



## FORGING A MARITIME PARTNERSHIP: INDIA-JAPAN STRATEGIC SYNERGY AND THE BALANCING OF CHINA'S NAVAL RISE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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### Abstract

*The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as the epicentre of great-power competition, where China's rapid naval modernisation and assertive maritime behaviour are reshaping regional security dynamics. In response, India and Japan have forged a deepening maritime partnership that serves as a critical pillar of stability. This article examines the strategic synergy between New Delhi and Tokyo as a calibrated response to Beijing's expanding naval capabilities, including its growing fleet of aircraft carriers, submarines, and forward presence in the Indian Ocean. At the core of this analysis is the argument that India-Japan maritime cooperation exemplifies **soft balancing** and **strategic hedging**. Rather than formal alliance structures, the partnership strengthens a rules-based maritime order through joint naval exercises (such as JIMEX and Malabar), logistics agreements, defence technology collaboration, and support for minilateral platforms like the Quad. This synergy leverages India's geographical advantages and manpower with Japan's advanced technology and financial capabilities, while promoting quality infrastructure and maritime domain awareness to counter unilateral changes to the status quo.*

*Key findings highlight the partnership's complementary strengths and operational progress, alongside persistent limitations stemming from India's strategic autonomy, Japan's constitutional constraints, and differing threat perceptions. The article concludes that sustained India-Japan maritime synergy can meaningfully contribute to regional equilibrium. However, its long-term impact will depend on deeper integration of capabilities and coordination with other like-minded partners.*

**Keywords:** *Indo-Pacific, India-Japan relations, maritime security, China's naval rise, Quad, strategic autonomy, soft balancing, Free and Open Indo-Pacific.*

### Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has become the primary theater of 21st-century geopolitical competition, where maritime domains serve as critical arteries for global trade, energy security, and military projection. Stretching from the eastern shores of Africa to the western Pacific, this vast region accounts for nearly two-thirds of global economic activity and hosts some of the world's

busiest sea lines of communication (SLOCs). Over 80% of China's energy imports and a significant portion of its trade pass through these waters, making maritime control a central strategic imperative for major powers.

The maritime geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific is undergoing a profound shift driven by China's rapid naval modernization and growing assertiveness. Once a coastal "brown-water" force, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has transformed into the world's largest navy by hull count. As of recent assessments, the PLAN operates over 370 battle force ships (excluding smaller missile-armed patrol craft), with projections of growth to approximately 395 ships by 2025 and 435 by 2030. This expansion includes three operational aircraft carriers (with the advanced electromagnetic catapult-equipped *Fujian* commissioned in 2025), advanced Type 055 destroyers, Type 075/076 amphibious assault ships, and a large submarine fleet.

China has paired this quantitative growth with qualitative advancements in anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities, including long-range anti-ship missiles, integrated air defense, and gray-zone tactics. Actions such as the militarization of features in the South China Sea, repeated incursions into the East China Sea, and expanding naval presence in the Indian Ocean (often linked to dual-use ports under the Belt and Road Initiative) have heightened concerns about freedom of navigation, overflight, and the stability of the rules-based maritime order. These developments pose direct challenges to littoral states and extra-regional powers with vital interests in open sea lanes.

This evolving security environment has prompted strategic responses from regional actors, most notably a deepening maritime partnership between India and Japan. Historically limited by geographical distance and differing Cold War alignments, New Delhi and Tokyo have forged a "Special Strategic and Global Partnership." Key milestones include the 2008 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, the 2015 Vision 2025 statement, regular Joint Maritime Exercises (JIMEX since 2012), participation in multilateral exercises like Malabar, the 2020 Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) for logistics support, and further advancements such as the operationalization of reciprocal access arrangements and defense technology collaboration.

### **Research Problem**

China's naval rise creates a classic security dilemma: its pursuit of regional dominance and protection of SLOCs is perceived by others as threatening their own security and autonomy. For India, this manifests in concerns over Chinese naval forays into the Indian Ocean, border tensions, and the "Malacca Dilemma" dynamics. For Japan, it involves threats to its sea lanes,

disputes in the East China Sea, and the broader challenge to its post-war security posture. The central research problem this article addresses is how India and Japan are translating shared threat perceptions into concrete maritime synergy, and to what extent this partnership can effectively balance or hedge against China's growing capabilities without triggering outright confrontation.

### **Research Objectives and Central Thesis**

This article has three main objectives: (1) to map the evolution and current dimensions of India-Japan maritime cooperation; (2) to assess its effectiveness as a balancing mechanism against China's naval assertiveness; and (3) to evaluate limitations and future trajectories. The central thesis is that India-Japan strategic synergy in the maritime domain represents a sophisticated form of **soft balancing** and **strategic hedging**. By leveraging complementary strengths, India's geographical position and manpower alongside Japan's technological and financial capabilities, this partnership strengthens a rules-based maritime order through joint exercises, capacity building, technology sharing, quality infrastructure initiatives, and minilateral platforms like the Quad, without resorting to formal military alliances.

