



## **MARITIME GEOPOLITICS AND POWER TRANSITION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: INDIA-JAPAN CONVERGENCE AMID CHINA'S STRATEGIC EXPANSION**

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**Paper Received On:** 20 MAR 2026

**Peer Reviewed On:** 24 APRIL 2026

**Published On:** 01 MAY 2026

### **Abstract**

*The Indo-Pacific region is undergoing a profound power transition characterized by China's rapid strategic expansion and the reconfiguration of maritime geopolitics. As the world's economic and strategic center of gravity shifts toward Asia, Beijing's naval modernization, assertive gray-zone tactics, and expansive Belt and Road Initiative maritime projects are challenging the existing rules-based order and reshaping regional power distribution.*

*This article examines the convergence between India and Japan as a critical middle-power response to this power transition. Drawing on Power Transition Theory and concepts of strategic hedging and minilateralism, it argues that India-Japan strategic synergy, manifested through operational naval cooperation, defense technology collaboration, quality infrastructure initiatives, and leadership in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), represents a sophisticated mechanism through which secondary powers can actively influence the emerging regional order without entering formal military alliances.*

*Key findings reveal that while the partnership has achieved notable operational and normative progress by leveraging complementary capabilities and shared visions of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), its effectiveness is tempered by India's strategic autonomy, Japan's constitutional constraints, and asymmetric threat perceptions. The article concludes that sustained India-Japan convergence can contribute to a more stable, multipolar Indo-Pacific equilibrium. It offers policy recommendations for deepening technological and operational cooperation among like-minded partners to uphold maritime norms amid ongoing power shifts.*

**Keywords:** *Indo-Pacific, power transition, maritime geopolitics, India-Japan relations, China's rise, Quad, strategic convergence, middle-power agency, Free and Open Indo-Pacific.*

### **Introduction**

The Indo-Pacific has solidified its position as the central theater of 21st-century geopolitics, encompassing the world's most dynamic economies, busiest sea lines of communication (SLOCs), and intensifying great-power competition. Stretching from the eastern coast of Africa

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to the western Pacific, the region accounts for nearly two-thirds of global GDP, over half of the world's population, and the majority of international trade. Its maritime character makes it uniquely consequential: critical chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca, Bab el-Mandeb, and the South China Sea serve as vital arteries for energy, raw materials, and finished goods. Disruptions here carry immediate global economic consequences.

At the heart of this geopolitical transformation lies a historic power transition. China's extraordinary economic and military ascent over the past three decades has fundamentally altered the regional distribution of power. Once a largely continental power with a coastal "brown-water" navy, China has rapidly developed significant blue-water capabilities. As of recent assessments, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) operates over 370 battle force ships, making it the world's largest navy by hull count. Projections indicate growth to approximately 395 ships by 2025 and 435 by 2030. This expansion includes three operational aircraft carriers (with the advanced Type 003 *Fujian* commissioned in late 2025), sophisticated destroyers, amphibious assault ships, and a growing submarine fleet, supported by robust anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) systems.

China has paired this military modernization with assertive maritime strategies, including the militarization of features in the South China Sea, extensive gray-zone operations, and the expansion of dual-use infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative's Maritime Silk Road. These actions challenge established norms of freedom of navigation, territorial sovereignty, and the rules-based international order, creating a classic security dilemma for regional and extra-regional actors.

This power transition is not occurring in a vacuum. It has catalyzed new alignments and strategic responses. Among these, the deepening convergence between **India and Japan** stands out as a particularly significant development. Both nations occupy critical positions in the Indo-Pacific: Japan as a technological and financial powerhouse with vital sea lane dependencies, and India as a continental-maritime power with growing naval ambitions and central geographic influence in the Indian Ocean. What began as primarily economic ties in the early 2000s has evolved into a "Special Strategic and Global Partnership" characterized by regular naval exercises (JIMEX and Malabar), defense technology collaboration, logistics agreements, and joint leadership in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).

### **Research Problem and Objectives**

The central research problem this article addresses is how secondary and middle powers like India and Japan navigate and influence an ongoing power transition driven by China's strategic

expansion. Traditional Power Transition Theory often focuses on bipolar dynamics between a dominant hegemon and a rising challenger. However, the Indo-Pacific context reveals a more complex, multipolar reality in which middle-power agency plays a crucial role in shaping outcomes.

This article has three primary objectives: (1) to analyze the drivers and manifestations of China's maritime expansion within a power transition framework; (2) to examine the historical evolution and current dimensions of India-Japan strategic convergence; and (3) to assess the effectiveness, limitations, and future trajectories of this convergence in contributing to regional order and stability.

### **Central Thesis**

The central thesis is that **India-Japan strategic convergence** represents a pragmatic and influential form of middle-power agency in a period of power transition. Rather than seeking direct military confrontation or formal alliances, New Delhi and Tokyo are pursuing a multifaceted approach, combining operational cooperation, technological collaboration, normative leadership, and minilateral diplomacy that helps shape a more balanced, rules-based maritime order while preserving strategic flexibility.

### **Significance of the Study**

Theoretically, this study contributes to International Relations scholarship by integrating classic Power Transition Theory with contemporary concepts such as strategic hedging, minilateralism, and middle-power diplomacy. It moves beyond binary hegemon-challenger models to highlight how coordinated action by secondary powers can influence systemic outcomes in maritime geopolitics.

