



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



POLICY BRIEF

India-Japan 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue Marks Modest Progress

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Japan's Defence Minister Minoru Kihara and Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa as well as India's Defence Minister Shri Rajnath Singh and External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar at the press conference at Hyderabad House, New Delhi on August 20, 2024. Source: PIB

Indian Air Force (IAF) and Japan Air Self Defence Force (JASDF) contingents at the inaugural edition of bilateral air exercise 'Veer Guardian 2023' in Japan, on 26 January 2023. Source: PIB

INS Shivalik in Yokosuka on June 12, 2024 to participate in the 8th Edition of the bilateral Japan - India Maritime Exercise 2024 (JIMEX 24). Source: PIB

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India-Japan 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue Marks Modest Progress

by
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Geographically, India and Japan are located at the opposite ends of the Indo-Pacific. It is largely the China factor and the search for a strategic balance in Asia that has driven convergence in relations between New Delhi and Tokyo. India-Japan relations were elevated to a 'Global Partnership' in 2000, a 'Strategic and Global Partnership' in 2006 and a 'Special Strategic and Global Partnership' in 2014.

Policies governing strategic partnerships are set at summit meetings. The 2+2 Ministerial Meeting has of late also emerged as a preferred directional-level instrument to build convergence. India holds such ministerial level dialogues with only four countries: the US commencing 2018, Japan commencing 2019, and Australia and Russia both commencing in 2021. Five such dialogues have been held with the US, two with Australia and one with Russia.

Japan's Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa and Defense Minister Minoru Kihara were hosted by their Indian counterparts, Rajnath Singh and Dr. S. Jaishankar, for the third 2+2 India-Japan Ministerial Meeting in New Delhi on August 20, 2024. This brief seeks to analyse the outcomes of the meeting and how they compare with expectations.

Strategic Vision of the Japan-India Partnership

On the Japanese side, the strategic vision underlying the Japan-India partnership has largely been set by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The India-Japan Strategic and Global Partnership was established in December 2006, during his first term as Japan's Prime Minister¹. His 'Confluence of the Two Seas' speech of 2007 in India's Parliament spelt out the vision in the following terms:

"The Pacific and Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and prosperity. A broader Asia that broke away from geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form. Our two countries have the ability – and the responsibility – to ensure that it broadens yet

¹ Joint Statement Towards India-Japan Strategic and Global Partnership, December 15, 2006, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/6368/Joint+Statement+Towards+IndiaJapan+Strategic+and+Global+Partnership>

further and to nurture and enrich these seas to become seas of clearest transparency”².... “Japanese diplomacy is now promoting various concepts in a host of different areas so that a region called ‘the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity’ will be formed along the outer rim of the Eurasian continent. The Strategic Global Partnership of Japan and India is pivotal for such pursuits to be successful”.

This vision became the basis for Abe’s ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ Policy. He also proposed greater bilateral cooperation with India in the area of security, saying “a strong India is in the best interest of Japan, and a strong Japan is in the best interest of India”³. This was taken forward by his successors by concluding the India-Japan Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in 2008 and its accompanying Action Plan in 2009.

Abe was again the Prime Minister when the bilateral relationship was elevated to a Special Strategic and Global Partnership in 2014⁴. The Political, Defence and Security Partnership was deemed a key pillar of this elevation, for which the 2+2 dialogue involving Foreign and Defence Secretaries was considered essential⁵. This would in 2019 be upgraded to the first India-Japan 2+2 Ministerial Meeting under his leadership. Another ambition at the time was that Japan’s policy changes on transfer of defence equipment and technology would usher in an era of cooperation in this field⁶. Related agreements on transfer of defence equipment and technology cooperation, as well as security measures for protection of classified military information, were concluded in 2015.

Neither Abe nor his successors were, however, able to overcome Japan’s dominant focus on alliance frameworks in East Asia and reticence in sharing defence material and technology outside the ambit of the US-Japan alliance. Consequently, progress, particularly in implementing the ‘Defence and Security’ pillar of India-Japan partnership, has consistently fallen well short of expectations. His successors, Yoshihide Suga and Fumio Kishida, have to an extent carried forward the Abe legacy, including during the 2022 bilateral

² “Confluence of the Two Seas”: Speech by H.E. Mr Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India”, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Tokyo Declaration for India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership, September 01, 2014, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/23965/Tokyo_Declaration_for_India_Japan_Special_Strategic_and_Global_Partnership

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid

summit⁷. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, markedly changed Kishida's outlook as he sought to turn Abe's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' concept to a 'Free and Open International Order' under US stewardship⁸. His overwhelming focus was contributing to the demands of the US alliance, in the hope that Japan's military and economic commitments to Ukraine would translate into enhanced security for Japan in the western Pacific over the longer term.

