara, where the consecration or eye opening of the towering statute of Lord Buddha was performed by an Indian monk, Bodhisena in 720 AD. Among the prominent Indians who were closely associated with Japan were the visionary Hindu spiritual leader Swami Vivekananda, Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, industrialists JRD Tata, revolutionary freedom fighter Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and Indian jurist Radha Binod Pal. The oldest international friendship body in Japan is the Japan-India Association that was established 110 years ago. It should be noted that in the 1400 years of the recorded history of India-Japan relations both nations have not been adversaries in any point of time.<sup>9</sup> There was slight strain in the relations between two nations in the aftermath of India's nuclear test in May 1998. Japan being the only nation that had suffered the devastating effect of nuclear weapons during the Second World War, had condemned India's nuclear weapons test and had imposed sanctions. India has always strived for peace and nuclear disarmament, but the India had rightly identified the double standards in the existing global nuclear disarmament treaty which is the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This global treaty had wrongfully given a legal status to five nuclear armed nations of USA, Russia, Britain, France and China. On the other hand it only prohibited other nations from acquiring nuclear weapons instead unilaterally forcing all nations to disarm their nuclear weapons. India's nuclear weapons test and the subsequent acquisition of nuclear weapons were solely for the purpose of India's national security which was under threat from its nuclear armed neighbour China. It should be noted that nuclear weapons are an emotive issue in the Japanese culture and in the immediate aftermath of the India's nuclear test, Japan imposed an economic sanction on India. But this was just a brief setback in the bilateral relations between the two nations.

There are a number changes in the international arena as well as the domestic front in both India and Japan which has brought India and Japan strategically, politically and economically closer. The most important among these factors is the rise of China and its aggressive behaviour with all its neighbouring countries leading to territorial conflict.<sup>10</sup> The India-Japan Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in 2008 is a very

important milestone in the strategic relations between both nations. There are some common security concerns that bind the interests of both India and Japan together like maritime security, terrorism, proliferation of small arms and global disarmament. Common political ambitions like the quest for permanent seat in the UN Security Council also bring India and Japan together.<sup>11</sup> At present Japan's national security is threatened by two external factors namely by the rising tensions in the Korean Peninsula caused by the nuclear armed North Korea and by the China's assertive claims in the East China Sea (ECS) and South China Sea (SCS). But Japan is in no position to counter these two threats on its own mainly because of its pacifist foreign policy that it had adapted ever since the end of the Second World War. Before the Second World War, Japan was the nation that had possessed the most powerful and advanced military force in the World. Japan with its large and powerful navy had made the successful military conquest of the entire South East Asia and occupied large parts of mainland China and the entire Korean peninsula. But after the unconditional surrender of Japan to the allied forces due to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it forcefully disarmed by the America. Subsequently Japan came under the security umbrella of the USA. Japan has only a small military force called the Japan Self Defence Force which mainly for moderate protection. At present Japan is feeling the threat to its national interests due to the aggressive expansion of Chinese influence in its periphery. Japan realises that it can no longer rely on its extra-regional ally USA for its national security and has to be self-reliant. After seven decades of pacifist foreign policy it is not possible for Japan to immediately rearm itself and become combat ready. Hence Japan sees India as the reliable partner to counterweight the expanding Chinese influence in the region. After Mr. Narendra Modi became the Indian Prime Minister in 2014, he and his Japanese counterpart Mr. Shinzo Abe have enhanced the security cooperation between the two nations to great extent. The notable example of the enhanced India-Japan security cooperation over the past two years is the inclusion of Japan as the permanent partner in India Malabar Naval Exercise conducted annually with USA in 2015. The Malabar exercise is viewed by China as a naval alliance to counter its presence in the SCS. Hence the India-Japan relation is a major influencing factor in the China-Japan bilateral relations.

