

India-Japan Defence Partnership

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After a long hiatus of mutual neglect, the India-Japan relationship is evolving in a robust manner, with convergence of interests in the economic, security/strategic and defence domains. After discovering their economic complementarities, the two countries are engaged in strengthening defence cooperation to protect their mutual economic interests and thereby contribute to a stable regional order. This is being done by way of exchange of visits of defence ministers and senior government officials, and a series of agreements for cooperation in various areas.

The bilateral ties have also assumed a regional focus. This has been precipitated by the rise of China and its unpredictable stances on many bilateral and regional issues such as the South China Sea resources, maritime security, territorial disputes, etc. This single China factor is driving major powers in the region, including Japan and India as well as the US to rebalance their relationships with the others. For example, though Japan and Australia have security agreements with the US, with the latter obliged to defend them under treaty obligation, Japan has signed security cooperation agreements with India and Australia separately. Though these security agreements do not entail an obligation to defend each other in times of crisis, they provide enough scope to coordinate security issues with the objective to achieve peace and stability in the region.

The growing bonhomie between India and the US in the post-cold war era also is being shaped to a great extent by a rising China and growing concern about China's power projection capabilities beyond its borders. After dislodging Japan as the world's second-largest economy in 2010, it is being projected that China's long-term objective is to emerge as the world's single-biggest economy and strongest military power. China's aggressive stances on many regional and global issues stem from its perceived longer-term profile. The evolution of India-Japan defence and strategic relationship should be examined from this perspective.

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Factors Driving India and Japan

Among the factors that are driving India and Japan to forge a defence and strategic partnership, maritime issues and securing the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) are the most important. Both economies are heavily dependent on imports of critical energy resources from the Persian Gulf, which makes maritime commerce important. Securing sea-based transport provides the trigger for forging closer naval cooperation. Japan's constitutional limitation inhibits the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) from deploying in international waters. Therefore, cooperation with the Indian Navy becomes a strategic priority for Japan.

India's geographic location endows it with an opportunity to play a critical strategic role in ensuring maritime safety. The country is positioned between two strategic chokepoints for global oil supplies – the Strait of Malacca to its east and the Strait of Hormuz to its west. The energy supplies of the major economies of Asia must pass through these two straits. It is estimated that as much as 33 per cent of international trade and 50 per cent of the world's oil pass through these sea lanes. For Japan, the Strait of Malacca is the main passage between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea and therefore it is a vital lifeline. As much as 90 per cent of Japan's oil requirements come from the Persian Gulf.¹ In recent years, this maritime passage has been heavily infested by pirates.

The Indian Navy has established its reputation in combating terrorism at sea and has been engaged in anti-piracy operations. Japanese ships have been attacked by pirates. The Indian Navy and Coast Guard rescued the Japanese vessel *MV Alondra Rainbow*, hijacked by pirates from the South China Sea in November 1999. By doing so, India demonstrated that it can play a critical stabilizing role in a volatile world, where the security environment was deteriorating rapidly.²

Significance of Mori's Visit in 2000 and Subsequent Summit Meetings

Though India and Japan maintained cordial relations till the early 1990s, their divergent models of economic development impeded deepening cooperation. India pursued the policy of import substitution and a socialist pattern of economic growth and Japan adopted outward-oriented path of economic growth with export promotion as the growth strategy. This changed dramatically when India introduced economic liberalization in the early 1990s and adopted its "Look East" policy.

Initially, Japan was reticent in responding to India's new policy outlook. South Korea, for example, responded more positively to economically engage with India. Even currently, Japan is behind South Korea in engaging with India. When Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro decided to visit India in August 2000 as a part of his four-nation South Asian tour ten years after a Japanese Prime Minister had taken such an initiative, it opened a new chapter in India-Japan bilateral ties. Mori's visit saw the signing of an agreement on "Global Partnership between Japan and India",³ which put bilateral ties back on track after a stormy phase following India's nuclear tests in 1998.⁴

When Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee visited Japan in December 2001, the two countries agreed to continue the India-Japan Comprehensive Security Dialogue and India-Japan military-to-military consultation. In the Joint Declaration issued after the summit, the two Prime Ministers reaffirmed that it was important to continue such dialogues and to annually hold the Comprehensive Security Dialogue covering the entire range of issues of mutual concern, including disarmament and non-proliferation, ensuring safety and security of maritime commerce and to foster defence exchanges.⁵

During Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to India in April 2005, the relationship received the much-needed momentum. Prime Ministers Koizumi and Manmohan Singh signed the "Japan-India Partnership in a New Asian Era: Strategic Orientation of Japan-India Global partnership".⁶ The Joint Declaration underlined the importance of security dialogues and cooperation in identifying the Eight-fold Initiatives for Strengthening Japan-India Global Partnership.⁷ The action plan aimed to stabilize the defence cooperation in a sustained manner. The initiative aimed to:

- further develop dialogue as well as security and defence exchanges between the two countries, including through full utilization of the Comprehensive Security Dialogue, Defence Policy Dialogue and military-to-military talks;
- strengthen ensuring the safety and security of international maritime traffic, with the related agencies of the two countries working together on a sustained basis, including the annual Japan Coast Guard-Indian Coast Guard talks, joint exercises against piracy as well as cooperation through means of information sharing and technical assistance.
- the MSDF of Japan and the Indian Navy to enhance their cooperation to ensure maritime security, including through exchange of views, friendship visits and other similar activities.