### **Significance of the Study**

Theoretically, the study contributes to International Relations literature on balance-of-threat theory (Stephen Walt), hedging strategies in multipolar Asia, and the role of minilateralism in regional order-building. It bridges power transition theory with middle-power agency, showing how non-hegemonic states can shape outcomes in a contested maritime space. From a policy perspective, understanding this synergy is vital for policymakers in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. As great-power competition intensifies, the India-Japan partnership offers a model of pragmatic cooperation that respects strategic autonomy while advancing collective resilience. It has implications for supply chain security, maritime domain awareness, and the future of frameworks like the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Strategic synergy in maritime partnerships refers to the deliberate alignment of capabilities, interests, and policies between states to enhance collective maritime security, domain awareness, and resilience without necessarily forming binding military alliances. In the Indo-Pacific context, it involves coordinated naval exercises, technology sharing, logistics agreements, infrastructure initiatives, and diplomatic signaling aimed at preserving a rules-based order. Unlike formal alliances with mutual defense commitments, strategic synergy

emphasizes flexibility, complementarity, and issue-specific cooperation. For India and Japan, this manifests in leveraging India's strategic geography and naval presence in the Indian Ocean with Japan's advanced maritime technologies, financial resources, and industrial capacity. This concept aligns with several strands of International Relations theory, particularly those explaining state behavior in response to rising powers.

### **Balance of Power and Balance of Threat Theory**

Classical Balance of Power theory (Waltz) posits that states form alliances or build capabilities to prevent any single actor from achieving hegemony. Stephen M. Walt refines this into the Balance of Threat theory, arguing that states balance against perceived threats rather than raw power alone. Threat perception depends on four key factors: aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions.

China's naval modernization, now the world's largest navy by hull count, with expanding carrier fleets, submarines, and A2/AD systems, combined with its actions in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and Indian Ocean, heightens threat perceptions for both India and Japan. Geographic proximity (border tensions for India, proximity to sea lanes for Japan) and perceived revisionist intentions amplify this dynamic. India-Japan cooperation thus represents balancing against a specific threat rather than against China's power per se.

### **Hedging and Soft Balancing**

Hedging involves a mixed strategy of engagement and risk mitigation, allowing states to avoid binary choices between balancing and bandwagoning. Soft balancing extends this by using non-military tools like diplomatic coordination, economic initiatives, and limited security cooperation to constrain a powerful state without provoking confrontation. India and Japan's approach fits this framework well. Both engage China economically while pursuing security cooperation through joint exercises (JIMEX, Malabar), the Reciprocal Access Agreement, defense technology collaboration, and quality infrastructure projects as alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative. This "soft" approach allows them to strengthen maritime order without formal alliance commitments.

### **Minilateralism**

Minilateralism refers to flexible, small-group cooperation among like-minded states, often more agile than broad multilateral forums like ASEAN. It enables targeted collaboration on specific issues such as maritime security, supply chain resilience, and technology standards. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) exemplifies this, serving as a platform for India-Japan synergy within a broader network that includes the United States and Australia.

### **Power Transition Theory**

Power Transition Theory (Organski and others) suggests that conflict becomes more likely when a rising power approaches parity with a dominant state and is dissatisfied with the existing order. In the Indo-Pacific, China's rise challenges the U.S.-led order, creating space for middle and secondary powers like India and Japan to play active roles in shaping outcomes. Rather than passive bystanders, they actively contribute to order maintenance through partnerships that support stability and norms favoring freedom of navigation and open sea lanes.

### **Application to India-Japan Maritime Cooperation**

The India-Japan partnership demonstrates a convergence of interests without a formal alliance, reflecting strategic autonomy (especially for India) and Japan's evolving security posture under its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) vision. Shared concerns over sea lane security, Chinese gray-zone tactics, and the need to diversify supply chains drive this synergy. It combines elements of soft balancing (through signaling and capacity building), hedging (economic engagement alongside security cooperation), and minilateralism (via Quad and trilaterals).

This framework avoids the rigidity of traditional alliances, reducing risks of entrapment while maximizing flexibility in a multipolar setting. It allows both states to enhance their maritime posture complementarily: India gains technological and financial support, while Japan extends its strategic reach beyond traditional U.S. alliances. Limitations remain, including differing threat intensities and domestic constraints, but the partnership effectively illustrates how secondary powers can influence regional equilibrium in a period of power transition.

