

Japan's Evolving Defence Posture: Policy Shifts, and Implications for India

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Introduction

Japan is at a historic inflection point in its defence policy, which has been long rooted in post-war constitutional pacifism. As a policy, Tokyo restricted the transfer of military technology and lethal equipment except where it served international cooperation or its own security. The recent review of the 'Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology' marks the most significant recalibration of Japanese security policy since 1947, driven by a deteriorating regional environment due to Chinese military expansion, North Korean provocations, and the possibility of a Taiwan contingency.

A high-level Japanese Embassy delegation of the Defence, Naval, and Air Attachés briefed the United Service Institution of India (USI) on this review on 20 Apr 2026, a day prior to the Japanese cabinet's official revision of the Three Principles. This showcased a strong signal of Tokyo's intent to shape the expectations of key strategic partners, India being a priority among them.¹ Less than 12 weeks later, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi travelled to New Delhi for the 16th India–Japan Annual Summit, an event that gave concrete shape to several themes raised during the USI briefing.

A Paradigm Shift in Japanese Security Policy

For nearly eight decades, Japan's defence posture rested on the pacifist principle enshrined in Article 09 of its 1947 Constitution and heavy reliance on American security guarantees. The Three Principles, first articulated in 1960s, confined defence exports to non-lethal equipment and a narrow set of partners. That restraint is now being dismantled. Japan's National Security Strategy of Dec 2022 described China as an unprecedented strategic challenge, and Tokyo consequently authorised the doubling of defence spending to two percent of gross domestic product by 2027.² Counterstrike capabilities, deeper alliance structures, and the export control review together marked Japan's shift from a passive security consumer to an active contributor to regional stability.

Drivers of Reform

The push for reform in Japan's defence exports policy stems from several reinforcing pressures. The Russia–Ukraine war exposed the limits of Japan's ability to assist an ally in need, since existing policy barred direct export of Japan-made lethal weapons to Ukraine. Meanwhile, Japan's contribution to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Prioritised Ukraine Requirements List fund remains confined to non-lethal items.

Japan's defence industry developed almost entirely around domestic procurement, with no substantial foreign revenue, leaving many firms unable to sustain scale, profitability, or reinvestment. The shift is also a pre-requisite future programs like Global

Combat Air Programme (GCAP) with the United Kingdom and Italy as these would require Japan to export jointly developed fighter aircraft to third countries.

Washington now expects Japan to evolve from merely serving as a platform for the United States (US) power projection into an active co-provider of regional security. This strategic shift has been reinforced by growing domestic support, driven by China's increasingly assertive naval activities, North Korea's advancing missile capabilities, and escalating tensions across the Taiwan Strait. Above all, China remains the structural driver for the shift in policy. The scale of the People's Liberation Army's naval construction, its anti-access and area-denial capabilities, and its grey-zone operations have compelled Japan to recalibrate deterrence, even as Tokyo frames the shift as being consistent with its stated identity of a peaceful nation.

Official Security Assistance (OSA), Global Combat Air Programme, and Technology Transfer Framework

Japan's OSA programme, introduced in 2023, allows Tokyo to provide equipment and infrastructure to partner nations on a grant basis, without the reciprocal obligations typical of conventional assistance.³ The Philippines, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Fiji have been the early recipients, reflecting a focus on maritime Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands.

The GCAP exemplifies Japan's shift toward genuine co-development rather than simple vendor relationships. Japan's invitation to India, alongside firms such as Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and Kawasaki Heavy Industries offering submarines, maritime patrol aircraft, and precision munitions, illustrates the breadth of the offer on the table.

Technology transfer has emerged as a central pillar of this framework. The Nov 2024 Memorandum of Implementation for co-development of the Unified Complex Radio Antenna, also known as NORA-50 stealth mast, for the Indian Navy shows the relationship has moved from intent to execution.⁴

India's Parallel Evolution from 'Make in India' to 'Owned by India'

India's own defence policy has evolved in a direction that converges with Japan's new posture. Lessons drawn from the Kargil conflict and the 2020 Galwan crisis pushed India away from dependence on foreign suppliers toward the more assertive 'Owned by India' concept, which insists on domestic ownership of intellectual property and design rights rather than licensed production. This has potential to create both opportunity and friction. Japan's willingness to consider joint ventures must be reconciled with India's insistence on internet protocol ownership, and it would be achievable through genuinely equitable partnership structures.

