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Japan's Increasing Military Posture in Asia

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Japan had once been criticised for its wartime atrocities in Asia, but the region later embraced Japanese economic assistance. Japanese economic assistance to Southeast Asia has been the engine of regional economic resurgence, which helped them emerge as one of the leading economies in the world. The Chinese aggression in territorial disputes in the South China Sea has again brought Japan closer to Southeast Asia, now militarily. This is also part of Tokyo's expanding military posture as a 'normal' military power in Asia, now ready to contribute externally for security purposes. The military contribution still works under the pacifist constitution, however, it collaborates with like-minded countries to counter the increasing Chinese threat not only for its own security but also for the Pacific regional countries.

With the Camp David tripartite agreement between the US, South Korea, and Japan, historical animosities by South Korea against Japan's wartime atrocities have been replaced by geostrategic concerns and America's security interests in the Pacific.¹ Both South Korea and Japan are the only military allies of the US in Asia, and are critical states in the US' military strategy against China in a Taiwan fiasco. At the same time, the US expects Japan to contribute more militarily for regional security rather than just depending on the US umbrella. An AUKUS (Australia-United Kingdom-US) model military consortium has been created by Japan, the United Kingdom, and Italy to develop sixth-generation fighter aircraft, known as the Tempest by the UK. Members of both groupings are the US' close military allies.

During his recent visit to the Philippines, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida offered patrol vessels and a coastal surveillance radar under a newly launched 600-million yen (US \$4 million) Official Security Assistance (OSA) grant to the Philippines.² Japan introduced OSA this fiscal year for like-minded countries 'for the benefit of armed forces and other related organisations by providing materials and equipment as well as assistance for infrastructure development'.³ The OSA was officially included in its New National Security Strategy of December 2022, to be delivered based on the security needs of the friendly countries. Tokyo has earmarked around two billion yen (approximately US \$15 million) for the OSA for the fiscal year ending March 2024.⁴ Tokyo has included four nations to receive the OSA assistance; other states being Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Fiji. Tokyo believes these countries will become part of Japan's conducive 'security environment' in the Asia-Pacific region amid China's increasing military assertiveness in the Pacific theatre. In his two-nation tour, Kishida met with his Malaysian counterpart Anwar Ibrahim, and both leaders vowed to 'promote bilateral defence and maritime security cooperation' and decided to 'accelerate adjustments toward the implementation of the OSA'.⁵

Philippines is expected to be the first country to receive OSA assistance. While Bangladesh has been offered 'patrol boats', it has not yet described the number and the type of boats, except for referring to them

as ‘four small boats’ that will be delivered next year.⁶ The Japanese military equipment will help the Philippine Navy monitor the South China Sea and Luzon Strait, ensuring the security of sea lanes that are also important to Japan. Friction between China and the Philippines has increased in recent times, with the latest issue being a collision in October between a Chinese coast guard ship and a Philippine patrol ship which was on a resupply mission in a disputed part of the South China Sea under the Philippines' control.⁷ Manila accused the collision as ‘intentional’ to provoke the Philippines to escalate the tension.⁸

Just prior to the PM’s visit, Japan’s Ministry of Defence announced the delivery of the first of four radar units manufactured by Mitsubishi Electric Corporation to the Philippines under a 2020 contract. This is the first transfer of domestically produced defence equipment to a foreign country after Japan lifted restrictions on their export in 2014. Besides, Fumio Kishida and Philippine President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. have agreed to start negotiations on a reciprocal access agreement that will allow the deployment of Japanese Self Defence Forces on the Philippine soil. This is the first time after the Second World War that Japan will deploy its defence forces in an Asian country. Japan and Australia signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) in January 2022, and Tokyo plans to deploy several fighter aircraft, including the F-35, F-15, and F-2, for a specific duration in Australian air force bases.⁹ Japan is expanding its military wings in Asia in collaboration with like-minded countries that will boost its image as a major regional challenger to China in the Asia-Pacific region.

