



CENTRE FOR AEROSPACE POWER AND STRATEGIC STUDIES

In Focus

New Delhi

CAPSS In Focus: 42/2026

03 September 2026

Indo-Japanese Cooperation in the Vertical Domain: Exercise Veer Guardian 2026

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Source: <https://newsonair.gov.in/defence-minister-rajnath-singh-japanese-counterpart-shinjiro-koizumi-co-chair-india-japan-defence-ministers-meeting/>



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Keywords: Veer Guardian, India, Japan, Air Power, Military Diplomacy

The Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF), or the *Koku-Jietai*, recently announced it will conduct Exercise VEER GUARDIAN 26 between September 09 and September 21, 2026, with the Indian Air Force (IAF). The JASDF said the exercise is to improve the tactical proficiency of units while engaging in air-combat manoeuvring (ACM) with the Indian Forces.¹ This exercise will be the first time the Japanese Air Force will send three Mitsubishi F-2 fighter aircraft from its 8th Wing, based at Tsuiki Air Base in Fukuoka Prefecture in south-western Japan, to India.² At least 110 personnel from the 8th Air Wing will also participate in the exercise, scheduled to be held in Jodhpur,³ and it will primarily involve air combat training against fighter aircraft. The aircraft will travel to India via Naha Air Base in Okinawa and Thailand. The United States (US) Air Force will provide aerial refuelling during the aircraft's visit to Thailand.⁴

These developments are a reflection of the operationalisation of the 'Japan-India Special Strategic and Global Partnership', which constitutes a key pivot in the array of strategic partnerships that India pursues within its broader Indo-Pacific.⁵ Similarly, the exercise entails operationalising the India-Japan Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), a key logistics support agreement along the lines of agreements that India has signed with several other partners.⁶ For instance, it operationalises the India-Japan ACSA under Article 1(a) and Article 2(2) of the agreement, which refers to reciprocal provisions and supplies as well as training and the conduct of joint and combined exercises.⁷

Exercise VEER GUARDIAN serves a dual purpose: it extrapolates the growing relevance of air power and situates the exercise as a critical pillar within the exercises that are being conducted between India and Japan. It also expands operational coordination between India and Japan. Finally, the exercises symbolise the broadening and deepening of bilateral ties between the two nations and reflect the strategic trust now structurally embedded in the broader bilateral partnership.

Growing Relevance of Air Power in the Strategic Partnership

Japan presently operates F-15J, F-2A and F-35 Lightning aircraft and is in the process of procuring 147 F-35s, making it the largest international operator of the platform.⁸ This is the first time that the Mitsubishi F-2 fighter aircraft will participate in an exercise in India.⁹ Modelled on the US F-16 fighter jet, it achieves better manoeuvring capability by maximising its wingspan. The conduct of these exercises with its own indigenous equipment suggests the JASDF is attempting to emerge as an independent, self-reliant force capable of operating in diverse geographies.

JASDF's deployment also demonstrates the Japanese forces' willingness to operate with India during contingencies in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the Indo-Pacific,¹⁰ while projecting power overseas. To this effect, this Indo-Pacific deployment follows the JASDF's historic deployment to the United Kingdom's Royal Koningsby Air Force Station in 2025. It substantiates the JASDF's operational philosophy that reinforces the interconnected nature of Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security.¹¹

Notably, this exercise is also the second edition of Exercise VEER GUARDIAN, first held at Hyakuri Air Base in Japan in January 2023. The JASDF participated in the exercise with F-2 and F-15 aircraft, while the Indian contingent was represented by the Su-30 MKI, C-17 Globemaster strategic airlift transport aircraft, and one IL-78 flight refuelling aircraft. The two sides engaged in air combat manoeuvring, interception, and air defence missions within Visual and Non-Visual ranges at the time. Interestingly, the aircrews of the two forces had flown each other's aircraft to better comprehend each other's operational principles.¹²

This exercise also follows the successful visit of Japanese Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi to India in August 2026, during which the two sides expressed satisfaction when assessing the trajectory of the ties. It also follows the successful visit of Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi to India and demonstrates India and Japan's commitment to the shared Indo-Pacific defence and security.

Growing Relevance of Bilateral Military Exercises

The exercise is also crucial because it demonstrates growing strategic trust between the two sides, which is demonstrated in the conduct of military exercises with the tri-services. The exercise also exemplifies growing convergence at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels among all wings of the defence forces. For instance, this exercise comes close on the heels of Ex DHARMA GUARDIAN, conducted by the Indian Army and the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF) at the Foreign Training Node in Chaubatia, Uttarakhand. It focused on military cooperation at the tactical level and included the establishment of a temporary operating base, the development of indigenous Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) and the conduct of heliborne operations.¹³

Similarly, this exercise follows the conduct of the Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JAIMEX)-2025, which saw the conduct of advanced Anti-Submarine Warfare and missile defence drills, and the enhancement of interoperability through the conduct of flying operations and underway replenishment during the sea phase of the exercise. The harbour phase of the exercise saw the conduct of cross-deck visits, collaborative operational planning, and sharing of best practices. More

importantly, the port call at Yokosuka was critical as it demonstrated India's ability to conduct long-range naval deployments in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁴

What Lies Ahead?

