Modi's India and Japan: nested strategic partnerships

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Abstract

The three pillars of India's foreign policy strategy under an overarching preference for 'strategic autonomy' are security, economic development, and status. Japan plays a significant part with respect to all three. We employ an analytical framework that assesses how Narendra Modi, in line with a trend set in motion by his predecessors, has attempted to build the India–Japan partnership through a set of nested strategic partnerships: bilateral (India–Japan), trilateral (India–Japan–United States) and quadrilateral (India–Japan–United States–Australia). We examine the extent to which Modi has contributed to the strengthening of each of these partnerships with respect to institutionalisation, security, economic interaction and status. Our findings show the degree of continuity or change wrought by Modi in each case and the reasons for this. We conclude that Modi's transformative impact has been limited, though he has been able to take two of the three strategic partnerships forward to a significant extent.

Keywords India · Japan · China · United States · Australia · Strategic partnerships

Introduction

India's strategic relationship with Japan has grown with unexpected rapidity considering its somewhat languid history (Horimoto and Varma 2013; Mukherjee and Yazaki 2016; Pardesi 2018). To what extent has Modi himself shaped its course? Scholars debate whether he has engineered a 'paradigm shift' in Indian foreign policy (Dixit 2019; Kumar 2019; Tremblay and Kapur 2017), wrought a significant

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transformation (Bajpai 2017; Chellaney 2014; Raja Mohan 2015), or represents continuity with a veneer of change (Basrur 2017; Chandra 2017; Ganguly 2020; Hall 2019). We address the debate with specific reference to India–Japan relations.

Indian foreign policy strategy is driven by an overarching preference for strategic autonomy and by three broad priorities: security, economic development, and status (Jaishankar 2020; Pande 2020; Schaffer and Schaffer 2016). Japan plays a significant part in Indian strategy with respect to all three. Below, we show how Modi, like his predecessors, has attempted to build the India–Japan relationship through a set of nested strategic partnerships: bilateral (India–Japan), trilateral (India–Japan–United States), and quadrilateral (India–Japan–United States–Australia). We examine each of these to build a comprehensive picture of Indian policy toward Japan before and during Modi’s tenure. We assess the degree of change, the factors driving it, and the implications of our findings for scholarship.

Analytical framework

The overarching concept spanning Indian foreign policy is ‘strategic autonomy,’ a central principle of the Indian worldview since independence in 1947. Its pivotal importance stems from the painful experience of colonial rule and the consequent desire to preserve national sovereignty and maximise freedom of decision making (Monsonis 2010: 612–13; Rana 1966: 114). Though there is much that is novel in post-Cold War Indian foreign policy (Ganguly and Pardesi 2009; Raja Mohan 2003), its core still revolves around strategic autonomy (Khilnani et al. 2012; Pande 2020: 78–82; Schaffer and Schaffer 2016: 2, 62–63) as reaffirmed by Modi himself and by his foreign minister, S. Jaishankar (The Hindu 2018; The Hindu 2020).

This continuity is evident over time in the three main components of India’s foreign policy framework: security, economic interaction and status (Basrur and Sullivan de Estrada 2017; Pande 2020; Schaffer and Schaffer 2016). Indian leaders have consistently (though not always successfully) striven to avert major power influence, safeguard economic independence, and attain high international status (Sullivan 2015; Hall 2019; Nayar and Paul 2003; Pande 2020). Like his predecessors, Modi has given much weight to strategic partnerships since they offer potential gains in tune with these broad foreign policy goals. Strategic partnerships, a distinctive phenomenon symptomatic of the post-Cold War era (Basrur and Narayanan Kutty 2018; Nadkarni 2010; Wilkins 2011), offer several advantages to states like India. First, they allow greater policy autonomy than alliances since they inhibit dominance by major partners and entanglement with their strategic goals, and permit flexibility in negotiating with adversaries. Second, they strengthen military security through arms transfers, shared military logistics, and the improved capacities fostered by military exercises. Third, strategic partnerships are usually associated with economic gain through trade and investment, as we show below. And fourth, they facilitate the prospect of attaining higher status through the acquisition of symbols of military power, close association with other major powers, and, sometimes, association with predominant global values.

India has signed several dozen strategic partnerships, but the key ones providing the above benefits are with Japan, France, Russia and the United States. The cumulative effect of multiple strategic partnerships or 'multialignment' (Hall 2019: 33–37) is the building of networks to enable partners and constrain adversaries (Farrell and Newman 2019; Flesmes 2013; Hafner-Burton, Kahler and Montgomery 2009; Tsuchiyama 2013) and to facilitate economic growth and status gains.