### **China-Japan Relations**

The bilateral relationship between China and Japan is overshadowed by a history of animosity between the two nations. Despite the shared cultural and historic ties of China and Japan, both nations had many bitter confrontations from the end of the nineteenth century. Some of the most important conflicts between China and Japan are the Boxer Rebellion of 1899, the Japanese occupation of South Manchuria in 1931, the Marco Polo Bridge incident and Nanjing Massacre in 1937 that eventually led to the Sino-Japanese War that lasted till 1945. These conflicts have inflicted deep scars in the bilateral relationship between China and Japan in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. However diplomatic relations were normalised in 1972 and a Treaty of Peace and Friendship was signed in 1978 between both nations. Under this treaty both nations committed to mutual economic and political cooperation. This treaty was a diplomatic and political success in improving the relations between China and Japan to such an extent that Japan's Official Development Assistance programs that provided China with low interest loans that contributed to the success of China's economic reforms initiated by China's former President Deng Xiaoping.<sup>12</sup>

However in the Twenty First the political and security environment has transformed considerably in the Asian continent. China over the past two decades has undergone a rapid economic development and military modernisation. China's expansive territorial claims in the ECS and SCS has brought in conflict with all its neighbouring countries including Japan. This has once again brought rifts in the relationship between Japan and China. The pacifist foreign policy of Japan has been transformed to a much more suspicious approach towards the China-Japanese relations. The Japanese suspicion arises over China's political, military and economic intentions. The Chinese expansive ambitions are mainly driven by the importance of ECS and SCS because of China's need for energy. The Chinese intentions in the ECS and SCS is for exploring and extracting the oil and natural gas reserves. China also desires to secure unhindered access to the Pacific Ocean in against the Japanese-American naval presence in the region. China's People Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is undergoing massive modernisation and is being readied to be deployed to protect China's interest in the surrounding maritime region that includes the SCS, ECS and the Pacific Ocean. Since April 2004 China has disputed to Japan's claim to an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around the Okinotori Islands in the Pacific Ocean. There has been raising tensions between China and Japan since the middle of

the 1990's mainly as a result of the historical issues and the rise of nationalism in both the countries. Against this complex background there is an increasing possibility of a military confrontation between China and Japan.<sup>13</sup> Another important bone of contention between the both China and Japan is over the Senkaku island dispute. These islands consists of eight uninhabited islands and rocks in the ECS and are currently under control by Japan. The Senkaku islands are strategically very important as they are close to important shipping lanes, consists rich fishing resources and huge oil and gas reserves. China is claiming the ownership of the islands stating that it have been part of its territory since ancient times. In 2012 the Japanese government had purchased the Senkaku Islands from its private owner, which triggered widespread protest in China. Since then the Chinese ships have regularly trespassed the territorial waters around the Senkaku islands. In November 2013 China announced the creation of a new air defence identification zone, which would require any aircraft in the zone to comply with the rules laid down by Beijing. Japan has labelled the China's moves as a "unilateral escalation" and has stated it would ignore it like its ally USA. In both China and Japan the Senkaku dispute has ignited nationalist passions and has put pressure on the politicians of both sides to appear tough and ultimately making any peaceful conflict resolution harder.<sup>14</sup> Hence it is the combination of both historic and contemporary disputes that is giving rise to antagonistic relationship between China and Japan.

### Way Forward for India-China-Japan Trilateral Relations

Many political scientist and observes brand the Twenty First Century as the Asian Century. The reason for this is that the Asian continent has the largest number of successfully emerging economies. India, China and Japan are the de-facto leaders of Asia in terms of their geographical size, population, technology, military power and economy. The analyses of the bilateral relationship between these three nations reveal certain inherent political animosity towards the each other except for the bilateral relationship between India and Japan. While both India and Japan see China's exponential rise with suspicion due to past experiences and China's current assertiveness over its various territorial claims. On the other hand China sees the alliance of India and Japan postured against it. In recent times China has repeatedly protested against several India-Japan military and political cooperation like the joint naval exercise conducted in the ECS in 2016. China has also condemned the political and military support of India and Japan to the ASEAN nations in the SCS dispute. The future of the Asian continent largely depends on the successful cooperation of these three nations. Despite the long history of cultural and economic ties between India, China and Japan there is a need for successfully overcoming a number challenges. These challenges range from historical conflicts, on-going territorial disputes and extra-regional interference. The leadership of all three nations must give utmost priority for resolving these issues amicably through dialogue and cooperation for achieving unilateral peace, stability and prosperity in the Asian continent.

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