

# Defense Diplomacy as a Foreign Policy Tool: Understanding the Evolving Curve of Japan-India Joint Military Exercises

Monika Chansoria\*

## Abstract

This paper delves into evaluating defense diplomacy as a foreign policy tool by exclusively discussing the nature and scope of the Japan-India bilateral joint military exercises (JMEs). While defense diplomacy and defense cooperation are concepts rooted in cooperative security, the latter took shape as an overarching concept comprising defense partnerships and collaboration via JMEs. It further highlights how the JMEs collaboration between Japan and India impacts three distinct sub-regions in Asia; namely, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia; along with the Indian Ocean Region and the Persian Gulf. The paper traces the evolving course and debates on Japan's defense diplomacy and security policy, highlighting Japan's implementation of a new proactive diplomatic policy tool – namely, the official security assistance (OSA) framework to grant financial aid to the militaries of like-minded countries. With the evolution of their respective security policies transiting to a phase wherein centrality of the Indo-Pacific is the focus, the paper provides an in-depth understanding of the Japan-India defense cooperation [JMEs] graph. The paper concludes by arguing that the Japan-India bilateral JMEs graph across Asia has proved instrumental in their expanding acceptance as key regional strategic actors, and how the JMEs constitute as a key confidence-building measure (CBM) to enhance a securitized regional order, which directly reflects upon the Indo-Pacific's balance-of-power politics.

Since the end of the Cold War, the term cooperative security has primarily been used to describe a peaceful approach to security through increased international cooperation. Its vitality got further pronounced, a decade later, following the 9/11 terror attacks on the US in September 2001, which redefined terrorism, along with the need to strengthen international cooperation to combat it in a comprehensive and sustained manner. Largely, cooperative security became a corresponding principle for international security, more so, in terms of being an understanding/commitment among a group of nations with commonality of interests and values to protect the security of individual members within their joint spheres of interest.<sup>1</sup> Resultantly, the role of international defense cooperation in meeting foreign policy goals and supplementing diplomatic initiatives gained critical consequence and momentum. While defense diplomacy and defense cooperation are concepts rooted in cooperative security, the latter took shape as an overarching concept comprising defense partnerships and collaboration via joint military exercises (JMEs), both bilaterally and multilaterally.

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\* Dr. Monika Chansoria is a Senior Fellow at The Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) in Tokyo, and a Senior Contributing Author on Asia's geopolitics for the JAPAN Forward Association, Inc., Tokyo.

<sup>1</sup> For more details see, Monika Chansoria, "Regional Cooperative Security in the Indo-Pacific: Synergizing Consultative Mechanisms across the Indian Ocean, East China Sea, South China Sea, and the Western Pacific," *Japan Review*, vol. 1, no. 2, Winter 2017.

## **Military Diplomacy, Defense Cooperation, and JMEs: Offshoots of the Contemporary Cooperative Security Paradigm**

The overarching need for cooperative security provided defense cooperation with a new role and broadened scope. Based essentially on the realist understanding of state behavior, and traditionally employed for *realpolitik* purposes by liberal democratic states, defense cooperation is the sum of many defense-related actions, collectively aimed at furthering one's national interests through active cooperation with friendly nations. Defense cooperation and military diplomacy are critical pillars of the cooperative security agenda, which, over time, have emerged as ideal tools to advance vital macro level foreign policy objectives with strategically important countries and regions. The post-9/11 world witnessed the scope of defense cooperation widening more towards a security-motivated-cooperative approach, with JMEs constituting as its most visible and predominant component in peacetime. As bilateral defense cooperation agreements (DCAs) assumed shape of becoming the most common form of institutionalized defense cooperation,<sup>2</sup> JMEs constituted their core. DCA formation saw states cooperating to obtain joint gains.<sup>3</sup> Faced with an increasingly complex security environment, states began to use DCAs<sup>4</sup> to improve coordinated responses to common security threats, and align themselves with communities of like-minded collaborators. JMEs serve multiple political dimensions, with reassuring allies and partners serving as one of the most crucial political aims.