Our analytical framework draws from Alexander Korolev's work on the China–Russia relationship, which systematically investigates the military and non-military aspects of inter-state cooperation by dividing each into 'early,' 'moderate' and 'advanced' categories of cooperation (Korolev 2019). We adapt his framework to our study of India–Japan relations and apply these categories to each component of the three nested strategic partnerships. On institutionalisation, which reflects organisational strength, we view the early stage of a strategic partnership as characterised by indication of interest in a closer affiliation and the holding of periodic official and non-official meetings; the moderate stage by regular high-level meetings and formal agreements on military and economic cooperation; and the advanced stage by the creation of standing bodies of system management. Early security cooperation involves occasional consultations and limited military interaction; a moderate level is illustrated by regular and extensive military exercises, capability sharing agreements and arms transfers; and an advanced level by military integration under a common defence policy. In economic relations, early cooperation covers significant levels of trade and investment; moderate cooperation includes limited institutionalisation in the form of free trade agreements and comprehensive economic partnerships; and advanced cooperation is reached by the establishment of customs unions and economic unions. Finally, an early level of status gains is attained by association with major powers through limited political, military and economic interaction, including for the public good; a moderate level is seen in institutionalised cooperation through elite 'clubs'; and an advanced level is attained through formalised institutions and processes for maintaining regional and global order.

In each case, we examine the level to which Modi's Japan policy has reached, the extent to which it has demonstrated change or continuity, and the reasons for this in terms of systemic and sub-systemic drivers.¹ We conclude by putting together a holistic picture and identifying the relevance of our study for scholarship.

¹ The standard approach is to examine factors at three levels of analysis: system, state and individual. We combine the latter two because domestic politics does not significantly shape India's policy toward Japan in ways that cannot be explained with reference to Modi himself. Modi, unlike his predecessors since the early 1990s, is unhampered by the domestic distribution of national political power or by challenges to his leadership from within his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The bilateral strategic partnership

India's 'special strategic and global partnership' with Japan is a key component of Indian grand strategy in the post-Cold War era driven by their economic complementarity and shared concerns over China's rise and expanding footprint in their neighbourhoods (Jain 2010; Basrur and Narayanan Kutty 2018; Choudhury 2018; Mukherjee 2018; Pardesi 2018). In Modi's own words, this relationship can exercise 'a profound influence on shaping the course of Asia and our interlinked ocean regions' (Ministry of External Affairs, India 2015).

Institution building

Through most of the Cold War, India and Japan kept a cordial yet guarded distance from each other despite the absence of major differences (Mathur 2012: 1–15). The primary reasons were India's distancing from the Japan–US alliance, its policy of non-alignment and friendship with the Soviet Union, and divergent economic visions (India's autarky versus Japan's export-oriented approach). With the collapse of the Soviet Union and a severe balance-of-payments crisis, India pushed through an agenda of economic liberalisation—a decision viewed favourably in Japan. Indian Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao and his finance minister, Manmohan Singh, favoured closer ties with Japan and sought economic assistance in 1991. Rao then announced the 'Look East Policy' in 1993, bringing bilateral alignment firmly into the early stages of institutional cooperation.

This upward trajectory experienced a setback in 1998 when India's nuclear tests elicited strong criticism and economic sanctions from Tokyo (Jaishankar 2000), but this did not last long. Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori made a historic visit to India in 2000 (following American president Bill Clinton) and proposed the idea of a 'global partnership.' This was upgraded to a 'global and strategic partnership' by Shinzo Abe and Manmohan Singh (2006) and, in 2014, at Singh's invitation, Abe became the first Japanese prime minister to preside over India's Republic Day celebrations. A few months later, Modi and Abe elevated ties further to a 'special strategic and global partnership,' transforming the relationship into 'a cornerstone of India's Act East Policy' (Ministry of External Affairs, India 2018). Institutional cooperation entered the moderate phase with formalised and regularised consultations.

Under Modi's stewardship, Japan became the first country with which India initiated a formal '2+2' arrangement for talks between the foreign and defence ministries in 2016 (Takenaka 2014). This was elevated to the ministerial level three years later, signalling its special status. The bilateral agenda widened from issues of mutual significance within the partnership to include issues of regional and global implications. Institutionalised engagement, subsequently, expanded into the annual Defence Ministerial Dialogue, the National Security Advisers' dialogue, the Defence Policy Dialogue and consultations on cyber issues and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Institutional outreach, as

detailed above, was built by Modi's predecessors, primarily Rao and Singh. Once in office, Modi swiftly steered India–Japan relations from the early to the moderate phase of cooperation.

Security relations

Early security cooperation between India and Japan included preliminary agreements such as the joint declaration on security cooperation signed in 2008. The agreement proposed the establishment of meetings between defence ministers, military-to-military talks at the director general or joint secretary level, navy-to-navy staff talks and student exchanges between defence institutions to foster trust between the two militaries. These inter-military consultations took on a routinised and comprehensive form over the years, becoming unique platforms for India and Japan to regularly share defence-related information.

Indo-Japanese military relations soon evolved from its early stages and tentatively entered the realm of moderate cooperation through arms transfers, though with complications. Both sides have worked to build military-technical cooperation (MTC) that 'increases mutual dependence and the compatibility of military hardware' while simultaneously creating an environment where the sharing of such technological expertise 'requires a considerable amount of trust' (Korolev 2019: 767). Japan hopes to assist India in modernising its military capabilities through the sale of its US-2 amphibian aircraft and Soryu submarines. ShinMaywa Industries, the manufacturer of the US-2, has offered to transfer technology and proposed setting up a plant in India but the two sides remain at a stalemate over pricing issues (Economic Times, 2018a; Siddiqui 2019). In the case of the Soryu submarines, their unsuitable size, higher price tag and Japanese reluctance to transfer technology have delayed further movement (Economic Times 2018b).

