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India–Japan Defense Partnership in the Indo-Pacific: Geopolitical Prospects and Challenges Under Trump

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Abstract
This article examines the India–Japan defense partnership in the Indo-Pacific, focusing on its geopolitical prospects and challenges under the Trump administration. Strengthened by shared concerns over China's rising influence and the convergence of their Indo-Pacific strategies, the partnership has evolved beyond symbolic engagement to include joint exercises, technology sharing, and defense dialogues aimed at preserving a free and rules-based regional order. At the same time, India's reliance on Russian defense equipment, Japan's dependence on US security guarantees, and the "America First" policy under Trump pose significant constraints. To sustain and deepen cooperation, both nations must enhance bilateral mechanisms, pursue strategic autonomy, expand multilateral engagements, and promote regional norms. These steps are essential for building a resilient, sustainable, and strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific amid a shifting US foreign policy landscape.

Keywords
India; Japan; Defense Partnership; Indo-Pacific; Geopolitics; China; Trump Administration

INTRODUCTION

The association between India and Japan dates back to the 6th century, when Buddhism was introduced to Japan. In 1949, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru gifted an Indian elephant to Tokyo's Ueno Zoo to boost Japanese morale following World War II. Formal diplomatic relations were established through a peace treaty in 1952, and in 1958, India became the first recipient of Japan's yen loans (MOFA 2024). Japan remains India's leading ODA donor and was the eighth-largest foreign investor in 2020 (Simran Walia 2024). The current state of bilateral trade continues to reflect strong economic ties.[1]

In the realm of politics and diplomacy, India–Japan relations have grown significantly, evolving from a "Global Partnership" in 2000 to a "Global and Strategic Partnership" in 2006, and subsequently to a "Special Global and Strategic Partnership" by 2014. During Prime Minister Abe's 2015 visit to India, both countries pledged to deepen this partnership into a profound, comprehensive, and action-oriented alliance, aligning their long-term political and strategic objectives. Their joint "2025 Vision" has since established a guiding framework for India–Japan relations in contemporary times. Prime Minister Modi emphasized Japan's pivotal role in India's economic transformation. At the same time, both sides continue to reaffirm their shared

[1]In 2024, the bilateral trade volume between India and Japan reached USD 22.85 billion, with India importing USD 17.69 billion and exporting USD 5.15 billion (IBEF 2025).

commitment to a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," highlighting their determination to collaborate on a wide range of international issues and further strengthen bilateral relations.

Thus, the favorable economic and political climate, shared foreign policy objectives, and evolving geopolitical dynamics have contributed to an increase in defense cooperation between the two countries.

METHODOLOGY

The paper employs a qualitative research design grounded in three interrelated theoretical frameworks—strategic autonomy, balance of power theory, and hedging strategy—to address two central questions: 1) why India and Japan are expanding their defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, and 2) how the Trump 2.0 administration's "America First" doctrine has influenced their security decisions.

Strategic autonomy is understood as a state's ability to pursue its national interests and formulate foreign policy decisions without undue external influence. For India, the concept has evolved from the non-alignment policy of the Cold War era to a pragmatic, multi-aligned approach in the post-liberalization period (Mohan 2003; Rej 2018), reflecting a desire to maintain autonomy while engaging with multiple powers. For Japan, although its autonomy has traditionally been constrained by its pacifist constitution and alliance framework with the United States (Hughes 2009), developments since 2014, including constitutional reinterpretation, institutional reforms, and a more proactive defense posture, signal a shift toward what scholars describe as "autonomous alignment" (Smith 2020).

Complementing this, the study applies the balance of power theory to situate India–Japan cooperation within the broader regional order. The "balance of power" refers to a systemic or subsystemic equilibrium of capabilities generated by key actors to prevent a rising power or a dominant state from achieving hegemony (Zhen & Paul 2020, 4). This perspective highlights how external pressures and power asymmetries prompt states to form countervailing coalitions in order to maintain stability and prevent the domination of a single actor. Applying the balance of power theory helps clarify the underlying motivations and strategic significance of India–Japan cooperation. As China's rise alters the regional distribution of capabilities, both countries seek to forestall potential hegemony by strengthening their bilateral partnership while simultaneously maintaining close ties with the United States.

At the same time, the study employs the concept of hedging to capture the multidirectional nature of India's and Japan's foreign relations. Hedging refers to strategies that deliberately combine elements of cooperation and competition, allowing states to manage uncertainty without fully committing to one side (Kuik 2023). It functions as a form of risk management, in which states diversify their alignments and policy instruments to avoid overdependence or strategic vulnerability (Lim & Cooper 2015; Ojinaka 2024). Beyond nurturing the India–Japan bilateral relationship, India's diversified defense partnerships, including ties with both Russia and Western powers, as well as Japan's simultaneous economic engagement with China alongside its defense alignment with the United States, exemplify hedging behavior aimed at mitigating risks in the evolving Indo-Pacific security environment.

By integrating these three frameworks, the paper analyzes how India and Japan, through bilateral defense cooperation, 1) safeguard their decision-making autonomy, 2) contribute to

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balancing dynamics against China's assertiveness, and 3) hedge against uncertainties regarding US reliability under the Trump 2.0 administration. The methodology relies on a close reading of policy documents, defense white papers, official statements, and secondary scholarly analyses, enabling a contextualized understanding of their converging yet differentiated approaches to defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on India–Japan relations, in general, and India–Japan defense cooperation, in particular, has been addressed in numerous valuable academic studies. Bajpai (2019), in his article "India and Japan: Strategic Partners for the 21st Century," situates the India–Japan partnership within the context of three major transformations in the international system: the rise of China, the backlash against globalization during President Donald Trump's first administration, and the growing impatience of the United States with its traditional allies in Asia and Europe. These shifts have compelled India and Japan to pursue more independent forms of strategic cooperation. Within this framework, their growing closeness is regarded as a strategic inevitability. Bajpai concludes that the current environment provides fresh impetus for India and Japan to consolidate their strategic partnership. In the longer term, if India strengthens its domestic governance capacity and advances economic and technological development, it could emerge alongside China and the United States as part of a global power triad, with Japan playing a pivotal supporting role, similar to the role it played in facilitating China's modernization after 1972.

Horimoto (2020) characterizes the India–Japan relationship as a "public good" for the region. Historically, the US–Japan alliance has been described as a "public good" underpinning stability in Asia. However, it has often been framed as an "unequal relationship" between a superpower and a dependent partner. In contrast, the India–Japan partnership, if grounded in the principles of equality and mutual benefit, has the potential to provide a more sustainable framework for restraining hegemonic tendencies and upholding a free, open, inclusive, and democratic Indo-Pacific. Horimoto views the present moment as a "golden opportunity" for the two countries to move beyond bilateral cooperation and assume a proactive role in shaping regional order.