From a policy perspective, understanding India-Japan convergence is vital for governments and analysts across the Indo-Pacific and beyond. As great-power competition intensifies, this partnership offers a model of constructive middle-power cooperation that supports regional resilience, supply chain security, and the preservation of open maritime commons. Its success or limitations will have broader implications for the future stability of the liberal international order in an era of contested multipolarity.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Power Transition Theory (PTT) serves as the primary analytical lens for understanding the dynamics of India-Japan convergence amid China's strategic expansion in the Indo-Pacific. Developed by A.F.K. Organski (1958) and later refined by Organski and Kugler (1980), PTT posits that periods of systemic instability and potential conflict arise when a rising power

approaches parity with the dominant hegemon and becomes dissatisfied with the existing international order. Unlike the Balance of Power theory, which emphasizes equilibrium through alliances, PTT focuses on the dynamic process of power shifts and the willingness of the rising challenger to revise the status quo.

In the contemporary Indo-Pacific, China represents the rising dissatisfied challenger, while the United States-led liberal order constitutes the established system. Beijing's rapid economic growth, military modernization, and assertive maritime posture, including island-building in the South China Sea, expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and development of anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities, signal its intent to reshape regional rules in its favor. This creates a classic power transition scenario characterized by heightened tensions and strategic realignments.

However, classical PTT, which often assumes bipolar or near-bipolar dynamics, requires adaptation for the current multipolar maritime context. This study integrates PTT with complementary concepts from International Relations theory to better explain middle-power behavior.

### **Integration with Balance of Threat, Hedging, and Minilateralism**

Stephen M. Walt's (1985) Balance of Threat theory refines traditional balance-of-power logic by arguing that states balance not merely against raw power but against perceived threats based on aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions. China's naval modernization and gray-zone tactics heighten threat perceptions for both India and Japan, prompting defensive cooperation even as they maintain economic engagement with Beijing.

This leads naturally to the concept of **strategic hedging** (Kuik, 2016). Hedging allows states to pursue mixed strategies, engaging economically while building security options, to avoid the binary choice between balancing and bandwagoning. In the maritime domain, hedging manifests through diversified partnerships, capacity building, and normative initiatives that reduce vulnerability without provoking confrontation.

**Minilateralism** further enhances this framework. Unlike broad multilateral institutions (e.g., ASEAN) that may suffer from lowest-common-denominator outcomes, minilateral groupings such as the Quad enable smaller, like-minded coalitions to deliver tangible cooperation on specific issues like maritime domain awareness, supply chain resilience, and technology standards (Koga, 2022). Minilateralism offers agility and effectiveness in a fluid power transition environment.

### **Conceptualizing Strategic Convergence**

This article conceptualizes **strategic convergence** as the deepening alignment of interests, capabilities, and policies between secondary and middle powers that enables them to exert collective influence on the regional order without forming formal military alliances. Unlike traditional alliances with mutual defense pacts, strategic convergence is flexible, issue-specific, and normatively driven. It is characterized by:

- Complementary capabilities (geography + manpower vs. technology + finance).
- Shared normative visions (rules-based order, freedom of navigation).
- Coordinated action across operational, technological, economic, and diplomatic domains.
- Preservation of strategic autonomy.

Strategic convergence allows middle powers to amplify their agency during power transitions, acting as stabilizers or “order shapers” rather than mere spectators.

### **Application to India-Japan Cooperation in a Multipolar Maritime Setting**

In the Indo-Pacific’s multipolar maritime setting, India-Japan convergence exemplifies this theoretical synthesis. Japan, a status-quo power with advanced technological and economic capabilities but constitutional limitations, faces direct threats to its sea lanes and territorial interests. India, an emerging major power with strategic autonomy traditions, views Chinese naval forays into the Indian Ocean and border assertiveness as challenges to its regional primacy.

Their partnership integrates PTT dynamics by actively shaping the transition process. Through operational cooperation (JIMEX, Malabar), logistics agreements (ACSA), technology collaboration, and leadership in the Quad, India and Japan engage in “soft balancing” and hedging that support the existing order while adapting to new realities. This convergence does not aim to contain China outright but seeks to raise the costs of revisionist behavior and preserve strategic space for smaller states.

By combining Power Transition Theory with Balance of Threat, hedging, and unilateralism, this framework explains how India and Japan, as pivotal secondary powers, can influence systemic outcomes in a contested maritime space. It highlights agency beyond the Sino-American dyad and provides a nuanced lens for analyzing middle-power roles in managing power transitions peacefully.

## **China's Strategic Expansion in the Maritime Indo-Pacific**

China's maritime assertiveness represents one of the most consequential developments in contemporary international relations. Driven by a combination of economic imperatives, nationalist ambitions, and security concerns, Beijing's expansion is fundamentally altering the geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific and accelerating a power transition in the maritime domain.

