

A timely tome on Indian bilateral relations with Japan

Krishnan Srinivasan

There are very few books on Indian bilateral relations with Japan, and this work edited by Harsh Pant and Madhuchanda Ghosh is to be warmly welcomed. As the contributors put it, “the bilateral relationship has been soaring high”, a “remarkable turnaround” from the acrimony arising from India’s nuclear weapon tests, and “increasingly positive views” of India in Japan, which mirrors the improved relations between India and USA. The two editors co-author the introduction; and while Ghosh contributes her own chapter, Pant writes one with a co-author. Eight chapters are by Indians and five are by Japanese.

Reference is made to Premier Shinzo Abe’s Indophile approach, the now regular meetings at high level, mutual access to naval facilities, and shared strategic concerns like access to sea routes for import of Middle East oil, all of which justify the view that “A strong India is in Japan’s best interest”.

A comprehensive recital of diverse bilateral ties is given, though the outcomes of some Japanese initiatives like connectivity in India’s Northeast, Japanese Industrial Townships, the Asia Africa Growth Corridor, environmental safeguards, maritime security, defence technology, and female empowerment are not adduced. The freight corridor and high-speed train projects are abnormally delayed by the Indian side. Our support for Japan and Germany for UNSC permanent membership is now, after the Ukraine war, even more likely to be vetoed by China and Russia than it was when this book was published.

The Indo-Pacific is described as a “building block for the future”. But the use of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ without qualification or definition is unfortunate, as is the propensity to adopt in our lexicon US terminology which has its origins in military theatre commands. (South Asia is itself has such an etymology.) It is improbable that all those that use

this terminology concur on the definition and scope of the ‘Indo-Pacific’. But the book correctly ascribes the concept to the US-led desire to embrace India as a strategic partner along with other US allies against China, though it overstates India’s “growing presence” in South-east and East Asia – a major default being India’s withdrawal from the RCEP.

In pointing to the rise of China, and Japan receding from its pacific past, the book underlines the military alliance aspect of the Indo-Pacific and Quad, the threat from China (and to a lesser extent, North Korea) being a central theme in the text. The term ‘disequilibrium’ in Asia is a euphemism for China’s emergence as a major great power in this century; Beijing and Moscow regard the Quad as an Asian NATO. Both Japan and India have in the post-World War II period parts of their territory claimed by China, and China’s grievances against Japanese atrocities before and during the war are well known and justifiable.

Japan’s territories are claimed by China, Russia and Korea as a result of end-of-war informal understandings between the allies, including those not honoured, primarily due to USA’s post war intimacy with Japan. This matter continues to fester.

The book is correct in describing India’s relations with USA and China as ‘strategic flexibility’, with autonomous activity in various multilateral groupings also including China. Its ‘soft balancing’ or even ‘evasive balancing’ membership of Quad – to counter the Chinese threat without joining any formal alliance – “stems from its insecurities”. It is “a cautious participant” and to many, the weakest link – as it is in BRICS. The ‘Open and Inclusive Pacific’ urged by some ASEAN countries is perhaps more appealing as opposed to the ‘Free and Open’ concept of the Quad. This is a tightrope on which India will “have to tread carefully.”

Decoupling from China will be hard for members of Quad, all of

whom have more robust economic relations with China than does India. The stakes are too high for any direct confrontation. The main problem for Japan is to be seen as a US protectorate or junior partner; when the Trump government has its allies worried, the concern for Tokyo is that Washington might cease to regard China as an adversary.

The cliché ‘rules-based order’ is used often in the text to describe the shared values of democracy and economic liberalism, but begs the question, whose order? Was it the erstwhile West-adjudicated order? The move of Japan from post-war pacifism into proactive diplomacy and possible military interventionism is seen as ‘normal’ but there is no serious examination whether it is an unmixed blessing. East and Southeast Asian countries have long memories of Japan’s atrocities during the last world war that have not been obliterated by Japanese ODA and commercial ties.

Bilateral trade is at a disappointingly low level – \$17 bn in total trade in 2019-20, the balance being in favour of Japan. Japan is the leading aid donor, but the book correctly refers to disincentives to Japanese investment in India, now at \$34 bn – taxation vagaries, infrastructure, visa matters, language issues. Policy makers are making “the most of what little space is left to them.”

India’s Act East Policy is hardly in evidence except as a rhetorical device. India opting out of RCEP is described as “a setback for ASEAN”. Was it not instead a setback for India? India as a “global manufacturing powerhouse” is also hyperbolic as India’s manufacturing is only 14 per cent of GDP.

China’s connectivity projects are described as ‘unilateral’, for reasons not elucidated. Its geopolitical leverage and “debt-trap diplomacy” are criticised – but this is natural for a great power with investible capital resources, besides belittling the intelligence of beneficiaries of the BRI.

The statement that Premier Modi has a “robust foreign policy vision

in the neighbourhood” is hardly sustained by recent history, with many South Asian countries in the Indian “sphere of influence” either sceptical or cautious about closer ties with New Delhi.

India-Japan ties are likely to expand in future because they “are not tightly linked to regional multilateralism”. A Japanese author urges cooperation in Afghanistan to prevent it from becoming a source of insecurity in the region, but here India has moved ahead faster than Tokyo, which is not likely or able to break ranks with the Western hardline approach.