In the post-9/11 world, confidence-building measures (CBMs), defense cooperation, and military [defense] diplomacy and engagement became not only possible, but highly desirable, given that they reduced transaction costs and made interstate relations more predictable. Participation in international level military exercises, bilaterally and multilaterally, became the highest CBM undertaken by a nation, or a group of nations. Operationally, JMEs enable militaries to understand each other's drills and procedures, and facilitate familiarization with equipment capabilities, and emerging technologies. This is particularly useful in the event of joint operations, whether in war, or, in military operations other than war (MOOTW). The gamut of defense cooperation ranges from JMEs and military-to-military training, strategic dialogues, peacekeeping, deterring war, promoting peace, humanitarian aid and assistance, disaster relief, and anti-piracy.

Above all, the most significant facet of JMEs, perhaps remains "strategic signaling" – be it bilaterally, or multilaterally. Strategic signaling in turn bolsters regional deterrence – in the context of understanding a nation's security policy, and the surrounding power politics in its region. As such, there are revisionist states that attempt to achieve their goals through coercion, which relies on the "threat of future military force to influence an adversary's decision-making."<sup>5</sup> Coercion, or any stage short of actual war, is, thus, the optimal use of military as an instrument of foreign policy.<sup>6</sup> Recall what John F. Kennedy stated on defense and diplomacy, "... the two are not substitutes for one another... either alone would fail."

Ranging from signaling military capability and resolve, to reinforcing the credibility of

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<sup>2</sup> Brandon J. Kinne, "Defense Cooperation Agreements and the Emergence of a Global Security Network," *International Organization*, vol. 72, no. 4, Fall 2018, pp. 799–837.

<sup>3</sup> For additional reading see, Charles Lipson, "International Cooperation in Economic and Security Affairs," *World Politics*, vol. 37, no. 1, 1984, pp. 1–23.

<sup>4</sup> Kinne, n. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Sushant K. Singh, "Military as an instrument of India's foreign policy: An expanding footprint," in *Handbook of Indian Defence Policy: Themes, structures, and doctrines* (ed.) (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 164.

joint defense commitments, JMEs contribute towards deterrence<sup>7</sup> driven by factors, such as geographic proximity, and/or a belief that an adversary is violating the “rules of the game” – either of which contribute to the perception of being “under threat.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the geographical location of the JMEs is often read as an indication of engagement and trust within partner nations, especially in reference to the current and underlying territorial and sovereignty issues across Asia. It has been observed that to employ JMEs as a geopolitical messaging tool that signals commitment, and/or deterrence, the visibility of JMEs remains essential.

Being the operation extended arm of defense diplomacy, defense cooperation aims at sharing operational and doctrinal expertise between the armed forces in training and capability enhancement of one’s own military. It also allows for the examination and imbibing of “best practices,” creating ability to operate alongside and enhance maritime domain awareness, through a variety of information sharing mechanisms. Additionally, defense cooperation activities signal political commitment to develop cooperative relations, promote military transparency, reduce misperception, and promote perception of common interests. Consequently, institutionalized defense cooperation becomes instrumental in helping to prevent conflict, and being an ideal tool in advancing vital common foreign policy objectives<sup>9</sup> with strategically important countries. When governments create DCAs, they reveal information about their trustworthiness and preferred institutional designs,<sup>10</sup> thereby providing transparency to mutual foreign policy initiatives and commonality in approaches.