A second feature of the moderate military alignment in the India–Japan partnership are joint military drills, which were initiated by Singh with naval exercises in December 2013 and expanded considerably under Modi. Exercise Dharma Guardian has brought the Indian Army and the Japanese Ground Self Defence Forces (JGSDF) together every year since 2018 in joint training for counter-terrorism operations at the platoon level (ANI 2019a). The Indian Air Force and the Japanese Air Self Defence Force (JASDF) engage annually during Exercise Shinyuu Maitri, while the coast guards of the two countries focus on search and rescue, external fire-fighting and sharing of best practices through Exercise Sahyog-Kaijin (ANI 2019b). Japan is also a regular participant in the annual Malabar naval exercises with India (plus the US and, more recently, Australia), which builds on their bilateral alignment. Shared logistical support and supplies are yet another important facet of bilateral security cooperation. Both finalised the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) in 2020, which facilitates the sharing of supplies and services by their respective armed forces (Bhaumik 2019; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2020).

With Modi at the helm, India–Japan military cooperation progressed into moderate alignment and went beyond initiatives proposed in the initial security agreement.

This rapidly expanding security agenda can be credited to his government taking the lead with ideas to advance cooperation (Mukherjee 2018: 847).

Economic relations

India's economic attractiveness was limited for Japan during the Cold War given the former's preference for an autarkic economic system. Bilateral economic ties remained lukewarm until 1991, when India moved toward economic liberalisation. Since then, this dimension has progressed from early to moderate levels of cooperation in step with developments in the broader strategic partnership. Their Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) came into effect in February 2011 under the Singh government, which provided tariff reduction on 90 percent of goods traded between the two. India has since faced a rapidly expanding trade deficit with imports from Japan rising at a much faster pace than its own exports even as their overall share of each other's trade has remained low (Sarma 2020). India's proportion of Japan's total trade stood at 1.1 percent in 2018 while Japan's share of India's trade was 2.1 percent (Makoto 2020). Still, by 2019, Japan was India's 12th largest trading partner and fourth largest investor (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2021).

Japan has invested heavily in economic capacity building across India with Tokyo linking economic cooperation with New Delhi to strategic and security gains (Mukherjee 2018: 851). Foreign direct investment (FDI) witnessed a nine-fold increase from 2007 while lending for development, particularly infrastructure, has grown more than sixfold since 2001 (Marlow and Takeo 2017). This segment includes two significant projects—the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High Speed Railway (MAHSR) and India's Northeast Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project. The MAHSR corridor uses Japanese financing and technology and is estimated to cost approximately USD 15 billion with the Japanese International Co-operation Agency (JICA) pledging to invest 81 per cent of that amount as a long-term low-interest loan to aid construction (Aiyer 2017). The MAHSR has hit multiple roadblocks since Japanese terms are relatively expensive and escalating project costs over the years, given numerous delays (completion first scheduled for 2023, later 2028) have raised budgetary concerns. Abe's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)' Strategy and Modi's 'Act East' Policy converge in action in the northeast of India—a bridge between South and Southeast Asia. Under Modi's leadership, the two sides set up the India–Japan Cooperation Forum for Development of the North East and the India–Japan Act East Forum. More specifically, Japan has invested to improve National Highway (NH) 40 in the state of Meghalaya and constructed a bypass on NH 54 in Mizoram.

Collaboration through infrastructure development in third countries (in the Indo-Pacific) such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Bangladesh is another noteworthy initiative. In May 2018, India and Japan agreed to jointly build the East Container Terminal at Colombo port and a trilateral memorandum of agreement has been signed for Sri Lanka's first LNG terminal (Press Trust of India 2019 Agence France-Presse). Another significant development is their 2017 announcement of the Asia Africa

Growth Corridor (AAGC)—a collaborative effort to soft-balance China's mammoth Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project—alongside forums like the India–Japan dialogue on Africa, India Africa Forum Summit and Tokyo International Conference on African Development. The coronavirus pandemic disrupted people-to-people exchanges and slowed down Japanese investments into India in 2020 though, at the same time, Japanese economic assistance continued in support of Modi's efforts to combat the crisis (IANS 2021).

Though Manmohan Singh had already taken economic cooperation to the moderate level with the CEPA, Modi's tenure saw it carried further through sustained Japanese investment into India and coordinated strategic projects in third countries across the Indo-Pacific. However, overall growth in bilateral trade remained limited given India's inability to diversify away from China.

Status

India's strategic alignment with Japan confers a certain degree of prestige and status to it. Both initiated and nurtured their association over widely favoured norms, the two maritime democracies sharing their interests in humanitarian and disaster response (HADR), upholding the freedom of navigation and reinforcing the rules-based international order. The partnership advanced to the beginnings of the moderate level in this category with CEPA, brief military exercises and club memberships. Japan assisted in enhancing India's status through direct association (as an important regional power) and by supporting India's entry into prestigious 'clubs' and institutions. For instance, in 2008, Japan supported a waiver of the Nuclear Suppliers Group's (NSG) embargo on nuclear trade with India and backed its application for membership of the group. Their joint military exercises have not only contributed to a broader network of balancing measures against China, but also bestow on India the image of a rising power associating militarily with another major regional power. Though the bilateral partnership does not presently involve the acquisition or transfer of instruments of military power, a sustained dialogue on the matter suggests that it remains an attainable goal.