An interesting aside in this compilation is the chapter by a Japanese author on recalling the Japanese defeat at Kohima and Imphal, which now is commemorated by the Japanese. This indicates, according to the writer, Japan’s greater interest to be involved in the Indian Northeast in strategic proximity to Myanmar and Southwest China.

The generic problem with compilations, in this case, 13 chapters of more or less equal length by 13 authors, is the varied quality of the contributions, overlap and repetition in the chapters. Significantly, no chapter has joint Indian-Japanese authorship. The ‘natural partnership’ presented by the book makes light of the vast mutual differences; societal, developmental, religious, and strategic, with the gulf in attitudes evident with Russia and Ukraine, which preclude closer cooperation in multilateral forums. And an Asian Century will hardly come about without China as the leading actor.

The two editors deserve great credit in examining in granular detail the current state of ties between the two countries which go back centuries in intellectual and cultural interaction but were interrupted by the realities of the Second World

Spot
Light

INDIA AND JAPAN:
A NATURAL
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INDO-PACIFIC

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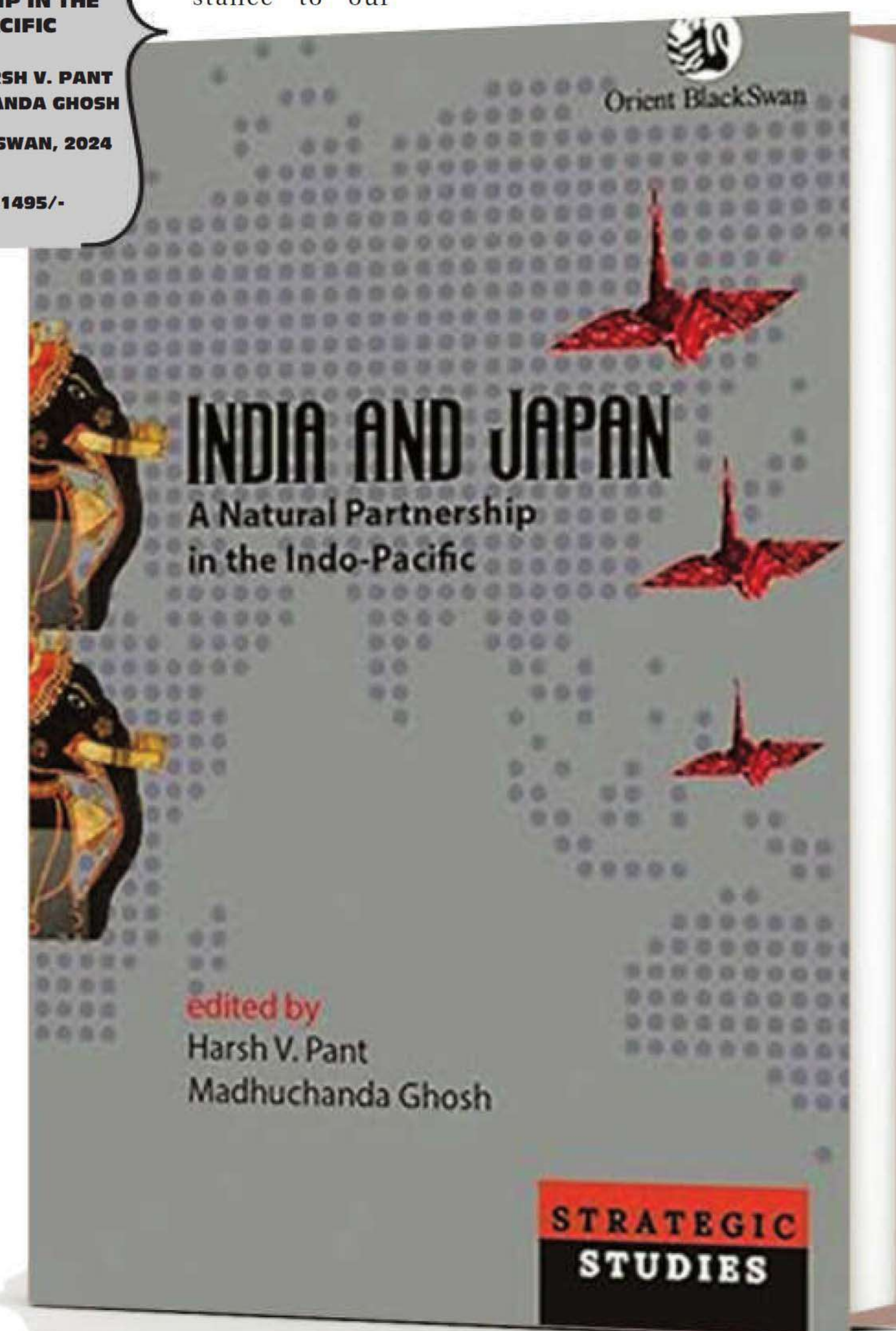
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War and the Cold War. It is refreshing that scholars from the two countries now begin to work together to explore and give substance to our

will hopefully stimulate further cooperative efforts to stimulate scholarly and people-to-people engagement.

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expanding bilateral ties. This book