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Against the universality of categories: India, Japan, and the limits of modern IR theory

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What is called "International Relations theory" today is not a science of the international but a provincial theology of Europe, secularized and universalized as global knowledge. Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism—these are not mere analytical tools, but conceptual residues of a specific historical experience: that of Latin Christendom grappling with its own theological crisis. When these theories are uncritically applied to non-Western contexts, they illuminate some dynamics but systematically misdescribe others, leaving residual variance unexplained. India–Japan relations, we show, are not an anomaly to these theories but a mirror reflecting their epistemic limitations. We do not abandon their insights but relocate them, showing that under specified scope conditions—early institutionalization, normatively costly cooperation, and trust-persistence—they fall short. We argue that the problem lies not with the world but with the conceptual apparatus we use to describe it. Civilizations are not variations on a universal template—they are distinct ways of being in the world. India and Japan engage each other not through abstract ideas of power or liberal values, but through shared memories, affective trust, and experiential continuity. We propose, therefore, not a new theory, but a shift: from theorizing the world as Europe once experienced it, to letting civilizations describe themselves. Only then does IR become global.

KEYWORDS

civilizational pluralism, colonial consciousness, India–Japan relations, experiential knowledge, international relations theory

Introduction

Why is it that India and Japan—two Asian democracies with divergent historical trajectories and distinct cultural formations—have forged a durable and expanding partnership, one that endures across administrations, ideological shifts, and global realignments? And why, we must ask, do the dominant theories of International Relations (IR) fail to adequately account for this phenomenon? Consider the standard narratives: Realist theory, for example, would not predict such deep strategic alignment between two states. Realism can, however, anticipate post-2010 alignment under shared concerns about China and U.S. facilitation; our claim is narrower—that it struggles to explain early institutionalization (2000–2008) and normatively costly cooperation such as Japan's 2016 civil nuclear agreement with a non-NPT state. Yet, contrary to its expectations, India and Japan have nurtured a consistent relationship marked by growing defense, economic, and diplomatic convergence (Naidu and Yasuyuki, 2019; John, 2024; Chadha, 2020). Liberal theories, for their part, might point to shared democratic credentials or the logic of economic interdependence. But this move, too, is insufficient: many democracies with robust economic exchanges have failed to develop comparable partnerships (Chadha, 2020; Singh, 2023). Constructivist approaches,

which draw attention to norms and identities, come closer—but even here, a problem remains. The constructivism available to us is, after all, seldom takes non-Western civilizational self-understandings seriously, except perhaps as 'alternative' or 'local' instances of universal processes (Chadha, 2020; John, 2024).

Thus, within the prevailing frameworks of IR, the India–Japan partnership becomes an anomaly: a puzzling exception to the rule, a case that resists easy categorization within the grammar of conventional theory. But is it truly the relationship that is anomalous—or is it the theory that is inadequate? This paper takes the latter position. It suggests that the difficulty lies not in the India–Japan relationship, but in the theoretical frameworks we use to interpret it. The dominant paradigms in IR are not neutral tools of analysis; they are the historical products of European thought, steeped in its theological past and its colonial ambitions (Pechishcheva and Korneev, 2021). They universalize what are, in fact, deeply parochial experiences of European modernity: the notion of an anarchic international system as a secularized echo of the fallen world; the liberal fantasy of historical progress, mirroring the Christian promise of salvation; the normative structures of law and morality derived from a specific ecclesiastical history. What we call IR theory today is not merely theory. It is the outcome of a long secularization process, whereby Christian theological concepts were emptied of their religious content and redeployed as secular common sense. This process has left its mark on our political, legal, and moral imaginations. And when these theories, so historically situated, are exported to interpret civilizational contexts radically different from the European, they generate cognitive distortions. That is, they do not merely misdescribe; they actively prevent alternative descriptions from emerging.

This paper unfolds in four parts. First, we lay bare the conceptual structure of our argument: how IR theories emerged from a particular European intellectual trajectory, and why this matters. Second, we critically examine Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism, demonstrating their blind spots when faced with experiential realities. We show that, under specified scope conditions, these paradigms leave residual variance in the India–Japan case—particularly early institutionalization, normatively costly cooperation, and trust-persistence across sectoral setbacks. Third, we turn to empirical case studies: the cultural and spiritual affinities between India and Japan, the memory of shared anti-colonial sympathies during the Second World War, and the contours of their modern strategic cooperation. In the final section, we make a modest proposal. We do not ask for the abandonment of IR theory, but we suggest that a truly global IR must begin by recognizing the limits of its categories. The India–Japan relationship, we argue, is not an exception. It is a pointer to what becomes visible when we allow experiential knowledge to speak in its own terms. From this vantage, the world no longer appears as a chessboard of rational actors or a marketplace of liberal norms. It becomes a plurality of moral orders, each with its own rhythm, memory, and way of being in the world.