Consolidating the Partnership

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's visit to New Delhi from 01 to 03 Jul 2026, her first since assuming office, provided the clearest test yet of whether this alignment can translate into

concrete outcomes.⁵ Her delegation of more than 50 business representatives coincided with the summit, following Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Tokyo in Aug 2025.

The two governments concluded a Joint Declaration on Economic Security and a Joint Statement on Cooperation in the Field of Artificial Intelligence (AI), elevating the relationship to a strategic research and development partnership across the AI stack.⁶ About 120 cooperation memoranda were signed between Japanese and Indian companies, with investment commitments of roughly two trillion yen.

On the defence and maritime dimension, the two leaders agreed to expand maritime exercises in the Indian Ocean, deepen ship maintenance cooperation, and pursue defence equipment and technology cooperation aligned with the Make in India initiative. A joint exercise between Japan's Maritime Self Defence Force destroyer JS Takanami (DD-110) and Indian Navy's INS Surat coincided with the visit.

The summit also confirmed cooperation between the IndiaAI Mission and Japan's Generative AI Accelerator Challenge initiative, with memorandum of understanding between Indian Institute of Technology-Bombay, BharatGen, and Japan's National Institute of Informatics, alongside an agreement between SarvamAI and Preferred Networks on large language model development.⁷ These technology agreements sit alongside, rather than substitute for, the defence industrial themes raised during the USI briefing, indicating a broad Japanese embedding within India's strategic and technological base.

Implications for the Indo-Pacific

Taken together, the USI briefing and the visit by Japanese Prime Minister point in the same direction. Japan is converting its revised export posture into an active programme for alliance building, spanning defence equipment, critical technology, and economic security. Engagement with Japan offers indigenisation pathways to India and a hedge against dependence on any single supplier, though New Delhi must insist on the ownership terms of its own doctrine.

Japan has set a pattern of building defence and technological relationships that do not require formal alliance commitments. These extend a latent political capital across the first island chain and into the Indian Ocean, bearing on how regional states might behave in a Taiwan contingency, even though India's strategic autonomy means it may not formally align with Japan against China.

Conclusion

Japan's revision of the Three Principles, first previewed during a USI seminar by the Japanese Embassy's Defence, Naval, and Air Attachés has since acquired diplomatic and economic substance through Prime Minister Takaichi's visit. Indo-Japanese defence

and technology cooperation could deepen further as both nations mark the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations in 2027, though the pace and depth of cooperation will depend on how the two governments reconcile Japan's export liberalisation with New Delhi's Owned by India doctrine.

Endnotes

¹ IISS, "Japan Loosens the Reins on Defence Exports", *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 27 Apr 2026, accessed 04 Jul 2026, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2026/04/japan-loosens-the-reins-on-defence-exports/>

² Cabinet Secretariat, "National Security Strategy of Japan", *Government of Japan*, Dec 2022, accessed 04 Jul 2026, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryoku/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>

³ MoFA, "Official Security Assistance (OSA): A New Framework for Security Assistance", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, Apr 2023, accessed 07 Jul 2026, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/ipc/page4e_001366.html

⁴ Press Information Bureau, "Memorandum of implementation Signed with Government of Japan for Co-Development of UNICORN Masts for the Indian Navy", *Government of India, Ministry of Defence*, 15 Nov 2024, accessed 07 Jul 2026, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseFramePage.aspx?PRID=2073843>

⁵ MoFA, "Prime Minister TAKAICHI's Visit to India", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, 30 Jun 2026, accessed 07 Jul 2026, https://www.mofa.go.jp/sa/sw/in/pageite_000001_01705.html

⁶ PMO, "Visit to India (2)" and "Visit to India (3)", *Prime Minister's Office of Japan*, 02 Jul 2026, accessed 07 Jul 2026, <https://japan.kantei.go.jp/105/actions/202607/02india2.html> and <https://japan.kantei.go.jp/105/actions/202607/02india3.html>

⁷ Press Information Bureau, "List of Outcomes: Prime Minister of Japan's visit to India for the 16th India-Japan Annual Summit", *Government of India*, 02 Jul 2026, accessed 07 Jul 2026, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2280591>

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