

INTERVIEW

India's top diplomat points to 'new phase' in Japan defense ties

Jaishankar weighs in on awkward relations with China, Pakistan, Maldives



Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar speaks with Nikkei at his office in New Delhi, ahead of a visit to Japan. (Photo by Satoshi Iwaki)

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NEW DELHI -- Defense ties can be an "important element" of India's relations with Japan and should focus on collaborative procurement in the South Asian nation, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar told Nikkei in an exclusive interview ahead of a three-day visit to Tokyo.

"Where defense is concerned, we expect partners to be competitive," Jaishankar said at his office in New Delhi. "Also, the emphasis has now shifted to procuring from 'Make in India' ventures. Japanese companies should explore more collaboration. We are poised to enter a new phase of our ties and it is in our mutual interest that this focuses on contemporary opportunities."

Jaishankar's visit to Japan starts Wednesday and comes as the two countries work to build on closer ties, forged between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and late former Japanese leader Shinzo Abe. Current Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Modi made reciprocal visits to each other's countries last year, pushing cooperation on Indo-Pacific security, infrastructure development and support for the emerging economies of the so-called Global South.

The interview was held as Indian and Japanese forces were conducting the fifth edition of joint military exercises called Dharma Guardian in the northwestern Indian state of Rajasthan.

Apart from the prospects for joint defense production, Jaishankar said that during his visit he would highlight the "enormous potential" of cooperation on new and critical technologies, including semiconductors, artificial intelligence, renewables, electric mobility and more. India last week approved its **first semiconductor fabrication plant** and two assembly units to be developed jointly by local conglomerates and companies from Japan, Taiwan and Thailand.

The minister also discussed a range of other themes, such as relations with the new government in nuclear arch-rival Pakistan, and whether India and China -- the most and second-most populous nations -- are reshaping the global order.



Japanese Self-Defense Force personnel and Indian soldiers storm a building during a training exercise in Japan in 2023.
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Jaishankar agreed that India and China are key players in a global power shift, and acknowledged a Goldman Sachs projection that by 2075 they will be the only two economies worth more than \$50 trillion. "But to be accurate," he stressed, "there are others [shaping global change] as well, including the Gulf, ASEAN, Latin America and Africa."

India, he added, "has never been closed to the world or seen itself as apart, and its tradition has been one of continuous and intensive interactions."

"There is also a strong element of fairness and equity in India's approach to international affairs. India tends to be naturally consultative, collaborative and transparent. These are all attributes which will benefit the changing world," he said.

Even so, India is at odds with several neighbors. Asked about three of these awkward relationships -- with China, Pakistan and the Maldives -- he insisted that they are "naturally not comparable."

"With China, the main issue is to ensure continued adherence to past commitments, maintenance of peace and tranquility in border areas and arriving at a sustainable equilibrium," he said. India and China have been locked in a lingering standoff in the Ladakh region along their Himalayan border since their forces engaged in deadly hand-to-hand combat in 2020.

On Pakistan, where Shehbaz Sharif was **elected prime minister** for the second time on Sunday, Jaishankar described India's approach as "wait and see."

For decades, India and Pakistan have been unable to overcome disputes over the territory of Kashmir and the issue of terrorism, regularly accusing each other of being behind militant threats. Sharif's camp, led by his brother and three-time Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, has repeatedly signaled that it wants better ties with Pakistan's neighbors.

Jaishankar stressed, "With Pakistan, it is to end cross-border terrorism emanating from that country [that is] so necessary for the future of the relationship."

"Every country normally wants good relations with its neighbors, we also want good relations with our neighbors," the diplomat said. "But we want our neighbor to behave how a good neighbor would behave. What does a good neighbor do? A good neighbor has trade, cultural exchanges, a good political relationship. A good neighbor doesn't do terrorism. To me, the terrorism issue is a very obvious issue."



Pakistan's newly elected Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif speaks in the National Assembly in Islamabad on March 3. (Pakistan National Assembly via Reuters)

On the Maldives, which recently elected a pro-China government, Jaishankar said India wishes to continue a wide-ranging partnership focused on development and public needs. "This is effectively pursued through being sensitive to each other's interests. Where the Indian Ocean is concerned, it is best served by stronger cooperation among its constituent states."

Elsewhere, India's positive relations with two bitter geopolitical enemies -- the U.S. and Russia -- have stirred much debate and discussion. Jaishankar called New Delhi's ties with Washington "a force of stability" in the Indo-Pacific region, while praising "exceptionally steady" relations with Moscow. On Russia's invasion of Ukraine, roundly criticized by Western allies but not explicitly condemned by the Modi government, the external affairs minister said India "will not hesitate to contribute to efforts toward dialogue and peace."

While Modi and U.S. President Joe Biden have made a show of **strengthening their ties**, one bone of contention is the Khalistan movement under which Sikh separatists -- mostly settled overseas -- call for an independent homeland in the northern Indian state of Punjab.

The issue hit headlines last September when Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced "**credible**" **allegations** linking Indian agents to the June murder of a Sikh separatist leader, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, in a Vancouver suburb. India called the accusation "absurd." Two months later, U.S. authorities said they thwarted an alleged conspiracy to assassinate another Sikh separatist, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, on American soil -- and reportedly issued a warning to India over concerns that the government could have been involved in the plot.

Jaishankar, who has repeatedly defended India on the issue, told Nikkei that "terrorist, extremist and separatist forces should not be given political or operational space in any country."

"This should be a matter of principle, not just restricted to a particular case," he said. "That responsibility is even more so where democratic nations are concerned. As we have seen in the past, utilizing or co-habiting with such elements comes back to bite the sponsors. We should never nurse the illusion that terrorism is just the problem of other people. I can only hope that the right lessons are drawn by the right people."



Hindu devotees wait to enter the Lord Ram temple after its inauguration in Ayodhya, India, on Jan. 23. © Reuters

India is headed for a general election due in April and May, with Modi seeking a third straight five-year term. But the polls have focused attention on the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's Hindu nationalism and what some critics say is a lack of tolerance for diversity. Modi's inauguration of the massive **Ram temple in Ayodhya** in January was widely seen as a brazen appeal to the BJP's Hindu base.

"Such views are based on either superficial understanding of India or motivated politics," Jaishankar insisted. "We are a deeply pluralistic society and our inherent unity is the basis for that pluralism. Quite frankly, India is far more appreciative of diversity than any other country that I have seen."

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