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Modernising US-Japan Alliance

The month of January witnessed two high profile meetings aimed at strengthening the US-Japan alliance, which is touted as “cornerstone of regional peace”. The dominating themes of the discussion included simmering geopolitical tensions and the evolving regional strategic balance, the pandemic and economic security concerns. The alliance reiterated its commitment to protect the rules-based international order by advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific.

The US-Japan Security Consultative Committee 2+2 meeting was held on 6-7 January, involving the US Secretary of State Blinken and Secretary of Defense Austin, and their Japanese counterparts, Minister for Foreign Affairs Hayashi and Minister of Defense Kishi. This was followed by the Leader’s meeting between President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida on 21 January. Both the meetings were hosted virtually given the ongoing pandemic situation. Both sides demonstrated their determination to “modernize the Alliance and strengthen joint capabilities by fully aligning strategies and prioritizing goals together”.

China remained one of the central themes of both the meetings. While America’s “extended deterrence remains credible and resilient”, Beijing’s attempts to undercut the rules-based order through its destabilizing actions in the East China Sea, militarization of the South China Sea, and escalation of tensions in the Taiwan Strait are a cause of concern. At the Biden-Kishida meeting, the US and Japan resolved to push back against Beijing. Article V of the Security Treaty encompasses the contested Senkaku Islands, and Washington has underscored its firm

commitment to defend Japan, employing its full range of capabilities including nuclear. Furthermore, both sides expressed “concern” over human rights issues in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. Meanwhile, another major concern for the US-Japan alliance is realising the goal of complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Repeated missile launches in violation of UNSC resolutions are adversely affecting regional stability. In addition to regional security situation, US-Japan committed to “work closely together to deter Russian aggression against Ukraine” at the Leader’s virtual meeting.

US-Japan have prioritised building robust cooperation on cross-domain capabilities, including space and cyber. Washington and Tokyo concurred on robust network defences, and suggested that “joint responses to the full range of cyber threats are an Alliance imperative.” In securing space, developing cooperation on space domain awareness, dialogue on proliferated low earth orbit satellite constellations, and creating norms to advance responsible behaviour were also on the discussion table. US and Japan are also jointly steering innovation with the objective of preserving alliance’s edge on critical and emerging technologies, such as AI, directed energy, and quantum computing. They agreed to do a joint analysis on counter-hypersonic technology cooperation.

In an important development, US-Japan has set up a ministerial-level Economic Policy Consultative Committee (the Economic “2+2”). The goal is to advance a rules-based Indo-Pacific economic order. To advance Washington’s economic leadership in the Indo-Pacific, Tokyo extended “strong support” towards US’s proposed Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. Earlier in 2021, US-Japan

launched the Competitiveness and Resilience (CoRe) Partnership to support economic development driven by open and democratic values, reinforced by transparent rules, and high labour and environmental standards.

Moving forward, US-Japan are prioritising to work in tandem with other allies and like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific, especially the Quad involving Australia and India; European powers such as the UK, France, Germany, and the Netherlands; and also Southeast Asia and Pacific Island nations — in pursuit of realising a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Japan-Australia RAA signed

Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) was signed on 6 January by Japanese Prime Minister Kishida and his Australian counterpart Scott Morrison. RAA establishes legal framework for augmenting mutually favourable defence cooperation and creates precise procedures between Canberra and Tokyo facilitating cooperative activities carried on by the forces of one country when visiting the other. It also defines status of the visiting force. However, RAA will not apply to any actions undertaken by the Australian forces when they are “acting as the United Nations forces pursuant to the Agreement Regarding the Status of the United Nations Forces in Japan, signed at Tokyo on 19 February, 1954.” Article III of this Agreement states that “it is the duty of the Visiting Force and the Civilian Component and the members thereof to respect the laws and regulations of the Receiving State and to abstain from any activity inconsistent with the spirit of this Agreement, and, in particular, from any political activity in the Receiving State.” The aim is to effectively contribute towards Indo-Pacific security by facilitating reciprocal access and deepening

cooperation between the Japanese Self-Defence Forces and their Australian counterparts.

Japan’s response to North Korean missile launches

January 2022 has witnessed repeated missile launches by North Korea. Japan as a regional stakeholder in the stability of the Korean Peninsula has argued that these developments which are in violation of UNSC resolutions are “extremely regrettable”. Prime Minister Kishida stressed that Japan is focused on firming up vigilance and monitoring, and has prioritised maximum effort in analysing related information and intelligence, ensuring safety of aircraft, vessels and other assets, and undertaking preparation for contingencies.

India-Japan maritime cooperation in Bay of Bengal

On 13 January, India-Japan Maritime Partnership Exercise was held in the Bay of Bengal. The objective was to further deepened India-Japan defence and security cooperation, bolstering interoperability between the navies, and learn from each other’s best practices. The focus of this exercise were reportedly on flying operations, replenishment approaches and tactical manoeuvres. While Shivalik and Kadmatt participated from the Indian Navy, Uruga and Hirado, which are part of the Minesweeper Division One, participated from the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF).

Quad Leader’s Meeting

Reports in media indicate that Quad Foreign Minister’s meeting will be hosted in Australia in February. Subsequently, Japan will be hosting the Quad Leaders Summit in the first half of 2022.