One Sortie, Many Signals:
Japan's Quiet Rearming and the India Connection

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Introduction

On 20 Sep 2026, General Takehiro Morita, Chief of Staff of the Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF), climbed into the cockpit of a Hindustan Aeronautics Limited Tejas Light Combat Aircraft at the Air Force Station in Jodhpur. He flew a sortie alongside his Indian counterpart, Air Chief Marshal Amar Preet Singh. The images from the event travelled at supersonic speed. Two air chiefs, one type of aircraft, a shared runway. It is a pleasant footnote to a bilateral exercise if seen only as a photo opportunity. However, when read against the backdrop of what Japan has been doing to its own security posture since 2022, it is a clearer signal, a data point in a realignment strategy that it has been building for four years.[1]

The sortie took place during Exercise Veer Guardian 2026. This is only the second edition of the India-Japan bilateral air exercise, running from 9 to 22 Sep at Jodhpur. Three JASDF Mitsubishi F-2A multirole fighter aircraft from the 8th Air Wing at Tsuiki Air Base operated from an Indian air base for the first time in the history of the exercise, alongside Indian Air Force (IAF) Tejas, Su-30MKI and Rafale aircraft.[2]

Here, the Tejas sortie should not be seen in isolation. It sits inside a wider and underappreciated pattern. Japan's post-2022 departure from decades of self-imposed strategic restraint has layered onto a bilateral relationship with India that has moved from ceremonial engagement to actual interoperability.

Veer Guardian on the Ground

Veer Guardian is a young exercise, and a slow-growing one. The maiden edition of the exercise ran from 12 to 26 Jan 2023 at Hyakuri Air Base in Japan. The Indian contingent included four Su-30MKI fighters, a C-17 and an IL-78 A aerial refueller, pitted against four JASDF F-2 and four F-15 fighters in air combat manoeuvring, interception and air defence missions across visual and beyond-visual-range settings. The IAF contingent was led by Squadron Leader Avni Chaturvedi, the first woman fighter pilot to lead an Indian squadron in a bilateral exercise, a detail that received less coverage at the time than it deserved.[3]

More than 3.5 years passed between that maiden edition and this one. As such, the 2026 edition does not represent a settled annual rhythm yet. It reflects a relationship still finding its cadence, which is exactly why expanding the format this time, flying Japanese fighters onto Indian soil instead of repeating 2023's arrangement in Japan, is a deliberate step up, not a rerun. Roughly 110 JASDF personnel accompanied the aircraft

to Jodhpur for this edition, which is a meaningful logistical footprint for what is still only the second iteration of this exercise.[4]

Reflecting on their experience, Air Chief Marshal Singh called the F-2 deployment "A significant milestone in defence cooperation between the two countries", while General Morita, after his own Tejas flight, described the aircraft as "A symbol of India's technological innovation and the Make in India initiative".[5]

It is important to note that General Morita's comment carries more weight than its diplomatic phrasing suggests. A JASDF chief does not publicly praise a foreign combat aircraft's engineering unless the flight has actually, genuinely, gone well and unless his own establishment has cleared the politics and optics of doing so. Japan has traditionally been more cautious than the other Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) partners about anything that validates Indian defence manufacturing, given Tokyo's long-standing preference for domestic and allied-sourced platforms. A sortie in an Indian light combat aircraft, followed by an on-record quote, is an act of active validation that India's defence industrial base will, and should, use in its subsequent export conversations.[6]

Moreover, as mentioned above, this exercise sits within a broader bilateral push. At the eighth India-Japan Defence Policy Dialogue and the associated Joint Press Statement issued on 20 Aug 2026, the two sides flew beyond the air exercise and also signed a memorandum on maritime domain cooperation between the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and the Indian Navy. The two nations agreed to explore joint shipbuilding and concluded the first defence equipment transfer project between the two countries, a shipborne integrated communications antenna system, the UNICORN. The Veer Guardian expansion was announced in that same statement as part of a package, and not as a standalone gesture.[7]

Bigger than the Photograph

An argument can be made that visiting air chief flying a partner nation's trainer or light fighter is a fairly standard courtesy. India has extended it to several partner air forces, and Indian service chiefs have done the same in reverse. What is not standard is a JASDF fighter squadron, however small a detachment, operating out of an Indian air base for close to two weeks. The F-2 deployment is an event of actual significance that requires basing arrangements, fuel and ordnance logistics coordination, air traffic control integration and a degree of operational trust that a single-day flypast simply does not.