Conceptual foundations

Western IR theory as secularized theology

That modern international relations theory arose in the West is not in itself problematic. What is significant, however, is how it arose, where it arose, and from what it arose. It is no accident of intellectual geography. Rather, it is a consequence of the gradual transformation of Christian theological thought into what we today call "secular" knowledge, clothed in the garb of universal reason. To illustrate: Carl Schmitt, a figure deeply engaged in the conceptual architecture of modern politics, remarked that many central political ideas in the West are "secularized theological concepts" (Schmitt, 1922). The same holds true for IR. Consider the Realist tradition. Its central premise—power struggle as inevitable (pessimism about human intentions), rooted in a tragic and immutable human nature—bears a striking resemblance to the Christian doctrine of original sin. Similarly, Liberalism's insistence on linear progress and universal moral values echoes the Christian narrative of providence and salvation—except now, the promise lies not in divine grace but in democracy and human rights (Viramontes, 2022; Acharya, 2017).

Even Constructivism, which appears to depart from materialist assumptions, is still embedded in a Western intellectual tradition that assumes a neat separation between the secular and the religious—an assumption drawn not from any universal human experience, but from a particular episode in European history: the Enlightenment, and the sociopolitical transformations following the Peace of Westphalia (Blaney and Tickner, 2017; Fonseca, 2019). In short, the dominant IR theories carry with them unacknowledged assumptions—conceptual residues of a theological past that has been rebranded as secular rationality. They are not "scientific" in the sense of being culturally neutral; they are historically parochial, shaped by a particular civilizational experience, even as they present themselves as universally valid. Here we come to the deeper wound inflicted by colonialism—not the economic drain or political subjugation alone, but the distortion of cognition with a framework for interpreting reality. And this framework survives in the social sciences, including IR. Colonialism denied people the right to describe their experiences in their own terms. It created what we may call "colonial consciousness"—a form of self-understanding filtered through the eyes of the colonizer (Balagangadhara, 1994, 2012). This consciousness persists long after the political colonizers have left. Scholars in formerly colonized societies often adopt Western theories not because they are best suited to their context, but because they lack alternative conceptual vocabularies (Sen, 2023; Krishna, 2023; Hassan and Sajjad, 2023). And so, when an Indian scholar speaks of "sovereignty," or a Japanese diplomat invokes "balance of power," these terms carry a conceptual weight that may not correspond to the experiential realities of their own traditions. What, then, is the way forward? Thinkers, such as Amitav Acharya, have called for a Global IR—a framework that acknowledges the multiplicity of civilizational voices in shaping international thought (Acharya, 2014; Acharya and Buzan, 2019). But what is required is more than inclusion; it is conceptual re-foundation. We suggest a civilizational perspective: one that treats nations not merely as strategic units or rational actors, but as embodiments of long-standing traditions, moral orders, and cultural memories (Viramontes, 2022; Dian, 2021). Such a perspective does not romanticize civilizations; it treats them with their own logics, norms, and modes of engagement.

India's dominant contemporary self-understanding is non-expansionist, shaped by principles such as dharma, ahimsa, and "sarva dharma samabhava." Yet history records contingent departures—the Mauryan consolidation, Mughal imperial expansion, the use of force in Hyderabad (1948) and Goa (1961), and the 1971

war. Our claim is not timeless essence but the repertoire of self-conceptions that shapes postcolonial strategic culture today. Japan, too, retains a civilizational self-understanding, shaped by its Shinto-Buddhist-Confucian heritage and its experience of rapid modernization. Concepts like wa (harmony) and historical calls for Pan-Asian unity reflect this orientation (Benedict, 1946). This repertoire has also been contested—exemplified by Meiji–1945 imperial expansion and earlier periods of internal warfare. Today, however, its normative reference points emphasize inclusivity and non-hegemony, shaping how Japan imagines partnerships. The India–Japan partnership, then, is not a mystery. It is an enactment of civilizational recognition. It is a conversation between two ancient cultures that see in each other not just strategic utility. This is why their Indo-Pacific vision speaks of openness, inclusivity, and non-hegemony—not as diplomatic slogans, but as expressions of historical selves.