### **Drivers and Patterns of China's Maritime Assertiveness**

China's maritime strategy is rooted in several interconnected drivers. First, economic security: over 80% of China's energy imports and a substantial share of its foreign trade transit through Indo-Pacific sea lanes, particularly the Strait of Malacca. This vulnerability, often termed the "Malacca Dilemma," has prompted Beijing to seek greater control over critical maritime routes. Second, national rejuvenation under Xi Jinping frames maritime power as essential to achieving "great power" status and the "Chinese Dream." Third, regime legitimacy is tied to nationalist narratives around historical claims in the South and East China Seas. Fourth, military modernization aimed at resolving the Taiwan issue and deterring U.S. intervention.

The pattern of assertiveness has evolved from defensive coastal protection in the 1990s to proactive "near-seas" control and, increasingly, "far-seas" power projection. This shift is operationalized through a "salami-slicing" or incremental gray-zone strategy that advances Chinese interests while staying below the threshold of armed conflict.

### **Evolution of PLA Navy Capabilities and A2/AD Strategy**

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has undergone a remarkable transformation. From a "brown-water" coastal defense force, it has become the world's largest navy by hull count. As of 2025–2026, the PLAN operates over 370 battle force ships. Projections indicate growth to approximately 395 ships by 2025 and 435 by 2030. This expansion emphasizes major surface combatants, submarines, amphibious ships, and auxiliaries.

Key platforms include three operational aircraft carriers — *Liaoning*, *Shandong*, and the advanced *Fujian* (Type 003) with electromagnetic catapults. A fourth carrier (potentially nuclear-powered) is under construction, with ambitions for 6–9 carriers in the longer term. The submarine fleet comprises around 60 vessels, including nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) and ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), alongside advanced diesel-electric boats with air-independent propulsion. Large destroyers (Type 055 and Type 052D) and amphibious assault ships (Type 075/076) further enhance power projection.

Complementing this quantitative growth is a sophisticated **anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD)** strategy. Long-range anti-ship ballistic missiles (e.g., DF-21D and DF-26 “carrier killers”), hypersonic weapons, integrated air defense systems, and advanced C4ISR networks create formidable “kill zones” within the first and second island chains. These capabilities aim to deter or delay U.S. and allied intervention in regional contingencies, particularly concerning Taiwan.

### **Key Initiatives: BRI Maritime Silk Road, Dual-Use Ports, and Gray-Zone Tactics**

The **21st Century Maritime Silk Road**, a core component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), serves as the economic and diplomatic backbone of China’s maritime strategy. It involves massive infrastructure investments in ports, logistics hubs, and connectivity projects across the Indo-Pacific. Notable examples include Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), and Djibouti (China’s first overseas military base). Many of these facilities feature dual-use characteristics, capable of supporting commercial operations while providing logistical support for PLAN vessels.

Gray-zone tactics form the operational frontline of assertiveness. These include deployment of maritime militia and Coast Guard vessels for swarming, ramming, water cannon use, and blocking maneuvers, notably against Philippine and Vietnamese vessels in the South China Sea. China has militarized artificial islands in the Spratlys and Paracels, equipping them with airstrips, radars, and missile systems, effectively creating forward bases that extend operational reach.

### **Impact on Regional Order, SLOCs, and Freedom of Navigation**

China’s actions have profoundly impacted the regional maritime order. By challenging UNCLOS interpretations and asserting historic rights (e.g., the nine-dash line), Beijing undermines the principles of freedom of navigation and overflight. This creates uncertainty for commercial shipping, raises insurance costs, and disrupts fishing activities. While China insists its actions protect its sovereign rights, regional states and extra-regional powers perceive them as attempts to transform the South China Sea into a “Chinese lake.”

Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) security is increasingly contested. Although China benefits from stable trade routes, its assertiveness paradoxically heightens risks of escalation and miscalculation. Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) by the U.S., India, Japan, Australia, and others have become regular responses to uphold international law.

### **Implications for Power Transition Dynamics**

China’s maritime expansion accelerates power transition dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. It challenges the U.S.-led order while exposing the limitations of classical Power Transition

Theory in a multipolar setting. Rather than a simple hegemon-challenger duel, the transition involves multiple actors, with middle powers playing pivotal roles. Beijing's strategy seeks to establish regional hegemony in the near seas while expanding influence in far seas, prompting counter-coalitions and hedging behaviors.

This expansion has stimulated strategic convergence among like-minded states, most notably India and Japan. It has also highlighted the agency of secondary powers in shaping transition outcomes through norm entrepreneurship, capacity building, and minilateral cooperation. While enhancing China's security and influence in the short term, it risks provoking a broader balancing coalition that could constrain its long-term ambitions.

In summary, China's strategic maritime expansion is both a symptom and driver of power transition. Its success in reshaping the Indo-Pacific will depend not only on its own capabilities but also on the effectiveness of countervailing responses from regional and middle powers.

### **Historical and Strategic Context of India-Japan Relations**

India-Japan relations have transformed dramatically over the past three decades, evolving from a primarily economic partnership into a robust strategic convergence that plays a pivotal role in shaping maritime geopolitics and power transition dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. This evolution reflects shifting regional realities, shared democratic values, and converging threat perceptions, particularly regarding China's rise.

### **Evolution from Economic Partnership to Strategic Convergence**

Historically, India and Japan maintained cordial but limited engagement. Post-World War II, Japan focused on economic reconstruction and export-led growth, while India pursued non-alignment and socialist-oriented development. Economic ties began gaining momentum in the 1980s and 1990s through Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA), which supported major Indian infrastructure projects. However, the relationship remained largely transactional until the turn of the millennium.