### **China's Naval Rise and Its Implications for the Indo-Pacific**

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has undergone one of the most remarkable military transformations in modern history. Once a coastal "brown-water" navy focused on near-shore defense, it has rapidly evolved into a major "blue-water" force capable of power projection across distant seas. This shift, driven by China's economic rise and strategic ambitions, fundamentally alters the maritime balance in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Evolution of PLAN Capabilities**

Since the early 1990s, China has invested heavily in naval modernization. The PLAN is now the world's largest navy by hull count. As of 2025–2026 assessments, it operates over 370 battle force ships (major surface combatants, submarines, amphibious ships, and auxiliaries),

excluding dozens of missile-armed patrol craft. Projections indicate growth to approximately 395 ships by 2025 and 435 by 2030, with significant emphasis on major surface combatants.

Key platforms illustrate this leap:

- **Aircraft Carriers:** China commissioned its third carrier, the *Fujian* (Type 003), in late 2025. Unlike the ski-jump *Liaoning* and *Shandong*, *Fujian* features electromagnetic catapults, enabling more efficient operations with advanced aircraft such as J-35 stealth fighters and KJ-600 airborne early warning planes. A fourth carrier (potentially nuclear-powered Type 004) is under construction. China aims for 6–9 carriers by the 2030s.
- **Submarines:** The fleet includes around 50–60 diesel-electric submarines (with advanced Type 039B/C classes featuring air-independent propulsion) and a growing nuclear-powered component (6–10 SSNs, with rapid expansion). Ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) enhance second-strike capabilities.
- **Surface Combatants:** Type 055 cruisers (large, stealthy, multi-role) and Type 052D destroyers form powerful escort groups. China also fields advanced Type 075/076 amphibious assault ships, with the latter capable of drone operations via electromagnetic catapults.

Complementing hardware are sophisticated **anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD)** systems: anti-ship ballistic missiles (e.g., DF-21D, DF-26 “carrier killers”), hypersonic weapons, integrated air defenses, and expanding C4ISR networks (including space-based surveillance). These create “kill zones” within the first and second island chains, complicating intervention by extra-regional powers.

### **Key Assertive Actions**

China has translated capability growth into assertive behavior. In the **South China Sea**, it has militarized artificial islands in the Spratly and Paracel chains, equipping them with airstrips, radars, missile batteries, and logistics facilities. This creates de facto forward bases that extend operational reach. Gray-zone tactics, short of outright conflict, form the core of this strategy. These include swarming by maritime militia and Coast Guard vessels, water cannon use, ramming, laser dazzling, and blocking maneuvers (notably against Philippine vessels). Such actions gradually shift the status quo while avoiding escalation thresholds that might trigger alliances.

In the **Indian Ocean**, China maintains a growing presence through the “**String of Pearls**” strategy, dual-use ports and facilities under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Notable sites include Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Djibouti (China’s first overseas military

base), and investments in Myanmar, the Maldives, and elsewhere. PLAN vessels conduct regular anti-piracy patrols, intelligence-gathering missions, and port calls, signaling sustained blue-water ambitions.

### **Impact on SLOCs, Malacca Dilemma, and Freedom of Navigation**

The Indo-Pacific hosts critical Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). Over 80% of China's energy imports and a huge share of global trade transit these waters, particularly through the Strait of Malacca. China's "**Malacca Dilemma**", vulnerability to blockade of these chokepoints, drives its naval expansion and port strategy. Paradoxically, its assertiveness heightens risks to freedom of navigation, a cornerstone of the rules-based order. Militarization and gray-zone activities undermine UNCLOS principles, raise insurance costs, disrupt fishing, and create uncertainty for commercial shipping. Extra-regional powers, including the US, Japan, Australia, and India, have responded with Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to challenge excessive claims.

### **Regional Threat Perceptions: Focus on India and Japan**

For **Japan**, China's rise directly threatens vital SLOCs carrying 90% of its energy imports. Activities near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, combined with carrier expansion and A2/AD, challenge Japan's maritime defense. Tokyo views this as a systemic threat to the liberal international order, prompting constitutional reinterpretations, defense budget increases, and stronger alignment with the US and partners.

For **India**, concerns center on the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), its traditional sphere of influence. Chinese naval forays, port acquisitions, and border tensions create a classic security dilemma. The "String of Pearls" is perceived as encirclement, exacerbating the Malacca Dilemma dynamics from an Indian perspective. New Delhi worries about the potential disruption of its energy imports and naval access. This has accelerated India's naval modernization, "Act East" policy, and partnerships (especially with Japan, the US, and Quad). Both nations perceive China's actions as revisionist, prompting convergence on maritime security despite economic ties with Beijing.