Since Koizumi's visit, Japan-India annual summit meetings have been

held alternatively in the capitals of the two countries. When Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Japan in December 2006, Japan-India relationship was elevated to “Global and Strategic Partnership”.⁸ Prime Minister Abe Shinzo visited India in August 2007. In the Joint Statement issued on 22 August 2007, it was agreed to carve a roadmap for “New Dimensions to the Strategic and Global Partnership Between Japan and India”.⁹

Before becoming prime minister, Abe had proposed in his book, *Toward a Beautiful Country*, a “Quadrilateral Initiative” for the stability of “broader Asia”. This was to be a multilateral framework comprising Japan, Australia, India and Singapore. He argued that “it is of crucial importance to Japan’s national interest that it further strengthen ties with India”. He added that “it would not be a surprise if in another 10 years, Japan-India relations overtake Japan-US and Japan-China relations.”¹⁰ The idea coincided with Japan’s participation in the annual India-US *Malabar* naval exercise and then transforming it into a multilateral naval exercise, with the navies of Singapore and Australia joining in the Bay of Bengal. The idea evoked sharp criticism from China, which saw it as a security alliance against itself. China saw this as the “resurrection of the Cold War mentality” in Asia and “the formation of small NATO to resist China”.

When Prime Minister Singh visited Japan in October 2008 for the summit meeting with Aso Taro, a landmark “Japan-India Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation” was issued.¹¹ This was the third document on bilateral defence cooperation that Japan signed with a foreign partner, after its alliance treaty with the US and the 2007 agreement with Australia.¹² The two prime ministers observed that the declaration emphasized bilateral cooperation within the multilateral frameworks of Asia, which could become “an essential pillar of the future architecture of the region”.

When Prime Minister Hatoyama visited New Delhi for the summit meeting with Prime Minister Singh in December 2009, the two leaders elevated the security cooperation to a higher level by signing the “Action Plan to Advance Security Cooperation based on the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between Japan and India”.¹³ The Action Plan outlined concrete steps on security cooperation, including the establishment of a sub-cabinet/senior official 2+2 dialogue. The first 2+2 dialogue was held in New Delhi on 10 July 2010. Talks for a civil nuclear cooperation pact also commenced for the first time. The Action Plan was an offshoot of the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation signed in October 2008 between the two countries.

Among the key areas discussed within the 2+2 dialogue was greater cooperation in combating piracy. India and Japan already exchange escort

schedules for ships, but are now looking at increased cooperation as the threat of piracy is moving beyond the Gulf of Aden. The two sides agreed to step up cooperation between their coast guards and to hold bilateral naval exercises. Among other issues that were discussed were non-traditional threats to security and intelligence training as part of counterterrorism efforts.¹⁴

The Action Plan gave a new direction to the bilateral security cooperation that aims to enhance information exchange and policy coordination on security issues in the Asia-Pacific region; promote open, transparent and inclusive regional cooperation in Asia, besides strengthening multilateral mechanisms in Asia such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), among others. It also envisaged an annual strategic dialogue at the Foreign and Defence Ministers' level; regular consultations between the National Security Advisor (NSA) of India and his Japanese counterpart; regular reciprocal visits between Service Chiefs of the two sides; periodic Staff talks between the respective ground forces and navies; and an annual bilateral naval exercise to enhance cooperation and "core ability" for maritime operation and disaster relief.

Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko visited India in late December 2011, having assumed the office in September 2011. China reacted sharply to his pronouncements during the visit. *China Daily* quoted security analysts as saying that Noda's India visit, aimed at boosting bilateral strategic ties, was part of Tokyo's attempt to strengthen its alliances with Asia-Pacific nations to "contain" China.

Security Cooperation/Joint Naval Exercise

Top leaders of the two countries have been stressing the importance of security in the Indian Ocean. Prime Minister Noda and his Indian counterpart agreed that Japan's MSDF and the Indian Navy would conduct joint exercises in 2012. Closer naval cooperation between the two countries as a balancer of power in Asia will be determined by events principally in East Asia and the Indian Ocean. As much as 97 per cent of India's international trade by volume and almost all of Japan's international trade is sea-borne. It is therefore necessary for the two countries to agree to build a stable, liberal, rule-based order in Asia.