Notably, there was no joint statement following Kishida's visit to India in March 2023, nor has the annual summit been scheduled since March 2022.

Outcomes of the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue

The Joint Statement of the third India-Japan 2+2 dialogue continues to reflect the shared strategic vision of the two countries for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific that is inclusive, peaceful, prosperous and resilient as part of the rules-based international order, and one where all countries refrain from any attempt to unilaterally change the status quo⁹.

Participating ministers condemned terrorism and violent extremism in all its forms and manifestations, including cross-border terrorism. They reiterated their strong support for ASEAN's unity and centrality, and full support for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. They valued their cooperation in the Quad and reaffirmed their commitment to advance it further.

A wide-ranging architecture of dialogues already exists between India and Japan, encompassing defence policy, foreign affairs, disarmament and non-proliferation, cyber, counter-terrorism and regional consultations on emerging and hot spot issues. The ministers looked forward to expanding this into the areas of space, maritime affairs, Africa, economic security and strategic trade.

On the defence cooperation front, much has transpired since the ministers last met in September 2022. The first India-Japan Joint Staff Talks in September 2023 added to the annual staff talks between the three services of the two

⁷ India-Japan Summit Joint Statement: Partnership for a Peaceful, Stable and Prosperous Post-COVID World, March 19, 2022, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100319162.pdf>

⁸ Policy Speech by Prime Minister KISHIDA Fumio at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), March 20, 2023, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202303/_00013.html

⁹ Joint Statement: Third India-Japan 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meeting, August 20, 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/38190/Joint_Statement_Third_IndiaJapan_22_Foreign_and_Defence_Ministerial_Meeting

countries. The inaugural edition of the bilateral exercise Veer Guardian took place in 2023. Exercise JIMEX 2023 took place off Visakhapatnam, while JIMEX 2024 took place off Yokosuka earlier this year. Exercise Dharma Guardian 2023 also took place in Japan, while the 2024 edition took place in Rajasthan in February/March this year. A JASDF team is in India to participate in India's first multilateral Air Force Exercise Tarang Shakti. The ministers expressed their commitment to continued participation in bilateral and multilateral exercises.

On the defence technology front, the ministers noted the completion of their joint project on UGV and Robotics, though little is known of the outcomes. They appreciated progress made for the transfer of the Unified Complex Radio Antenna (UNICORN) and related technologies to India and sought early signing of related arrangements. They concurred on accelerating future cooperation in defence equipment and technology, and welcomed exploration between the IN and JMSDF for cooperation in the area of ship maintenance in India. They concurred on exploring discussions for coordination and cooperation in the field of defence and security assistance to third countries in the Indo-Pacific. Most importantly, they affirmed their intention to revise and update the 2008 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation to reflect contemporary priorities and security challenges.

The ministers also agreed to promote in-depth dialogues for further cooperation in the field of economic security and trade. India Japan trade in 2023-24 was \$ 22.85 billion, marginally up from \$ 21.96 billion in 2022-23¹⁰. Exports to Japan were \$ 5.2 billion, below the 2022-23 and 2021-22 levels, while imports were \$ 17.7 billion. The need for effective dialogue to address the imbalance and substantially improve overall trade cannot be denied. On the investment front, Japan's cumulative FDI in India stood at \$ 41.9 billion¹¹, making it the fifth largest investor in India. It has committed to investing 5 trillion yen (about \$ 34.2 billion) in public and private financing in India during the 2022-2027 period.