In summary, China's naval rise has shifted the Indo-Pacific from a relatively stable US-dominated maritime order toward contested multipolarity. While enhancing Beijing's security and influence, it has stimulated counter-coalitions and hedging strategies. The trajectory suggests continued tension unless managed through robust diplomacy and deterrence.

## **Historical Evolution of India-Japan Maritime Relations**

India-Japan maritime relations have evolved from modest post-Cold War engagements to a robust strategic partnership that forms a cornerstone of Indo-Pacific security architecture. This transformation reflects shared democratic values, economic complementarities, and growing convergence on maritime security concerns, particularly in response to China's naval assertiveness.

### **Early Post-Cold War Engagement (2000s)**

Bilateral ties received fresh impetus at the turn of the millennium. In August 2000, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori's visit to India led to the establishment of a **Global Partnership**, marking a shift from primarily economic relations to broader strategic engagement. Early maritime interactions were limited but symbolic, focusing on coast guard cooperation. Annual joint exercises between the Indian Coast Guard and Japan Coast Guard began around 2000, emphasizing anti-piracy, search and rescue, and maritime law enforcement.

The early 2000s also witnessed initial naval port calls and dialogues. A significant milestone came in 2007 when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe delivered his landmark "**Confluence of the Two Seas**" speech to the Indian Parliament. Drawing on historical and cultural ties, Abe envisioned the Indian and Pacific Oceans as a single strategic space and advocated closer cooperation among like-minded democracies. This speech laid the intellectual foundation for the Indo-Pacific concept and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).

That same year, Japan participated in the multilateral **Malabar 2007** naval exercise alongside India, the United States, Australia, and Singapore. Though the Quad initiative faced Chinese criticism and was temporarily shelved, it demonstrated the potential for maritime collaboration.

### **Key Milestones: 2008 Joint Declaration and 2014 Upgrade**

A formal breakthrough occurred on 22 October 2008 with the signing of the **Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation** between Prime Ministers Taro Aso and Manmohan Singh. This was India's first such security agreement with any country and Japan's second (after the US). The declaration outlined cooperation in areas including maritime security, counter-terrorism, disaster management, and information exchange. It committed both sides to regular dialogues, joint exercises, and capacity-building, providing a structured framework for defense and security ties. In 2012, the two navies initiated the bilateral **Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX)**, which has since become a cornerstone of their operational cooperation.

The partnership received further elevation in September 2014 during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Japan. The two countries upgraded their relationship to a "**Special Strategic**

**and Global Partnership.”** This upgrade reflected deepening trust and a shared desire to play proactive roles in regional stability. The 2014 Tokyo Declaration emphasized maritime security, freedom of navigation, and peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law (UNCLOS).

### **Post-2014 Acceleration under Abe-Modi Leadership**

The personal chemistry between Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe and Narendra Modi provided strong political momentum. Regular annual summits and frequent high-level interactions translated into concrete outcomes:

- **Defense and Technology Agreements:** The two sides signed agreements on defense equipment and technology cooperation.
- **Logistics and Access:** Progress toward mutual logistical support, culminating later in the 2020 Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA).
- **Multilateral Integration:** Japan became a permanent participant in the **Malabar exercises** from 2015 onward, transforming it into a key Quad naval platform.
- **Vision Documents:** The 2015 India-Japan Vision 2025 statement outlined ambitious goals for maritime cooperation, connectivity projects (e.g., Asia-Africa Growth Corridor), and infrastructure development as quality alternatives to China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

Maritime domain awareness improved through information-sharing arrangements, while joint exercises grew in complexity, incorporating anti-submarine warfare, surface warfare, and interoperability drills. Cooperation extended to capacity-building with third countries in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean.

### **Convergence Driven by Shared Concerns over China**

While economic and technological factors played a role, strategic convergence on China has been the primary driver of accelerated maritime ties. Both nations face challenges from China’s naval expansion: Japan in the East China Sea and vital Pacific SLOCs, and India in the Indian Ocean and along its land borders. Beijing’s assertiveness, militarization of the South China Sea, gray-zone tactics, and expanding presence in the Indian Ocean have created a classic security dilemma that pushed New Delhi and Tokyo closer despite their economic interdependence with China.

This convergence is not framed as containment but as support for a **Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)** based on rules, openness, and respect for sovereignty. India’s SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision and Japan’s FOIP strategy have found strong

synergy, enabling coordinated positions on maritime norms, supply chain resilience, and regional connectivity.