To understand such partnerships, IR must undergo a conceptual decolonization. It must cease treating European categories as cognitive defaults. It must open itself to other ways of knowing, other grammars of politics. And above all, it must learn to listen—not to what fits its models, but to what emerges from the lived experiences of others. Only then can IR become truly international. Only then can it speak, not as a voice of one civilization about the rest, but as a chorus of many worlds, each intelligible on its own terms—and to one another.

Theoretical critique: limits of dominant IR paradigms

Having examined the theological and Eurocentric foundations of mainstream International Relations (IR) theory, we now turn to its internal architecture—specifically, how its dominant paradigms attempt to explain the India–Japan partnership. What emerges from this exercise is not merely that these theories fall short, but that under specified conditions they leave residual variance unexplained. Each paradigm—Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism—offers partial insights, but these are filtered through assumptions derived from European experiences. The result is a picture of India–Japan relations that is at best distorted, at worst unintelligible. We therefore treat mainstream theories not as wrong, but as insufficient: they explain some patterns, yet miss crucial dynamics rooted in civilizational repertoires, ethical affinities, and historical memory.

Realism: power without meaning

Realist theory begins with the assumption that states act to preserve and enhance their material power in an anarchical world order. Alliances, from this perspective, are temporary arrangements driven by the logic of survival and threat perception. The India–Japan partnership, seen through this lens, becomes a function of a shared concern about China's rise. This is not an implausible interpretation. And yet, its plausibility does not make it adequate (Keerthiraj and Sekiyama, 2023). Realism can account for post-2010 alignments—such as Malabar exercises, the 2020 ACSA, or maritime domain awareness initiatives—that reflect balancing behavior against China and U.S. facilitation. The initiation of a "Global Partnership" in 2000, followed by the "Strategic and Global Partnership" in 2006, predate

much of the current strategic anxiety about Beijing. Nor does Realism adequately explain the persistence of goodwill and trust between India and Japan, even in moments of friction—such as after India's 1998 nuclear tests. Japan, a country with a staunch anti-nuclear posture, initially imposed sanctions; and yet, by 2000, Prime Minister Mori was in New Delhi, proposing a forward-looking framework for cooperation (John, 2024; Chadha, 2020; Pechishcheva and Korneev, 2021).

What are we to make of such actions, which appear to transcend the logic of strategic necessity? Realism, focused as it is on interests and threats, has no language for civilizational esteem, for gestures that emerge not from immediate utility but from recognition of historical continuity. Why would Japan, whose economic stakes with China far outweigh those with India, strategically invest in the latter? One can say it is hedging. But one cannot explain why the hedge takes this particular cultural and civilizational form—why India, and not some other actor, emerges as a "natural partner." Our point is narrower: Realism captures balancing dynamics, but misses how civilizational repertoires make some alignments "stickier" and more trust-intensive than others. That Realism cannot account for this is not a minor oversight. It is a symptom of its secular-materialist foundations, which systematically exclude non-material motivations, ethical narratives, or civilizational worldviews. These are rendered irrational or irrelevant in its conceptual vocabulary. Consequently, when applied to India–Japan relations, Realism does not merely misread—it mutilates the picture, forcing complexity into the Procrustean bed of power politics.

Liberalism: shared institutions, missing histories

Liberal theory, in contrast, sees international cooperation as the result of shared values, institutional trust, and economic interdependence. This appears more promising. India and Japan are, after all, stable democracies with market-based economies and active participants in multilateral forums. Bilateral trade and investment have grown significantly. Agreements like the CEPA and forums like the Quad suggest a liberal logic of deepening cooperation (Singh, 2023; John, 2024). But again, the explanation does not go far enough. If liberal values and economic logic were sufficient, India's relations with other democracies should exhibit similar warmth; but they do not. Nor do Japan's with its other economic partners. The uniqueness of the India–Japan relationship lies not in shared democracy alone, but in the mutual perception of being civilizational kin—something that liberal theory, rooted in Western political development, fails to register (Basrur and Kutty, 2021; Shaheen and Mu, 2023).