The Unicorn Antenna

The Unicorn system is an integrated communications antenna that combines multiple different aerials into one: U/VHF, IFF, Data Link, Wi-Fi, Electronic Support Measures (ESM) for both radars and communications, and tactical air navigation. All these are encased in one specially designed radome (radar

¹⁰ Department of Commerce Export Import Data Bank, accessed August 19, 2024, <https://tradestat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/iecmt.asp>

¹¹ Fact sheet on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) Inflow, March 2024, https://dpiit.gov.in/sites/default/files/FDI_Factsheet_30May2024.pdf

dome), reducing the ship's radar cross-section and thus enhancing its stealth capability. The ESM also enables detection of transmissions from missiles and drones. The Unicorn antenna has an omnidirectional radiation pattern, employs advanced filtering technologies to minimize interference and has advanced anti-jamming features. It is currently used on the JMSDF's Mogami-class frigates.

Observations

The 2+2 Ministerial's Joint Statement notes the completion of the project on UGV and Robotics. There is, however, no announcement of the project translating into joint production or procurement. This points to its being abandoned, rather than resulting in something fruitful.

There were three salient outcomes from the 2+2 meeting. The first is the possible progress on transfer of the Unicorn system to India, which has been under negotiation for at least the last three years. Notably, the ministers have only appreciated progress towards the transfer, and have not yet signalled that it stands approved. If it is, the transfer will represent a breakthrough of the kind that was once hoped for when discussions on the transfer of the US-2 amphibian were taking place a decade ago. That discussion failed because the asking price for what was essentially an aircraft for search and rescue with limited military utility was too high. Whether the Unicorn transfer fructifies, and its precedent then results in faster processing for numerous other dual use items that India desires, remains to be seen.

The reality, however, is that there have been no transfers of military-grade equipment from Japan, which makes a range of advanced platforms including aircraft, submarines, ships and specialised vehicles for the army, to India. That India's External Affairs Minister publicly urged Japanese counterparts to look into regulatory bottlenecks that currently exist to enable trust-based collaboration in emerging technologies, including in the field of defence, speaks for itself¹².

The second outcome of note is the decision to explore routine repair of JMSDF vessels in India, on the pattern already accepted by the USN for its support vessels. A precedent enabling repair of Japanese warships at ports abroad was set when JS Samidare underwent maintenance work at Colombo in 2023¹³.

¹² Press Statement by EAM, Dr. S. Jaishankar on the third 2+2 India-Japan Ministerial Meeting, August 20, 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/38189/Press_Statement_by_EAM_Dr_S_Jaishankar_on_the_third_22_IndiaJapan_Ministerial_Meeting_20_August_2024

¹³ Japan destroyer tests Sri Lanka shipyard with eye on future use, August 10, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/Japan-destroyer-tests-Sri-Lanka-shipyard-with-eye-on-future-use>

JMSDF ships have increased their deployment to the Indian Ocean over the last few years, and the possibility of repair in an Indian shipyard certainly exists. Such repair will be part of the low-hanging fruit and make some contribution, albeit limited, to India-Japan strategic convergence in the Indo-Pacific.

The third and most significant outcome is the decision to revise and update the 2008 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation¹⁴ between India and Japan to reflect contemporary priorities. This is a long overdue step that has been called for in the past¹⁵. It will hopefully be completed in time for the next India-Japan Summit that is likely to be held later in the year.

Conclusion

It is difficult to escape the impression that India-Japan defence and security cooperation has remained limited in the absence of serious effort on the Japanese side to generate more substantive results. Dialogues and exercises, especially between two widely separated middle powers, definitely contribute to the volume of defence cooperation, but not to the substance of making the Indo-Pacific more secure. Graduating to something more substantive will require the political will to overcome Japan's regulatory bottlenecks, which has so far not been visible.

India on its part makes no secret of its desire to partner with Japan in defence technologies to achieve its goal of making India a global defence manufacturing hub. This is what would make a meaningful impact on regional stability, which would also be in the interest of Japan.

Abe's vision of India and Japan as democratic bookends in the Indo-Pacific, helping to strengthen each other, still remains in play. That there has been a sharp increase in the volume of India-Japan defence cooperation, including in dialogues and exercises in the last decade, is beyond doubt. Outside the ambit of the US deterrent posture in East Asia, there are no two other Asian countries capable of strengthening regional resolve in resisting expansionism and coercion than India and Japan. As of now, that promise is yet to become a reality.

¹⁴ Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between India and Japan, October 22, 2008, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/5408/>

¹⁵ Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh, "India and Japan: Time to Refocus on Indo-Pacific Stability", July 28, 2023, <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/india-and-japan-time-to-refocus-on-indo-pacific-stability.html>



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