Joshy M. Paul (2020) examines the India–Japan relationship within the broader context of US–China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. According to Joshy, China, through its naval modernization program and anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategy, has increasingly challenged US naval dominance in the Western Pacific while expanding its influence into the Indian Ocean. This development threatens not only US interests but also directly impacts the security of India and Japan. Consequently, both countries, classified as "secondary states" in the international system, have intensified their naval cooperation as a means to counterbalance China's hegemonic ambitions without forming a formal military alliance. The study concludes that the India–Japan partnership carries significance beyond the bilateral dimension, serving as a central factor in shaping the regional order of the twenty-first century. In the long term, India–Japan maritime security cooperation is likely to emerge as a vital pillar of the Indo-Pacific security architecture, particularly when aligned with mechanisms such as the Quad and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative.

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Situating India–Japan defense relations within the context of China's rapid rise, Keerthiraj and Sekiyama (2023), in their article "The Rise of China and Evolving Defense Cooperation between India and Japan," argue that China represents both the largest trading partner and the most significant security threat for India and Japan. According to the authors, while Japan has consistently adopted a proactive stance regarding India as a key strategic partner in safeguarding sea lanes and balancing Chinese power, India was far more cautious during the earlier period (2000–2014). During these years, New Delhi maintained a policy of non-alignment and strategic autonomy, carefully balancing its relationships with both China and Japan. A turning point occurred after Narendra Modi assumed office in 2014. The Modi government pursued a more assertive foreign policy, emphasizing national security and strategic partnerships, which encouraged India to move beyond its initial hesitancy and actively deepen security cooperation with Japan.

Keerthiraj and Sekiyama further highlight the strategic implications of this shift: India–Japan cooperation contributes to building a rules-based Indo-Pacific security architecture, enhances deterrence capabilities, and provides a form of soft counterbalance to China. At the same time, both countries have deliberately avoided forming a formal military alliance so as not to compromise India's principle of strategic autonomy or escalate tensions with China and Russia (India's principal arms supplier). In conclusion, the authors contend that India–Japan defense cooperation is a natural evolution driven by shared interests in response to China's rise. It should not be viewed merely as an "anti-China alliance," but rather as a calibrated expansion of cooperation, strengthening defense capacity and supporting regional order while preserving strategic flexibility to avoid confrontation.

Examining the specifics of defense cooperation between India and Japan, Chansoria (2023), in her article "Defense Diplomacy as a Foreign Policy Tool: Understanding the Evolving Curve of Japan–India Joint Military Exercises," analyzes defense diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy, with particular emphasis on the development of Joint Military Exercises (JMEs) between the two countries. She argues that in the post–Cold War era, cooperative security has emerged as a guiding principle, especially after the events of September 11, 2001, when global terrorism prompted states to intensify defense collaboration. Within this context, JMEs have become a critical component of defense cooperation, serving both as confidence-building measures and as tools of deterrence and strategic signaling toward potential adversaries.

In her discussion of Japan's security policy, Chansoria demonstrates Tokyo's shift from a posture constrained by its pacifist constitution to a more proactive deployment of defense diplomacy, with JMEs with India at the center of this transformation. Japan's characterization of China as "the greatest strategic challenge of an unprecedented nature" has driven Tokyo to strengthen cooperation with like-minded partners such as India. On India's side, Chansoria highlights the enduring relevance of the classical rajamandala theory, which views concentric circles of neighboring states as both threats and opportunities in shaping contemporary strategic thinking. This framework helps explain New Delhi's proactive pursuit of defense linkages to balance the influence of major powers, particularly China.

The article concludes that the series of JMEs between Japan and India not only enhances their defense capabilities and interoperability but also carries significant political and strategic weight. They send a deterrent message to China, reinforce the vision of a Free and Open Indo-

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Pacific (FOIP), and bolster the roles of both countries as pivotal strategic actors in the evolving regional order.

Next, Jojin V. John's article, "India, Japan and the Indo-Pacific: Evolution, Consolidation and Limitations of the Strategic Partnership" (2024), provides a theory-based analysis of how the India–Japan partnership operates under pressure and how minilateral architectures, particularly the Quad, shape bilateral military behavior. John characterizes the India–Japan relationship as having evolved from a narrowly defined bilateral engagement into a "strategic partnership" with both regional and global orientations, primarily driven by the discourse on the Indo-Pacific regional architecture. In this context, the article identifies four distinct phases in the evolution of the partnership: formation, realization, consolidation, and revival. These phases correspond to the broader trajectory of the Indo-Pacific concept itself—from its initial stage as a geographical idea, to its emergence as a strategic concept, and finally to its institutionalization as a framework for regional order.

Similarly, viewing the India–Japan relationship within the Indo-Pacific framework through a theoretical lens, Ghosh (2025) employs role theory. According to Ghosh, the national role conceptions of each country shape their cooperative choices: India's self-image as a "leading power" and "security provider" in the Indian Ocean both conflict with and converge toward Japan's transition from a constrained "civilian power" to a more "autonomous aligner" under the FOIP vision. The article further explains why India–Japan coordination is most evident in the maritime, logistical, and minilateral domains, arenas where role expectations are broadly aligned, while remaining fragile in the realm of hard, alliance-type commitments.

Overall, the existing literature demonstrates an increasingly robust trajectory of defense alignment between India and Japan, driven by their shared perception of China as a challenge to regional security and national interests, as well as by their respective aspirations to enhance strategic autonomy and achieve greater international standing. The analyses also highlight key bilateral and multilateral mechanisms of defense cooperation between the two countries, affirming that the India–Japan partnership is pivotal in shaping the Indo-Pacific regional order.

Nevertheless, several research gaps remain. First, no study to date has addressed the prospects and challenges of India–Japan defense cooperation under the influence of US foreign policy during the Trump 2.0 administration. Second, the frameworks of India–Japan defense cooperation have yet to be comprehensively analyzed and updated; most scholarship has focused primarily on joint exercises and defense interactions, while defense industrial cooperation has not been systematically examined.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by analyzing the foreign policies of the Trump 2.0 administration and assessing their implications for the future trajectory of India–Japan defense cooperation. In addition, it aims to map a complete and up-to-date range of defense cooperation mechanisms between India and Japan, thereby underscoring the role of strategic autonomy in the evolution of their bilateral relationship.

FOUNDATIONS FOR ADVANCING INDIA-JAPAN DEFENSE COOPERATION

Strategic Indo-Pacific Space

In the early 21st century, the Indo-Pacific region's political upheavals created a "strategic space" conducive to the advancement of India–Japan defense cooperation.

