

COMMENTARY / JAPAN

Japan and India — a special relationship

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WASHINGTON – Japan and India are set to hold their inaugural “two plus two” defense and foreign ministerial dialogue on Nov. 30. The new two plus two is expected to advance cooperation around a range of bilateral issues ahead of next month’s annual summit between Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe and Narendra Modi.

This will only be India’s second such two plus two, after a similar exchange with the United States last year, but it heralds the continuation of a new era of energy and potential in the special relationship forming between Tokyo and New Delhi. The upcoming talks are an opportunity for both governments to put their combined energies to specific action in three key areas of focus where the relationship is seen as flagging or in need of forward movement: defense, technology and infrastructure.

Defense

Japan and India already cooperate broadly on defense, with all three military branches engaged in joint exercises, including the Dharma Guardian land exercise, the Shinyu Maitr aerial exercise and the Japan-India Maritime Exercise. Perhaps the highest profile sign of cooperation is the annual trilateral Malabar exercise with the United States. Both countries are also jointly developing new defense technologies, having established a working group to collaborate on the production of unmanned ground vehicles.

However, there is great scope to expand bilateral cooperation, particularly by moving forward on key deliverables on military sales, agreements and exercises. India and Japan should move quickly to conclude the sale of the ShinMaywa US-2 amphibious aircraft for the Indian Navy. Not only would such a sale bolster India’s ability to conduct humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts, it would complement its recent maritime platform acquisitions, such as the P-8i maritime patrol aircraft and the potential acquisition of the Sea Guardian armed drone. Moreover, with Japan’s promise to manufacture 30 percent of the plane in India, the sale would support India’s efforts to become a defense manufacturing hub.

The two plus two meeting is also a good opportunity to announce the completion of the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), a logistics sharing agreement similar to those India has already signed with the U.S. and France. Specifically, the agreement would grant Japan access to Indian naval facilities in the Andaman and Nicobar islands, and India access to Japan’s naval facilities in Djibouti, thereby significantly expanding both countries’ logistic capacities in the Indo-Pacific.

Both countries should also further expand joint exercises. One often-discussed idea is to make Malabar a two-theater exercise in the Indian and Pacific oceans, further operationalizing the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy. Now Malabar only engages the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, one of India’s three theater commands, as well as specific vessels from Japanese naval escort flotillas.

By expanding Malabar in such a way, the exercise could ensure regular cooperation and deeper interoperability with a greater number of theater commands and flotillas from all three countries. In addition, these expanded exercises could engage commands not traditionally involved with Indo-Pacific planning but still operating within the geographical Indo-Pacific region, such as the U.S. Central Command, which oversees U.S. operations in the western Indian Ocean.

Both countries could also look to conduct trilateral capacity-building exercises with key Indo-Pacific partners, such as Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Vietnam. Capacity-building in key areas, including maritime domain awareness and training of military officials, creates a greater constituency for a “free and open Indo-Pacific,” advancing both countries’ interests in supporting freedom of navigation and upholding international law in the region.

Technology

Another priority for Japan and India is to bridge the gap between the two countries on technology cooperation. So far, they have worked together on specific projects and initiatives, such as an undersea cable from Chennai to the Andaman and Nicobar islands, and a partnership between Japan’s National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology and the Indian Institute of Technology, Hyderabad, to jointly develop artificial intelligence and robotics technology. However, both countries can use the upcoming two plus two dialogue to deepen their cooperation in new areas.

One key area is facilitating the deployment of 5G in India. As recently as last year, then-Indian telecom minister Manoj Sinha had insisted that India would be an “early adopter of 5G.” India was a late adopter of earlier 3G and 4G iterations, leading the minister to argue that India had “missed the bus” in adopting these technologies. However, meeting this ambition is increasingly tough given the considerable financial stress facing the Indian telecommunications sector.

This sadly means that despite India’s long history of suspicion regarding the Chinese firm Huawei, it remains in the running given its lower overall operational costs. Japanese support on this issue, particularly to ensure that India can meet its ambitions while balancing the costs of 5G deployment, will be a critical national security and development-based area of cooperation that the foreign and defense ministers can discuss at the two plus two.

Another issue likely to come up is the gap between Japan and India on the “Osaka Track,” Tokyo’s proposal at the June Group of 20 summit for “a set of international rules enabling the free movement of data across borders.” This proposal, a key priority for Abe, has seen some resistance from India, which has been an important proponent of data localization. Indeed, India has already announced some data localization, arguing that any data on Indian citizens collected by foreign technology companies should be domestically stored so it generates some economic utility for India rather than just the foreign companies.

Resolving these differences, particularly as India also withdraws from multilateral initiatives such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, will be a priority for Japan at this two plus two.

Infrastructure

A final area of flagging bilateral cooperation is infrastructure development. At the 2018 Abe-Modi summit, there was considerable emphasis on the creation of new mechanisms for bilateral security cooperation, including the upcoming two plus two, an annual space dialogue and the ACSA. Though the two leaders also broadly discussed plans for further cooperation on “open, transparent and nonexclusive” infrastructure development across the Indo-Pacific, they did not mention by name, much less sketch out, plans for a comprehensive rollout of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). This is an ambitious maritime connectivity enterprise introduced in late 2016 to

compete with China's "string of pearls" effort to build ports at strategic locations around the Indian Ocean. A joint declaration from the 2018 summit instead hinted at future discussions regarding a "Platform for Japan-India Business Cooperation in [the] Asia-Africa Region," lowering expectations for concrete follow-through on the AAGC vision statement released in 2017.

The AAGC's diminution reflects difficulties with aligning Tokyo and New Delhi's contrasting investment standards and approaches to Africa. Whereas Japan is more insistent on prioritizing trade and regional institution- and capacity-building, as well as targeting clusters of high-growth countries around Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania and Mozambique, India's ambitions reach riskier markets, while Indian firms tend to view the AAGC as just another source of potential capital for large infrastructure projects requiring more than what might be available from the Indian government's Exim Bank.

These differences will take time to bridge, but the upcoming two plus two and annual summit present an opportunity to re-elevate the AAGC and redirect political attention to the two countries' strategic interests and differing but potentially complementary approaches in the region.

One immediate solution to close ranks around the AAGC framework is the creation of a new bilateral business forum, co-hosted by both countries and supporting joint private sector investment in Africa. Japan's Tokyo International Conference on African Development, which convened for a seventh time in August, along with the India-Africa Forum Summit, last held in 2015, provide a pre-existing framework for bringing both countries' industries together under such an initiative while jump-starting the AAGC.

The Japan-India relationship today has the makings of a truly special relationship. As the world's economic center of gravity shifts to Asia, it increasingly falls to these two countries to take up the baton and champion freedom, inclusivity, trade and other liberal values. By exploring new imperatives across defense, technology and infrastructure cooperation at the two plus two and subsequent engagements, India and Japan can set the pace for future collaboration on mutual security and commercial priorities, as well as push forward on a human-centered vision for Asia that embodies these values on a global scale over the next century.

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