Liberalism assumes that modernity dissolves civilizational distinctiveness, replacing it with institutional rationality. But what if this assumption itself is culturally specific? What if India's pluralism is not an outcome of liberal democracy but a continuation of its civilizational ethic? What if Japan's consensus politics emerges not from Enlightenment ideals but from indigenous moral traditions rooted in Confucian and Shinto ethics? When Indian and Japanese leaders invoke Buddhism, not as heritage but as a foundation of shared moral vision, liberal theorists often relegate such statements to the domain of "soft power" or cultural diplomacy. But what if these invocations are not symbolic add-ons but constitutive elements of how cooperation is understood and pursued? Liberalism thus explains

institutions and trade flows but misses the deeper layer of ethical and civilizational resonance that sustains them. It explains the growth, but not the depth (Sen, 2023; Krishna, 2023).

Constructivism: identity without ground

Constructivist theory appears, at first, to offer a corrective. It focuses on how identities, ideas, and norms shape international behavior. One might say this is the paradigm most suited to interpret the India–Japan relationship. Indeed, constructivists have pointed to shared identities as peace-loving, democratic Asian powers, and to mutual perceptions that construct India and Japan as "natural partners."

But here too we encounter a conceptual limit. Mainstream constructivism remains bound to a framework in which norms are either European in origin or defined in relation to Europe. Much of its empirical grounding comes from the European experience: the socialization of post-war Germany, the formation of EU identities, and Cold War ideologies. When applied elsewhere, non-European norms tend to be exoticized—treated either as deviations or as local color. Consider the notion of the "free and open Indo-Pacific." A constructivist might describe this as a new international norm. But who articulated this norm? When Abe Shinzo invoked the "confluence of the two seas," quoting Mughal prince Dara Shikoh to describe a civilizational vision bridging the Indian and Pacific Oceans, what emerged was not merely a strategic alignment but a civilizational grammar. Here is a Japanese leader invoking an Indian metaphor to construct a shared future—not borrowing from the West, but drawing from Asia's own intellectual resources (Jain, 2021; John, 2024).

Constructivism can accommodate this, but only awkwardly. Its theoretical apparatus lacks the tools to treat Buddhist or Hindu concepts, Confucian ethics, or indigenous civilizational memories as constitutive of international identity. Religion, when considered, is often dismissed as pre-modern residue or bundled under "non-rational" influences. It cannot grasp how ideas like '*dharma*' or '*wa*' shape not only internal behavior but external diplomacy. Moreover, the colonial experience—the very background against which India and Japan articulate their modern identity—is rarely incorporated. Both countries are engaged in a civilizational reassertion: India as a voice of pluralistic spirituality, Japan as a modern yet culturally grounded Asian power. These identity reconstructions are not reactions to Western norms; they are alternatives to them (Hassan and Sajjad, 2023). Thus, Constructivism sees norms, but not their ground. It hears voices, but only if they speak in familiar tongues.

Toward a civilizational framework: beyond the triad

The failure of Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism to fully explain the India–Japan partnership is not due to a lack of empirical detail or analytical refinement. It is a structural limitation. These theories are calibrated to interpret a world built in Europe's image. They operate with assumptions that emerged from European history—of state behavior, of rationality, of modernity, and of what counts as legitimate knowledge. But India and Japan do not fit neatly into these assumptions. Their partnership is not just a strategic move or an economic alignment. It is a civilizational dialogue—a slow and steady recognition of kinship rooted in non-Western histories, shared memories, and ethical affinities. It draws from experiences of colonization, from spiritual traditions, and from a common desire to articulate a future that is not scripted by others (Mukherjee and Yazaki, 2016; Pardesi, 2018).

This does not mean discarding existing theories. Power matters; so do institutions and identities. Our point is that how power is understood, how institutions are built, and how identities are defined differs across civilizational contexts. By relocating mainstream insights within a broader epistemological horizon, we highlight the residual dynamics—trust-persistence, normatively costly cooperation, and early institutionalization—that only a civilizational sensibility makes visible.

Empirical case studies: India–Japan relations through a civilizational lens

If one were to describe the India–Japan relationship using the conceptual grammar of dominant IR theories, one might speak of a strategic convergence, a balancing coalition, or a values-based alliance. But such descriptions remain external to the relationship; they explain it without understanding it. What if we shifted the frame entirely? What if these episodes, typically studied as events or turning points, are better understood as *expressions*—as manifestations of a shared civilizational sensibility, one that cannot be reduced to the interests, institutions, or identities fabricated in the crucible of the European experience? In what follows, we do not present case studies. We present instances of civilizational continuity—episodes that speak not to an episodic alliance but to a form of experiential affinity. These are not illustrations of a theory; they are interruptions in theory—moments where the language of conventional IR begins to falter and another kind of understanding becomes possible.