On March 24, 2026, Major General Sera Tatsuhiro, Director, JASDF Air and Space Power Studies Institute (JASI), delivered a talk in the International Seminar on the Strategic Renaissance of Air Power, jointly hosted by Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies (CAPSS), and Manohar Parrikar -Institute for Defence and Strategic Analysis (MP-IDSA). This talk was a part of the regular engagement between JASDF and CAPSS, New Delhi.

This engagement demonstrated the growing convergence and depth of the bilateral partnership between India and Japan in the military domain, with both conceptual as well as operational engagement being given a priority. This holistic engagement now envisaged at multiple levels is indicative of growing mutual trust.

While the current exercise is planned at Jodhpur, a base familiar with foreign military exercises, future exercises must expand the frequency and scope across diverse geographies. This can include long-range maritime air operations from peninsular bases/ islands, Special Forces operations involving helicopter and transport aircraft in hilly regions, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), et al., to realise the full spectrum of cooperation envisaged during the Japan-India Defence Ministers' Meeting at Delhi on August 20, 2026.¹⁵ Exercise Veer Guardian 2026 is a small step in this journey.

Notes:

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² Syeong Heong Choi, "What Japan's coming fighter jet deployment to India means for China," *South China Morning Post*, August 29, 2026, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3365697/what-japans-coming-fighter-jet-deployment-india-means-china>. Accessed on August 30, 2026.

³ "Japan to deploy fighter jets to India for 1st time for joint exercise," *Japan Today*, August 30, 2026. <https://japantoday.com/category/politics/japan-to-deploy-fighter-jets-to-india-for-1st-time-for-joint-exercise>. Accessed on August 30, 2026.

⁴ Takahashi Kosuke, "JASDF fighter jets visit India for first time", *The Diplomat*, August 26, 2026, <https://thediplomat.com/2026/08/jasdf-fighter-jets-to-visit-india-for-first-time/>. Accessed on August 30, 2026.

⁵ Anuttama Banerji, "Advancing India's Partnerships within the Indo-Pacific," Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies, August 11, 2026, <https://capssindia.org/advancing-indias-partnerships-within-the-indo-pacific/>. Accessed on August 30, 2026.

⁶ Anuttama Banerji, "Leveraging India's Logistic Support Agreements in the Maritime Domain", *Defence and Diplomacy Journal*, vol.15, no. 3, April-June 2026. pp. 17-31.

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, "Agreement between the Government of Japan and the Government of the Republic of India concerning reciprocal provision of supplies and services between the Self Defence Forces of Japan and the Indian Armed Forces," September 10, 2020, pp. 1-2, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100091751.pdf>. Accessed on August 30, 2026.

⁸ Kalyan Ray, "India, Japan to strengthen defence ties; maiden air exercise in India set for September," *Deccan Herald*, August 20, 2026, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/india-japan-to-strengthen-defence-ties-maiden-air-exercise-in-india-set-for-september-4118289>. Accessed on August 30, 2026.

⁹ Choi, n. 2.

¹⁰ Banerji, n. 5.

¹¹ United Kingdom Royal Air Force, United Kingdom, "Japan Air Self Defence Force completes historic first fighter deployment to Europe," September 19, 2025, <https://www.raf.mod.uk/news/articles/japan-air-self-defense-force-makes-historic-first-fighter-deployment-to-europe/>. Accessed on August 30, 2026.

¹² Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "IAF's Joint Air Defence Exercise with Japan, 'Veer Guardian 2023' concludes," January 27, 2023, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1894080>. Accessed on August 30, 2026.

¹³ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "India-Japan Joint Exercise 'Dharma Guardian' commences in Chaubattia, Uttarakhand," February 24, 2026. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2232191®=3&lang=1>. Accessed on August 30, 2026.

¹⁴ Indian Navy, Government of India, "Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JAIMEX)-2025," <https://indiannavy.gov.in/content/japan-india-maritime-exercise-jaimex-2025>. Accessed on August 30, 2026.

¹⁵ Ministry of Defense, Government of Japan, "Japan-India Joint Press Statement," August 20, 2026, <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2026/08/d53ab5504adee3c85a14df37a5b7e3108fa885e8.html>. Accessed on September 01, 2026.