### **The Evolving Course in Japan’s Defense Diplomacy and Security Policy**

The series of security policy announcements in and around the Indo-Pacific between 2011 and 2014, including the US “rebalance” towards the Asia-Pacific (2011); Japan’s reorientation to the Indo-Pacific (2012); and India’s upgrade of its 1992 “Look East” Policy to the “Act East” Policy (2014) resulted in promotion of bilateral JMEs with regional stakeholders. Moreover, Japan’s announcement of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy found near overlap with the revival of the Quadrilateral Initiative (*Quad*) ahead of the East Asia Summit in 2017. Coining of the term *Indo-Pacific* brought the Indian context to the fore as it links the Indian Ocean with the Western Pacific, across the Malacca Straits, to form a seamless economic and security continuum. The subsequent period witnessed purposeful redefining of the “Asia-Pacific” as the “Indo-Pacific” – succinctly identifying the geographic space and geostrategic significance between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. “Indo-Pacific” gained traction in the political lexicon and strategic thinking not just among the *Quad* members, but also the ASEAN states. Accordingly, the rising scope in Japan-India’s bilateral JMEs discussed in the later sub-section of this paper, indicates strategic realism<sup>11</sup> that simultaneously has contributed to their national security interests, as well as broader regional security goals. Beyond its immediate neighborhood, India has adopted a maritime strategy with

<sup>7</sup> Jordan Bernhardt and Lauren Sukin, “Joint Military Exercises and Crisis Dynamics on the Korean Peninsula,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 20, no. 10, 2020, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Cohen, “Threat Perception in International Crisis,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 93, no. 1, pp. 93–107.

<sup>9</sup> Monika Chansoria, “Institutionalizing Defense Cooperation Agreements: A Contextual Study of India & Japan’s First 2+2 Foreign & Defense Ministerial Meet,” *Policy Brief*, Japan Institute of International Affairs, March 30, 2020, available at [https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/policybrief/pdf/PolicyBrief\\_Chansoria\\_200330.pdf](https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/policybrief/pdf/PolicyBrief_Chansoria_200330.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Schelling’s idea of realism, termed *Strategic Realism* mainly focuses on foreign policy decision-making; Schelling argued that when state leaders face diplomatic and military challenges, they must think strategically in the interest of their state.

an interesting amalgamation of hard and soft power stretching from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea.<sup>12</sup>

The changing geopolitical situation in an overcrowded Indo-Pacific – the new economic and political center of gravity of the world has paved way for rapid shifts in the regional balance of power.<sup>13</sup> The world is multipolar economically, broadly unipolar in military terms, and muddled politically – i.e., a world that is in between orders, and adrift.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, China's growing belligerence stemming out of its economic and military rise is challenging the existing rules-based order. Beijing's relentless unilateral actions in the East and South China Seas, and quest for distant Indian Ocean footholds have drawn sharp attention to the region's maritime security.<sup>15</sup> The new *National Security Strategy* document along with two other key defense-related strategic documents announced by Japan in 2022 reflects upon the evolution of Japanese security policy in the past decades. The *National Security Strategy* document identifies that Japan is facing the "most severe and complex security environment" since the end of World War II – labeling China as the unprecedented "greatest strategic challenge" and further predicting that a similar development could occur in the Indo-Pacific or East Asia.

The centrality of the Indo-Pacific in the 21<sup>st</sup> century augurs a naval century wherein geography illuminates and sets priorities for geostrategic vitality in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), and the South and East China Seas. Making the Indo-Pacific space a larger regional objective enhances the centrality of the Indian Ocean.<sup>16</sup> In this reference, the *January 2015 Joint Strategic Vision* for the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean identified bridging the Asia-Pacific with the Indian Ocean Region. Of this, Japan, and India, increasingly, are key players and drivers of regional and global growth, from Africa to East Asia, covering the sub-regions, South, Southeast, and Central Asia. Importantly, the *Joint Strategic Vision* clearly suggested a shift in India's strategic thinking towards adopting a more public position against revisionist maritime threats, given its focus to promote partnerships in the region<sup>17</sup> – as does the latter's expanding JME graph in this region suggests.

