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## **India and Japan: Emerging Indo-Pacific Security Partnership**

*By Dhruva Jaishankar*

### **Synopsis**

*India and Japan, motivated primarily by shared concerns about China, have been developing a closer defence partnership defined by regular maritime exercises and high-level political consultations. The upward trajectory in strategic ties since 2006 can be maintained, as long as both countries take certain structural limitations into consideration.*

### **Commentary**

AMID GROWING competition between the United States and China in Asia, the often-overlooked relationship between two secondary powers - India and Japan - has quietly developed into a close security partnership over the past 16 years. Ties now encompass regular military exercises, particularly between their maritime forces, and frequent high-level political consultations. The evolving security collaboration between Asia's largest and wealthiest democracies will play a critical role in the regional balance of power.

The security relationship between India and Japan has been driven primarily by shared concerns about the rise of China, with which both have politically-charged territorial disputes. For Japan, this includes Chinese assertiveness over the Senkaku or Diaoyu Islands, as well as rising anti-Japanese nationalism often promoted by China's top leadership. For India, the legacy of the 1962 Sino-Indian border war still casts a long shadow. Incursions by Chinese forces along the disputed border with India in 2013 and 2014 stoked tensions. India is also increasingly wary of Chinese dual-use infrastructure projects and political influence in the Indian Ocean region.

### **Significant Changes in Foreign and Security Policies**

In response, both Japan and India have made significant changes to their foreign and national security policies. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has elevated the country's defence agency into a full-fledged ministry, advanced a National Security Strategy that loosens restrictions on weapons exports, and created a National Security Secretariat to streamline decision-making. His government has also created an Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Agency (ATLA) to better manage procurement and exports, and reinterpreted Japan's Constitution to facilitate collective self-defence.

For Tokyo, India's role is vital for securing sea lines of communication, as a potential export destination for Japanese arms, and as a facilitator of Japan as a more 'normal' military power through joint exercises and military diplomacy.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has injected significant energy into Indian diplomacy. This has included unprecedented outreach to the United States and the conclusion of a wide-ranging Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region. Modi has also emphasised better ties in the Indian Ocean region and with democratic partners in East Asia, including South Korea, Mongolia, and Australia.

Better relations with Japan have support across the Indian political spectrum, making it a critical partner for 'minilateral' security dialogues and exercises in the Indo-Pacific, whether the US-Japan-India maritime exercises or the new India-Japan-Australia dialogue. The emerging India-Japan security partnership therefore reflects a confluence of two strategies.

### **Three-Phase Strategic and Global Partnership**

Historically, India-Japan security ties can be considered in three distinct phases. The first phase, when relations were described as a "global partnership" (2000-2006), involved normalisation after India's 1998 nuclear tests. This period saw Coast Guard exercises, initial defence exchanges, and ad hoc humanitarian and disaster relief cooperation following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

The second period of "strategic and global partnership" (2006-2014) provided clearer context and objectives. In 2007, India and Japan held the first quadrilateral naval exercises with the United States and Australia (to which Singapore was also invited). They also announced a joint declaration on security cooperation, initiated staff talks and exercises between the two maritime forces, started a "2+2 dialogue" involving the foreign and defence ministries, and began contemplating defence sales and joint production. However, this period was also marked by a degree of hesitation, with Indian reticence about multilateral exercises in the Indian Ocean and Japanese attempts at assuaging China's concerns.

The current phase of cooperation since 2014 – termed the "special strategic and global partnership" – has involved less hesitation on both sides. The two have improved cooperation on sensitive space and defence issues, issued a joint statement supporting freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, and signed agreements on defence technology transfers and classified military information. India

has also publicly welcomed Japan's constitutional reinterpretation on collective self-defence and invited Japan to permanently participate in the bilateral India-US Malabar naval exercises. Japanese defence officials have noted fewer concerns in New Delhi about potentially jeopardising relations with China.

### **Constraints and Opportunities**

Today, India is arguably Japan's third most important strategic partner, after the US and Australia. For India, Japan is possibly India's second most important partner in Asia, after the US. Yet, despite the impressive trajectory in relations, there are at least three significant constraints:

- *Attitudinal differences*: These include bureaucratic inertia, Cold War-era strategic cultures, continued sensitivities about China's responses, emotional Japanese attitudes towards India's nuclear weapons, India's presence outside US alliance structures, and differences over freedom of navigation in India's exclusive economic zone.
- *Secondary security priorities*: For India, Japan is not concerned enough about Pakistan; for Japan the reverse is true about North Korea. Both sides will have to become more sensitised to the other's priorities.
- *Overinflated expectations*: Complications arising from potential arms sales could lead to disillusionment, as followed Australia's rejection of Japanese submarines. There are risks with associating the relationship too closely with individual leaders. And any future progress will have to contend with Japanese public opinion and Indian resource constraints.

However, India and Japan can still take a few important steps to deepen their security partnership. Despite its sweeping national security reforms, Japan's biggest weapon is official development assistance (ODA). Using ODA strategically in India to develop civilian infrastructure in Northeast India and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, would have important and mutually beneficial security implications.

India and Japan can also better coordinate development efforts in third countries, such as in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and East Africa. Secondly, while maritime cooperation is continuing apace, interoperability can still be improved between the two countries' emerging maritime expeditionary forces and air forces. The US, through its Marine Corps and multinational Red Flag air exercises, can facilitate such cooperation.

The Japan-India partnership has already witnessed remarkable progress. The two countries are now involved in ever closer consultations and coordination. If important structural constraints can be navigated, the upward trajectory in India and Japan security ties can easily be sustained. That, in turn, would help preserve a stable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

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