India's Defence Minister A.K. Antony and Minister for External Affairs, S.M. Krishna, visited Japan in November 2011 ahead of Noda's India visit in December 2011, during which Antony proposed the joint naval exercise. The

decision to hold joint naval exercises from 2012 is a sign that the two countries have graduated from emphasizing shared values to seeking to jointly protect shared interests. The move is seen as aimed to counter Beijing's strategic inroads into the Indian Ocean Region. So far, Japan had been engaged only in multilateral naval exercises that included India. The two navies also conducted routine passage exercises (PASSEX) during the visit of Japanese ships to Indian ports.

India has been engaged in bilateral naval cooperation with several South-East Asian countries. Under a trilateral arrangement, the navies of India, China and Japan have been coordinating to strengthen anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden since January 2012. South Korea is likely to join the "third cycle" of the "escort and convoy coordination" plan set in motion in July 2012.

With the MSDF boosting ties with the Indian Navy, Japan's Ground Self-Defense Force and Air Self-Defense Force will also promote dialogue with their Indian counterparts. The Self-Defense Forces have conducted joint exercises with the United States, Australia, South Korea and Russia. With India, Japan held goodwill naval exercises under a trilateral framework with the United States in 2007. On the occasion of the Japan-India summit talks in December 2009, the two countries agreed to hold bilateral naval exercises, but this failed to materialize till June 2012.

Since October 2008, Indian warships have ensured the safe passage of close to two thousand vessels from around fifty countries through the Gulf of Aden. With the pirates now also operating around 1100 nautical miles away from Somalia's coast in the Arabian Sea, the Navy and Coast Guard have actively thwarted many pirate attacks on merchant vessels near Indian shores too.

Between the coast guards of India and Japan, combined exercises on anti-piracy, search and rescue etc. have been conducted since 2000. The two coast guards conducted a joint exercise at Chennai in January 2012. The heads of the two coast guards visit each other almost every year. They exchanged a Memorandum on Cooperation on the occasion of Commandant Ishikawa's visit to India in November 2006.

In April 2011, Japan pulled out of the trilateral *Malabar* Exercise between India, US and Japan at the last moment due to the Fukushima nuclear crisis. Japan had earlier agreed to play host to Indian and the US naval warships by holding the exercise near the port city of Okinawa. The first such bilateral naval exercise and the congruence of the two defence forces is a "win-win for both". Since India and Japan have increased mutual cooperation and

interoperability and conformability with NATO procedures, the joint drill will bring out the best for the two nations.

The first-ever maritime exercise between India and Japan commenced on 9 June 2012 off the coast of Tokyo. Two destroyers, one maritime patrol aircraft and a helicopter of the MSDF participated in the exercise, where *INS Rana*, *INS Shivalik*, *INS Karmukh* and fleet tanker *INS Shakti* represented India. The two-day exercise was held after the Indian warships started exiting Tokyo after a four-day port call.¹⁵

India and Japan also jointly patrol the Malacca Straits to counter piracy operations there. They have also decided to enhance cooperation in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and launch a maritime dialogue mechanism. The warships of the two navies have started coordinated patrolling in the Gulf of Aden to be able to escort a larger number of cargo vessels passing through the troubled waters there.

The Indian government has been deploying Navy warships in the East in keeping with India's "Look East" policy to strengthen military ties with the countries of this strategically important region. In addition, India and Japan have established a trilateral strategic dialogue with the United States. The first such trilateral dialogue took place in Washington in December 2012.

The China Factor

China's assertive stances on regional and bilateral issues are driving the other countries in the region to engage in a hedging strategy. While India has territorial problems with China, Japan has disputes with China over the Senkaku islands as well as the history issues. China's assertive stance in the South China Sea makes the smaller countries in the region nervous and makes the area a major flashpoint. China has not stated that it abjures the use of force to assert its claims.

Japan's traditional security concerns have remained in the following areas:

- Implications of the rise of China as a modern military power with its extended strategic reach and periodic belligerent utterances on Taiwan, Tibet and assertive policy on disputed islands in the South China Sea and Sparty Islands, where some other South-East Asian countries have contending claims;
- North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities and Beijing's suspected complicity in furthering Pyongyang's nuclear programme;

- The emergence of Asia as the epicentre of nuclear non-proliferation, with North Korea, Myanmar and Pakistan as frontrunners; and
- The threat to Japan's maritime trade and energy supplies from state and non-state actors.

Japanese defence planners have viewed the security concerns Japan faces from three different angles: as “considerable threat”, “realistic threat” or “potential threat”. In India's threat perception, however, China is not seen as a threat but more of a concern for Asian stability. Yet, India and Japan are much in agreement in standing together to face China. Japan may be looking to India as a hedging strategy in its China policy. Though the China factor may be driving both India and Japan to forge a strategic bond, Prime Minister Singh has taken pains to clarify that the “comprehensive security” framework between India and Japan is not directed against China.¹⁶ Neither can, however, overlook Chinese incursions into the Indian waters and in its neighbourhood.