The end of the Cold War and the rise of China created new incentives for deeper engagement. Both countries recognized the need for diversified partnerships in an increasingly multipolar Asia. This marked the beginning of a shift from purely economic cooperation toward strategic convergence driven by mutual interests in maritime security, technology, and regional stability.

### **Key Milestones**

A foundational milestone came in August 2000 during Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori's visit to India. The two countries established the **India-Japan Global Partnership**, which

broadened cooperation beyond economics to include political and security dialogue. This laid the groundwork for future strategic engagement.

In 2007, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe delivered his landmark “**Confluence of the Two Seas**” speech at the Indian Parliament. Abe articulated a vision of the Indian and Pacific Oceans as a single strategic space and called for closer cooperation among democratic nations. This speech provided the intellectual foundation for the Indo-Pacific concept and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). That same year, Japan participated in the Malabar naval exercise, signaling emerging maritime cooperation.

The formalization of security ties occurred on October 22, 2008, with the signing of the **Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation** between Prime Ministers Manmohan Singh and Taro Aso. This was India’s first security agreement with any major power and Japan’s second (after the United States). The declaration outlined cooperation in maritime security, counter-terrorism, disaster management, and information sharing, providing an institutional framework for defense engagement.

The relationship reached a new height in September 2014 when Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Japan. The two nations upgraded their ties to a “**Special Strategic and Global Partnership.**” This upgrade reflected growing trust and a shared desire to play proactive roles in regional affairs. The accompanying Tokyo Declaration emphasized freedom of navigation, peaceful dispute resolution in accordance with international law, and cooperation in maritime security.

### **Post-2014 Acceleration under Abe-Modi and Beyond**

The personal rapport between Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe and Narendra Modi provided strong political momentum. Annual summits and frequent high-level interactions accelerated practical cooperation. Key developments included:

- Regularization and expansion of the bilateral **Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX)**.
- Japan’s permanent participation in the multilateral **Exercise Malabar** from 2015.
- Signing of the 2015 Vision 2025 document outlining ambitious goals for security, technology, and connectivity cooperation.
- The 2020 **Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA)**, enabling reciprocal logistics support.
- Growing defense technology and equipment collaboration through the Joint Working Group on Defense Equipment and Technology Cooperation.

This momentum has continued beyond the Abe era. Successive Japanese leaders, including Fumio Kishida and Shigeru Ishiba, have maintained strong commitment to the partnership. Recent joint declarations (notably in 2025) have further expanded cooperation in emerging domains such as cybersecurity, space, and critical technologies.

### **Shared Threat Perceptions and Normative Alignment**

The primary driver of this strategic convergence has been shared threat perceptions regarding China's maritime assertiveness. For Japan, China's actions in the East China Sea, militarization of the South China Sea, and expanding naval capabilities threaten vital sea lanes through which nearly 90% of its energy imports flow. For India, Chinese naval forays into the Indian Ocean, dual-use port developments ("String of Pearls"), and border tensions represent challenges to its regional influence and security.

This convergence is underpinned by strong normative alignment. Japan's **Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)** strategy and India's **Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)** vision complement each other effectively. Both emphasize respect for international law (particularly UNCLOS), freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, and transparent, high-quality infrastructure development as alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

This normative synergy has enabled India and Japan to position themselves as responsible stakeholders and order-builders in the Indo-Pacific. Through the Quad and other minilateral formats, they promote a rules-based maritime order while respecting India's strategic autonomy and Japan's pacifist constitutional framework.

In summary, the historical trajectory of India-Japan relations illustrates a classic case of strategic convergence between two major maritime democracies. What began as economic cooperation has matured into a multifaceted partnership that actively influences power transition dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. This evolution provides the foundation for analyzing the operational, technological, and diplomatic dimensions of their contemporary synergy.

### **Dimensions of India-Japan Convergence in Maritime Geopolitics**

India-Japan strategic convergence in the maritime domain represents a multifaceted middle-power response to the ongoing power transition in the Indo-Pacific. This convergence leverages complementary strengths, India's geographical centrality and operational reach in the Indian Ocean, with Japan's technological sophistication, financial capacity, and industrial prowess, to promote a rules-based order, enhance resilience, and shape regional outcomes. It spans operational, technological, economic, and multilateral dimensions.

### **Operational and Security Cooperation**

Operational cooperation forms the most visible and practical pillar of the partnership. The bilateral Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX), initiated in 2012, has evolved into a sophisticated annual drill. JIMEX-25 (held in 2025) featured advanced anti-submarine warfare (ASW), surface warfare, air operations, and interoperability drills, underscoring growing tactical coordination between the Indian Navy and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF). Complementing JIMEX is participation in the multilateral Exercise Malabar. Japan became a permanent participant in 2015, and the exercise now routinely includes all Quad members. Malabar 2025 further enhanced high-end interoperability in complex maritime environments. Additional exercises, such as air (Veer Guardian) and army (Dharma Guardian) drills, reflect broadening defense ties.

A landmark development was the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) signed in 2020, which enables reciprocal logistics support during exercises, training, and humanitarian operations. This agreement has been actively utilized and was further strengthened through the 2025 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation. Maritime domain awareness has improved through information-sharing mechanisms and regular naval diplomacy, including port calls and staff talks. These operational linkages enhance interoperability, build trust, and signal collective commitment to freedom of navigation and regional stability.

