Tokyo’s Defense Export Liberalization and the India-Japan Strategic Convergence

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Japan’s Strategic Reorientation

On April 21, 2026, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi amended the rules restricting the transfer of defense equipment and technology to other countries. It diluted the earlier export limitation to 5 non-lethal categories: rescue, transport, warning, surveillance, and mine-sweeping. In principle, countries can now receive missiles, advanced warships, submarines, and other such offensive weapons from Tokyo. The lifting of the blanket ban on the export of lethal weaponry is a significant step in Tokyo’s shedding of post-War restrictions mandated by constitutional clauses and pacifist ideology.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Guo Jiakun, warned against Japan’s “neo-militarism”, conflating Tokyo’s current posture with past imperial aggrandizement. The

Chinese government urged the international community to "resist [such] reckless moves" by Japan. Meanwhile, Indian government spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal welcomed Tokyo's revisions, reinstating existing India-Japan security cooperation and technological collaboration. Indian analysts have viewed this policy change as a significant step toward boosting India-Japan defense-industrial cooperation and strengthening India's "Special Strategic and Global Partnership" with Japan.

Interestingly, this has coincided with the largest-ever expansion of the US-Philippines Balikatan exercise, with maiden combat-driven participation by the Japanese SDF, deploying destroyers, a multi-service force, a helicopter carrier, and C-130H transport aircraft, as well as engaging in a live mission to sink a decommissioned ship by firing a Type-88 ground-to-surface missile.

In response, the Chinese Foreign Ministry denounced such security collaboration as aggravating tensions, casting it as "fire-and-backfiring." Incidentally, during the Balikatan exercise, the Philippines fired a BrahMos missile in a simulated event to validate its operational prowess.

Expanding India–Japan Defense & Technological Convergence

Despite India and Japan signing the defense technology transfer agreement way back in 2015, there has been no significant progress in this vertical, yet broader bilateral defense ties have burgeoned. So far, only the joint research cooperation on Unmanned Ground Vehicle is complete, but it is yet to translate into tangible production output.

Japan's lifting of export controls introduces another avenue for India to acquire reliable, interoperable, and capability-enhancing technologies, thereby strengthening India's multi-domain operations. Under Delhi's broader diversification strategy, Japan's emergence as a defense and technology

partner is pivotal for Delhi's defense and military technologies. Japan's defense technological prowess, especially in the underwater domain, has been remarkable, built over years of experience in cutting-edge stealth, sensor, and acoustic systems.

Sensing and Stealth Capabilities

The UNICORN mast deal between India and Japan may finally conclude, paving the way for boosting India's Indigenous Integrated Masts system, which is currently in an advanced stage of development by DRDO. The system draws heavily from and relies on UNICORN mast technology. Such acquisition of capabilities alongside indigenous development is likely to influence India's refitment decisions. It may replace the MF-START radar system, which is more detectable than the UNICORN radar, which consolidates multiple antennas into a single dome structure on Indian warships such as frigates and destroyers.

Before lifting these restrictions, Japan had signed a contract with Australia for the joint development and production of 11 Mogami-class frigates, which are currently under construction by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries. Current Japanese Mogami frigates are installedwith UNICORN mast radar antennas. Indian warships equipped with advanced UNICORN capabilities would seamlessly align with both Australia's and Japan's compatible models, fulfilling India's interoperability objectives—a move that also fits with Japan's interoperability with allied and partner states.

Reports also surfaced that, before the Japanese export control architecture was repurposed, Tokyo offered to share design and technology with Indian shipyards for the Mogami-class frigates. A SCMP blog reported that such offers will likely enable joint naval exercises and mission operations among three countries (Australia, India, and Japan). This process may also streamline the provision of spare parts and

maintenance services. These steps align with efforts to build allied capabilities, enable regional deterrence, and enhance cooperation among partners in the Indo-Pacific.

Undersea Capabilities

Japanese input into India's strategic program may revamp capability augmentation and response capabilities, aligning with Japan's lifting of export restrictions. India's Project 75-I, which seeks to build India's conventional submarines, is reeling under pressure. The Air-Independent Propulsion (AIP) system failed to satisfy the Indian Navy's requirement—the demonstrative prototype built by Germany's ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems (TKMS) largely featured in a smaller 2000-ton submarine rather than the usual 3000-ton submarines. During the technical evaluation, however, TKMS's fuel-cell-based AIP module that competed in the competitive bid was contracted, contingent on additional promises to equip it with a lithium-ion battery for enhanced performance. India's DRDO has also field-tested its indigenous AIP for retrofitting onto Kalvari-class submarines built by the French company Naval Group, which lacked an AIP.