Ancient civilizational linkages: memory before modernity

Long before the international system was organized into states, borders, and treaties, India and Japan shared a form of communication that required no embassy: a civilizational conversation carried by spiritual figures, cultural motifs, and ethical ideals. The transmission of Buddhism from India to Japan was not merely the export of a religion but the migration of a worldview (Narsimhan, 2020). The journey of the Indian monk Bodhisena to Japan in the 8th century, culminating in his consecration of the Great Buddha at Tōdai-ji, is not simply a historical anecdote. It is a symbolic act—an act that inaugurates a relationship based not on strategic interest but on a shared aspiration toward truth. When modern Japanese leaders visit Bodh Gaya, or when Indian leaders evoke Buddhist bonds in diplomatic addresses, they are not performing cultural rituals for political theatre. They are reactivating an experiential memory—one that predates the modern and refuses to disappear within it (Moinuddin, 2018). Other Buddhist-influenced relationships in Asia have been more ambivalent or even conflictual, making the

India–Japan bond unusually reverential rather than adversarial. This is not soft power; it is *slow power*—a power that accumulates through generations of shared ethical inquiry (Sahoo and Khandual, 2024; Chadha, 2020).

Pan-Asian imaginings: civilization as counter-colonial grammar

The early 20th-century dialogues between Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Kakuzō belong to no standard category in IR theory. They were neither negotiations nor alliances. They were, instead, attempts to name a different possibility: that Asia could be imagined not as a reaction to Europe, but as a collective of civilizations rooted in their own ethical universes (Hill, 2015). Okakura's dictum, "Asia is one," was not a geopolitical assertion but a metaphysical one (Okakura, 1903). And Tagore's simultaneous admiration for Japan's modernity and anxiety over its militarization expressed a desire to retain the civilizational depth that modernization often erodes. This shared concern, expressed in poems, lectures, and personal encounters, did not translate into treaties. But it shaped the self-understanding of both cultures. It allowed them to see each other not as competitors or allies, but as *fellow inheritors* of traditions that the West had declared irrelevant (Basu, 2014). Liberal and realist paradigms cannot capture this: no institutions, trade flows, or balance logics explain the resonance of Tagore's poetry in Tokyo or Okakura's metaphysical appeals in Calcutta.

The war and its aftermath: empathy beyond alignment

World War II offers a revealing contrast between historical narratives. In Western accounts, Japan is the aggressor, and India the loyal colony. Yet this framing collapses entirely when we consider the figures of Subhas Chandra Bose and Justice Radha Binod Pal. Bose's alliance with Japan is not comprehensible through a realist lens; it is not a strategic partnership in any conventional sense (Panda, 2014). It is a desperate gesture of civilizational defiance—a call to one Asian power from another, not to conquer, but to unshackle. Justice Pal's dissenting opinion at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal is similarly unintelligible to Western categories of legality or diplomacy. But in Japan, his gesture is remembered not as a legal argument but as an act of justice grounded in civilizational ethics. That he is commemorated at Yasukuni Shrine is not a fluke; it is a civilizational acknowledgment. India did not fight for Japan, and Japan did not liberate India—but each recognized in the other an ethical stance that transcended wartime alliances. When Nehru refused to attend the San Francisco Peace Conference and instead signed a bilateral treaty waiving reparations, he was not performing a diplomatic maneuver. He was enacting a principle: that peace, to be meaningful, must be rooted in dignity, not punishment (Lynch and Przystup, 2017). From a liberal lens this appears irrational; from a civilizational one, it is dharma in practice.

Cultural diplomacy as civilizational reenactment

In the post-war period, gestures such as Nehru's gift of an elephant to the Tokyo zoo are often dismissed as charming footnotes. But such dismissals come from a worldview that sees diplomacy only in strategic or economic terms. What if, instead, such gestures are understood as *reenactments*—as the performance of friendship not through treaties, but through symbols? The elephant was not just a

gift. It was a signal: India remembers, and India offers joy. The reactivation of cultural ties through institutions like the Japan–India Association or the celebration of figures like Rash Behari Bose signals not the construction of soft power but the continuity of *cultural knowing*. These acts tell us that India and Japan do not need to invent common ground—they need only to uncover it (Sahoo and Khandual, 2024). Constructivism, which might code this as "identity building," misses that these acts are intelligible only when seen as reactivations of longer civilizational repertoires.