Firstly, the Indo-Pacific is currently undergoing substantial strategic transformations, primarily due to China's rise and maritime expansion. China's emergence presents a shared challenge for regional nations: to restrain Beijing's assertiveness while maintaining favorable economic relations. At the same time, China's aggressive behavior and rapid military modernization have unsettled Indo-Pacific states, prompting them to seek new strategic alliances to counterbalance its power (Fravel 2018).

Secondly, the United States, as a global superpower, has facilitated the strategic alignment of interests among its allies and partners through policy adjustments in the region. During President George W. Bush's second term, the United States prioritized the Middle East in its foreign policy agenda. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, coupled with the aftermath of the 2007–2008 financial crisis, heightened concerns about the US's commitment to multilateral engagement in Asia, often described as the "relative decline" of US influence in the region. This context provided an opportunity for a "rising" China to expand its influence, intensify US–China tensions, and create conditions for the establishment of a counterbalance to Beijing.

China's rise has manifested in an increasingly assertive posture in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. Given the geopolitical and geoeconomic significance of these seas, China's unilateral actions have raised concerns in the US over potential threats to maritime trade routes, thereby affecting the economic interests of both the United States and its regional allies.

The strategic rapprochement between the United States and India, exemplified by the 2008 US–India Civil Nuclear Agreement, which enabled extensive civil nuclear cooperation, served as a key catalyst for Japan's intent to deepen its engagement with India. Around this time, US foreign policy began shifting from a traditional strategy of engagement to one of deterrence, particularly in response to China's rising influence. This shift was symbolized by President Obama's landmark address to the Australian Parliament in 2011, later referred to as the "Pivot to Asia" strategy. Since then, a central objective of the United States has been to strengthen ties with key allies and partners, notably Japan and India.

The US's increasingly assertive stance toward China, coupled with its strengthening relationship with India, lowered barriers for Japan to pursue security cooperation with India (Bajpai 2019). Subsequently, the United States introduced the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy and revitalized the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), prompting several major nations to recalibrate their strategic outlooks. This recalibration emphasized the convergence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, thereby reinforcing multilateral cooperation among the US and its allies and partners. These shifts in the regional security architecture, in turn, facilitated the expansion of India–Japan defense cooperation.

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The Convergence of Japan's and India's Indo-Pacific Vision

India and Japan have distinct yet complementary economic and geopolitical interests in the Indo-Pacific. The Indian Ocean–Pacific connection is crucial for India, supporting half of global trade and 90% of its own trade (Mukherjee 2019), while the South China Sea is key to countering China's "String of Pearls" strategy and strengthening its maritime security posture. Japan likewise relies on these sea lanes to sustain its trade and energy imports. For both countries, the assurance of security in the South China Sea directly affects their respective strategic environments, the East China Sea for Japan and the Indian Ocean for India.

Despite differing alliance models, India's non-alignment and Japan's US alliance, both countries increasingly align in their Indo-Pacific visions, driven by shared aspirations for strategic autonomy. Japan introduced the Indo-Pacific concept as early as 2007 and formalized the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) concept in 2016, while India outlined its inclusive Indo-Pacific vision in 2018 (reaffirmed in the 2019 East Asia Summit). Moreover, their joint declarations in 2015 and 2017 reflected mutual recognition of each other's roles as autonomous actors shaping the Indo-Pacific architecture. Their responses to regional instability, particularly the rise of China, share notable similarities. While acknowledging China's economic weight, both seek to constrain its assertiveness through cooperative measures without undermining their policy independence.

Since officially designating their bilateral ties as a "natural partnership" in 2006 (MEA 2006), the leaders of both nations have consistently reaffirmed each other's roles. In 2016, Prime Minister Modi described Japan as a "special friend and a valued partner" (IANS 2016). These symbolic affirmations were followed by tangible strategic cooperation, especially as both countries grew increasingly wary of China's posture in the South and East China Seas. While Japan, as a key US ally, faces constraints in exercising full autonomy, it has increasingly diversified its strategic engagements, FOIP being a prime example, to enhance regional influence without undermining its bilateral alliance. India, in turn, balances its growing strategic cooperation with the US and its economic interactions with China by maintaining autonomy in decision-making and refraining from formal military alliances.

This growing alignment reflects soft balancing through strategic autonomy, allowing flexible collaboration without legal or institutional binding. Rather than forming a formal alliance, India and Japan coordinate through the Quad, the Malabar exercises, and shared principles, including ASEAN centrality, peaceful dispute resolution, the rule of law, and freedom of navigation, to support a multipolar, inclusive regional order.

As both countries' Indo-Pacific visions aim to establish a regional order that balances rising powers with liberal norms, their strategic autonomy enables them to engage with both the US and China. This approach sets them apart from traditional alignment models, allowing for adaptive responses to emerging threats. The India–Japan partnership, therefore, serves as a linchpin for sustaining a balanced, rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. At its core, their convergence is driven by shared strategic goals: preserving sovereignty, managing regional instability, and enhancing global stature, all while maintaining flexibility in foreign policy and strategic autonomy. Together, they play a pivotal role in shaping the region's evolving security and governance architecture.

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INDIA-JAPAN DEFENSE COOPERATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Since the 2000s, Japan has prioritized maritime defense cooperation with India to protect maritime trade routes and strengthen anti-piracy efforts, particularly following the MV Alondra Rainbow incident. This initiative laid the groundwork for broader defense ties. With the launch of the Quad in 2007, cooperation shifted toward addressing shared concerns over China's assertiveness. In its early phase, the Quad was perceived as Prime Minister Abe's political initiative to establish a coalition of four like-minded countries aimed at enhancing maritime security in the Indo-Pacific and countering China's unilateral actions at sea (Zongyou Wei 2022).

Simultaneously, statements from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs highlight this trend, emphasizing the robust advancement of India–Japan bilateral defense cooperation, which arises from growing alignment on strategic matters. This is primarily because both nations prioritize peace, security, and stability in the Indo-Pacific region (MEA 2023). Subsequently, India–Japan defense cooperation was significantly enhanced and reached new levels during Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's third term, in both bilateral and multilateral dimensions.

Bilateral Defense Cooperation: India–Japan

Defense Interactions and Defense Dialogues

The India–Japan relationship is recognized as one of the few exceptional instances characterized by consistent and ongoing interactions among high-ranking officials. India–Japan defense interactions began in 2000 with Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes' visit to Japan, which established the basis for regular high-level exchanges. Despite a pause during the COVID-19 pandemic, these connections have helped establish a robust bilateral defense framework.

Annual summits, held since 2005 following Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to India, have contributed to underscoring the evolution of strategic alignment and the institutionalization of defense cooperation between India and Japan (Table 1). The 2005 summit marked a significant elevation of bilateral relations to a global level, the establishment of annual strategic dialogue mechanisms, and the integration of defense cooperation into a shared regional security strategy.