### **Technological and Defense Industrial Collaboration**

Technological collaboration is a high-potential area that aligns with both countries' goals of capability enhancement and supply chain resilience. The 2015 Defense Equipment and Technology Cooperation Agreement established the framework, supported by a Joint Working Group. Key initiatives include joint research on unmanned systems, sensors, maritime surveillance, and dual-use technologies.

Notable progress includes collaboration on the Unified Complex Radio Antenna (UNICORN) project for naval communication and stealth capabilities. Japan has shown interest in co-development and co-production of UAVs, maritime patrol systems, and advanced electronics. India benefits from Japanese expertise in batteries, propulsion systems, and precision manufacturing, while Japan gains access to India's growing defense market and software capabilities.

This cooperation extends to emerging domains such as cyber security, space-based maritime awareness, and quantum technologies, as highlighted in recent summits. While challenges like

differing procurement systems and export controls persist, momentum is building toward more substantive co-production.

### **Economic and Connectivity Initiatives**

Economic and connectivity initiatives provide the foundational layer for maritime geopolitics. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), launched in 2017, promotes quality infrastructure, sustainable development, and people-to-people ties as transparent alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Though implementation has been gradual, it reflects a shared philosophy of high-standard connectivity.

Japan remains a major investor in India, with commitments targeting infrastructure, high-speed rail (e.g., Mumbai-Ahmedabad), semiconductors, and manufacturing. Both nations emphasize supply chain resilience, collaborating on critical minerals, semiconductors, and clean energy technologies. Quad initiatives, including the Critical Minerals Initiative (launched in 2025), amplify these bilateral efforts by diversifying away from single-source dependencies.

These projects enhance maritime security indirectly by improving port resilience, digital connectivity, and economic interdependence among like-minded partners, thereby reducing vulnerability to coercion.

### **Minilateral and Multilateral Engagement**

India-Japan convergence finds its broadest expression in minilateral and multilateral platforms. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) serves as the premier vehicle, evolving from a security dialogue into a platform for practical deliverables in maritime domain awareness (IPMDA), critical technologies, supply chains, and infrastructure. India and Japan play leading roles in shaping Quad agendas, including the Ports of the Future initiative and coordination on gray-zone challenges.

#### **Trilateral formats further deepen cooperation:**

India-Japan-United States (JAI): Focuses on advanced naval exercises, intelligence sharing, and technology.

India-Japan-Australia: Emphasizes capacity building in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. Both countries also engage ASEAN through the Act East Forum, East Asia Summit, and other mechanisms, promoting an inclusive Indo-Pacific vision that respects ASEAN centrality while advancing rules-based norms.

### **Overall Assessment**

India-Japan maritime convergence demonstrates remarkable depth and adaptability. Its strength lies in complementarity, shared normative commitments to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, and

flexibility that respects India's strategic autonomy and Japan's constitutional constraints. Limitations remain, particularly in the pace of technology transfer and operational integration, but the trajectory is positive. In the context of power transition, this partnership serves as a stabilizing force, enhancing deterrence through presence, resilience through economics and technology, and order-building through normative leadership.

### **Assessing Effectiveness and Limitations in the Power Transition Context**

The India-Japan strategic convergence constitutes a significant middle-power initiative within the broader power transition unfolding in the Indo-Pacific. While it has produced tangible outcomes, its overall effectiveness must be evaluated against the structural realities of great-power competition, domestic constraints, and the fluid nature of regional order-building. This section assesses the partnership's strengths and limitations, offers a comparative perspective, and analyzes its contribution to regional equilibrium.

#### **Strengths**

The partnership's foremost strength lies in **complementary capabilities**. India contributes strategic depth, geographical centrality in the Indian Ocean, a large and growing navy, and substantial manpower. Japan brings advanced technology, sophisticated maritime surveillance systems, substantial financial resources, and high-quality industrial capacity. This synergy allows both countries to address capability shortfalls: India gains access to cutting-edge sensors, propulsion systems, and electronics, while Japan extends its operational reach into the Indian Ocean.

A second major strength is **normative leadership**. Through consistent advocacy for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and alignment with India's SAGAR vision, the two countries have emerged as credible champions of a rules-based maritime order. They promote UNCLOS-compliant behavior, freedom of navigation, and high-standard infrastructure, offering a compelling alternative to China's approach.

Finally, their **order-building role** is evident in minilateral platforms, particularly the Quad. By focusing on practical deliverables, such as maritime domain awareness (IPMDA), supply chain resilience, and capacity building with third countries, India and Japan help shape regional norms and institutions during this power transition, rather than merely reacting to Chinese initiatives.

#### **Limitations**

Despite these strengths, several limitations constrain the partnership's impact.

**India's Strategic Autonomy** remains a defining feature of its foreign policy. New Delhi is reluctant to enter any arrangement resembling a formal alliance, preferring flexible partnerships that preserve its independent decision-making. This limits deeper operational integration, such as joint patrols or automatic mutual defense commitments.