Japanese vocalisation of support for Indian positions along with policy coordination between their institutions—regional and across the Indo-Pacific—helps advance the non-material aspects of India's status. They echo New Delhi's networking goals—to align with democratic states that are invested in a rules-based international order. To this effect, the two work closely on global issues such as proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs), terrorism, space and cyber security, and environment (e.g. the International Solar Alliance). These joint networking efforts also assist in their pursuit of a related status goal that both are committed to: obtaining a permanent seat in a reformed United Nations Security Council (UNSC). To sum up, the relationship entered the moderate phase of cooperation for status enhancement under Singh and moved forward significantly under Modi.

How do Modi's contributions to the India–Japan bilateral partnership compare with those of his predecessors? We have already seen that the initial drive toward stronger institutional cooperation, the formalisation and steady elevation of the

strategic partnership, and implementation of important economic initiatives (e.g. CEPA) were achieved during Manmohan Singh's tenure and propelled the bilateral relationship into the moderate phase. Modi, on his part, moved the needle forward steadily across all dimensions, as examined above, leaving an indelible mark on the security and economic fronts. For instance, bilateral military exercises expanded to include separate drills between the armies and air forces. Modi's most notable contribution, though, is the considerable growth registered in the bilateral economic agenda, which has seen Japanese investments pouring into strategic infrastructure projects such as the MAHSR corridor and road connectivity in India's north-east.

The systemic factor has driven Modi closer to Japan. US encouragement to both has been an important driver of the tightening partnership. But the sharp deterioration in India's ties with China over the Doklam and Ladakh crises has been critical. Jolted by the crises, Modi moved to enhance ties with Japan and other powers more quickly. Deeply concerned by China's use of military force, Japan publicly declared its support for India, opposing 'unilateral attempts to change the state quo.' (Times of India 2017; Hindustan Times 2020). The two have coordinated positions on numerous issues deemed important by the other. In joint statements, Abe has exerted political pressure on Pakistan and, reciprocating, Modi has condemned North Korea's missile programme (Tribune 2019).

Such high-level political coordination also speaks to the influence of personalities on this relationship. Modi's bonhomie with Abe was cultivated over two decades during the former's tenure as chief minister of Gujarat state and later as prime minister. Abe's successor Yoshihide Suga, at the time of writing, has signalled policy continuity vis-à-vis India and the Indo-Pacific. In short, the trigger for change has come from the system level and has been facilitated by a sub-systemic factor: Modi's cultivation of relations with Japan's leadership at the personal level. Irrespective of how this plays out, Modi has devoted considerable political capital to extend bilateral benefits to the trilateral and quadrilateral networks analysed in the next two sections.

The India–Japan–US trilateral partnership

Triangular partnerships have become ubiquitous for numerous reasons ranging from the ineffectiveness of larger multilateral frameworks to the benefits from capability enhancement and perceptions that old alliances are weakening, which induces hedging (Goldgeier 2018; Green 2018; Joshi 2019; Miller 2017; Nagao 2015; Paul and Underwood 2019; Schweller 2018). Unsurprisingly, the India–Japan–US trilateral has made some progress.

Institution building

The first move toward a trilateral structure came in Manmohan Singh's tenure with the initiation in 2006 of a Track 1.5 dialogue hosted in Washington by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in collaboration with the Confederation of Indian Industry and the Japan Institute of International Affairs (Center for Strategic

and International Studies 2007). Its meetings, held regularly till 2015, led eventually to an official process initiated by the United States, which encouraged Japan, disturbed by India's 1998 nuclear tests, to accept a trilateral setting (Mukherjee 2018; Panda and Tuke 2011). Singh favoured a 'cooperative architecture' but, not wanting to antagonise Beijing, was inclined to hedge rather than seek a strong institution to counter China (Singh 2013). Nevertheless, he supported the move for a formal grouping and the first official trilateral dialogue was held at the bureaucratic level in December 2011.

During Narendra Modi's tenure, a more organised arrangement developed and Trilateral Ministerial Dialogues were conducted from September 2015. These highlighted commitment to FOIP within a rule-based international order, including freedom of navigation and overflight and unhindered trade. The agenda grew to incorporate strategic dialogue, military exercises, counter-proliferation, counter-terrorism and connectivity through a Trilateral Infrastructure Working Group (Hindustan Times 2018a). The first summit with Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Shinzo Abe and President Donald Trump took place in November 2018, followed by another in June 2019 (Business Standard 2019).

Clearly, the triangular partnership was consolidated under Modi and may be considered to have moved from an early phase in the preceding period to a moderate one under him.