The 2008 and 2009 summits further institutionalized defense cooperation through the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC) and the "Action Plan to Advance Security Cooperation," while introducing the 2+2 dialogue mechanism and annual naval exercises, thereby solidifying security cooperation as a lasting pillar of the bilateral relationship.

In 2014, India and Japan upgraded their relationship to a "Special Strategic and Global Partnership," consolidating the foundation of defense cooperation through formal memoranda of understanding and deepening their strategic relationship. The 2015 summit marked another milestone, with agreements on the sharing of classified information, the transfer of defense technology and equipment, and cooperation in civilian nuclear energy. Notably, this was Japan's first nuclear agreement with a non-NPT signatory, signaling a clear elevation of strategic trust and an expanded scope of collaboration, emphasizing the imperative to strengthen India–Japan security relations in response to regional threats.

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Table 1: India–Japan Summits with Outstanding Achievements in Defense Cooperation (Source: Author's compilation)

Time	High-level Interaction	Strategic/Diplomatic Outcomes
August 2000, August 2001	PM Mori visited India	Launching the normalization phase and officially bringing defense cooperation into the framework of bilateral relations, laying the foundation for a new strategic orientation.
April 2005	PM Koizumi visited India	Starting this year, the summit takes place annually. Elevate relations to the global level, establish annual strategic dialogue mechanisms and integrate defense cooperation into a common regional security strategy.
July 2006, August 2007	PM Singh visited Japan (2006), PM Abe visited India (2007)	Formally shape the "Global Strategic Partnership," create a basis for comprehensive defense and security dialogue, and open up cooperation in naval training and exercises.
October 2008, December 2009	PM Singh visited Japan (2008), PM Hatoyama visited India (2009)	Institutionalize defense cooperation through the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation and an Action Plan to Advance Security Cooperation, supplementing the 2+2 dialogue mechanism and annual naval exercises to make security cooperation a sustainable pillar.
September 2014	PM Modi visited Japan	Upgraded ties to a "Special Strategic and Global Partnership." Signed the "Memorandum on Defense Cooperation and Exchanges." This, along with the 2008 Joint Declaration, formed the foundation of India-Japan defense cooperation.
December 2015	PM Abe visited India	Signed key agreements: Agreement concerning security measures for the protection of classified military information; Agreement concerning transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology Cooperation; Memorandum concerning the Agreement on Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy.
October 2018	PM Modi visited Japan	Launched 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue and ACSA negotiations, promoted Japan-India Space Dialogue and discussed US-2 amphibious aircraft, indicating a shift towards substantive security engagement and multi-sectoral coordination.

The 2018 summit highlighted a shift toward substantive security linkages and multi-domain coordination, with the launch of the ministerial-level 2+2 dialogue and advances in cooperation across high-technology sectors, including space, maritime security, and defense equipment. Overall, the significant achievements in India–Japan defense cooperation have emerged mainly from these summit meetings.

The signing of the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) on September 9, 2020, has generated renewed momentum for bilateral defense cooperation by establishing a framework for enhanced collaboration between the Indian Army and the Japan Self-Defense Forces, particularly through the exchange of military provisions and defense logistical services. The provisions of the ACSA took effect in 2021, were subsequently integrated into the MILAN 2022 framework, and have since been applied in all exercises and visits involving ships, aircraft, and military personnel between India and Japan (Embassy of India in Japan n.d.).

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ACSA serves as the logistical foundation enabling reciprocal supply and support between Indian and Japanese forces, thereby extending their operational reach and enhancing real-time interoperability. This development not only strengthens their capacity for deployment across the Indo-Pacific but also sends a strong deterrent signal to China regarding the depth of India–Japan joint combat readiness.

As Indian Foreign Minister Vikram Misri has emphasized, the "annual summit is the highest-level dialogue mechanism and the driving force of the agenda" (ANI 2025) of the India–Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership. It is through this platform that the frameworks of defense cooperation have been initiated, elevating defense and security collaboration to a central pillar of the bilateral relationship.

Building on the achievements of the summits, India–Japan defense dialogue has progressed through six key mechanisms: the Annual Defense Ministerial Meeting, bilateral dialogue between Coast Guards, the Defense Policy Dialogue, the 2+2 Foreign and Defense Ministerial Dialogue, the National Security Advisors' Dialogue, and Service Staff Talks (Table 2).

Table 2: Defense Dialogues between India and Japan (Source: Author's compilation)

Dialogue Mechanism	Key Milestones
Annual Defense Ministerial Meeting	Started in May 2006, the event has been held annually, except in 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic.
High-Level Meeting between ICG and JCG	Initiated in 2006 under a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) to promote joint training, exchange of expertise, and professional engagement.
Defense Policy Dialogue	Started in April 2007 and has been held seven times to date (most recently in 2023). In 2023, India invited Japan to invest in its defense sector as part of the "Make in India" initiative.
2+2 Foreign and Defense Ministerial Dialogue	First held in 2019, followed by events in 2022 and 2024. In 2024, the "Dialogue on Economic Security, including Strategic Trade and Technology" was launched.
Service Staff Talks (JSST)	This includes the India-Japan Joint Service Staff Talks (JSST) and staff-level dialogues for each of the three services. The JSST refers to the dialogue between the Headquarters, Integrated Defense Staff (HQ IDS) of India and the Joint Staff of the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF). The first edition was held in 2023, followed by the second in 2024. Concurrently, the staff-level dialogues comprise the Air Staff Talks, Navy Staff Talks, and Army Staff Talks. To date, India and Japan have held six editions of the Air Staff Talks (most recently in June 2025), seven editions of the Army Staff Talks (most recently in March 2025), and ten editions of the Navy Staff Talks (most recently in July 2024).
National Security Advisors' (NSA) Dialogue	The most recent, fifth round of the NSA-level dialogue was held in November 2019 in New Delhi.
Japan-India Space Dialogue	Started in 2019 following the 2018 summit decision; held three times (2019, 2021, and April 2025). It covers space policy, JAXA-ISRO cooperation, SSA, and space security.

These mechanisms enable both parties to enhance cooperation in targeted areas and collaborate more efficiently, fostering interactions across diverse domains, including high-level exchanges, inter-service cooperation among the Army, Navy, and Air Force, as well as

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educational and academic exchanges in defense, and cooperation in defense equipment and technology.