Strategic cooperation as civilizational confidence

The formalization of the "Special Strategic and Global Partnership" in the 21st century appears, on the surface, to align with liberal and realist frameworks. There are summits, treaties, and military exercises. And yet, something else is happening beneath the bureaucratic surface. Prime Minister Abe's invocation of Dara Shikoh's "confluence of the two seas" was not just rhetorical flourish. It was a civilizational gesture—using an Indian Islamic prince's metaphor to articulate a shared Indo-Pacific destiny (Chadha, 2020; Pardesi, 2018). This act is not explainable by reference to norms or interests. It is a sign of mutual recognition—a moment where diplomacy becomes pedagogy. Similarly, Japan's decision to sign a nuclear cooperation agreement with India, despite its own anti-nuclear ethos and India's status outside the NPT, cannot be reduced to power politics. It is a wager on civilizational trust: that India, unlike others, will act according to a deeper ethical grammar. Japan's development assistance to India—unparalleled in scale and scope— is not merely altruistic. Nor is it only strategic. It is an investment in a shared future, grounded in the belief that India's rise is a civilizational necessity (Nandakumar and Kumar, 2007). Here Realism notices balancing, Liberalism notes interdependence, Constructivism notes identity—but only a civilizational lens explains why trust persisted across India's RCEP exit or why Japan accepted reputational costs in the 2016 civil nuclear pact.

Samvad and civilizational norm-making

The Samvad initiative—the Hindu–Buddhist dialogue on global conflict and sustainability—offers the clearest proof that India and Japan are not merely responding to the world; they are trying to reshape it. This is not a forum for soft power branding. It is an attempt to formulate a new grammar for global ethics—not from Geneva or New York, but from Bodh Gaya and Kyoto. Such an initiative makes little sense within IR theory as it currently stands. What role can religious dialogue play in international security? But to civilizations that have long seen peace as rooted in self-restraint and relational harmony, this is entirely natural. That the prime ministers of both countries co-authored the foreword to such a gathering is not symbolic—it is ontological. They are reminding the world that values do not have to travel westward. Samvad thus exemplifies the predictive and normative value-added of a civilizational lens: it not only describes enduring affinities but anticipates forms of norm entrepreneurship missed by materialist and institutional accounts.

From Bodhisena's blessing of the Daibutsu to Abe's articulation of the Indo-Pacific, the India–Japan relationship is best understood not as a series of diplomatic events but as a civilizational rhythm. It moves slowly, remembers deeply, and acts with a quiet confidence that defies the compulsions of immediate utility. This rhythm is invisible to dominant IR theories not because it is illusory, but because those

theories are not trained to perceive it. To them, history begins with treaties. But here, history is not a backdrop—it is the terrain. India and Japan have not merely forged a partnership. They have remembered each other in relevance. Their bond is not an anomaly in theory. It is an invitation to rethink what theory itself should be.

Framework proposal: rethinking IR from a civilizational-experiential perspective

The preceding analysis has made one thing abundantly clear: the dominant theories of International Relations—however sophisticated—are built upon the presuppositions of a particular historical experience. They function well when interpreting the world that gave birth to them. They falter when faced with civilizational realities that did not participate in that genesis. The relationship between India and Japan, read through this lens, is not an exception to theory—it is an invitation to re-theorize. What would it mean to build an IR theory that is not merely inclusive in data but plural in its foundations? That does not add "non-Western" examples to a Western frame, but asks: What do these traditions and experiences tell us about the frame itself? The task is not to invent something radically new. It is to recover what has been rendered invisible by the secularized, colonial consciousness of modern theory. Our aim is not to discard mainstream paradigms but to relocate them: under specified scope conditions, they leave residual variance that a civilizational-experiential lens can illuminate, motivate hypotheses for, and evaluate empirically. Below is a preliminary sketch—not a full theory, but a direction—towards a civilizational, experiential, and pluralistic approach to IR.

Multiple civilizational ontologies: there is no one world

Modern IR begins with the assumption of a shared reality: a world of sovereign nation-states, rational actors, and secular institutions. But this "world" is already a construction—an outcome of the European experience of Reformation, Westphalia, and Enlightenment. To export this ontology as universal is to confuse the particular with the general. A pluralistic IR must begin differently. It must ask: what is the world for those who inhabit it? The Indian conception of the political may not rest on the same ontological assumptions as the French. Japanese political reason may draw not from Hobbes or Locke, but from Confucian harmony, Buddhist moderation, and Shinto cosmology (Yusoff, 2022). Civilizations are better seen as partially overlapping, historically sedimented worlds—with shared interfaces but distinct background assumptions. This is not relativism. It is realism—of a different sort. It demands that we understand how India and Japan, for instance, do not merely participate in "global order," but conceptualize order differently. That "maitri" and "nakama" are not diplomatic euphemisms but ontological commitments (Sugimoto, 2010). And when such terms travel into diplomacy, they do so in specific institutional and historical contexts, not as timeless essences. That when Indian diplomats speak of "the world as one family," they are not quoting poetry but invoking a lived reality (Shani and Behera, 2021).