Security

India has till recently tried to balance China without riling it through 'evasive balancing' (Rajagopalan 2020: 81). Accordingly, it has engaged China through high-level bilateral meetings, symbolic small-scale military exercises and multilateral forums such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and RIC (Russia, India, China). Their possession of nuclear weapons and their closely linked economies induce restraint, but India has hedged against an increased Chinese threat. Though the main source of hard balancing for New Delhi is the United States, their triangular linkage with Japan has helped build a network of powers designed to encourage Beijing to exercise restraint while leaving open the possibility of a détente by advancing political and economic cooperation. Above all, India has sought to sustain its strategic autonomy by avoiding too close a strategic embrace with its partners.

During Singh's premiership, tentative moves toward building a trilateral security network began with naval cooperation on assisting (together with Australia) tsunami-hit nations in 2004. In 2007, the three navies, along with those of Australia and Singapore, joined in the India-hosted Malabar exercise, which officially focused on countering terrorism and piracy, but encompassed submarine and anti-submarine warfare, 'cross-deck' carrier landings by fighter jets and helicopters, and air defence (Cherian 2007; Garg 2007). The exercise helped the Indian Navy achieve a higher level of warfighting skills (Khurana 2007), but trilateral naval cooperation received a

setback when Singh deferred to Chinese protests and ended Japan's involvement for the remainder of his tenure till 2014.

Under Modi, Japan returned to the Malabar exercises in 2015, this time permanently. Naval joint exercises now included anti-mine operations (Peri 2019; Prakash 2017) and combined carrier strike group operations (Rahmat 2018). In 2018, the three air forces held their first joint exercise (Gady 2018). The India–Japan agreement on Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services of September 2020 synced with the US–Japan alliance and the 2016 India–US Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement. In May 2019, the three conducted joint naval exercises with the Philippines in the South China Sea (Reuters 2019)—a format that could be expanded to other states.

There has been much emphasis on the gains from ‘inter-operability’ through military exercises (White 2009). But while exercises do have hard balancing effects by enhancing capabilities, they are unlikely to produce advanced military cooperation. Joint interdiction may be contemplated against sea pirates—and India has been reluctant even here—but it is hard to see it happening vis-à-vis the Chinese Navy. India has resisted joint patrols with the United States Navy, though it has agreed on joint patrolling with France (ANI 2019c; Economic Times, 2018c; Smith 2016). Joint India–US–Japan patrolling still lies in the future. Moreover, India has spread its bets on logistics cooperation: it has signed similar agreements with France (May 2018), Singapore (June 2018), South Korea (September 2019) and Australia (June 2020).

In sum, security cooperation in the India–Japan–US strategic triangle has been fortified under Modi, but remains at a moderate level.

Economic relations

The three states see market opportunities in one another, with India a potential regional production base for the other two (Rossow et al. 2014). Nevertheless, though India's combined trade with Japan and the United States has grown, it actually fell in proportion to its global trade from 20.95 percent in 1991 (the year liberalisation commenced) to 12.24 percent in 2018. In contrast, trade with China as a proportion of India's global trade grew from 0.18 percent in 1991 to 10.83 percent in 2018 (calculated from International Monetary Fund, n.d.).

Despite strategic tensions with China, Singh persisted with the long-standing policy of separating business from politics. Modi continued this but began to curb Chinese FDI following the Ladakh crisis. To decrease India's trade dependence on China, he joined Japan and the US in seeking to build an alternative network of trade and investment. During the pre-Modi era, India's trade with China had reached 9.19 percent of India's total trade in 2014—almost level with the proportion of India's trade with Japan and the US combined: 10.20 percent. Under Modi, there was an *increase* in the proportion of trade with China: in 2018, the year after the Doklam crisis, the proportion touched 10.24 percent (calculated from International Monetary Fund, n.d.). In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic hit India–China trade less severely (–15 percent) than trade with Japan (–30.93

percent) and the US (-27.50 percent) (Banerji 2020). However, the effects of India's efforts to curtail reliance on China may become clearer only when the global (and with it the Indian) economy stabilises.

Other forms of trilateral economic cooperation have shown some forward movement. Japan in 2015 launched a competitive response to China's BRI with its Partnership for Quality Infrastructure in sync with the Asian Development Bank to foster sustainable growth in developing nations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, n.d.; see also Harris, 2019). In 2018, the United States initiated its own infrastructure investment strategy for the Indo-Pacific (White House 2018a; White House 2018b; Wilson 2019). India's response to these developments included a 2019 agreement with the US for cooperation on infrastructure development (Ministry of External Affairs, India 2019); the India–Japan AAGC mentioned previously; and parleys on joining the US-led Blue Dot Network, announced in November 2019, which coordinates infrastructure development with Japan and Australia in third countries. An India–Japan–US Trilateral Infrastructure Working Group aims at competing with China and setting up alternatives for regional economic capacity enhancement (Hindustan Times 2018a).