Notably, when the 2+2 Foreign and Defense Ministerial Dialogue was first convened in 2019, Japan became the only country with which India holds both an annual summit and a ministerial-level 2+2 mechanism (MEA 2020). The 2+2 mechanism is particularly significant, as it enables alignment of defense strategies with diplomatic initiatives while expanding into economic security and technological cooperation. It represents a pivotal step in strengthening strategic supply chains, providing additional leverage for India–Japan relations amid US–China competition, and offering ASEAN a model for integrating security and economic dimensions. At the 2024 2+2 Foreign and Defense Ministerial Dialogue, both sides discussed the transfer of Japan's UNICORN warship communication antennas and associated technology to India. This marked Japan's first defense equipment sale and technology transfer to New Delhi under the 2015 agreement (Reuters 2024), opening the way for deeper bilateral defense industrial cooperation with implications for the regional military balance.

Additionally, the Japan–India Space Dialogue, launched in 2019 pursuant to the 2018 summit agreement, has advanced cooperation between JAXA and ISRO in areas such as global navigation satellite systems, space situational awareness (SSA), space security, and the establishment of international norms for outer space. This collaboration enhances India and Japan's surveillance and early-warning capabilities while strengthening their capacity to deliver public security goods, such as satellite data, SAR support, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), to ASEAN. In doing so, it reinforces the India–Japan role in shaping international space governance and constraining China's unilateral activities.

Joint Bilateral Exercises

One of the cornerstones of the India–Japan partnership is the series of joint military exercises spanning the naval, ground, air force, and coast guard domains. These exercises not only reinforce operational interoperability but also underscore the shared commitment of both nations to maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Cooperation between the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) and the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) was among the earliest forms of engagement, with informal coordination dating back to 2000. This collaboration was institutionalized through a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) signed in 2006, paving the way for the Sahyog Kaijin joint exercise, which focuses on enhancing humanitarian and environmental response capabilities (The Economic Times 2024).

Naval engagement was further strengthened with the launch of the Mutual Naval Exercise (PASSEX) in 2007. These drills, typically held during mutual port visits by Indian Navy and JMSDF vessels, are designed to enhance tactical capabilities and maritime coordination. The establishment of the Japan–India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) in 2012 marked a significant advancement in bilateral naval relations. First held off the coast of Sagami Bay, JIMEX has since become a regular, rotating exercise in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific, aiming to foster mutual understanding and strengthen maritime collaboration through increasingly complex operational scenarios (Press Information Bureau 2012).

On land, the Dharma Guardian exercise framework was introduced in 2018 as a collaborative initiative between the Indian Army and the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force

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(GSDF). This exercise emphasizes urban warfare and counter-terrorism operations under a United Nations mandate, reinforcing the two countries' shared commitment to regional peace and disaster preparedness. Air force cooperation has been promoted through exercises such as Shinyuu-Maitri and Veer Guardian. Initiated in 2018, Shinyuu-Maitri facilitates operational exchanges and mutual understanding between the two air forces. The first fighter jet exercise, Veer Guardian, held at Hyakuri Air Base in 2023, has further deepened bilateral air defense cooperation through advanced aerial combat drills.

Overall, these joint exercises not only enhance the defense capabilities and operational interoperability of India and Japan but also carry significant political and strategic implications. They serve as a deterrent signal to China, reinforce the vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), and elevate the roles of both countries as key strategic actors in the regional order (Chansoria 2023). The joint exercises, naval (PASSEX, JIMEX), ground (Dharma Guardian), and air (Shinyuu-Maitri, Veer Guardian), have established a multi-domain deterrence chain, directly influencing the strategic environment China seeks to shape in the Indo-Pacific. JIMEX, with its complex maritime combat scenarios, and Veer Guardian, with sophisticated aerial drills, highlight the growing tactical interoperability between India and Japan. This reduces China's ability to exploit strategies of "divide and isolate adversaries" or to leverage rapid deployments within a single operational domain. Most importantly, demonstrating capabilities across the critical domains of maritime, air, and land sends a strategic signal that Beijing must carefully consider before escalating "gray-zone" activities or intensifying regional tensions.

In addition, these exercises play a burden-sharing role for the United States. India and Japan's ability to coordinate independently in exercises such as PASSEX, JIMEX, and Dharma Guardian not only provides the US with more reliable partners in protecting sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and regional security but also demonstrates the strategic convergence of the two Asian powers in maintaining a rules-based order. This contributes to the expansion of the "Quad" effect in the defense sector without necessarily formalizing it, signaling that the regional balance of power does not rely solely on the United States.

Moreover, India and Japan's practice of conducting regular exercises, extending from naval operations to include ground and air forces, has reinforced their image as "strategic pillars" of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). These exercises carry normative significance by promoting transparency, multilateral cooperation, and respect for international law, thereby challenging the legitimacy of unilateral or coercive actions.

In short, the series of bilateral exercises between India and Japan not only strengthens defense capabilities and operational interoperability but also has profound strategic implications, contributing to the shaping of a regional security order that is rules-based, more balanced, and less dominated by a single power.

Defense Equipment and Technology Cooperation

Technological cooperation constitutes a key pillar reinforcing the view that the India–Japan partnership serves as a major driver of substantive collaboration within the Quad (Zongyou Wei 2022). Defense equipment and technology cooperation between India and Japan has been significantly advanced through several institutional mechanisms, notably the Joint Working Group on Defense Technology and Equipment Cooperation (JWG-DETC), established in

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2014; the agreement concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology, signed in 2015; a joint research initiative on Visual SLAM-based GNSS Augmentation Technology for Unmanned Ground Vehicles (UGVs) and robotics; and the Japan–India Defense Industry Business Forum. Japan's release of new security strategies in 2022, coupled with the 2023 revision of its defense export principles, has further revitalized bilateral defense ties, creating a more conducive foundation for enhanced technological cooperation.

Since its inception, the JWG-DETC has convened seven times, with the latest meeting held on June 26, 2023. These meetings have provided a structured platform for advancing bilateral cooperation in defense technology. Regular engagements have expanded dialogue beyond the technical domain to include formal negotiations involving the Air Force Staff and other military branches, thereby institutionalizing comprehensive trilateral discussions across the Indian Army, Navy, and Air Force. Annual dialogues between the two Coast Guards further reinforce this cooperation.

The Japan–India Defense Industry Business Forum, first held in 2017, marked key B2B engagements between Indian and Japanese defense enterprises. Growing momentum in bilateral exchanges led to notable milestones in subsequent years, including the 2018 visit of Japanese defense firms to Indian industrial defense complexes and the second B2B meeting during Aero India 2019 in Bengaluru on February 23, 2019.