Countries that recognize the role defense can play in forging international relations actively use their military capabilities to cooperate with other nations to enhance their influence and build a desirable security environment. It was only after the end of the Cold War that Japan began international peace cooperation activities and started defense exchanges with countries other than the United States, but it now regards strengthening security cooperation as a pillar of its basic defense policy.<sup>18</sup> Japanese security scholars have come to define defense diplomacy as "the use of assets of the national defense authorities and armed forces to cooperate with other countries mainly in peacetime to create an environment conducive to the achievement of foreign policy and security objectives." Among the activities that fall into this category include not only "security cooperation," "defense exchange," and "defense cooperation" but also the dispatch of

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<sup>12</sup> James R. Holmes, Andrew C. Winner, and Toshi Yoshihara, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-first Century*, (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Shivshankar Menon, "India's Foreign Affairs Strategy," *Brookings India Impact Series*, May 2020, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Arun Prakash, "East meets east," *The Indian Express*, October 27, 2018, available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/east-meets-east-5420476/>

<sup>16</sup> S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, (New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020), p. 161.

<sup>17</sup> *US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region*, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, January 25, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> For more details see, *Strengthening Japan's Defense Diplomacy*, Sasakawa Peace Foundation's *Policy Proposal*, Tokyo, March 2022, p. vi.

troops and personnel for international peacekeeping operations and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.<sup>19</sup> It has also been suggested to build a framework for cross-decking and officer exchanges during JMEs, which have proliferated in recent years among the major countries.<sup>20</sup> To date, Japan's involvement in cross-decking has largely been limited to the landing of shipboard helicopters on the naval vessels of other countries, although the United States, Europe, and Australia regularly dispatch helicopters and related personnel for joint maneuvers to foreign ships for extended periods at a time.<sup>21</sup> Cross-decking is seen on a larger, more expanded scale, for example, during the Pacific Partnership, a multinational preparedness mission led by the US Indo-Pacific Command.

Unlike conventional diplomacy, defense diplomacy employs hard, military power as a diplomatic tool to communicate and advance its strategic interests. More specifically, defense diplomacy enables cooperation with other countries in crisis management and areas of common interest by fostering friendly relations built on mutual understanding and trust. With countries that share strategic interests, from a Japanese point of view, defense diplomacy can enhance operational capability and deterrence, as coordination is strengthened through military cooperation frameworks and improved interoperability of forces.<sup>22</sup> It is further argued from Japan's side that joint military activities in politically disputed regions, such as the South China Sea can be a powerful form of strategic communication, sending a message to China and the littoral countries alike. The armed forces in many emerging and developing countries are often powerful enough to exert an influence on both external relations and domestic politics. Defense diplomacy can thus provide a direct diplomatic channel for military-to-military relations, with capacity building assistance and the transfer of equipment serving as important means of deepening relations.<sup>23</sup>

Japan acknowledges that India is increasing its influence with its population (the world's second largest), its high economic growth, and its latent economic power. Located in the center of sea lanes that connect Japan with the Middle East and Africa, India is an extremely important country for Japan,<sup>24</sup> that is reflected in Tokyo and New Delhi's cooperation in maritime security and various other areas, while utilizing some frameworks including the "2+2" meeting. In September 2022, the Defense Ministers of the two countries held a meeting to improve interoperability between the two and confirmed that they would continue to work together on defense equipment and technology cooperation. They also participated in the 2nd Japan-India "2+2" in Tokyo, during which it was confirmed that Japan and India would cooperate towards the common goal of realizing FOIP. Furthermore, the importance of cooperation with ASEAN, continued support for ASEAN's unity and centrality, and providing concrete cooperation for FOIP, India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) was underlined.<sup>25</sup> In addition, there is shared recognition to realize concrete cooperation in the areas of defense equipment and technology cooperation, coordination to launch the Joint Service Staff Talks to strengthen cooperation between the Japan Joint Staff and the Indian Integrated Defense Staff.

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In the field of security affairs, Japan has introduced a new proactive diplomatic policy tool –

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. v.

<sup>20</sup> For details see, Michito Tsuruoka, "Promptly Build a Framework for Joint Exercises and Collective Action," cited in Sasakawa Peace Foundation's *Policy Proposal*, n. 18, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> *Strengthening Japan's Defense Diplomacy*, n. 18, p. v.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. v–vi.

