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# India and Japan Sign First Defence Co-Development Pact: UNICORN Mast

3 July 2026

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# India and Japan Sign First Defence Co-Development Pact: UNICORN Mast

3 July 2026 · 6 min read ·

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## WHY IN NEWS

*At the 16th India-Japan Annual Summit held in New Delhi on July 1 to 2, 2026, India and Japan launched their first-ever bilateral (<https://ujyari.com/vocab/bilateral/>) defence co-development programme, the UNICORN (Unified Complex Radio Antenna) mast, an integrated stealth mast for future Indian Navy warships.*

## WHAT IS THE UNICORN MAST

UNICORN stands for **Unified Complex Radio Antenna**. It is a single, streamlined integrated mast that consolidates the many exposed antennas and electronic-warfare arrays normally scattered across a warship's superstructure into one low-observable enclosure. Traditionally, a naval mast bristles with separate communication, radar and electronic-support antennas, each of which reflects radar energy and enlarges the ship's radar signature. The UNICORN design houses these systems inside a single **Fibre-Reinforced Plastic (FRP) radome**, a composite dome that is transparent to the ship's own transmissions but presents a smooth, sloped surface to hostile radar.

The result is a marked reduction in the warship's **Radar Cross-Section (RCS)**, the measure of how detectable a vessel is to enemy radar, while communication and sensor performance is preserved. The technology is already fitted on Japan's advanced **Mogami-class frigates**. For the Indian Navy, the mast is intended for future warships, improving both stealth and maintainability by replacing a cluttered array of individual antennas with one integrated structure.

FEATURE	CONVENTIONAL MAST	UNICORN INTEGRATED MAST
Antenna arrangement	Multiple exposed antennas	Consolidated inside one radome
Radar signature	High (many reflective surfaces)	Reduced (smooth low-observable shape)
Material	Metal frames and fittings	Fibre-Reinforced Plastic (FRP) radome
Maintenance	Complex, many separate units	Simplified, integrated unit

## WHO IS BUILDING IT

The programme is executed by India's **Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL)**, a defence public-sector undertaking, in partnership with Japanese industry. The Japanese firms involved include **NEC Corporation**, which brings systems-integration and electromagnetic expertise, along with **Sampa Kogyo K.K.** and **The Yokohama Rubber Co., Ltd.**, which contribute composite mast engineering and signature-reduction materials. The project rests on a **Memorandum of Implementation (MoI)** signed on November 15, 2024, between India's Ambassador to Japan and Japan's **Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency (ATLA)**, operationalised under the India-Japan Defence Equipment and Technology Transfer Agreement of 2015.

## Japan's Strategic Shift

For decades after the Second World War, Japan followed a near-total ban on arms exports. The UNICORN transfer marks Japan's evolution from a reluctant arms exporter into an active defence-industrial partner. This follows Tokyo's ongoing review of its **Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology** (adopted 2014), which liberalised the earlier blanket prohibition and now permits co-development and export of defence equipment to trusted partners. The UNICORN project is Japan's first transfer of advanced defence equipment to India and a signal that New Delhi is regarded as a trusted technology partner.

## THE BROADER SUMMIT CONTEXT

The mast was one of the headline outcomes of the 16th Annual Summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Japanese Prime Minister **Sanae Takaichi**. The summit produced 16 outcomes and three joint statements, including a **Joint Declaration on Economic Security Cooperation**, a Joint Statement on Energy Resilience (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/resilience/>), and a Joint Statement on Artificial Intelligence. On the economic front, the two sides reaffirmed a target of **10 trillion yen** in Japanese investment into India, and the accompanying Joint Economic Forum saw fresh Japanese investment pledges of about **12.5 billion US dollars** from around 150 firms. The defence pact sits within the **India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership** established in 2014 and reinforces the two countries' convergence (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/convergence/>) within the **Quad** and their shared vision of a **free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific**.