These forums not only provide a platform for major defense corporations but also open pathways for small and medium-sized enterprises to integrate into the bilateral defense supply chain. Notable Japanese firms participating in these forums include ShinMaywa Industries, renowned for its involvement in the US-2 amphibious aircraft project, as well as Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and Kawasaki Heavy Industries, leading corporations in aerospace and defense systems. On the Indian side, companies such as the Kalyani Group, with expertise in artillery and defense component manufacturing, have actively engaged in discussions on potential cooperation (Kalyani Group n.d.). The involvement of the private sector enables India to reduce reliance on state-owned enterprises, which are often constrained by bureaucratic inefficiencies, while simultaneously advancing the Make in India initiative to promote domestic production and technology transfer. For Japan, private defense companies, long restricted by export policies, now have opportunities to expand into new markets and diversify their client base, thereby reducing dependence on domestic contracts. This demonstrates that private industrial cooperation carries significance beyond commercial interests, contributing to the consolidation of technological and military balance in the region. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic slowed progress between 2020 and 2023, resulting in limited activity. Bilateral defense-related business was primarily limited to minor transactions, with no significant large-scale agreements concluded (ISIC Japan n.d.).

The 2018 Project Arrangement on Visual SLAM-based GNSS Augmentation Technology for UGVs and robotics marked the first joint research initiative between the two countries. Building on the 2015 bilateral agreement on defense technology transfer, it underscored mutual strategic trust. This cooperation reflects a deep level of confidence, as both sides demonstrate a willingness to share sensitive dual-use technologies. It also exemplifies the growing convergence between military and civilian applications, opening avenues not only in defense but also in industrial robotics, disaster response, and logistics. Within this framework, research organizations and defense technology institutes such as India's DRDO and Japan's JAXA and

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ATLA serve as key knowledge platforms supporting collaborative projects. Their involvement helps create a sustainable network of experts, less susceptible to political cycles, thereby reinforcing the continuity of strategic cooperation.

However, actual defense trade remained limited due to Japan's restrictive 2014 export principles. It was not until late 2023 that these restrictions were eased, allowing the export of domestically produced defense equipment to countries with end-user authorization. In early 2024, Japan further relaxed export rules by allowing next-generation fighter jets from the Global Combat Air Programme to be sold to countries with defense agreements, opening new prospects for cooperation with India. As of 2024, however, no official transfers to India have occurred, despite ongoing discussions over the amphibious aircraft US-2 and the Soryu-class submarine. These projects have faced prolonged negotiations, primarily due to unresolved pricing issues. Additionally, Japan is exploring the export of its naval communication antenna, specifically the Nora-50 (also known as "Unicorn"), to India. If successful, this would represent a significant advancement in bilateral defense ties (Chaudhury 2024).

Nonetheless, challenges such as structural restrictions, high costs, and India's policy emphasis on self-reliance in defense manufacturing through initiatives like "Make in India" continue to hinder progress.

Multilateral Defense Cooperation

Among India and Japan's multilateral defense frameworks, the Quad stands out as the most significant. Its primary objectives are to counterbalance China, foster pragmatic cooperation, and enhance influence and standing in regional affairs (Zongyou Wei 2022). Since 2017, the Quad has aligned member states' positions on the South and East China Seas, upheld the lawful freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, conducted joint maritime exercises in the Indo-Pacific, supported Southeast Asian maritime capabilities, and established the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) to "enhance and share maritime domain awareness to promote stability and prosperity" in the Indo-Pacific. Its infrastructure initiatives also aim to reduce the appeal of China's Belt and Road Initiative by offering alternative pathways and securing strategic influence in the region (Zongyou Wei 2022).

A key multilateral element in India–Japan defense ties is the Malabar naval exercise, which began as a US–India initiative in 1992. Japan joined in 2007, marking a milestone in trilateral maritime cooperation. However, it was not until 2015 that India formally invited Japan to become a permanent participant, institutionalizing Japan's role and deepening strategic convergence among the three Indo-Pacific democracies. This evolution reflects a shared commitment to preserving maritime freedom, a rules-based order, and regional stability in the Indo-Pacific. The Malabar exercise serves as a critical platform to enhance interoperability, coordination, and trust among the navies of India, Japan, and the United States. Notably, the 2016 Malabar exercise, held near Okinawa, was just 400 kilometers from the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. It was widely interpreted as a strategic signal to China, underscoring shared security concerns and alignment among the three participating navies (Joshy 2020, 12).

Beyond Malabar, India and Japan collaborate in ASEAN-led multilateral frameworks, including the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defense Ministers'

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Meeting Plus, and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum. These efforts are synchronized to address global and regional challenges, with a particular focus on maritime security. They also co-lead the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), which is widely regarded as a competitor to China's Belt and Road Initiative, also known as the Maritime Silk Road. The AAGC seeks to establish significant maritime connectivity across the African and Indian Ocean regions, enabling India and Japan to play a more substantial role in developing a new regional security framework.

Consequently, India–Japan defense cooperation has evolved from a focus on anti-piracy operations to a broader agenda encompassing Indo-Pacific security, involving regional partners and organizations. Their collaboration has strengthened regional security, enhanced interoperability, and built mutual trust in support of their converging Indo-Pacific visions.

PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF INDIA-JAPAN DEFENSE COOPERATION

The re-election of President Donald Trump and the commencement of his second term in January 2025 have injected renewed momentum into security cooperation across the Indo-Pacific, including India–Japan defense collaboration. Although Trump continues to uphold the "America First" doctrine, recalibrating alliances and multilateral strategies, the administration's overarching objective remains the containment of China's power. Diplomatic and security measures since his inauguration have made this orientation unmistakably clear, as reflected in both direct policies and actions targeting China, as well as in the strengthening of cooperation with allies and strategic partners.

Immediately upon taking office, Trump 2.0 identified China as the central challenge to regional security and order. The administration has consistently condemned Beijing's unlawful activities in the South China Sea, opposed unilateral attempts to alter the *status quo* in the East China Sea, and openly supported Taiwan as part of its deterrence strategy (US Department of State 2025a). The US also emphasized the importance of strengthening regional deterrence through bilateral ministerial-level meetings with Japan (January 31, 2025) and India (February 6, 2025), resulting in agreements to deepen field cooperation and advance military technologies to counter coercive actions (Department of Defense 2025a, 2025b). At the same time, the Trump administration reaffirmed its commitment to implementing the Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), which was authorized under Section 1263, to enhance the defense capabilities of regional partners (US Department of State 2025b).

US defense officials have highlighted the concept of integrated deterrence through joint exercises and partnerships, designating the Indo-Pacific as the Department's top strategic theater while emphasizing China's ongoing military modernization and aggressive behavior as destabilizing to the rules-based order (US Indo-Pacific Command 2025). The United States' heightened focus on maritime security, cyber defense, and the protection of critical infrastructure further incentivizes India–Japan convergence, particularly as both countries confront overlapping threats from China's naval expansionism and cyber influence campaigns.