**Capability Gaps and Implementation Challenges** persist. While Japan excels in technology, its Self-Defense Forces face constitutional and political restrictions on offensive operations. India's defense modernization, though progressing, continues to encounter delays in indigenous production and bureaucratic hurdles. Joint projects often move slowly due to differing procurement systems and regulatory environments.

**Economic Dependencies on China** create hedging behavior on both sides. Both countries maintain significant trade and investment ties with Beijing, which tempers their willingness to confront China too aggressively. This economic-security dilemma frequently results in cautious, incremental cooperation rather than bold initiatives.

**Domestic Constraints** further moderate outcomes. In Japan, public opinion and Article 9 interpretations continue to shape the pace of security normalization. In India, coalition politics, economic priorities, and a multi-aligned foreign policy approach impose their own limitations.

### **Comparative Analysis**

Compared to other responses to China's rise, the India-Japan partnership occupies a distinctive middle ground.

**Versus AUKUS:** AUKUS represents "hard balancing" through deep technological integration, particularly nuclear-powered submarines (Pillar I) and advanced capabilities (Pillar II). It delivers rapid capability enhancement and strong deterrence signals but risks arms race escalation and regional polarization. In contrast, India-Japan convergence is softer, more inclusive, and focused on sustained presence, norm-building, and resilience. It complements AUKUS without the same level of provocation.

**Versus Traditional U.S. Alliances:** Formal U.S. alliances (e.g., with Japan, Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines) offer clear security guarantees and integrated command structures. They provide high-end deterrence but can appear exclusive and trigger strong Chinese countermeasures. The India-Japan model, rooted in strategic partnerships and multilateralism, is more agile and acceptable to ASEAN countries and Global South actors wary of bloc politics.

**Versus ASEAN Centrality:** ASEAN-led mechanisms prioritize consensus and non-confrontation, often resulting in limited effectiveness on hard security issues. India-Japan convergence, while respectful of ASEAN centrality, offers more decisive action through

targeted minilateral initiatives, thereby supplementing rather than undermining ASEAN-led architecture.

### **Contribution to Regional Equilibrium**

In the context of power transition, the India-Japan partnership makes a meaningful contribution to regional equilibrium. It does not seek to “contain” China but raises the costs of unilateral revisionism through persistent presence, capability development, and normative pressure. Strengthening maritime domain awareness, diversifying supply chains, and promoting quality infrastructure, it helps create a more balanced and resilient Indo-Pacific.

The partnership’s greatest value may lie in its demonstration of middle-power agency. It shows that secondary powers can actively shape transition outcomes by building flexible networks that support the existing order while adapting to new realities. This approach reduces the risk of bipolar confrontation and creates space for smaller states to navigate great-power competition.

Nevertheless, its overall contribution remains moderate rather than transformative. It enhances stability but cannot single-handedly offset China’s growing capabilities. Its long-term effectiveness will depend on the ability of both countries to accelerate technological collaboration, expand third-country partnerships, and gradually deepen operational coordination while managing domestic and economic constraints.

In sum, India-Japan strategic convergence represents a pragmatic and constructive force in the Indo-Pacific power transition. Its flexible, norm-driven character makes it a sustainable model of middle-power cooperation, one that strengthens regional equilibrium without exacerbating great-power rivalry.

### **Future Trajectories and Scenarios**

The future of India-Japan strategic convergence will play a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of power transition in the Indo-Pacific. As geopolitical competition intensifies, the partnership’s evolution will depend on political will, technological breakthroughs, external pressures, and the ability of both countries to overcome structural limitations. This section explores plausible scenarios, the transformative potential of emerging technologies, prospects for deeper integration, and key factors that could accelerate or constrain progress.

#### **Optimistic, Pessimistic, and Middle Scenarios**

**Optimistic Scenario:** By 2035, India-Japan convergence matures into a highly effective middle-power axis. Regular joint patrols in the Indian Ocean and western Pacific become normalized under Quad frameworks. Substantial defense co-production agreements

materialize, including joint development of next-generation unmanned systems and submarine technologies. A robust technology alliance emerges, significantly enhancing maritime domain awareness through integrated space-based sensors and AI analytics. In this scenario, India and Japan, working with Quad partners, successfully deter gray-zone coercion, promote high-standard connectivity across the Indo-Pacific, and help stabilize the regional order. Power transition becomes more peaceful and multipolar rather than destabilizing.

**Pessimistic Scenario:** Domestic constraints and economic dependencies stall progress. India's strategic autonomy concerns and Japan's constitutional limitations prevent meaningful operational integration. Technology cooperation remains limited to low-hanging fruit, with bureaucratic hurdles and export controls slowing implementation. China's continued economic leverage and assertive diplomacy create wedges between New Delhi and Tokyo. In this scenario, the partnership plateaus at symbolic exercises and modest dialogues, failing to meaningfully influence power transition dynamics and leaving smaller regional states more vulnerable to coercion.

**Middle (Most Likely) Scenario:** The partnership continues its gradual, pragmatic deepening. Operational cooperation expands through more frequent and complex exercises and coordinated presence missions. Technology collaboration advances unevenly but produces concrete outcomes in unmanned systems, maritime surveillance, and supply chain resilience. Minilateral mechanisms like the Quad deliver incremental wins in capacity building and norm-setting. While not transformative, the convergence successfully raises the costs of revisionist behavior and contributes to a more balanced regional architecture. This scenario aligns with both countries' preference for flexible, non-alliance-based cooperation.

