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Veer Guardian: The India-Japan Air Force Bonhomie

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Two major democracies, India and Japan, have been natural allies for decades. In recent times, they have intensified their desire to play a greater role in increasing their security and defence cooperation, along with the security of the Indo-Pacific region. Both nations cooperate extensively to ensure stability for a free and open Indo-Pacific region through connectivity initiatives and increasing security partnerships. With regard to the deepening defence cooperation between the two nations, both India and Japan conducted the maiden bilateral joint air exercise, Veer Guardian 2023, from January 12 to 26¹. The air exercise was aimed at promoting air defence cooperation between the two countries². Japan also wishes to promote training and exercises along with collaboration in their defence equipment and technology with India.

The Indo-Pacific region has been facing multifarious challenges due to China's expansionist behaviour and shifting balance of power politics, which further leads to ambiguity in terms of the world order. Various countries, like Japan, have attempted to step up and increase their security and defence strategies and cooperation to address such challenges. Japan recently released its revised National Security Strategy (NSS), which aims at boosting defence spending and possessing counterstrike capabilities to deal with the growing threats from neighbours like China, North Korea, and Russia.

In recent years, the India-Japan security partnership has elevated beyond the QUAD. Both countries released a joint declaration on security cooperation in 2008, and ever since then, they have achieved remarkable progress in joint efforts for security-related and defence relationships. The year 2019 was marked as a major turning point in bilateral security relations between India and Japan. Both countries carried out the 2+2 foreign and defence ministers' meeting. Japan was the second country with which India had such an engagement after the US. India and Japan also signed the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) in 2020, which aims at promoting the reciprocal provision of logistical supplies and services between Japan's Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) and the Indian Army. With the help of the ACSA's logistical support, Japan and India have become better equipped to work together, along with other nations, to strengthen maritime security cooperation throughout the Indo-Pacific.

In 2022, both countries held their second 2+2 ministerial defence dialogue in Tokyo, which focused on India's commitment to enhance bilateral security cooperation between the two Asian democracies³. The dialogue focused on the future pathway for collaboration in the areas of security and defence, joint military exercises, and emerging technologies such as in the field of information communication technology (ICT), 5G, telecom security and smart-cities technologies.

Veer Guardian 2023 was one of the new initiatives that came up through these discussions. Veer Guardian took place at the Hyakuri air base in Japan and involved combat drills between the Indian Air Force (IAF) and the Japan's Air Self-Defence Forces (JASDF). The JASDF has been following a pacifist and defensive security policy since World War II. However, in recent times, developments in Japan's defence capabilities and the need to increase its military strength led to an evolution in the strategy of the JASDF in the direction of attempting to become quite offensive through planning to acquire counter-strike capabilities to be protected against an enemy attack.

India and Japan have been conducting bilateral exercises between their navies and armies, named JIMEX, Dharma Guardian, Malabar, and MILAN naval exercises. Now Veer Guardian is the first exercise of both countries' air forces. This exercise is another step towards deeper defence collaboration between India and Japan. The bilateral defence relationship is also crucial for ensuring a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific amidst China's expansionist behaviour in the region through regular training defence exercises and deeper partnership between India and Japan. Moreover, the manner in which the first fighter exercise is conducted will pave the way for considerably more collaboration and interoperability between the two countries' air forces. This is quite clear with the way India is bolstering its military like Japan to tackle their security threats which includes China.

While the IAF contingent participated with Su-30 MKI aircraft, the JASDF took part with its F-2 and F-15 aircraft. One IL-78 flight refuelling aircraft and two C-17 Globemaster strategic airlift transport aircraft were added to the IAF fighter contingent. The drill required meticulous preparation and deft execution from both air units. In both visual and beyond visual range situations, the IAF and JASDF participated in air combat manoeuvres, interception, and air defence missions. To better comprehend one another's operating philosophies, the two participating air forces' pilots also flew in each other's fighter jets⁴.

According to a statement released by the Indian Ministry of Defence, both contingents "not only shared their expertise on current issues of counter-terrorism operations but also took advantage of this opportunity to share their experiences on the exploitation of disruptive technologies like Drone and Anti-Drone weapons."⁵

China's rising military power and its supposed claims to nearly all of the disputed South China Sea have led India, the US, and other world powers to focus on ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific. The great power conflict between the US and China has brought nations like India, Japan, the US, and Australia closer to constructing a new security architecture in the form of the QUAD.

Moreover, the fourth edition of the India-Japan training exercise, 'Dharma Guardian' was also held from February 17 to March 2, 2023. This was aimed at enhancing the defence cooperation between the Indian Army and Japan's Ground Self-Defence Forces. The Ministry of Defence stated in a release that the joint exercise would allow the two armies to share best practices in tactics, techniques, and procedures for conducting tactical operations under a UN mandate as well as develop interoperability, bonhomie, camaraderie, and friendship between the two armies. Defence training exercises like Veer Guardian and Dharma Guardian are vital for deeper India-Japan cooperation keeping in mind rising security threats in the international arena.

NOTES:

¹ "IAF's Joint Air Defence Exercise with Japan, 'Veer Guardian 2023' Concludes", *Ministry of Defence*, January 27, 2023, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1894080>. Accessed on February 27, 2023.

² India and Japan to hold joint air exercise Veer Guardian 2023', *Air Force Technology*, January 09, 2023, <https://www.airforce-technology.com/news/india-japan-exercise-veer-guardian2023/>. Accessed on March 04, 2023

³ Prof Rajaram Panda, Second India-Japan 2+2 Dialogue: Major Take Away, *Vivekananda International Foundation*, September 20, 2022, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2022/september/20/second-india-japan-2-2-dialogue-major-take-away>. Accessed on March 02, 2023.

⁴ "IAF's Joint Air Defence Exercise with Japan, 'Veer Guardian 2023' Concludes", *Ministry of Defence*, January 27, 2023, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1894080>. Accessed on March 04, 2023.

⁵ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, 'Veer Guardian 2023: Maiden India-Japan Air Exercise to Begin', *The Diplomat*, January 10, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/veer-guardian-2023-maiden-india-japan-air-exercise-to-begin/#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20statement%20issued%20by%20the%20Indian,exploiting%20disruptive%20technologies%20like%20Drone%20and%20Anti-Drone%20weapons.%E2%80%9D>. Accessed on March 01, 2023