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Japan's New Military Doctrine — Lessons for India's Great-Power Balancing

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Japan revoked its post-war pacifism to acquire counter-strike capability. India has its own "strategic restraint" tradition. Can India continue to invoke strategic autonomy without the same capability investments Japan is making?"

Japan's defence pivot — 2% GDP spending, counter-strike capability, US alliance depth — mirrors India's great-power dilemma. The lesson: strategic autonomy requires capability, not just posture.

JAPAN'S STRATEGIC SHIFT

OLD JAPAN	NEW JAPAN
1% GDP defence cap (post-war)	~ 2% GDP (revised NSS, 2022-23)
Purely defensive "shield"	Counter-strike capability (Tomahawk, Type-12 upgrades)
Pacifist Article 9 restraint	Reinterpretation: "collective self-defence" + preemptive strike
Alliance-dependent	Alliance + independent deterrence

THE INDIA-JAPAN PARALLEL

ISSUE	JAPAN	INDIA
US transactionalism risk	Formal ally but wary	QUAD partner; non-ally
China threat	Maritime; Taiwan Strait	Land (LAC); IOR
Strategic posture	Shifting toward capability	Strategic autonomy
Indigenisation	Advanced	Growing (Aatmanirbhar Bharat)

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	RELEVANCE
GS2	India-Japan; QUAD; India-US; strategic autonomy
GS3	Defence — counter-strike; indigenisation; iDEX; Aatmanirbhar
Prelims	Japan Article 9; QUAD members; iCET; Aatmanirbhar Bharat defence targets

Sources: *Indian Express, Ministry of Defence*

Source: Japan's New Military Doctrine — Lessons for India's Great-Power Balancing — Ujyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Japan's strategic shift — expanding defence spending to 2% of GDP and acquiring counter-strike capability while hedging against both US unreliability and Chinese coercion — mirrors dilemmas India faces in its own great-power balancing act, and India can draw lessons from Tokyo's simultaneous investment in alliance depth with Washington and independent deterrence capacity against Beijing.

✓ SUPPORTING

- Japan raised its defence budget to ~2% of GDP (versus its post-war self-imposed 1% cap) and acquired long-range strike missiles (Tomahawk, indigenous Type-12 upgrades) for counter-strike capability against adversary launch infrastructure — a fundamental revision of its exclusively defensive “shield” doctrine.
- Like India, Japan faces a credibility problem: relying too heavily on a US security guarantee that Trump-era transactionalism has made uncertain, while also deterring a rising China that has militarised the waters around Japan and Taiwan.
- India similarly must balance the benefits of US-India strategic alignment (QUAD, iCET, defence technology transfers) against the need for an independent deterrence posture that does not become a liability if US priorities shift.


COUNTER

India's strategic context is distinct from Japan's: India is not a formal US ally, carries a Non-Aligned tradition, and cannot afford a Japan-sized defence spending jump; "strategic autonomy" remains valuable as a negotiating asset with multiple partners.


WAY FORWARD

India should draw the key lesson from Japan — capability, not just posture, is the foundation of strategic autonomy; this means sustained defence-R&D investment (DRDO, private sector via iDEX), accelerated indigenisation under Aatmanirbhar Bharat, and ensuring that the QUAD deepens into a genuine security architecture rather than remaining a diplomatic talking shop.


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MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

"Strategic autonomy is credible only when backed by independent deterrence capacity." Examine India's approach to great-power balancing in the light of Japan's strategic shift. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Japan's 2022-23 National Security Strategy — abandoning its post-war 1% defence-spending cap, acquiring counter-strike missiles, and expanding its role in regional deterrence — represents the most significant shift in Japanese strategic policy since 1945. For India, the Japanese case is instructive, not because the two countries' positions are identical, but because they share a core strategic dilemma: how to maintain alliance depth with the US while building sufficient independent deterrence against China.

BODY

Japan operates under Article 9 of its constitution (renouncing war and force), the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty, and a tradition of exclusively defensive posture. Its 2022 shift — upgrading to 2% GDP, acquiring Tomahawk-class long-range strike capability, and repositioning Okinawa-area forces — is a

bet that alliance dependence alone is insufficient in a world where US commitments are transactional under Trump.

India's strategic position is analogous: the QUAD is deepening, but India has consistently refused a formal alliance; the US-India defence partnership is real but limited by India's Non-Aligned history and its Russia relationship. Where Japan's example is instructive is on the capability side: strategic autonomy is credible only if your military forces can act independently across the full spectrum of conflict. India's recent successes — BrahMos exports, RudraM-II testing, Agni modernisation, carrier battle group development — point in the right direction. But India needs to sustain and accelerate this indigenisation at Japan-like commitment levels.

CONCLUSION

Japan's lesson for India is not to replicate its alliance dependency — India's strategic context demands more independence — but to invest in the capabilities that make independence real. Strategic autonomy without military depth is not autonomy; it is vulnerability dressed in diplomatic language.

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