### **Role of Emerging Technologies**

Emerging technologies will be decisive in determining which scenario materializes.

**Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Unmanned Systems:** Joint development of AI-enabled unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), unmanned surface vessels (USVs), and unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs) could revolutionize maritime domain awareness and reduce human risk in contested waters. India's software strengths combined with Japan's sensor and precision engineering expertise offer strong complementarity.

**Space-based Maritime Domain Awareness:** Integration of satellite constellations, quantum sensors, and AI analytics could provide real-time tracking of vessels, including "dark ships," across the vast Indo-Pacific. A joint or Quad-linked space initiative would significantly enhance deterrence and response capabilities.

**Hypersonics and Advanced Missiles:** Collaboration on hypersonic technologies or related propulsion systems could strengthen conventional deterrence against A2/AD threats, though this area remains highly sensitive due to proliferation concerns.

These technologies have the potential to multiply the effectiveness of existing platforms and create new asymmetric advantages for middle powers.

### **Potential for Deeper Integration**

Several avenues for deeper integration exist. **Joint patrols** or coordinated deployments in strategically vital areas (e.g., Andaman Sea, South China Sea approaches, or western Pacific) could become more routine. **Submarine cooperation**, particularly in areas such as lithium-ion battery technology, quieting techniques, and maintenance facilities, represents a high-impact opportunity. A formal **technology alliance** focused on critical and emerging technologies (CET) could include pooled R&D funding, joint testing facilities in India, and harmonized export controls among Quad members.

Such deepening would mark a qualitative shift from soft balancing toward more credible collective resilience, while still preserving strategic autonomy.

### **Factors that Could Accelerate or Hinder Progress**

#### **Accelerating Factors:**

- Heightened Chinese assertiveness (e.g., new incidents in the East/South China Seas or Indian Ocean).
- Major technological breakthroughs and successful pilot projects.
- Strong political leadership and personal chemistry at the summit level.
- Deepening Quad institutionalization and inclusion of additional partners (e.g., European states).
- Economic decoupling pressures that favor trusted supply chains.

#### **Hindering Factors:**

- Domestic political shifts (e.g., change of government in either country with different foreign policy priorities).
- Economic recession or renewed heavy dependence on the Chinese market.
- Successful Chinese wedge-driving diplomacy.
- Slow progress on bureaucratic and regulatory harmonization.
- Escalation risks that make both sides more cautious.

In conclusion, the future of India-Japan convergence is promising but contingent. A middle-ground trajectory, steady, incremental deepening supported by technological innovation,

appears most probable. If both countries can effectively harness emerging technologies and gradually expand operational cooperation, their partnership will not only strengthen their own security but also make a substantial contribution to managing power transition and preserving stability in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Policy Recommendations and Broader Implications**

The analysis of India-Japan strategic convergence in the context of power transition yields several actionable recommendations for policymakers while highlighting important implications for the future of the Indo-Pacific order. As middle powers navigating a period of systemic change, India and Japan are uniquely positioned to influence outcomes through pragmatic, sustained cooperation.

### **Policy Recommendations**

#### **For India:**

- Prioritize Japan as a Tier-1 defense and technology partner within the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* framework. This should include fast-tracking joint development projects in unmanned systems, maritime surveillance, and propulsion technologies.
- Gradually expand operational coordination, beginning with more frequent coordinated presence missions and information-sharing protocols, while maintaining strategic autonomy.
- Invest in domestic reforms to accelerate defense procurement and technology absorption, reducing bureaucratic delays that hinder joint projects.
- Deepen third-country capacity building with Japan in Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, and Africa to promote maritime security norms and high-quality infrastructure.

#### **For Japan:**

- Further liberalize defense export policies and streamline technology transfer mechanisms to enable more substantive co-production with India.
- Increase investment in joint R&D facilities located in India, focusing on dual-use and emerging technologies such as AI, space-based maritime domain awareness, and hypersonics.
- Actively utilize the ACSA and explore additional logistics arrangements to enhance JMSDF reach into the Indian Ocean.
- Leverage its financial and diplomatic influence to scale quality infrastructure initiatives under the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor and Quad frameworks.

**For Like-Minded Partners (Quad and Beyond):**

- Institutionalize practical mechanisms within the Quad, such as a dedicated Maritime Security Working Group and a Critical Technologies Alliance with pooled funding.
- Develop standardized protocols for responding to gray-zone tactics and coordinated humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HADR) operations.
- Expand minilateral formats selectively (e.g., India-Japan-Australia, India-Japan-US) while preserving ASEAN centrality to maintain regional buy-in.
- Promote supply chain resilience initiatives in semiconductors, critical minerals, and clean energy to reduce strategic vulnerabilities.

These recommendations emphasize incremental but purposeful deepening — focusing on areas where complementarity is strongest and political sensitivities are lowest.

**Implications for the Liberal International Order and Power Transition Stability**

India-Japan convergence carries significant implications for the evolving liberal international order. By championing UNCLOS principles, freedom of navigation, and transparent infrastructure standards, the partnership helps sustain key normative pillars of the maritime order even as U.S. dominance faces relative decline. It demonstrates that the liberal order can be supported and adapted through networked middle-power cooperation rather than relying solely on traditional great-power leadership.