In parallel with its direct approach toward China, the Trump 2.0 administration has continued to emphasize the importance of strengthening alliances and partnerships. A series of high-level diplomatic engagements in the early months of the term illustrates this strategy. On February 7, 2025, President Trump and Prime Minister Ishiba issued a joint statement with Japan, announcing the launch of a "new golden era" in bilateral relations, reaffirming their commitment

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to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, and advancing regional security (White House 2025).

In addition, US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and his Japanese counterpart, Gen Nakatani, agreed to deepen military technology cooperation and enhance field coordination to strengthen deterrence (Department of Defense 2025b).

The Trump 2.0 administration has also strengthened ties with the Philippines by increasing support for Manila's defense capacity-building. In February 2025, Washington announced $336 million in defense assistance for the Philippines (Lagniton 2025), alongside plans to establish a munitions production hub at Subic Bay to bolster collective deterrence in the region. One month later, the United States announced that it would deploy anti-ship missile systems and unmanned platforms during joint exercises with the Philippines to safeguard freedom of navigation in the South China Sea (Gomez 2025).

At the multilateral level, the Quad Summit was convened immediately after President Trump's inauguration on January 21, 2025, bringing together the United States, India, Japan, and Australia. The joint statement firmly rejected unilateral attempts to alter the status quo, while pledging to deepen cooperation in maritime security, critical mineral supply chains, and advanced technologies (US Department of State 2025a).

These US engagements, both bilateral and multilateral, have reinforced the confidence of allies and partners in Washington's enduring commitments to the Indo-Pacific. In turn, this has indirectly bolstered the momentum of India–Japan defense cooperation. Trump 2.0's China-containment policies have, in effect, created a favorable environment for closer India–Japan collaboration. With Washington's "backing," both nations have gained additional impetus to expand coordination in defense, military technology, and maritime security. In this sense, the strategy of containing China not only remains central to US foreign policy but also provides a solid foundation for India–Japan relations to enter a new phase of more profound and more comprehensive development.

Challenges

Notwithstanding numerous indicators of optimism, India–Japan defense cooperation faces unavoidable challenges.

Primarily, India's reliance on Russian weapons presents a structural constraint. India ranks among the world's largest arms-importing nations, with approximately 1.38 million personnel in its armed services. Between 2020 and 2024, Russia accounted for 36% of India's defense imports (SIPRI 2025), despite ongoing efforts to diversify supply sources. This reliance complicates India's ability to integrate Japanese technology and maintain balanced foreign relations, while potentially influencing India's political positions on matters involving Russia. Sustaining a stockpile of Russian-origin weaponry requires continued cooperation with Moscow to ensure the provision of components, maintenance, and upgrades. Consequently, India's participation in sanctions against Russia or overt support for Moscow's opponents in global forums could be constrained.

Meanwhile, Japan's alignment with the United States and its firm stance on Russia, particularly following the Ukraine conflict, presents a dilemma: deepening ties with Japan risks straining relations with Russia, whereas prioritizing Russia may hinder closer India–Japan

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defense collaboration. This structural asymmetry is especially salient: India maintains a long-standing and deeply embedded defense partnership with Russia, while Japan operates within a U.S.-centric security alliance framework. India's reliance on Russian platforms, including the S-400 missile defense system, Su-30MKI fighter jets, and T-90 tanks, limits its flexibility in fully aligning with partners like Japan, particularly in areas involving sensitive technology sharing or joint exercises. Conversely, Japan's security posture is institutionalized under the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty of 1960 and reinforced by the stationing of approximately 54,000 US troops on Japanese soil (US Indo-Pacific Command 2024), firmly embedding Japan within the Western security architecture. The result is that, although both nations share concerns over China's assertiveness, their differing structural orientations, India's Russia-centric legacy and Japan's US-aligned posture, pose practical and strategic constraints to deeper defense integration.

Reliance on Russian weapons also complicates India's pursuit of an independent and self-determined foreign policy. Continued defense ties with Russia may lead countries such as Japan to question India's commitment to shared norms upheld by Japan and its Western allies, including adherence to international law and resistance to unilateral military actions. This scrutiny could impede broader defense cooperation within the regional security context.

A second challenge arises from divergences in foreign policy outlooks between India and Japan. Although both countries share apprehensions regarding China, they differ in their approaches to engagement and regional involvement. Japan, constrained by its pacifist constitution, limits its overseas military operations and emphasizes UN peacekeeping efforts. India, pursuing a non-aligned policy, seeks strategic autonomy and maintains multifaceted ties with countries including Russia, the United States, and ASEAN members. With a substantial military force and active participation in UN peacekeeping missions, India's obligations and strategic priorities may not always align with those of Japan. Furthermore, the two nations have differing regional security priorities: Japan focuses on East Asia and the maintenance of its alliance with the United States, whereas India concentrates on South Asia and the Indian Ocean. These disparities may result in divergent approaches to defense cooperation, constraining both the scope and depth of India–Japan collaboration.

The third challenge to India–Japan cooperation may arise from the so-called "Trump shock." As a key US ally in Asia, Japan's security is closely tied to Washington, making it vulnerable to abrupt shifts in US policy. Historical shocks, such as the 1972 "Nixon shock,"[2] significantly destabilized the US–Japan alliance, and similar concerns have reemerged under Trump's "America First" approach. The administration's emphasis on burden-sharing and pressure on allies to increase defense spending has raised doubts in Japan regarding the reliability of US security guarantees. This dynamic places additional strain on Japan, a nation actively pursuing strategic autonomy in defense and security. In response, Japan has steadily increased its defense budget, rising from 5,400.5 billion yen in 2022 to nearly 7,950 billion yen in 2024. The prospect of the US imposing a so-called "protection fee" not only affects US–Japan relations but also risks constraining Japan's ability to exercise full defense autonomy.

[2] The "Nixon shock" refers to President Nixon's decision to end the gold standard for the US dollar, a cornerstone of the post–World War II international monetary system established at the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944.

From India's perspective, President Trump's unpredictability poses a significant challenge. His administration may pressure India to increase purchases of US weaponry to help offset the trade deficit. Amid US sanctions against Russia, such as the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), Washington has urged New Delhi to reduce its reliance on Russian arms and shift toward US suppliers. This pressure has strained US–India relations, as the Trump administration publicly criticized India and imposed a 50% tariff on Indian goods in retaliation for its continued imports of Russian oil and military equipment (Nancy Jaiswal 2025). Such measures risk constraining India's defense budget and limiting its capacity to invest in cooperative initiatives with Japan. Although US and Indian leaders previously affirmed that their partnership constituted "the foundation of a free, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific" (White House 2025b), serving as a strategic pillar of the regional order, these developments underscore the volatility of US foreign policy under the Trump 2.0 administration. This "strategic miscalculation" could drive India closer to Russia, further complicating the outlook for India–Japan relations.

