

Japan-India cooperation in the realm of defense and security

Interview with Dr. Monika Chansoria



*Senior Fellow, Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA), Tokyo;
Senior Contributing Author on Asia's geopolitics, Japan Forward
Association, Inc., Tokyo*

Question 1: How has Japan-India defense cooperation evolved, and what key agreements or joint initiatives have been established to enhance their security collaboration?

India and Japan signed a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in 2008, and this bilateral relationship has witnessed significant progress in the realm of defense cooperation and security. Apart from the operationalization of the Agreement Concerning Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services between Japan's Self-Defense Forces and the Indian Armed Forces, the two countries signed up for the inaugural fighter exercise between the Japan Air Self-Defense Force and the Indian Air Force.

Defense cooperation between India and Japan has been on a path of ascendancy in the past few years especially since the establishment of the 2+2 Ministerial Level Dialogue in 2019, including the defense policy dialogue. This was considered a major milestone for both countries as they moved forward in strengthening the India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership. In 2015, two key agreements on Defense Equipment and Technology Cooperation and Security of Classified Military Information were concluded. Moreover, the signing of agreement concerning Reciprocal Provisions of Supplies and Services between the

Indian Armed Forces and the Self-Defense Forces of Japan in September 2020 provided a new momentum to the defense cooperation relationship. This agreement was operationalized during the MILAN 2024 and has been utilized in all subsequent military exercises and visits by ships, aircraft, and contingents¹.

The Joint Working Group on Defense Equipment and Technology Cooperation (JWG-DETC) has held many meetings. Defense cooperation has extended to official Air Force Staff Talks that were part of institutionalized Staff Talks between all three Armed Services as well as an annual dialogue between the Indian and Japanese Coast Guards. Further, the Joint Services Staff Talks were also approved.

In addition to the Service-to-Service dialogues, other engagements and exercises (both bilateral and multilateral) have been on the rise. In the realm of institutionalized bilateral joint military exercises (JMEs), the *Dharma Guardian* is an annual bilateral JME conducted between the Indian and Japanese Army since 2018, sharing experiences of counter-terrorism operations. *Dharma Guardian* is a platoon-level JME focusing on training for counter-terrorism operations in jungle and urban scenarios, enhancing interoperability and practicing tactical drills. In February-March 2023, the Japanese Army (GSDF) conducted the first bilateral field training exercise *Dharma Guardian* in Japan with the Indian Army to further strengthen cooperation. Additionally, the Japan-India bilateral air exercise *Veer Guardian 23* as well as the Japan-India bilateral transport aircraft training *Shinyuu Maitri 23* were conducted for the first time in Japan, in January, and March 2023 respectively. Furthermore, bilateral naval cooperation between India and Japan has increased in scope and complexity over the recent years and taken shape in the form of Japan India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (JIMEX) which commenced in 2012 with a special focus on maritime security cooperation.

Question 2: What specific challenges and opportunities do Japan and India face in deepening their defense ties, particularly in the maritime domain and technological cooperation?

India-Japan bilateral military exercises across Asia have been instrumental in their expanding acceptance as key regional strategic actors by other powers, be it within South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Indian Ocean Region and the Persian Gulf. Enhanced defense cooperation *via* joint military exercises is a key foundation for strengthening regional diplomacy. JMEs directly reflect regional balance-of-power politics. There is a visible coherence in the like-minded approach between Japan and India for a free and open Indo-Pacific strategy. That said, there are no signs that Tokyo, or Delhi, intends to qualitatively upgrade this partnership into a formal alliance-like relationship involving a commitment to collective defense.

India's bilateral JMEs with Japan demonstrate the expanding presence and frequency of New Delhi's naval engagement with Tokyo, thereby improving capacity-building and regional security linkages. Together, they augment a much-needed regional balance of power in the Indian Ocean – the pivot of the Indo-Pacific region. India's core interests may be in the Indian

¹ MILAN is a biennial Multilateral Naval Exercise hosted by the Indian Navy with participating friendly foreign navies, incepted by the Indian Navy in 1995.