Such refits with upgraded capabilities offer avenues for exploring the potential integration of Japanese systems onto Indian warships.

Japan's Taigei-class submarine offers an alternative to AIP, with high-capacity lithium-ion batteries that provide extended endurance and stealth. This alternative provides greater stealth against Anti-Submarine Warfare capabilities such as seabed sensors, patrol aircraft, and mounted sonars—a capability Tokyo has built to counter China's surveillance in the SCS and East Asia. India's revamped capabilities aimed at tackling China may thus fall short of Tokyo's already realized and superior capabilities.

What Taigei shies away from introducing is the submarine-

launched land attack capability. India's Project 75-I specifies thisoperational land-attack aspect. Japan's Taigei reinforces Tokyo's "quiet" war – a sensing, detecting, and decision-making tactic – but lacks the land-attack shooting feature, which is expected to roll out by 2027. Taigei-class submarines also support Japan's underwater domain warfare. Supporting such warfare, Taigei also aims to deploy unmanned systems for real-time surveillance and attack posture, as well as mines to support sea-denial activities.

In this area, India and Japan reportedly decided to co-develop underwater surveillance technologies, introducing significant convergences with Taigei submarines teaming with uncrewed vehicles, creating the possibility of real-time surveillance feeds for India and Japan in the Indo-Pacific region.

Transport Capabilities

Another potential project that may gain traction owing to policy changes is India's quest to acquire a medium transport aircraft, with Japan's Kawasaki C-2 competing against Brazil's Embraer and Europe's Airbus. The Kawasaki C-2's induction may overhaul India-Japan ties, break Airbus's monopoly in India, offer the requisite cargo capabilities, a reliable engine, and set India on course to receive its first turbofan transport production lines.

A fleet of C-2s serves as aerial delivery vehicles, transporting strategic weapons technology to partner states, a demand that has increased since India's exponential rise in defense exports since 2023. These systems are reportedly susceptible to interdiction and damage during commercial shipping. Acquiring C-2 will also offload existing pressure on the C-17 Globemaster and IL-76 fleets engaged in various disaster relief operations and other non-combat tasks.

Drone Capabilities

Japan's lifting of restrictions has given countries the option to diversify their sources of electronics and micro-components, as reported by Reuters. India is also playing along. And indeed, the Indian firm Ideaforge partnered with a Japanese DMP to augment chip capabilities for processing multiple visual inputs. The Print reportedly called this marriage of "Indian drone engineering with Japanese semiconductor" technology, paving the way for alternative suppliers of chips that control the drone's core functions. This also dovetails well with Japan's "China-free" defense supply chain, which aims to eliminate critical dependencies on China and relocate them to Japan's shores.

Future Pathways

India's defense collaboration with Japan will now hinge on modern warfare conditions gleaned from the current wars. Iran's chokehold over the Strait of Hormuz via extensive mine deployment may elevate the significance of mine countermeasures for India. India has had no operational mine-sweeping vehicles since 2016. India floated a 2023 Request for Information to procure 12 MCM vessels, with indigenous GSL identified as the primary shipbuilder and strategic partners such as SAAB, Naval Group, and others to diffuse technologies. Given this critical gap, the Indian Navy relies on L&T Multi-purpose vessels and Thales's mine-sweeping "clips" for its operational needs.

Given India's existing reliance on Thales, New Delhi can certainly benefit from Japan's and France's efforts to integrate high-frequency (Thales) and low-frequency (MHI) sonars to significantly augment detection and classification capabilities onboard an autonomous mine countermeasures system. While still in the experimental phase, Thales and MHI can inform India's decision on incorporating these systems into its existing plans to build the MCM vessels as the stand-off system and its autonomous sub-unit systems for detecting and classifying mines.

While many such potential offers were mooted and already present in defense circles, some have lost momentum, such as the potential sale of ShinMaywa US-2 amphibious aircraft. Others, India and Japan, have to find ways to manage the challenges of technology transfer, cost-effectiveness, and policy drifts that hinder defense technology collaboration.