The trilateral grouping complements Modi's efforts to control Chinese investment in India. As political tensions rose, Chinese FDI inflows fell from USD 350 million in 2018 to USD 229 million in 2019; and, following Modi's banning of popular Chinese social media firms such as TikTok, WeChat and UC Browser on national security grounds (McGregor 2020), a further decline to 162 million is estimated for 2020 (Statista, n.d.-c). This has made FDI from Japan and the United States all the more attractive. India is already a leading recipient of Japanese development assistance with a large number of major infrastructure projects on the anvil (Harris 2019). Japanese FDI in India is much higher than China's—USD 2.74 billion in 2019 (Statista, n.d.-a), as is US FDI—USD 2.8 billion in 2019 (Statista, n.d.-b). This set of FDI connections offers India scope to offset the decline in Chinese investment.

India is also interested in a US-led drive to restructure global supply chains in order to reduce China's key position in them (Hille 2020; Jha 2020). Partly driven by the sudden rise in demand arising from the Covid-19 pandemic (Hausman 2020; Rosenberg 2020), the push has been propelled by a desire to reduce China's global preponderance in manufactured goods. Japan has offered billions of dollars to its firms based in China to move home, or even to third countries (Japan Times 2020). In September 2020, India joined Japan and Australia in an agreement to modify supply chains (Sharma 2020) and planned cooperation with the US is expected to take this further, boosting FDI flows into India (Prasad and Roche 2020).

In economic activity, Modi has helped build the India–Japan–US relationship, but not beyond a moderate level. He has neither slashed trade with China nor rapidly expanded economic cooperation with Japan and the US, and, emphasising *atmanirbharta* (self-reliance), has avoided multilateral free trade pacts. Joint efforts to changes in the pattern of investment and supply chains have been no more than preliminary.

Status

India's acquisition of symbols of power has been either unilateral (nuclear weapons) or bilateral (conventional weapons from the United States, Russia and others). Nevertheless, the associational value of the trilateral relationship has been considerable. At the political level, the building of an institutional network helps enhance India's status by means of its close association with two major powers in high-level meetings. The military dimension further strengthens India's image, again through association with major powers: joint exercises and overlapping logistics sharing agreements create the sense that India now belongs to an elite club that shapes the international order. The trilateral arrangement is also a stepping stone to the Quad, a wider association that adds to these gains and is discussed in the following section.

In the non-material dimension, India has positioned itself as a 'responsible' power helping maintain international order through low-key (non-military) action. The three partners cooperated as members of the core group responding to the 2014 Asian tsunami. They also came together, along with members of ASEAN, in the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response and Military Medicine Exercise (HADR & MM EX) in 2013 (Rajagopalan and Mishra 2015). Together they have pressed for the FOIP and the centrality of 'fundamental values such as freedom, democracy and the rule of law' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2019). These actions are intrinsic to the status-seeking aspect of India's projection of itself as a 'leading' power and a 'net security provider' (Gurjar 2017; Mukherjee 2014).

Has Modi made a distinctive contribution to India's international image through the trilateral framework as compared to his predecessors? A 2009 survey of Asian elite opinion showed that India had gained considerable esteem, with 80 percent of respondents welcoming its role in an 'East Asian Community' (Japan Institute of International Affairs 2009: 2–3). Manmohan Singh helped chart the early stage of the partnership and showed signs of moving up to the moderate level by bringing Japan into Malabar, but stepped back upon China's protests. It was under Modi that India entered into a more well-knit institutional and security relationship at the moderate level and economic ties at the early level, though mainly after its relationship with China deteriorated from 2017.

To what extent can we attribute Modi's personal drive to the strengthening of the India–Japan–US trilateral partnership? Given his unchallenged power in national and intra-BJP politics, he could probably have engineered more change, but retained his predecessors' preference for strategic autonomy and reluctance to draw too close to the US. Though the Chinese threat and US encouragement have influenced him to embrace the triangular partnership more closely, his own preference for strategic autonomy has been a constraining factor. There has never been a hint that India will consider joining a tight organisational framework that would detract from this unchanged strategic priority.

The Quad

The India–Japan–US–Australia Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or ‘Quad’) was initiated in 2007, before Modi came into office, by Japanese Prime Minister Abe following successful collaboration among the four over humanitarian relief after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Representatives met at the sidelines of an ASEAN event that year signifying an early phase of institutional cooperation, but Australia and India both backed away owing to China’s bristling response. The four states, however, continued to deepen bilateral and trilateral interactions (India–Japan–US, Japan–US–Australia, India–Japan–Australia), keeping the prospects of the Quad’s revival alive.

Institution building

The grouping found new life in November 2017, when Modi was prime minister, and representatives of the four democracies gathered at the East Asia Summit in Manila to discuss ‘issues of common interest in the Indo-Pacific region’ (Ministry of External Affairs, India 2017). In Japanese foreign minister Taro Kono’s words, the objective of the Quad’s revival was to ‘seek a peaceful maritime zone from Asia to Africa’ (Hayashi and Onchi 2017). This renewal was, indubitably, in response to Beijing’s strategic behaviour. China was viewed as increasingly aggressive following its assertive stance on territorial and maritime disputes, especially with respect to the South and East China Seas, which brought its commitment to the ‘rules-based order’ into question. For India and Japan, the India–China military standoffs in Doklam (2017) and Ladakh (2020) as well as China’s dispute with Japan over the Senkaku Islands were specific instances of concern in recent years. Growing Chinese influence in Australian politics as well as economic espionage in the US were other considerations that drove the resurgence of the Quad. In addition, the strategic impact of the BRI reflected Beijing’s growing clout in Asia.