In essence, the evolution of India-Japan maritime relations reflects a transition from symbolic engagement to substantive strategic partnership. What began as coast guard exercises and high-level dialogues in the early 2000s has matured into operational interoperability, technology collaboration, and joint efforts to shape the regional maritime order. This trajectory underscores how shared threat perceptions, democratic values, and complementary capabilities have transformed two historically distant maritime powers into key partners in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Dimensions of India-Japan Strategic Synergy in the Maritime Domain**

India-Japan strategic synergy in the maritime domain represents a multifaceted partnership that combines operational interoperability, technological collaboration, infrastructure development, and multilateral coordination. This synergy leverages complementary strengths: India's extensive coastline, large navy, and central position in the Indian Ocean with Japan's advanced technology, financial resources, and high-quality industrial capabilities. Together, they advance a shared vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) grounded in respect for international law, freedom of navigation, and rules-based order.

### **Operational and Military Cooperation**

Operational cooperation forms the most visible pillar of the partnership. The bilateral **Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX)**, initiated in 2012, has matured into a sophisticated annual drill. The 2024 edition (JIMEX-24) was held in Yokosuka, Japan, involving the Indian Navy's stealth frigate INS *Shivalik* and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force's (JMSDF) destroyer JS *Yugiri*. The exercise featured harbor and sea phases, focusing on anti-submarine warfare (ASW), surface gunnery, multi-domain operations, and interoperability across air, surface, and sub-surface domains.

Complementing JIMEX is India's participation in the multilateral **Exercise Malabar**. Originally a bilateral India-US drill, Japan joined permanently in 2015, and Australia in 2020, transforming it into a key Quad naval platform. Malabar 2025, hosted by the United States near Guam (November 10–18), involved complex drills in ASW, air defense, replenishment at sea, and tactical maneuvers, with Indian participation through ships like INS *Sahyadri*.

Beyond exercises, the two navies engage in regular port calls, naval diplomacy, and capacity-building initiatives with third countries in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. Information sharing has improved through mechanisms such as the Maritime Affairs Dialogue and mutual logistical support arrangements.

A landmark development is the **Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA)** signed in 2020, which enables reciprocal provision of supplies and services during joint exercises, training, and humanitarian missions. This agreement has been actively utilized since MILAN 2022. While a full Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) similar to Japan's pacts with Australia and the Philippines has not yet materialized with India, the ACSA and ongoing 2+2 ministerial dialogues provide a strong functional equivalent for operational access and logistics.

These activities enhance tactical interoperability, build trust, and signal resolve to uphold maritime norms against coercive behavior.

### **Technology and Defense Industrial Collaboration**

Technology and industrial cooperation represent a high-potential but still-evolving dimension. The 2015 Agreement on Defense Equipment and Technology Cooperation established a framework for joint research and development. A Joint Working Group on Defense Equipment and Technology Cooperation (JWG-DETC) meets regularly to identify projects.

Notable initiatives include collaboration on unmanned systems, maritime surveillance, and sensors. Early projects focused on unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs) and robotics through ATLA-DRDO cooperation. More recent efforts target maritime domain awareness technologies, dual-use electronics, and next-generation sensors (e.g., the Unified Complex Radio Antenna or UNICORN project). Japan has expressed interest in supplying advanced engines and components for Indian platforms, while both sides explore co-development in areas such as UAVs and maritime patrol systems.

Quad-driven initiatives amplify bilateral efforts. The partnership contributes to supply chain resilience in critical minerals, semiconductors, and defense technologies, aiming to reduce dependencies on single sources. Japan's relaxation of arms export rules and emphasis on "China-free" or trusted supply chains align with India's Atmanirbhar Bharat push, creating opportunities for co-production in areas like missiles, electronics, and unmanned maritime vehicles.

Challenges persist due to differing procurement processes, regulatory hurdles, and the slow pace of translating research into production. However, momentum is building through business-to-business forums and high-level commitments in the 2025 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation.

### **Infrastructure and Connectivity Initiatives**

Infrastructure and connectivity form the economic backbone of maritime synergy. The flagship **Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC)**, launched in 2017, envisions quality infrastructure

linking Asia and Africa through sea corridors, industrial networks, and capacity building. It emphasizes sustainable development, skills enhancement, and people-to-people ties as alternatives to debt-intensive models. While implementation has faced delays due to political shifts, funding constraints, and competing priorities, efforts continue to revitalize the initiative through private sector engagement and targeted projects in eastern Africa.

Both countries promote high-standard connectivity projects in the Indo-Pacific, including port modernization, digital infrastructure, and energy corridors. Japan's technical expertise and financing complement India's on-ground implementation experience. These initiatives support maritime security by enhancing port resilience, reducing vulnerabilities in SLOCs, and offering transparent alternatives for regional partners.

India's SAGAR vision and Japan's FOIP strategy converge here, promoting "quality infrastructure" that adheres to international standards, transparency, and environmental sustainability.

### **Multilateral and Minilateral Platforms**

The partnership thrives within broader multilateral and minilateral frameworks. The **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)** serves as the premier platform, enabling coordinated maritime domain awareness (IPMDA), law enforcement cooperation, and humanitarian assistance. Initiatives such as the Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Mission, maritime legal dialogues, and logistics networks directly benefit from India-Japan leadership.

