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India-Japan Edging Closer: Strategic Ties

Simran Walia

Associate Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies



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India and Japan, two prominent Asian democracies, have completed 10 years of their Special Strategic and Global Partnership this year.¹ India-Japan ties witnessed a major boost in their strategic cooperation within this special partnership signed under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Japan's former PM Shinzo Abe. Beyond commercial ties, India and Japan have a deep people-to-people connection and a shared history of Buddhist beliefs. The bilateral alliance between Japan and India is expanding its reach and exhibiting multifaceted collaboration.

India's External Affairs Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar, visited South Korea and Japan from March 5-8.² The 16th India-Japan Strategic Dialogue was held between Jaishankar and his counterpart Yoko Kamikawa, wherein they reviewed the India-Japan special strategic and global partnership. The two Ministers decided to improve mutual understanding between our two peoples and adapt the relationship to the needs of the modern world. One of the major priorities of Jaishankar's visit to Japan was strengthening the semiconductor supply chain and further pitching India as a reliable destination for chip manufacturing.

It is also in the shared interest of the two powers that are integral to Asia's multipolarity that the general balance continues to favour liberty, transparency, openness, and rule-based order. Japan aims to continue working with India to realise a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" based on the rule of law and together develop solutions for the problems facing the global community at this momentous time in history. Members of the Quad Framework, which includes Australia, the United States, Japan and India, have quickly deepened their bilateral ties as a result of their shared worry over China's more assertive military and economic actions in the area.

Regular high-level meetings, such as those involving foreign ministers and leaders, have been the foundation of Japan-India relations. The two ministers agreed to continue these discussions regularly. They affirmed that they would aggressively foster cooperation in the field of defence technology and equipment. Given the dire security situation of recent years, they welcomed the holding of combined security training exercises by all of their armed forces. The two Ministers also agreed to increase the opportunities for collaboration in cyberspace, space, and other emerging areas.

Since they independently presided over the Group of 20 (G20) and the Group of Seven (G7), two important international organisations, last year was noteworthy for Japan and India. These interactions played a pivotal role in reinforcing the unique strategic alliance and worldwide

cooperation between Japan and India and establishing a roadmap to achieve the maximum potential of our mutually beneficial relationship.

Japan is an important ally in India's economic transformation. Japan's representatives requested to enhance India's business climate to help the country reach its 5-trillion-yen goal of receiving funding and investment from the Japanese public and private sectors.³ Minister Kamikawa further clarified that last month saw the signing of exchanges of notes (E/N) for nine Official Development Assistance (ODA) loans, one of which was for a project aimed at developing Northeast India.⁴

Through well-established platforms such as the India-Japan Comprehensive Economic and Partnership Agreement, Industrial Competitiveness Partnership, the India-Japan Digital Partnership, the India-Japan Clean Energy Partnership, the Semiconductor Supply Chain Partnership, and the trilateral Supply Chain Resilience Initiative with Australia, there is tremendous potential for India and Japan to work together on economic security and growth. Japan has been an essential partner in India's infrastructure development, contributing to landmark projects like the Mumbai Trans Harbour Link and the Mumbai-Ahmedabad high-speed rail corridor. Mutual growth is facilitated by the complementarities between India's trained human resources and the demands of the Japanese economy. Furthermore, initiatives such as 'Make in India' and 'Export from India' are potential possibilities to be explored by Japanese companies to bolster India-Japan economic trade ties and investment further. Japan needs to recognise India's growth story for stronger ties between the two nations.

Both nations are widely focused on enhancing people-to-people ties as well. India and Japan declared 2023 as the India-Japan Year of Tourism Exchange to foster cultural ties and promote interpersonal interactions. Building on the success of this initiative, 2024 is to be designated as the India-Japan Year of Tourism 2.0, with the theme 'Connecting the Himalayas with Mount Fuji.' Additionally, this year will also mark the Science and Innovation Year between Japan and India.

Both nations have been working together to bolster their defence cooperation by regularly conducting military and defence exercises through air, navy and ground forces. The Fumio Kishida administration is still hedging its bets on Beijing even though both Japan and India are directly confronted by an expanding China, and now after Ukraine Invasion, Russia is an emerging threat to Japan. Moscow is putting more pressure on Tokyo. Japan's pacifist notion is becoming a significant obstacle to India-Japan defence cooperation. Another obstacle is Japan's reluctance to give India technology, particularly in light of PM Modi's commitment to the 'Make in India' initiative to establish

India as a global economic and military power. However, through Japan's revised NSS that came out in 2022, Japan is trying to move away from its pacifist stance by considering acquiring counter-strike capabilities and increasing defence spending by 2 per cent of its GDP. This could be a further stepping stone for enhanced defence cooperation between India and Japan to cope with China's expansionist behaviour.

Way Forward

If Japan acts like a transactional power and does not share cutting-edge technology with its quad partner, the two nations will have to come up with new ground rules and the bilateral relationship will come to a standstill.

India regards Japan as a vital ally in becoming a developed country. However, the moment has now come for Japan to acknowledge that India has changed during the past ten years. The crucial election that took place in Taiwan recently and the US elections that are coming up in 2024 will determine the region's geopolitics. Additionally, given the domestic political climate and the electorate's lack of trust in Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's cabinet, as evidenced by the party's recurrent popularity ratings, there may be a leadership transition in Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) around September. The changes in regional geopolitics and the current security environment will further shape India-Japan relations, which remains to be seen. Nevertheless, India-Japan ties are edging closer as both nations are also working on setting up an investment fund together to bolster financial ties and the geopolitical bond between the two.

NOTES:

¹ Mari Yamaguchi, "India Looks to Step Up Security and Economic Cooperation With Japan, South Korea," *The Diplomat*, March 08, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/03/india-looks-to-step-up-security-and-economic-cooperation-with-japan-south-korea/>. Accessed on March 09, 2024.

² Ibid

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 16th Japan-India Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue and Working Dinner, March 07, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_00194.html. Accessed on March 10, 2024.

⁴ Ibid