Furthermore, the tariff war has also affected Japan and other US allies. Japan initially faced a 25% tariff, which was later reduced to 15% following bilateral negotiations in July 2025 (Francis Tang 2025). Even so, the Trump 2.0 administration's tariff policies continue to undermine allies' and partners' confidence in US commitments. The economic pressures extend beyond trade, generating uncertainty in industrial cooperation and regional security. As tensions escalate, India–Japan relations risk indirect impacts, particularly on investment projects and defense supply chains. Overall, the US's profit-driven approach may constrain its regional role, thereby limiting the potential for deeper India–Japan collaboration.

The final challenge stems from China's response. From Beijing's perspective, the strengthening of India–Japan defense cooperation amid US policy uncertainties is often seen as an attempt to construct a "balancing arc" around China. Chinese officials have repeatedly criticized Japan's alignment with India and other Quad partners, with the Chinese Foreign Ministry condemning Japan's "smear attacks" on China during high-level meetings with the United States, India, and Australia in July 2024 (AP News 2024).

Chinese analysts have also highlighted India–Japan joint exercises, such as JIMEX and Veer Guardian, as sending a clear "deterrence message" to Beijing, complicating China's naval calculations in the Indo-Pacific (SCMP 2023). Moreover, the 2024 2+2 dialogue agreement between India and Japan, which aims to upgrade the 2008 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, explicitly addresses China's "assertiveness" in regional waters, reinforcing Beijing's perception that the bilateral defense relationship is increasingly aimed at containing its influence (Sachin Parashar 2024).

At the same time, the intensification of India–Japan defense cooperation may not enjoy full support from ASEAN member states. While ASEAN benefits from India–Japan security collaboration through the provision of "public security goods", such as joint coast guard training, enhanced HADR capabilities, and shared satellite/SSA data, which strengthen regional resilience without forcing countries into complete dependence on either the United States or China, concerns persist. Economically dependent states may perceive a tighter India–Japan defense alignment, especially amid the turbulence of the Trump era, as potentially polarizing regional security dynamics. These states may feel pressure to avoid being drawn into great-power rivalry, raising anxieties over the erosion of ASEAN centrality. Consequently, while ASEAN

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broadly welcomes capacity-building support, it remains cautious about the strategic implications of deepening India–Japan security cooperation in an environment of intensifying US–China competition.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, defense cooperation between India and Japan, particularly as their strategic relationship deepens, must be understood within the broader context of the Indo-Pacific region. Over the past two decades, the evolving regional security architecture, especially the rise of China and its assertive behavior, has driven a convergence of interests between New Delhi and Tokyo. At the same time, the United States has served as a critical enabler in aligning its strategic outlooks, notably through initiatives such as the Quad. Together, these factors have fostered an increasingly robust defense partnership that goes beyond symbolic engagement, encompassing joint exercises, technology sharing, and defense dialogues aimed at sustaining a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific order.

Nevertheless, in the context of President Donald Trump's second term, India and Japan are likely to encounter renewed challenges in defense cooperation. These include India's historical dependence on Russian defense equipment, Japan's constitutional and operational reliance on US security guarantees, and the uncertainties introduced by the America First doctrine, which could prioritize domestic interests over multilateral commitments. To sustain momentum and mitigate these constraints, both countries must recalibrate their strategic posture with greater autonomy and adaptability.

First, India and Japan must enhance the effectiveness of their bilateral defense cooperation mechanisms, particularly in critical areas such as maritime security, defense technology transfers, and military infrastructure development. The prolonged delay of the US-2 amphibious aircraft deal illustrates the political, legal, and economic constraints both nations face and shows how strategic linkage efforts remain limited by short-term interests rather than proactive engagement. While recent progress in bilateral defense dialogues is noteworthy, much of it remains confined to technical or symbolic achievements that fall short of generating long-term strategic breakthroughs (Rajeswari 2024). In an environment of intensifying Indo-Pacific competition, only high-level political commitments, accompanied by meaningful resource allocation and consistent policy implementation, can transform India-Japan defense relations into a more enduring, stable, and deeply rooted partnership.

Second, both nations should pursue pragmatic strategic autonomy by diversifying their defense partnerships and reducing over-reliance on any single actor. India can gradually reduce its dependence on Russian arms imports by expanding co-development and joint production with countries such as France, Israel, and Japan. Japan should continue to strengthen its domestic defense industry and reinterpret existing legal constraints to enable more proactive regional engagement. Joint investments in emerging defense technologies, cybersecurity, and interoperable military platforms would reinforce self-reliance while maintaining compatibility with allied systems.

Third, India and Japan should expand minilateral and multilateral engagement beyond US-centric frameworks. Deepening cooperation within groups such as the Quad+ and ASEAN-led forums would provide greater strategic flexibility. Both countries can jointly spearhead initiatives, including multilateral naval exercises, crisis response task forces, and regional security

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dialogues involving Southeast Asian, Australasian, and European partners. Such platforms not only reduce dependence on Washington but also cultivate a broader network of like-minded states committed to upholding regional stability.

Fourth, India and Japan must assert themselves as normative leaders in promoting the foundational values of the Indo-Pacific. They should actively advance principles such as the rule of law, freedom of navigation, open trade, and inclusive connectivity through diplomatic channels and infrastructure initiatives, including high-standard alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time, recognizing the risks of escalating U.S.-China competition, both countries should engage China through parallel dialogues, Track II diplomacy, and regional confidence-building measures to manage tensions and prevent miscalculations.

Through these combined efforts, including the strengthening of autonomous capabilities, deepening of multilateral ties, and responsible engagement with regional powers, India and Japan can build a resilient and sustainable defense partnership. This approach not only enhances their bilateral cooperation but also contributes to a stable, multipolar, and rules-based Indo-Pacific order, even amid the uncertainties of US foreign policy under Trump 2.0.

However, comprehensive assessments of India-Japan defense cooperation's achievements, limitations, and prospects, particularly under the influence of US foreign policy, require additional time and evidence. Given the volatility of the Trump administration's approach, conclusions drawn from developments at a single point in time risk presenting an incomplete picture. Moreover, while this study draws on perspectives from policy elites and scholars, it primarily relies on secondary sources, which imposes certain constraints on objectivity. Future research could address these gaps through systematic empirical studies, including comparative analyses of India-Japan defense cooperation under different US administrations, supplemented by surveys or field interviews with policymakers, defense experts, and military officers. Examining how domestic political dynamics in India and Japan intersect with evolving US policies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the resilience and adaptability of this strategic partnership.

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CONTRIBUTOR

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