Trilateral formats further deepen cooperation:

- **India-Japan-US (JAI):** Focuses on advanced naval exercises, intelligence sharing, and technology.
- **India-Japan-Australia:** Emphasizes capacity building in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean.

These arrangements allow flexible, issue-specific collaboration while respecting India's strategic autonomy. The Quad's evolution toward practical deliverables in maritime security, critical technologies, and supply chains amplifies bilateral synergy without creating formal alliance obligations.

### **Overall Assessment of Synergy**

India-Japan maritime cooperation has achieved significant operational depth and institutional maturity. Its greatest strength lies in complementarity and shared normative commitments. Limitations include slower progress on co-production, differing threat prioritization intensities, and the need for greater private sector involvement. Nevertheless, sustained momentum in

exercises, technology, and connectivity positions this partnership as a stabilizing force in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Assessing the Effectiveness and Limitations of the Partnership**

The India-Japan maritime partnership has emerged as one of the most substantive bilateral relationships in the Indo-Pacific, demonstrating measurable progress in operational coordination, normative alignment, and strategic signaling. However, its effectiveness remains constrained by structural, domestic, and geopolitical factors. This section evaluates the partnership's strengths, limitations, and its relative position compared to other balancing mechanisms such as AUKUS and traditional U.S. alliances.

#### **Strengths**

The partnership's core strength lies in **complementary capabilities**. India brings strategic geography, a large navy with blue-water ambitions, extensive manpower, and central positioning across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Japan contributes advanced naval technology, sophisticated maritime surveillance systems, financial resources, and high-quality industrial capacity. This synergy creates a natural division of labor: India provides forward presence and operational reach in the IOR, while Japan enhances technological edge and logistical support.

Both countries share a strong **normative alignment** on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision. They consistently advocate for a rules-based maritime order, freedom of navigation and overflight, and peaceful dispute resolution under UNCLOS. This alignment has translated into coordinated positions in multilateral forums and practical cooperation through quality infrastructure projects and maritime domain awareness initiatives. Recent developments, including the 2025 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, underscore deepening defense ties and over 500 planned joint military activities in 2026.

Operationally, regular JIMEX and Malabar exercises have improved interoperability in anti-submarine warfare, surface warfare, and multi-domain operations. The 2020 Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) has facilitated logistics support, while growing information-sharing mechanisms enhance situational awareness. These efforts contribute to deterrence by signaling resolve without provocative escalation.

#### **Challenges and Limitations**

Despite progress, several limitations constrain the partnership's potential.

**India's Strategic Autonomy and Non-Alignment Tradition:** India remains wary of formal military alliances that could compromise its independent foreign policy. It continues to

maintain significant defense imports from Russia and engages economically with China. This limits deeper integration, such as joint patrols or binding defense commitments, distinguishing the partnership from traditional alliances.

**Japan's Pacifist Constitution and Domestic Constraints:** Article 9 of Japan's constitution restricts offensive military capabilities, though successive reinterpretations and legislative changes have expanded the Japan Self-Defense Forces' role. Domestic political sensitivities, public opinion, and legal hurdles still slow the pace of cooperation, particularly in high-end combat operations or offensive capabilities. Japan's reliance on the U.S. security umbrella further shapes the boundaries of its bilateral engagements.

**Asymmetry in Threat Perceptions and Economic Dependencies:** Japan views China as an immediate and existential challenge to its sea lanes and territorial integrity. India perceives a broader threat spectrum, including land border issues, while maintaining substantial economic ties with China. These differing priorities can lead to uneven commitment levels. Both countries' economic interdependence with China also creates hedging behavior that tempers security cooperation.

**Risk of Escalation and Gray-Zone Dilemmas:** The partnership excels in peacetime signaling and capacity building but faces challenges in responding to gray-zone tactics (e.g., maritime militia swarming or incremental island-building). Without robust joint command structures or automatic response mechanisms, coordinated responses to hybrid challenges remain difficult, risking either over-reaction or under-reaction.

### **Comparative Analysis**

Compared to other balancing efforts, the India-Japan partnership offers distinct advantages and trade-offs.

**Versus AUKUS:** AUKUS represents "hard" balancing through advanced technology transfer (nuclear-powered submarines under Pillar I) and deep integration in emerging capabilities (Pillar II). It delivers rapid capability leaps and strong deterrence signals but carries risks of arms race escalation and regional polarization. In contrast, the India-Japan synergy is softer, more flexible, and inclusive, better suited to sustained presence, norm-building, and capacity enhancement across the broader Indo-Pacific. India has welcomed AUKUS as a stabilizing factor while maintaining distance, using the Quad and bilateral ties as its primary vehicles. Japan participates in AUKUS Pillar II discussions while deepening ties with India.