In its renewed avatar, the Quad convened at the bureaucratic level, indicating the preference for a measured approach to the arrangement given past experience. The grouping has opted for a low profile with no post-meeting joint statements. All parties refer to the loosely-bound arrangement as ‘quadrilateral consultations,’ displaying reluctance to formally invoke the term ‘Quad’ even as analysts and the media use the term unabashedly (Madan 2017). Several rounds of talks were held during 2017–19 before discussions were raised to the level of a ministerial meeting (2019). The second ministerial, held in Tokyo in October 2020 during the pandemic and India’s military standoff with China, decided on meeting annually, thereby elevating the interaction to the moderate level. Discussions focused on coordinating responses to the pandemic, increasing the resilience of supply chains and enhancing access to vaccines, which were all key priorities for the Modi government (Ministry of External Affairs, India 2020).

Given that the foundation of Quad cooperation lay in disaster policy coordination, the four members expanded their conversation regarding the coronavirus

pandemic to include Vietnam, South Korea and New Zealand, in effect creating an unofficial ‘Quad Plus.’ This was initiated by the US at the foreign secretary level in March 2020. Such an effort would be one way to increase buy-in into the minilateral as long as the focus remains on the pandemic and not on China. New Zealand has already expressed reservations about the Quad’s approach to China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2018), which makes the future inclusion of security consultations a long shot (Grossman 2020). Under Modi’s second term, the ‘Quad Plus’ appears poised to become a welcome, if limited, addition to this category of institution building, which would further elevate India’s interactions within the moderate level of cooperation.

Security relations

Member statements of the Quad suggest early levels of military cooperation and frequently allude to collaboration in counter-terrorism, non-proliferation and maritime and cyber security, though specifics have not been forthcoming. The four states also maintain divergent positions when it comes to China (perhaps explaining why there was no joint statement after the 2020 ministerial). The US explicitly named the Chinese Communist Party in its 2020 readout while the other three refrained.

At the start of its revival, all members, including India, downplayed the prospects of a military component, publicly questioning its purpose at the time. In this vein, the Indian naval chief remarked in 2018, ‘What do you think a military dimension will achieve? India is the only country in the Quad with a land border with China. In case of conflict...nobody will come and hold your hand’ (Hindustan Times 2018b). Modi also displayed a preference for ‘evasive balancing,’ seeking to reassure Beijing that the Quad was not aimed at its containment. India maintained, alongside other members, that states need not choose ‘between us and China’ (Economic Times 2019). In a loose arrangement like the Quad, members display a tendency to limit their commitments, especially on security. The question of containing China will continue to inhibit the Quad’s development until all parties articulate their respective positions on the matter with more clarity (Envall 2019). It has, consequently, been easier to sidestep this issue and work on others that are less antagonistic toward Beijing. Therefore, it is not surprising that military cooperation within the grouping remains in its early stages.

The expansion of the MALABAR exercises to include Australia in 2020 is certainly noteworthy. However, it remains to be seen whether this will become a regular fixture within the ambit of the Quad’s activities. Additionally, military exercises alone do not necessarily bring with them the required heft for a security partnership to withstand a robustness check. Without more wide-ranging military interaction, such as agreements on coordinated activity, perhaps joint HADR patrols, the likelihood of the Quad entering moderate levels of military cooperation remains low while progression to advanced levels, i.e. an integrated command or common defence policy, remain a distant prospect. Overall, security relations remain restricted to an early phase of cooperation.

Economic relations

The members of the Quad share economic imperatives and this sector appears greatly conducive to further cooperation. Given that India–Japan–US overlapping interests have been reviewed in the previous section, Australia's addition to this mix is of special interest. Among Quad relationships, the weakest link is the India–Australia partnership. Both have been working to address gaps and explore opportunities to further economic ties. The release of Australia's India Economic Strategy 2035 (IES) in 2018 was a significant step to bring India into the 'inner circle of Australia's strategic partnerships' and set targets for India to become one of Australia's top three export markets as well as the third-largest destination in Asia for Australian outward investment (Bhaskar 2020). For Japan, Australia was the second most favoured destination for outbound investment after the United States, with Japanese companies investing a record USD 26 billion in 2019 (Gray 2020).

The Quad's most significant contribution in this category, and a priority for the Modi government, involves coordinated efforts to create 'alternative financing mechanisms' that preclude 'predatory financing or unsustainable debt' (Peri 2017). As noted earlier, one such US-led multi-stakeholder initiative that attempts at coordinated activity on infrastructure is the 'Blue Dot Network' that attempts to push back on China's BRI through a (still vague) 'globally recognised evaluation and certification system for roads, ports and bridges with a focus on the Indo-Pacific region' (Walden 2019). Japan and Australia signed on in late 2019 while India has shown interest, but has been slow to jump on board (White House 2020). A second area, also flagged as critical by Modi, is the restructuring of supply chains—an idea that has gained popularity during the pandemic with countries seeking to reduce their dependence on China. India, Japan, and Australia have already proposed to establish a Supply Chain Resilience Network (Chaudhury 2020). In short, the economic underpinning of the Quad is still in its early phase with initiatives to create alternate financing mechanisms or restructure supply chains in the nascent stages of discussion.