Ocean region, but a presence beyond ensures a peaceful periphery. Therefore, India's participation in JMEs with Japan and other Southeast Asian nations has contributed to Asia's broader stability goals.

India and Japan also attach growing importance to nations in and around the Persian Gulf, which can directly be attributed to the geostrategic significance of the Persian Gulf region and its linkage to maritime security in the western Indian Ocean. Peninsular India is adjacent to one of the most vital sea lanes stretching from the Suez Canal and Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca, through which much of the oil from the Gulf region transits. Moreover, the lack of any regional security architecture, and given deep-rooted frictions among regional states, renders the region dependent on external military presence. In this reference, Japan and India have deployed their naval ships to ensure security of international oil and cargo shipping passing through the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman.

However, it would be wrong to assume that Japan and India share similar positions on international issues such as the ongoing war in Ukraine. Unlike India, Japan is an ally of the United States and has joined sanctions against Russia, while India has refused to do so. India's reluctance to confront Russia over its invasion of Ukraine caused considerable consternation in Japan, especially when New Delhi refused to allow Japan's military cargo aircraft carrying aid for Ukraine to land in India. There is not much likelihood of any change in New Delhi's tightrope balancing act.

Question 3: How does the Japan-India defense partnership contribute to regional stability and address common security concerns, such as the evolving geopolitical landscape and potential threats in the Indo-Pacific region?

The ongoing constructive dialogue and multifaceted collaboration between India and Japan during their respective G20 and G7 Presidencies in 2023 has particularly contributed to bringing the concerns and aspirations of the Global South to the fore. The deepened cooperation discussed through the Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Dialogue, the Maritime Affairs Dialogue, the Space Dialogue, and the Cyber Dialogue, underscores the expanding scope and importance of multilayered dialogues between the two countries.

The India-Japan bilateral partnership's scope, especially in the defense and security cooperation sector, is growing satisfactorily, and further deepens the India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership. In March 2023, PM Kishida delivered a policy speech titled: The Future of the Indo-Pacific – Japan's New Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' – Together with India, as an Indispensable Partner.

The centrality of the Indo-Pacific in the 21st century augurs a naval century wherein geography illuminates and puts the Indian Ocean region as well as the South and East China Seas at the forefront of geostrategic priorities. In this reference, the January 2015 India-Japan Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean identified the importance of bridging the Asia-Pacific with the Indian Ocean region. Japan and India, increasingly, are key players and drivers of regional and global growth, from Africa to East Asia, covering the sub-regions of South, Southeast, and Central Asia.

An overcrowded Indo-Pacific has become the nerve center of geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic activity of the world – thereby making way for rapid shifts in the regional balance of power. Tokyo and New Delhi are indispensable players in the Indo-Pacific at a time when the region is confronting stark shifts in its geopolitical reality. Given such uncertainties, proactive defense cooperation initiatives and other peacetime efforts are essential to ensure a secure strategic future for Japan and India.

The importance of the India-Japan partnership gets further strengthened owing to their shared values and principles of democracy, freedom, and respect for the rule of law, to ensure a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region that is inclusive and rules-based. For this, cooperation under multilateral and plurilateral frameworks, including Quad, shall only get stronger in times to come, including the deepening of the Japan-India defense equipment and technology cooperation.

As India and Japan work towards striving to secure and consolidate their maritime peripheries, and play a greater proactive role in Asia’s regional balancing, the Japan-India defense partnership formulation and policy implementation is only beginning to be utilized and leveraged as a vital instrument, and a promising foundation for securing regional security priorities and order. By means of their defense cooperation initiatives, Tokyo and New Delhi have contributed substantially to enhancing the overall net security of the Indo-Pacific region, *via* leveraging cooperation to augment interoperability and confidence-building.

« The importance of the India-Japan partnership gets further strengthened owing to their shared values and principles of democracy, freedom, and respect for the rule of law, to ensure a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region that is inclusive and rules-based.»

January 2024