<sup>24</sup> *Defense of Japan 2023*, Annual Report, Japan's Ministry of Defense, Tokyo, p. 410.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 411.

namely, implementing its new official security assistance (OSA) framework to grant financial aid to the militaries of like-minded countries. The OSA is aimed at raising the security capabilities of developing countries, and provides assistance in areas such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance activities, counterpiracy operations, and international peacekeeping. Defense and other equipment to be used by militaries, including satellite communication systems and radars, as well as materials necessary to build military infrastructure such as ports, could be offered as well.<sup>26</sup> While the OSA's potential strategic benefits for diplomacy include enhanced engagement and deterrence, it is primarily likely to be focused on covering logistics such as infrastructure building, and material support to like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific region and helping them improve their surveillance capabilities to strengthen deterrence. In fiscal year 2023, feasibility studies are likely to be conducted for plans to provide assistance to the Philippines, Malaysia, Bangladesh and Fiji – four strategically key nations spread across the Indo-Pacific.

### **The Indo-Pacific in India's Doctrinal Thinking and Statecraft**

Post-independence in 1947, India, beginning essentially as a reluctant player, has emerged in being a significant stakeholder in the remodeled multipolar architecture of the 21st century. India's geography is open on three sides, with a history of the Indus and Gangetic valley. According to India's ancient and traditional theory "circle of states" or *rajamandala* theory, adversarial states border the ruler's state by forming a circle around it. As a reactive strategy in response, another set of states surround this set of hostile states to form an outer concentric circle ring. The second circle of states are described as the natural allies of the ruler's state against the hostile states placed between them.<sup>27</sup> Flowing from the above construct, India's foreign policy thinking and strategy in the 21st century places critical significance to its geographical spaces, envisaging its neighborhood in the form of three concentric circles. The first encompasses the "immediate neighborhood" in the form of southern Asia; the second circle includes the "extended neighborhood" stretching across Asia and the Indian Ocean Littoral; and, the third and final circle covers the entire global stage – with India being a key player in every successive circle, reflecting the *Arthashastra's* realist vision of geopolitics and statecraft.<sup>28</sup>

In the intricate and multifaceted interplay between all these three circles, India has sought to balance the influence of other powers and prevent them from undercutting its interests, whilst register its presence as one of the prominent powers and player in regional and international peace and security, in line with its core national security and strategic interests. Since its independence, what remained constant was India's adoption of an independent strategic course while adjusting tactically to the realism of world politics. In managing its relations with major

<sup>26</sup> For more details see, Hirohito Ogi, "How Japan can make the most of its latest diplomatic tool," *The Japan Times*, August 27, 2023, available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2023/08/27/japan/new-security-policy-tool/>

<sup>27</sup> The theory of the "circle of states" entails that every ruler within the international system will find a state at the centre of its own circle of states – and this ruler is described as *vijigishu*; For more details on the subject see, Akhilesh Pillalamarri, "Chanakya: India's Truly Radical Machiavelli," *The National Interest*, January 29, 2015; also see, C. Raja Mohan, "India and the Balance of Power," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 85, no. 4, 2006, p. 18.

<sup>28</sup> In the context of historical influences and motivations, the foundational premise and conceptual underpinning of Indian diplomacy can be traced back to the end of fourth century BC. *Arthashastra* delineates theories of statecraft, diplomacy, strategy, and prerequisites of politics and power, and rests on the fundamental notion of pragmatism and utility to justify state actions; for more details and further reading on this see, Monika Chansoria, "From Reluctance to Readiness: India's Foreign Policy and Strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," in Jacqueline Braveboy-Wagner, ed., *Diplomatic Strategies of Nations in the Global South: The Search for Leadership* (City University of New York and Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

and rising powers, India has opted for calibrated balancing behavior over band-wagoning and, also demonstrated a penchant for pragmatic issue-based partnerships on a case-to-case basis.<sup>29</sup> Even though India now stands ready to assume a greater international role, it is only beginning to break out of the bounds of a regional power.<sup>30</sup>