In terms of power transition stability, this convergence offers a stabilizing influence. Classical Power Transition Theory often predicts heightened conflict risk during power shifts. However, active middle-power agencies, as exemplified by India and Japan, can moderate these risks by raising the costs of revisionism, creating alternative networks, and providing diplomatic off-ramps. The partnership contributes to a more multipolar equilibrium in which no single power can unilaterally reshape regional rules.

This model reduces the likelihood of binary bloc confrontation by offering flexible, non-exclusive arrangements that smaller states can engage with comfortably. It thus supports a “multiplex” regional architecture where minilateralism complements multilateral institutions.

**The Role of Middle Powers in Shaping a Multipolar Indo-Pacific**

The India-Japan experience underscores the growing importance of middle powers in contemporary international relations. In a multipolar Indo-Pacific, secondary and middle powers are not mere bystanders but active order shapers. Through strategic convergence, they can amplify their influence, compensate for capability gaps, and help manage great-power competition.

India and Japan illustrate how democratic middle powers can leverage normative credibility, complementary strengths, and multilateral platforms to promote stability without provoking outright confrontation. Their approach, flexible, norm-driven, and focused on resilience, offers a replicable model for other actors such as Australia, South Korea, France, and ASEAN states. Ultimately, the success of India-Japan convergence will serve as a litmus test for whether middle powers can collectively steer power transitions toward peaceful, rules-based outcomes. If nurtured effectively, this partnership will not only enhance the security of both nations but also contribute meaningfully to a stable, open, and multipolar Indo-Pacific, one in which power is balanced, norms are upheld, and smaller states retain meaningful strategic space.

The coming decade will determine whether this middle-power diplomacy can translate shared visions into an enduring regional architecture. With sustained commitment, India and Japan are well-positioned to play a decisive role in shaping a more balanced and resilient maritime future.

### **Conclusion**

The Indo-Pacific stands at the epicenter of a historic power transition, where China's ambitious maritime expansion is reshaping regional geopolitics and challenging the established rules-based order. This article has argued that the strategic convergence between India and Japan represents a significant and pragmatic middle-power response to this transition. Rather than pursuing formal alliances or direct containment, New Delhi and Tokyo have developed a flexible, multifaceted partnership that combines operational cooperation, technological collaboration, economic connectivity, and normative leadership through multilateral platforms such as the Quad. This convergence leverages their complementary strengths, India's geographical centrality and manpower, with Japan's technological and financial capabilities, to uphold freedom of navigation, promote high-standard infrastructure, and enhance regional resilience.

Core arguments presented throughout this study are clear. First, China's naval modernization, gray-zone tactics, and Belt and Road Initiative maritime projects have created convergent threat perceptions that drive India-Japan alignment. Second, their partnership has evolved from modest post-Cold War economic ties into substantive strategic cooperation, particularly since the 2014 elevation to a Special Strategic and Global Partnership. Third, while the partnership demonstrates notable strengths in complementarity and normative influence, its effectiveness is moderated by India's strategic autonomy, Japan's constitutional constraints, economic interdependencies, and capability gaps. Overall, India-Japan convergence serves as a stabilizing force that helps manage, rather than merely react to, the ongoing power transition.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Contributions**

This study contributes to International Relations scholarship in two primary ways. Theoretically, it bridges classic Power Transition Theory (Organski & Kugler) with Balance of Threat theory (Walt), strategic hedging, and minilateralism. It demonstrates how secondary and middle powers can actively shape transition outcomes in a multipolar maritime environment, moving beyond traditional hegemon-challenger binaries. Empirically, it provides a comprehensive examination of India-Japan maritime cooperation across operational, technological, economic, and multilateral domains, supported by recent developments in exercises, agreements, and Quad initiatives. By offering a balanced assessment of both achievements and limitations, the article avoids overly optimistic or alarmist narratives common in Indo-Pacific scholarship.

### **Final Reflections on Prospects**

The prospects of India-Japan convergence remain cautiously optimistic. In the most likely middle scenario, the partnership will continue to deepen incrementally, driven by shared interests and technological advancements in AI, unmanned systems, space-based maritime domain awareness, and supply chain resilience. Success in these areas could significantly enhance deterrence by denial and raise the costs of coercive behavior. However, realizing the full potential of this convergence will require sustained political commitment, bolder technology co-production, and greater willingness to coordinate on gray-zone challenges.

India-Japan strategic convergence will not single-handedly resolve the challenges posed by China's rise, nor will it restore unipolar stability. Yet, it offers a valuable model of middle-power diplomacy capable of supporting a more balanced, multipolar Indo-Pacific. By reinforcing key norms of the liberal international order while adapting to new realities, this partnership helps create strategic space for smaller states and reduces the risk of destabilizing great-power confrontation.

As the power transition unfolds, the India-Japan relationship stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of democratic middle powers. If both nations continue to invest in this convergence with strategic patience and pragmatism, it can play a constructive role in managing China's rise and fostering long-term stability in the world's most dynamic maritime theater. The coming decade will test whether such a middle-power agency can help usher in a more stable and inclusive regional order, one defined not by hegemony, but by balanced power and shared rules.

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