**Versus Traditional U.S. Alliances:** U.S. treaty alliances (with Japan, Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines) provide clear mutual defense commitments and integrated command

structures. They offer high-end deterrence but can appear exclusive and provoke stronger Chinese reactions. The India-Japan partnership, operating through unilateralism and strategic partnerships, is more agile and acceptable to ASEAN and Global South countries wary of great-power blocs. It complements rather than competes with U.S. alliances, acting as a “middle-power bridge” in the regional architecture.

Overall, the India-Japan maritime synergy is moderately effective as a stabilizing force. It has successfully built habits of cooperation, enhanced interoperability, and contributed to a broader balancing network. However, it falls short of a transformative impact due to structural limitations. Its long-term value lies in its sustainability and normative influence rather than raw military power.

To maximize effectiveness, both countries should focus on deeper technology co-production, expanded third-country capacity building, and clearer mechanisms for gray-zone response while preserving the flexibility that defines their partnership. In an era of contested multipolarity, this calibrated approach offers a pragmatic model for middle-power cooperation.

### **Future Trajectories and Policy Recommendations**

The India-Japan maritime partnership stands at a critical juncture. As the Indo-Pacific enters a period of intensified great-power competition, the trajectory of this relationship will significantly influence regional stability. Deepening synergy offers substantial opportunities, yet success depends on overcoming existing limitations and harnessing emerging technologies.

### **Scenarios for Deepening Maritime Synergy**

Several plausible scenarios could shape the partnership’s evolution in the coming decade:

1. **Enhanced Operational Integration:** Joint patrols in high-priority areas, such as the Andaman Sea or western Pacific, could emerge as a logical next step. While full-scale combined patrols may face political hurdles, coordinated patrols or “coordinated presence” missions under Quad frameworks are feasible. Advanced joint exercises could incorporate live-fire drills, cyber-defense components, and integrated command-and-control simulations.
2. **Submarine and Undersea Cooperation:** India has long sought advanced submarine capabilities. Japan’s expertise in lithium-ion battery technology (as in the *Soryu*-class) and quiet diesel-electric submarines offers potential for collaboration. While past attempts (e.g., Project 75(I)) faced obstacles, renewed discussions on technology transfer, joint maintenance facilities, or co-development of battery and propulsion systems could materialize by 2030.

3. **Expanded Logistics and Forward Presence:** Building on the 2020 ACSA, both sides could establish mutual ship repair and replenishment facilities. Japan gaining access to Indian shipyards (e.g., in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands) would extend JMSDF reach into the Indian Ocean, creating a more persistent presence.

These scenarios would gradually shift the partnership from “soft balancing” toward more credible deterrence without crossing into formal alliance territory.

### **Role of Emerging Technologies**

Emerging technologies will define the future character of India-Japan maritime synergy.

- **Unmanned Systems and AI:** Collaboration on unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), unmanned surface vessels (USVs), and underwater vehicles (UUVs) holds high potential. Joint development of AI-enabled autonomous systems for maritime surveillance, swarm tactics, and targeting could enhance domain awareness. India’s strengths in software and cost-effective production complement Japan’s expertise in sensors, semiconductors, and precision engineering.
- **Hypersonics and Advanced Missiles:** Cooperation on hypersonic glide vehicles or related propulsion technologies could strengthen deterrence against A2/AD threats.
- **Space-based Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA):** Integration of satellite data, quantum sensors, and AI analytics would provide real-time tracking of vessels, including “dark ships.” Quad initiatives could expand to include a dedicated Indo-Pacific MDA satellite constellation.
- **Cyber and Electronic Warfare:** Joint cyber defense protocols and electronic warfare capabilities will become essential for protecting naval assets in contested environments.

These technologies could enable a “networked maritime posture” that multiplies the effectiveness of existing platforms while reducing human risk.

### **Policy Recommendations**

#### **For India:**

- Accelerate defense technology reforms to facilitate faster co-production and technology absorption.
- Prioritize Japan as a key partner in *Atmanirbhar Bharat* for critical subsystems (sensors, engines, batteries).
- Expand third-country capacity building with Japan in Southeast Asia and Africa to promote maritime security norms.

- Gradually increase comfort with operational coordination while preserving strategic autonomy.

**For Japan:**

- Further relax export control interpretations to enable meaningful technology transfer.
- Invest in joint R&D facilities in India focused on dual-use technologies.
- Leverage financial instruments (ODA, JICA, and private investment) to scale quality infrastructure projects.
- Deepen operational engagement, including more frequent JMSDF deployments in the Indian Ocean.