Striving to wriggle out from its long economic slump, the Japanese leadership is under immense pressure to look for new economic measures to resuscitate the economy. With a view to this, Japan lifted the ban on arms exports, paving the way for its air and maritime forces to upgrade their hardware capability. China sees this as posing a threat to itself and interprets Japan's decision as possibly reshuffling the international arms trade, and that Japan's competitiveness in electrical equipment for military use may squeeze the other countries' market share. As Japan now breaks into a politically restricted area, China perceives that Japan's move would create uncertainties in the Asia-Pacific region. China also fears that Japan sought and obtained Washington's approval to relax the ban on arms exports as a part of their joint Asia-Pacific strategy to “contain” China. That India would be a possible market for Japanese arms manufacturers also concerns China.

Conclusion

The joint statement issued at the end of Noda's visit spoke of bolstering cooperation on security and economic issues. The decision to conduct joint naval exercises in June 2012 to beef up maritime security in the Indian Ocean and to protect the SLOCs with a view to secure maritime commerce is a landmark development. Coming ahead of the sixtieth anniversary in 2012 of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries and amid China's growing military and economic might in the region, Noda's India visit was extremely significant.

While strengthening the strategic partnership is welcome, the ties must move to the next level so that it demonstrates tangible results. This can be done by starting trade in defence technology because security cooperation without accruing economic benefits would not be sustainable for long. If Japan can relax its rules to facilitate arms transfer, sale of defence technologies and joint production of military hardware, the strategic component of the bilateral ties would get sharper teeth. Despite being a leading world producer of advanced military technologies, Japan has constraints to engage in arms trade with India. Japan's leading conglomerates such as Mitsubishi, Ishikawajima, Toshiba and Kawasaki have advanced military technologies and have joined with leading US defence companies in various sectors for producing military hardware for American forces. India would expect similar defence relationships that would serve the twin objectives of beefing up the defence ties and yielding economic dividends to both, thereby reinforcing their complementarities.⁵

Notes

- ¹ Rajaram Panda, 2012, "India and Australia: Security Dynamics in the Asia Pacific", *Asia-Pacific Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, May, pp. 131–2.
- ² Rajaram Panda, 2010, "India and Japan: Exploring Strategic Potentials", *Journal of Defence Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, October, p. 92.
- ³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, 2000, "Japan-India Summit Meeting (Summary)", 23 August, at http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0008/india_s.html
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, 2011, "Japan-India Joint Declaration", 10 December, at <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/joint0112.html>
- ⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, 2005, "Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's Visit to India and Pakistan (Summary and Outcome)", 9 May, at <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/pmv0504/summary.html>
- ⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, 2005, "Japan-India Partnership in a New Asian Era: Strategic Orientation of Japan-India Global Partnership", 29 April, at <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/partner0504.html#eight>
- ⁸ For an analysis on this, see Vivek Pinto, "A Strategic Partnership Between Japan and India?", *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, at <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Vivek-Pinto/2321>

- ⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, 2007, “Joint Statement on the Roadmap for New Dimensions to the Strategic and Global Partnership Between Japan and India”, 22 August, at <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/joint-2.html>
- ¹⁰ See Abe Shinzo, 2007, *Towards a Beautiful Country: My Vision for Japan*, Vertical, October, p. 320.
- ¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, 2008, “Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation Between Japan and India”, 22 October, at http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/pmv0810/joint_d.html
- ¹² For the Japan-Australia security relationship, see Takashi Terada, 2010, “Evolution of the Australia-Japan Security Partnership: Towards a Softer Triangle Alliance with the United States?”, *Asie.Visions* 35, October, Ifri Center for Asian Studies, Paris, p. 29.
- ¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, 2009, “Joint Statement by Prime Minister Dr. Yukio Hatoyama and Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh – New Stage of Japan-India Strategic and Global Partnership”, 29 December, at <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/pmv0912/joint.html>
- ¹⁴ “India, Japan Hold 2+2 Dialogue”, *Economic Times*, 7 July 2010, at http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2010-07-07/news/27580670_1_india-and-japan-dialogue-foreign-office-consultations
- ¹⁵ “India, Japan to Hold First Joint Naval Exercise Today”, 9 June 2012, http://zeenews.india.com/news/nation/india-japan-to-hold-first-joint-naval-exercise-today_780682.html
- ¹⁶ Rajaram Panda, 2011, “Changing Dynamics of India-Japan Relations: Future Trends”, in Akihiro Iwashita, ed., *India-Japan Dialogue: Challenges and Potential* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, July), p. 8. Also available at http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/rp/publications/no06/01_Panda.pdf