Commensurate with its “Act East” Policy announcement, India’s JMEs framework established and sustained across Southeast and East Asia has aided in improving regional security and capacity-building, and created key linkages at the regional and global levels. Additionally, defense cooperation executed through JMEs has facilitated demonstration of India’s commitment to regional stability, and showcased its defense/defense-industrial capabilities.<sup>31</sup> While its core interests may be in the Indian Ocean Region, but a presence beyond also ensures a peaceful periphery, and therefore, India’s participation in JMEs with Japan and other Southeast Asian nations contributes to broader stability goals in Asia. Besides, the geopolitical realities in the region called for Japan and India to adjust the thinking and formulation of their respective security strategies in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, especially as territorial and maritime disputes return to center stage.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, India began institutionalized mechanisms for bilateral army and naval JMEs with Japan and various other Southeast nations including Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

The evolutionary enhancement of JMEs conducted by India post 9/11 in its immediate and extended neighborhood manifests a calibrated shift in its foreign policy orientation. The 1991 “Look East” policy which aimed primarily at promoting India’s integration with East and Southeast Asia, was transformed into an “Act East” policy in 2014.<sup>33</sup> Even though it would not ideally want to be drawn into the ongoing power rivalries in the region, given its central location in the Indian Ocean, India can ill-afford to ignore issues in its own strategic backyard. The peninsular shape provides India a coastline of about 7,600 kms, 1200 islands, and an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of over 2.4 million sq. kms. Further, its island territories in the east are 1,300 kms away from the mainland, with closer physical proximity to Southeast Asia.<sup>34</sup> In the said reference, the expanse of India’s JMEs, most significantly, with Japan highlights the relative importance of regional security architectures and dialogues in strengthening defense cooperation across its eastern, far eastern, and south-eastern Asian neighbors.<sup>35</sup>

In the economic realm, the Indo-Pacific is one of the world’s most dynamic regions accounting for more than 60 percent of the global GDP.<sup>36</sup> Further, more than half of India’s GDP depends on its dealings with the rest of the world. This expanded definition of interests perfectly is in sync with Japan’s security and foreign policy agenda evident in its vision of *a Free and Open Indo-*

<sup>29</sup> P.R. Chari and Vyjayanti Raghavan, *Sino-Indian and Sino-South Korean Relations: Compulsions, Comparisons and Contrasts*. (New Delhi: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Aseema Sinha and Jon P. Dorschner, “India: Rising Power or a Mere Revolution of Rising Expectations?” *Polity*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2010, p. 90.

<sup>31</sup> For more details and further reading see, Monika Chansoria, “Joint Military Exercises and Confidence-Building: Theoretical and Applied Features,” *CLAWS Journal*, Summer 2015, pp. 59–69; and see, Chansoria, “Institutionalizing Defense Cooperation Agreements...” *Policy Brief*, n. 9.

<sup>32</sup> For related details and further reading see, Menon, n. 13, p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> The “Look East” Policy was first formulated under then-PM, P.V. Narasimha Rao in 1991 and sought to strengthen India’s relationships with Southeast Asia specifically, and East Asia more generally.

<sup>34</sup> Government of India, MoD, *Annual Report 2002-2003*, New Delhi.

<sup>35</sup> Bernhardt et al., n. 7, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> As cited in “The What, How and Why of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework,” *The Wire*, May 27, 2022, available at <https://thewire.in/economy/the-what-how-and-why-of-the-indo-pacific-economic-framework>

*Pacific*, based on free sea lanes and navigation, open markets, international law, and common rules. India's maritime trade flowing east through these waters account for 55 percent of India's total trade.<sup>37</sup> As far as Japan is concerned, the Indo-Pacific houses three of the world's largest economies, i.e., the US, China, and Japan, with 60 percent of global maritime trade occurring through its waters.