**For Like-Minded Partners (especially the Quad):**

- Institutionalize practical deliverables, such as the “Ports of the Future Partnership” and IPMDA (Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness).
- Develop standardized protocols for gray-zone response and humanitarian assistance.
- Create a Quad technology alliance focused on supply chain resilience in semiconductors, critical minerals, and defense electronics.

**Broader Implications for Regional Stability and the Liberal International Order**

A stronger India-Japan maritime partnership would contribute to a more balanced Indo-Pacific by raising the costs of unilateral revisionism. It would reinforce norms of freedom of navigation, peaceful dispute resolution, and the rule of law, core elements of the liberal international order.

By demonstrating that middle and secondary powers can shape outcomes through flexible, norm-driven cooperation, the partnership offers an alternative to great-power dominance or pure transactionalism. It supports a “multiplex” regional architecture where minilateralism complements multilateral forums like ASEAN.

However, risks remain. Over-securitization could strain economic ties with China or provoke countermeasures. Success requires careful calibration, signaling strength while keeping dialogue channels open.

In conclusion, the future of India-Japan maritime synergy is promising but not guaranteed. With sustained political will, technological innovation, and pragmatic expansion of cooperation, this partnership can become a cornerstone of Indo-Pacific stability, helping preserve an open, rules-based maritime order amid power transition.

## Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific maritime domain has become the central arena of great-power rivalry in the 21st century. In this contested environment, the strategic synergy between India and Japan has evolved into a significant stabilizing force. This article has demonstrated that the India-Japan maritime partnership represents a sophisticated form of **soft balancing** and **strategic hedging** in response to China's rapid naval modernization and assertive behavior. By combining India's geographical centrality and operational reach in the Indian Ocean with Japan's technological prowess and financial capacity, the partnership has made tangible progress in joint exercises, logistics support, defense technology collaboration, quality infrastructure initiatives, and minilateral platforms such as the Quad.

Key arguments advanced in this study are threefold. First, China's transformation of the PLA Navy from a coastal force into a blue-water navy, coupled with gray-zone tactics and dual-use port strategies, has generated convergent threat perceptions in New Delhi and Tokyo. Second, the bilateral relationship has moved beyond symbolic engagement since the 2008 Joint Declaration and the 2014 Special Strategic and Global Partnership to deliver substantive operational and normative outcomes. Third, while the partnership exhibits notable strengths in complementarity and shared commitment to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), its effectiveness is moderated by India's strategic autonomy, Japan's constitutional constraints, asymmetric threat perceptions, and economic interdependencies with China.

This study contributes to the International Relations literature in several ways. It bridges **Balance of Threat theory** (Walt) with contemporary concepts of hedging and minilateralism, illustrating how secondary and middle powers can actively shape regional order during a period of power transition. It provides an empirical examination of maritime security cooperation outside formal alliances, enriching the growing scholarship on "networked" or "minilateral" security architectures in Asia. Furthermore, by analyzing both the achievements and limitations of India-Japan synergy, the article offers a nuanced perspective that moves beyond optimistic narratives of inevitable alignment or pessimistic accounts of inevitable rivalry. It underscores the agency of non-hegemonic states in sustaining elements of the liberal maritime order.

## Final Reflections on Prospects

Looking ahead, the India-Japan maritime partnership holds considerable promise as a pillar of Indo-Pacific stability. Its flexible, non-alliance character makes it politically sustainable and broadly acceptable across the region, including to ASEAN members. Sustained momentum in emerging technologies, particularly unmanned systems, AI-enabled maritime domain

awareness, and space-based surveillance, could significantly multiply the partnership's deterrent and stabilizing effects.

However, realizing this potential will require pragmatic steps: deeper technology co-production, more regular operational coordination (including coordinated presence missions), expanded third-country capacity building, and clearer mechanisms for responding to gray-zone challenges. The partnership's success ultimately depends on political will in both capitals to gradually expand the boundaries of cooperation while respecting core sensitivities.

In shaping the Indo-Pacific balance, the India-Japan maritime synergy is unlikely to single-handedly offset China's growing naval capabilities. Nevertheless, when embedded within broader Quad efforts and complementary arrangements (such as AUKUS Pillar II), it contributes meaningfully to a diversified, resilient security architecture. By upholding norms of freedom of navigation, promoting transparent infrastructure, and fostering habits of cooperation, India and Japan are helping preserve strategic space for smaller states and reinforcing the principles of a rules-based order.

The trajectory of this partnership will be one of the defining variables of Indo-Pacific geopolitics in the coming decade. If nurtured carefully, it can serve as a model of pragmatic middle-power cooperation, demonstrating that even in an era of intensifying great-power competition, constructive and stabilizing partnerships can emerge to shape a more balanced and open maritime future.

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