This is the detail that should draw attention from the viewpoint of interoperability standards and acquisition procedure. Exercises that put foreign combat aircraft on Indian tarmac for extended periods generate the practical congruence and friction points—communications protocols, fuel specifications, munitions handling, ground support equipment compatibility—that eventually get written into standard operating procedures and, further down the line, into institutional acquisition and sustainment thinking.

Diplomatic language always runs ahead of this; actual protocols catch up quietly and usually get less coverage than a photo of two chiefs in flight suits.

The Logic behind Tokyo's Shift

It all makes sense when seen from the perspective of Japan's own trajectory since Dec 2022, when Tokyo released a revised National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy and Defense Buildup Program. That package did three things that would have been difficult to imagine a decade earlier. It named China as Japan's greatest strategic challenge in considerably sharper language than the 2013 strategy's emphasis on engagement. It authorised a limited counterstrike capability against missile-related sites in an attacking country, although Tokyo clearly insisted the posture remains responsive rather than pre-emptive. It set a course toward defence spending of 02 per cent of the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP), roughly doubling the traditional 01 per cent ceiling Japan had observed since the 1970s.[8] By late 2025, reports suggested Japan remained on track toward its medium-term target of roughly USD 70 bn in annual defence spending at the 02 per cent of GDP level, even as the budget its cabinet approved that December for the coming fiscal year came in lower, at approximately USD 58 bn and 1.8 per cent of GDP.[9] Then in Apr 2026 Tokyo went further still. The cabinet revised the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology, scrapping the old five-category limit that confined exports to rescue, transport, warning, surveillance and minesweeping equipment, and replacing it with a simpler weapons/non-weapons split.[10]

A Japan that is rearming, reinterpreting its own constitutional restraint and actively hedging against China does not do so in a vacuum. It needs partners it can actually operate alongside. Geography, scale and its own China concerns make India one of the more natural candidates. The Tejas sortie and the F-2 deployment are small, visible instalments of that larger recalculation. They are not proof that Japan intends to buy Indian aircraft; Japan's own fighter future runs through the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) with the United Kingdom and Italy, and nothing in this exercise changes that. But they are proof that Tokyo is now willing to be seen operating on Indian terms, on an Indian base, in an Indian aircraft, which is a different and arguably more consequential thing than any joint statement could be.

Implications and the Limits of the Story

For India, the practical gain is threefold. First, the credibility dividend for Tejas export prospects is quite real, even if it is soft rather than transactional. A JASDF chief's endorsement will be cited in conversations with genuine prospective buyers, irrespective of what Japan's own procurement path looks like.[11]

Second, the F-2 basing precedent, once repeated across future editions, builds the kind of interoperability muscle memory that matters far more in an actual contingency.

Third, and the part to be underlined for institutional attention, is that exercises such as Veer Guardian generate a body of practical protocol and procedure that deserves to be captured systematically rather than left to informal squadron-level memory. It is precisely the sort of documentation gap that acquisition and digital engineering frameworks are meant to close.

What should not be overread is any suggestion that this signals a Japanese shift toward Indian platforms, or a change in Japan's own fighter procurement calculus. GCAP remains Tokyo's central fighter programme, and nothing in Veer Guardian 2026 alters that. The sortie and the basing precedent are best read as goodwill and interoperability signalling, layered onto a Quad-adjacent strategic partnership that has its own logic, and not as a data point on hardware decisions. The two should not be conflated whatever the photographs might suggest.

Conclusion

A visiting air force chief's sortie, on its own, is not of great consequence. As alluded to earlier, air chiefs fly each other's aircraft on friendly visits all the time, and nobody outside the service chapters remembers them by the following week. What makes this one worth noticing and remembering is the company it keeps and the timing it arrives at. Here is a Japan that has spent four years quietly chipping away at 70 years of self-imposed restraint, one policy document and one budget line at a time, rather than through any single dramatic announcement. And here is an India-Japan relationship that saw Prime Minister Takaichi land in Delhi for the annual summit in July, moving, within no time, from statements of intent to actual Japanese fighters sitting on an Indian ramp for two weeks. That is the particular shift worth watching, not the man in the cockpit. The photograph is incidental, just a convenient handle for a story that has been building for years. It just happened to be where the shift in Japanese policy chose to surface this time.

Endnotes

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