### **Japan-India Bilateral JMEs<sup>38</sup>**

JMEs aid in safeguarding not just the individual maritime security interests of the nation in question, but also that of its littoral region – thereby enhancing the entire region's net security via enhanced interoperability and confidence building. By managing, conserving, sustaining, and securing the regional maritime domain, JMEs ensure regional security and stability by means of a non-treaty-based, cooperative, and collaborative approach.<sup>39</sup> In the contemporary context, India and Japan's bilateral JMEs have become an instrumental tool in shaping a favorable and positive environment for enhancing regional net security and maritime domain awareness across the Indo-Pacific by means of identifying cooperative activities, including, joint patrols, port visits, personnel and information exchanges, staff talks and interactions, exercises with foreign navies, maritime assistance, operational interactions, and high-level maritime strategic interactions.<sup>40</sup>

India and Japan signed a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in 2008, and this bilateral relationship has witnessed significant progress in the realm of defense cooperation and security affairs. Apart from operationalization of the Agreement Concerning Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services between Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and the Indian Armed Forces, New Delhi and Tokyo signed up for the inaugural fighter exercise between the Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) and the Indian Air Force. In the realm of institutionalized bilateral JMEs, the *Dharma Guardian* is an annual bilateral JME conducted between the Indian and Japanese Army since 2018, sharing experiences of counter-terrorism operations. The *Dharma Guardian* 2019 was held at the Counter-Insurgency and Jungle Warfare School situated in Vairengte (north-eastern state of Mizoram, India). *Dharma Guardian* is a platoon-level JME focusing on training for counter-terrorism operations in the jungle and urban scenarios, enhancing interoperability and practicing tactical drills.

Furthermore, bilateral naval cooperation between India and Japan has increased in scope and complexity over the recent years and taken shape in the form of Japan-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (JIMEX) which commenced in 2012. With a special focus on maritime security cooperation, the fifth edition of JIMEX between the Indian Navy and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) was held in the Arabian Sea in 2021. In addition to the indigenously built Guided Missile Stealth Destroyer *Kochi* and Guided Missile Frigate *Teg*, representing the Indian Navy, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force was represented by JMSDF ships *Kaga*, an Izumo-Class Helicopter Carrier and *Murasame*, a Guided Missile Destroyer. In addition to these ships, P-8I Long Range Maritime Patrol Aircraft, Dornier Maritime Patrol Aircraft, integral helicopters, and MiG 29K fighter aircraft also participated in this edition of the JIMEX. The primary aim of

<sup>37</sup> Ministry of External Affairs (India) (hereafter MEA), Rajya Sabha, Parliamentary Question no. 808, "Trade through South China Sea," February 9, 2017, available at <https://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/28041/QUESTION+NO808+TRADE+THROUGH+SOUTH+CHINA+SEA>

<sup>38</sup> For details cited in this section, further see, Government of India, MoD, "Defence Cooperation with Foreign Countries," *Annual Reports* 2009-10, 2010-11, 2011-12, 2012-13, 2016-17, 2018-19, 2019-20, 2020-21, New Delhi.

<sup>39</sup> Vice Admiral MP Muralidharan, "Significance of Joint Maritime Exercises," *Indian Defence Review*, vol. 37, no. 4, Oct-Dec 2022, available at <https://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/significance-of-joint-maritime-exercises/>

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*



this JME was developing a common understanding of operational procedures and enhancing interoperability through conduct of a multitude of advanced exercises, across the entire spectrum of maritime operations, and tactical exercises involving weapon firings, cross-deck helicopter operations and complex surface, anti-submarine, and air warfare drills.