Experiential knowledge and indigenous concepts: begin from within

We cannot understand another culture unless we begin from its own descriptions of itself. This principle, long accepted in anthropology, has yet to be taken seriously in IR. Instead, we impose abstractions—"power," "rationality," "statehood"—without asking whether these concepts correspond to the experiences of the actors in question. A civilizational framework would reverse this. It would begin with local concepts—not as embellishments, but as sources of theory (Misra and Keerthiraj, 2025). "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," for instance, is not a slogan but a concept of world order (Mitra, 2009; MEA, 2023). It informs India's approach to conflict, diplomacy, and sovereignty. Likewise, "heiwa shugi" in Japan is not a legal commitment but an ethical stance, shaped by memory, trauma, and civilizational values (Yamamoto, 2018). What if we took these seriously—not as "cultural background" but as theoretical foreground? In practice, this means deriving operationalizable propositions (e.g., trust-persistence, norm entrepreneurship) from these concepts and testing them against observable patterns. What if IR theory emerged from the experiences of India and Japan, rather than merely being applied to them?

Decolonizing the vocabulary of IR: words are not innocent

Terms like "failed state," "rogue actor," "order," or even "civilization" carry baggage. They are not neutral descriptors. They are categories forged in the colonial encounter—used to describe the colonized in the image of the colonizer. A pluralistic IR must cleanse itself of such residues—not by banning terms, but by historicizing and replacing them (Mallavarapu, 2009). "Civilization," in our usage, does not mean what it meant for Toynbee or Huntington (Huntington, 1996). It is not a stage to be achieved or a block to clash. It is a repertoire of experiences, ethics, and orientations—open-ended and overlapping. This is not multiculturalism. It is epistemic integrity. Just as there is not one physics for the West and another for India, there cannot be one theory that pretends to describe many worlds by ignoring their conceptual grammars. Decolonizing vocabulary therefore entails specifying provenance, scope conditions, and limits for the terms we use—and, where needed, coining or restoring indigenous categories with analytic bite.

Holism: power and meaning are not separate

A major limitation of modern theory lies in its divisions: material vs. ideational, strategic vs. normative. But such divisions do not exist in the civilizational self-understanding of many societies. In India and Japan, strategic decisions are informed by history, ethics, and memory—not as "background noise," but as constitutive elements (Bettiza, 2014). When Japan signs a nuclear deal with India despite NPT anxieties, it reflects strategic calculations intertwined with historically resonant ethical repertoires—a signal of trust whose form and acceptability are shaped by long-run civilizational narratives (Narsimhan, 2020). When India and Japan align in the Indo-Pacific, they are not just coordinating logistics—they are enacting a shared

vision of peace rooted in Buddhist ethics and non-hegemonic interaction. A civilizational framework does not abandon the study of material interests. It integrates them—seeing them not as causal variables but as embedded within meaning systems. The strategic becomes cultural, and the cultural becomes strategic. This integrated view clarifies why certain alignments become stickier and more trust-intensive than material incentives alone would predict.

Normative pluralism: learning across civilizations

If theory is to become truly international, it must become dialogical. This does not mean compiling "best practices" from various cultures. It means treating each tradition as a site of theoretical production. India and Japan, for instance, are not just implementers of global norms—they are generators of them. The Samvad dialogues show how Hindu and Buddhist philosophies offer alternative visions of peace, development, and sustainability. These are not marginal contributions—they are candidates for universality, if only we allow the conversation. Such pluralism is not naïve. It recognizes that civilizations can conflict. But it also recognizes that they can learn. That mutual intelligibility is not a given, but a task. And IR theory must take up that task, not assume it has been accomplished (Yusoff, 2022; Shani and Behera, 2021). Value-added, in analytic terms: (a) descriptive—reveals practices obscured by materialist lenses; (b) explanatory—accounts for trust-persistence and normatively costly cooperation; (c) predictive—anticipates norm entrepreneurship (e.g., Samvad) and vocabulary shifts in joint texts.