Japan aims to bolster its own defence capabilities and increase synergy with the militaries of defence partners, especially the US and Australia, in joint operation mechanisms. Japan has allocated 896.8 billion yen (US \$6.7 billion) for defence-related research and development in fiscal year 2023 for developing new missiles and boosting the capabilities of existing ones, apart from purchasing 400 long-range Tomahawk cruise missiles from the US.¹⁰

Conclusion

With two decades of strategic bond, India and Japan are poised to become close defence partners in Asia to counter the Chinese challenge. However, defence technology cooperation is the one area that both countries have exploited the least. Japan has large and renowned defence contractors, like Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and Kawasaki Heavy Industries, and thousands of small and medium companies involved in defence manufacturing. India allows foreign direct investment in the defence sector under the ‘Make in India’ initiative and can focus on joint ventures with Japanese companies, especially in the high-tech sector. Similarly, India can collaborate with Japanese companies to indigenously develop marine gas turbine engines being used in Russian-origin warships, which India currently import from Ukraine. Public sector undertaking Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) has partnered with private players to develop gas turbine engine, and can seek

collaboration with Japanese companies not only for marine engines but also other hardware that India imports from abroad.

Notes:

¹ Demetri Sevastopulo, "Camp David pact eases Japan-South Korea tensions", *Financial Times*, August 19, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/1e1652d5-452c-48fc-b726-1251b707c8e6>, Accessed on November 10, 2023.

² JII, "Japan to offer surveillance radars to the Philippines", *The Japan Times*, November 1, 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/11/01/japan/japan-philippines-surveillance-radars/>, Accessed on November 10, 2023.

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Official Security Assistance (OSA)", Government of Japan, Tokyo, November 13, 2023, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/ipc/page4e_001366.html#:~:text=In%20order%20to%20achieve%20this,armed%20for ces%20and%20other%20related, Accessed on November 15, 2023.

⁴ Riyaz ul Khaliq, "Japan to provide military aid to 'like-minded nations'", *Anadolu Agency*, April 5, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/japan-to-provide-military-aid-to-like-minded-nations-/2864128>, Accessed on November 12, 2023.

⁵ "Japan and Malaysia vow to boost defense tie amid China's rise", *Nikkei Asia*, November 5, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-and-Malaysia-vow-to-boost-defense-tie-amid-China-s-rise>, Accessed on November 10, 2023.

⁶ "Japan includes Bangladesh in OSA to enhance defence cooperation", *Prothomalo*, August 26, 2023, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/bninnf1q8u>, Accessed on November 15, 2023.

⁷ Associated Press, "Philippines protests after a Chinese coast guard ship nearly collides with a Philippine vessel", *The Hindu*, October 6, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/philippines-protests-after-a-chinese-coast-guard-ship-nearly-collides-with-a-philippine-vessel/article67389343.ece>, accessed on November 20, 2023.

⁸ Enrico Dela Cruz and Karen Lema, "Philippines says Chinese coastguard 'intentionally' collided with its boats", *Reuters*, October 23, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-tells-china-stop-provocative-actions-south-china-sea-2023-10-23/>, Accessed on November 16, 2023.

⁹ Ashish Dangwal, "Japan To Deploy F-35, Air-Superiority F-15 Fighters To Australia Amid Flaming Tensions With China: Reports", *EurAsian Times*, November 2, 2023, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/japan-to-deploy-f-35-air-superiority-f-15-fighters-to-australia-amid-flaming-tensions-with-china-reports/>, Accessed on November 10, 2023.

¹⁰ "Japan to triple defense R&D to bolster counterstrike capability", *Nikkei Asia*, December 24, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Japan-to-triple-defense-R-D-to-bolster-counterstrike-capability#:~:text=TOKYO%20%2D%20Japan%20will%20allocate,the%20draft%20budget%20approved%20Friday>, Accessed on November 10, 2023.