Status

The Quad has created an institutional network since 2017 through regular consultations. For India, its associational value is very high given there is a major power (US) in the mix alongside two strong middle powers (Australia, Japan) with sturdier economies and compatible norms that it can certainly benefit from. Though based on informal membership, the arrangement provides an added degree of prestige and enhanced status to New Delhi.

This quadrilateral framework was also founded on the basis of non-material dimensions of ideational connectivity. The enunciation of a 'democratic diamond' by Abe in 2012 anticipated the group's emphasis on democratic values (though this emphasis appears more nuanced in its second avatar); and was followed by the promotion of the FOIP strategy. The four members continue to advocate responsible behaviour and

Table 1 Classification of change/continuity under Modi

	Pre-Modi	Pre-Modi	Modi	Modi	Change/Continuity
	Early	Moderate	Early	Moderate	
Bilateral					
Institutionalisation	X			X	Change
Security	X			X	Change
Economic		X		X	Continuity
Status		X		X	Continuity
Trilateral					
Institutionalisation	X			X	Change
Security		X		X	Continuity
Economic	X			X	Change
Status	X			X	Change
Quadrilateral					
Institutionalisation	X		X		Continuity
Security	X		X		Continuity
Economic	X		X		Continuity
Status	X			X	Change

favour a ‘rules-based order’ as a universal principle that sets a standard of behaviour for all members of the community of states. The Quad, thus far, has the characteristics of a major power club and India’s membership gives it a modicum of prestige, placing this category within the moderate level of our assessment. India’s engagement with the Quad under Modi is very much in keeping with the goal of building its image as a ‘responsible’ and ‘leading’ power.

The Quad, it is evident, remains in an early phase of development owing to limited institutionalisation, and tentative security and economic interaction, which also affect its status dimension. India’s motivation for participating in it remains systemic—primarily, the China challenge. But Modi is yet to embrace an explicit anti-China agenda. American initiatives are a second systemic impetus that Modi has exploited to further India’s economic and security agenda. He has used the elasticity of this framework to engage with like-minded partners like South Korea, Vietnam and Israel in various US-led formats of discussion. The Quad fits well into Modi’s preference for strategic autonomy by broadening ‘multialignment.’ But the looser the framework, the harder it is to institutionalise meaningfully, particularly to formalise security cooperation, and the Quad faces tough questions because of this inherent contradiction. For this reason, it is likely to remain in an early phase of cooperation for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

This paper has examined India’s policy toward Japan with the aim of judging the degree of change wrought by Narendra Modi in the strategic partnership with Japan. The partnership itself is viewed as a nested set of three: bilateral, trilateral

(with the US) and quadrilateral (with Australia added). We have tried to undertake a systematic analysis by assessing the degree of change—early, moderate or advanced—in four components of each partnership: institutionalisation, security, economics and status. Our finding is summed up in Table 1. At the outset, let us set aside the ‘advanced’ classification since that is not found in any component of any set. The key distinction is between ‘early’ and ‘moderate’ stages of cooperation.

Of the twelve constituent areas of the India–Japan strategic partnership examined, there are six areas of change and six of continuity, which indicates a modest degree of change. This by no means represents ‘paradigm change,’ as claimed by some commentators—all the more so since in no case has an advanced level of cooperation been achieved. But it is certainly unidirectional change: in no case has the change been one of reversal. Besides, Modi has reached a moderate level in nine cases whereas his predecessors had attained this level in only three. Hence, while his transformational impact has been limited, he has attained higher levels across the board in the bilateral and trilateral settings. Of the areas of change, two are in the bilateral setting, three in the trilateral, and only one in the quadrilateral, the last because the Quad, still in an early stage with the exception of the status component, is lagging behind—but this is not remarkable given its relatively recent revival during Modi’s premiership. In terms of categories, change has been fairly evenly divided: two in institutionalisation, one in security, one in economics and two in status.

What are the drivers of the process? Our discussion shows that systemic factors have been predominant, primarily in the form of the Chinese threat and American initiative in responding to it. The chief constraining factor has been Modi’s prioritisation (like his predecessors) of strategic autonomy, which has prevented institutionalisation and security and economic cooperation, the three together limiting status gains. The main implication of this analysis is that India is unlikely to enter into a stronger and more binding relationship in any of the three partnerships with Japan, but will be content to sustain an incremental increase in warmth in all three.

Our findings have three implications. First, Modi’s personal charisma and transformative role in shaping Indian foreign policy has been overstated. This may have broader connotations for populist leaderships and their impact on foreign policy—a subject that needs to be investigated. Second, the framework adopted here may be profitably applied to the wider set of Indian strategic partnerships, both bilateral and multilateral. Those with the United States come readily to mind since their trilateral and quadrilateral formats have already been examined here. Finally, the framework could be applied to the foreign policies of other states and, more broadly, to the entire spectrum of strategic partnerships, whether nested or not.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interests On behalf of both authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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