More recently, in February–March 2023, the Japanese Army (Ground Self-Defense Force) conducted the first bilateral field training exercise *Dharma Guardian* in Japan with the Indian Army to further strengthen cooperation. Earlier, in July 2022, the Chief of Staff (Maritime Self-Defense Force) held a video teleconference with India’s Chief of the Naval Staff to confirm the direction of strengthening future cooperation between the MSDF and Indian Navy. In fact, in 2022, the MSDF conducted a total of four Japan-India bilateral exercises, including JIMEX 2022. In May of the same year, the Chief of Staff (Air Self-Defense Force) held a meeting with India’s Chief of Air Staff during his visit to Japan, in which they agreed to further activate Japan-India defense cooperation and exchanges. The Japan-India bilateral air exercise *Veer Guardian 23* as well as the Japan-India bilateral transport aircraft training *Shinyuu Maitri 23* each was conducted for the first time in Japan, in January, and March 2023 respectively.<sup>41</sup>

Further, India and Japan attach growing importance to nations in and around the Persian Gulf, which could directly be attributed to the geostrategic significance and linkage of the Persian Gulf region to maritime security in the western Indian Ocean. Peninsular India is adjacent to one of the most vital sea-lanes stretching from the Suez Canal and the Persian Gulf to the Malacca Straits through which much of the oil from the Gulf region transits. The stability of the international oil market renders the Persian Gulf vital for international security. Moreover, the lack of any regional security architecture, and missing regional balance of power, given deep-rooted frictions among regional states, render the region dependent on external military presence.<sup>42</sup> In this reference, Japan and India have deployed their naval ships to ensure security of international oil and cargo shipping passing through the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman.

India’s bilateral JMEs graph with Japan has brought out the expanding presence and frequency of New Delhi’s naval engagement with Tokyo, thereby improving capacity-building, and regional security linkages. Together, they augment a much-needed regional balance of power in the Indian Ocean – the pivot of the Indo-Pacific region. While its core interests may be in the Indian Ocean Region, but a presence beyond ensures a peaceful periphery, and therefore, India’s participation in JMEs with Japan and other Southeast Asian nations has contributed to Asia’s broader stability goals.

### **Conclusion and Implications for the Regional Order**

India and Japan’s bilateral JMEs graph across Asia has proved instrumental in their expanding acceptance as key regional strategic actors, be it within South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Indian Ocean Region and the Persian Gulf. Enhanced defense cooperation via the JMEs is provenly a key foundation for strengthening regional diplomacy based on the bilateral JMEs initiatives undertaken. JMEs directly reflect regional balance-of-power politics. In this case, there is a visible coherence in the collective like-minded approach for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, especially around its maritime rim.

An overcrowded Indo-Pacific has become nerve center of geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic activity of the world – thereby making way for rapid shifts in the regional balance of

<sup>41</sup> *Defense of Japan 2023*, n. 24, p. 411.

<sup>42</sup> Md. Muddassir Quamar, “India and the Persian Gulf: Bilateralism, Regional Security and the China Factor,” *Issue Brief*, May 10, 2022, The Institute for Security and Development Policy (Sweden), p. 2.

power.<sup>43</sup> Tokyo and New Delhi are indispensable players in the Indo-Pacific at a time when the region is confronting stark shifts in its geopolitical reality. Given such uncertainties, proactive defense diplomacy initiatives and other peacetime efforts including an expanding web of JMEs are essential to ensure a secure strategic future for Japan and India.

As India and Japan work towards striving to secure and consolidate their maritime peripheries, and play a greater proactive role in Asia's regional balancing, the JMEs' formulation and policy implementation is only beginning to be utilized and leveraged as a vital instrument of defense diplomacy, and a promising micro-foundation of securing regional security priorities and order. Tokyo and New Delhi's JMEs have contributed substantially in enhancing the net security of the Indo-Pacific region, by means of leveraging cooperation via cooperative and collaborative bilateral and multilateral JMEs to augment interoperability and confidence-building, which, in turn, has contributed in enhancing the Indo-Pacific's overall regional net security.

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<sup>43</sup> Menon, n. 13, p. 10; additionally, also see, James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization*, vol. 49, no. 3, 1995, pp. 379–414.