## ANALYSIS AND WAY FORWARD

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The UNICORN project is significant well beyond a single piece of hardware. First, it embeds **Atmanirbhar Bharat in defence** through co-development rather than off-the-shelf import: BEL does not merely buy the mast but manufactures and integrates it, absorbing composite and stealth know-how that can spill over into other indigenous platforms. Second, it deepens the strategic logic of the Indo-Pacific, where stealthier Indian warships strengthen the maritime balance against a rising Chinese naval presence.

For Japan, the deal validates the liberalisation of its defence-export rules and gives its industry a foothold in a large, friendly market. The way forward lies in ensuring genuine technology absorption, so that India can eventually design and produce integrated masts independently, and in extending this co-development template to other domains such as unmanned systems, sensors and submarine technology. The proposed India-Japan **2+2 ministerial dialogue** and expanded joint naval exercises will be the institutional scaffolding that keeps this partnership moving from transactional purchases to genuine joint innovation.

## UPSC RELEVANCE

**GS Paper 2:** India and Japan bilateral relations; the Special Strategic and Global Partnership; groupings and agreements involving India such as the Quad; effect of policies of developed countries on India's interests.

**GS Paper 3:** Defence **indigenisation** (<https://ujijari.com/vocab/indigenisation/>) and Atmanirbhar Bharat; developments in science and technology and their application; defence technology co-development; security challenges in the maritime and Indo-Pacific domain.

### Prelims pointers:

- UNICORN stands for Unified Complex Radio Antenna; it is an integrated stealth mast that reduces a warship's Radar Cross-Section (RCS).
- The mast uses a Fibre-Reinforced Plastic (FRP) radome and is fitted on Japan's Mogami-class frigates.
- Indian executing agency: Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL); Japanese partners include NEC Corporation, Sampa Kogyo and Yokohama Rubber.
- It is India and Japan's first bilateral defence co-development project, based on a Memorandum of Implementation signed on November 15, 2024, with Japan's ATLA.
- Japan's arms-export liberalisation flows from its Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology (2014).
- The India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership dates to 2014; the summit reaffirmed a 10 trillion yen investment target.

**Mains question:** “India-Japan defence ties are moving from arms procurement to genuine co-development.” Analyse this shift with reference to the UNICORN mast project and its significance for India’s defence indigenisation and the Indo-Pacific balance. (15 marks, 250 words)

## FACTS CORNER

### ★ FACTS CORNER, KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

**Event:** At the 16th India-Japan Annual Summit (New Delhi, July 1 to 2, 2026), the two nations launched their first bilateral defence co-development project, the UNICORN mast.

**UNICORN:** Unified Complex Radio Antenna, an integrated stealth mast that consolidates a warship’s antennas into one Fibre-Reinforced Plastic (FRP) radome to cut its Radar Cross-Section (RCS).

**Origin:** Fitted on Japan’s Mogami-class frigates; intended for future Indian Navy warships.

**Partners:** Executed by Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) with Japanese firms NEC Corporation, Sampa Kogyo and Yokohama Rubber.

**Legal base:** Memorandum of Implementation signed November 15, 2024, with Japan’s Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency (ATLA), under the 2015 Defence Equipment and Technology Transfer Agreement.

**Japan’s shift:** Enabled by its review of the Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology (2014); India’s first receipt of advanced Japanese defence equipment.

**Summit outcomes:** 16 outcomes and three joint statements, including a Joint Declaration on Economic Security; reaffirmed target of 10 trillion yen Japanese investment.

**Framework:** India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership (2014); Quad; free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

**Leaders:** PM Narendra Modi and Japanese PM Sanae Takaichi.

**Sources:** *Prime Minister of India* (<https://www.pmindia.gov.in/>), *Press Information Bureau* (<https://pib.gov.in/>), *Business Standard* (<https://www.business-standard.com/>), *India TV News* (<https://www.indiatvnews.com/>)

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