From India–Japan to a global civilizational IR

What we have sketched through the India–Japan case is not a model, but a possibility. This approach can be extended—not as a template, but as a methodology. Russia and China, for instance, may not share democratic norms, but they share experiences of humiliation and civilizational revival. ASEAN states speak often of "Asian values"—dismissed by some, but meaningful to them (Keerthiraj et al., 2025). The European Union itself could be re-understood as a civilizational project—an effort to transform the memory of fratricide into a structure of cooperation (Bettiza, 2014). This framework does not discard existing theories. It completes them. It asks the analyst not just to measure power, but to listen for meaning. Not just to map alliances, but to trace memories. Not just to observe behaviors, but to understand the worlds in which those behaviors make sense. Generalization here is conditional: where civilizational repertoires are institutionally activated and socially salient, expect stickier cooperation and higher tolerance for short-term asymmetries than mainstream models predict.

Methodology: How shall we know?

Such a framework demands different methods. Theorists must read not only policy documents but epics. Not only treaties but philosophical texts. Not only speeches but silences. Primary sources in original languages, collaboration across disciplines, and openness to learning from outside political science become essential. The task is no longer to explain behavior, but to make the behavior intelligible within its own conceptual universe (Yamamoto, 2018). This is not "area studies." It is comparative science of cultures—a rigorous, systematic attempt to build theory from the inside out. Empirically, this implies mixed methods: text-as-data to track civilizational vocabulary in joint statements; process-tracing for normatively costly decisions (e.g., nuclear pact); and matched-dyad comparisons to assess trust-persistence across sectoral shocks (e.g., RCEP).

Caution and confidence: between essentialism and emptiness

Of course, dangers abound. One is essentialism: the belief that civilizations are fixed, homogeneous, and eternal. Our approach rejects this. It sees civilizations as evolving stories—rooted in experience, but open to transformation. Another danger is appropriation: using civilizational discourse to justify nationalism or exclusion. We counter this by normative pluralism: the insistence that every civilization has something to teach and nothing to dominate. A further risk is over-ascription—reading every cooperative move as "civilizational." We avoid this by specifying scope conditions and seeking disconfirming evidence (cases where material incentives suffice). In the India–Japan case, this is already visible. Both define themselves as peace-loving, non-expansionist, inclusive. They have not used civilizational identity to demand supremacy, but to build bridges. Our framework does not invent this. It learns from it. Crucially, these self-understandings are contested domestically (e.g., debates on pacifism/normalization in Japan; strategic autonomy/alignment in India), so claims are probabilistic, not absolute.

Conclusion

India–Japan relations are not an exception that puzzles theory; they are the kind of relationship that exposes what theory is. What appears as an anomaly is not in the relationship—it is in the way we have been taught to understand relationships. Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism help us see some dynamics (balancing, institutions, democratic affinity), but under specified scope conditions they leave residual variance unexplained. They presuppose a world already familiar to them and thus struggle with early institutionalization, normatively costly cooperation, and the persistence of trust across setbacks. But the world in which India and Japan relate to each other is not that world. These theories are not universal frameworks. They are descriptions drawn from a specific historical experience—of Europe, of its theological past, and of its attempt to make that past invisible by calling it "secular." They are not theories in the abstract sense; they are the cognitive outcomes of a particular culture trying to understand itself. When applied elsewhere, they do not merely fail to describe—they distort.

This is the continuation of colonial consciousness: a process where the West continues to describe others using its own categories, and in doing so, denies others the ability to describe themselves. In such a framework, the relationship between India

and Japan becomes something that must be "explained"—because it does not fit. But what if explanation is the problem? What if we need to listen before we explain? India and Japan do not speak the language of rational alliances or institutional convergence. They speak of "maitri," of "samvad," of remembering each other. These are not metaphors for realpolitik. They are not symbols. They are practices—practices of being in relation, rooted in civilizational experience. Our task is not to translate them into theoretical categories. It is to allow them to speak. This paper does not propose a new theory. It proposes a different vantage point: one that relocates existing theories within a broader horizon and complements them with civilizational-experiential insights. It does not claim to replace the old. It questions the assumption that the old was ever universal. And in doing so, it suggests that India–Japan relations are not a case to be solved but a world to be understood. Not as data for theory, but as an occasion to rethink what we mean by theory itself. The civilizational lens adds descriptive clarity, explanatory power, and predictive traction: it reveals why cooperation is stickier, trust more enduring, and norm entrepreneurship more visible than mainstream paradigms anticipate.

Author contributions

K: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. TS: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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