



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES
मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

Strategic Digest

Vol. 3 | No. 7 | 15 April 2021

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China and Iran sign 25-year cooperation agreement

Japan steps up cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners in 2+2 format

In pursuit of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, Tokyo has recently engaged in a series of 2+2 defence and foreign ministerial meetings with not just the Quad countries but also European and Asian partners. Ahead of Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide's visit to India, India-Japan 2+2 meeting is scheduled in the last week of April, reportedly on April 24 or 25.



Earlier in March, the US-Japan 2+2 Security Consultative Committee meeting was held in Tokyo where the discussion focussed on the China threat, especially stability in the Taiwan Strait, regional implications of Chinese Coast Guard law, developments in the South and East China Seas, and human rights situation in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

Japan is bolstering cooperation with European partners in the Indo-Pacific, especially with Germany, the UK and France. On April 13, the maiden Japan-Germany meeting was held. The key theme of this discussion remained to strengthen a free and open international order based on rule of law. As Germany plans to send a navy frigate to the Indo-Pacific, Japan aims to step up cooperation by way of joint exercises, and monitoring and surveillance of illicit ship-to-ship transfers by North Korea-related vessels. Last month, the Japan-Germany Agreement on the Security of Information entered into force which enables the exchange of confidential information and intensifies cooperation on security policy and military technology.

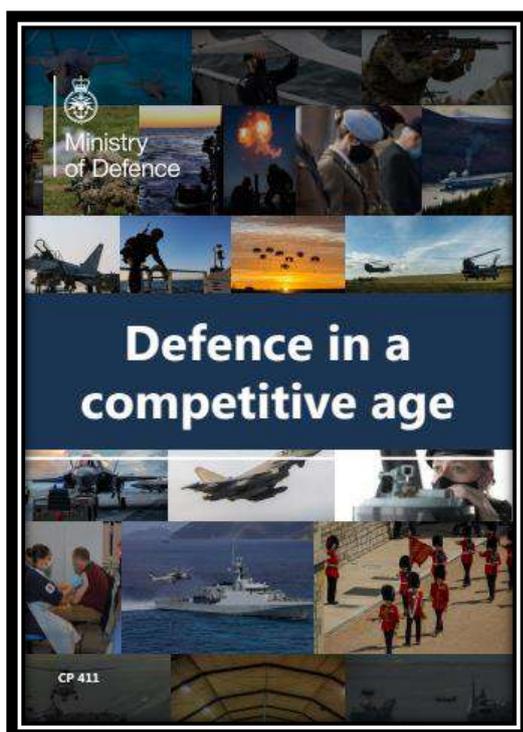


Additionally, Japan-Indonesia 2+2 meeting was held in Tokyo in March and both sides reportedly decided to boost defence cooperation and hold a joint exercise in the South China Sea. Adding more depth to the strategic partnership, both sides have signed a deal on promoting the transfer of defence equipment and technology. One area of export could be technology for escort vessels.

Earlier in February, Japan-UK 2+2 meeting expressed reservation concerning China's unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force in the East and South China Seas and opposed any coercion including by economic means. The Maritime Security Arrangement has deepened security cooperation between the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and the British Royal Navy. As HMS QUEEN ELIZABETH and her Carrier Strike Group will sail through the region including East Asia, it presents the opportunity for joint exercises.

UK Defence Command Paper - Defence in a Competitive Age

Following the release of the Integrated Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) released the Defence Command Paper entitled 'Defence in a Competitive Age' on 22 March 2021. Drawing from the strategic assessment highlighted in the integrated review, the focus of the command paper is to prepare the UK defence forces for the future battlefield which would be defined less by the physical environment and more by the technological advances being made by the UK's adversaries.



Highlighting previous defence reviews as “overambitious and under-funded”, the Command Paper argues that “the Integrated Review’s refreshed strategy and increased funding offers Defence an exciting opportunity to turn hollow forces into credible ones”. Towards this end, the paper reiterates commitment to spending £188bn on Defence over the coming four years – an increase of £24bn or fourteen per cent. However, this increased spending has been earmarked for future capability acquisition. The revenue expenditure, or day to day running expenditure, has been kept flat, at £31.5bn till 2025.

This fiscal imperative of keeping revenue expenditure on a tight leash has necessitated cuts in the current force structure. The army target size will be cut by 9,500 to 72,500 by 2025. The paper aims to retire the legacy platform of armed forces. The number of navy frigates and destroyers will drop from 19 to 17 in the next 18 months. A third of the army’s Challenger tanks will be scrapped, while 148 will be upgraded. A string of ageing RAF planes will be retired in the next couple of years, including 24 first-generation Typhoon bombers, as well as nine chinook helicopters, 14 Hercules transporter aircraft and 20 Puma support helicopters.

There is much talk of new capabilities, including artificial intelligence and autonomous systems, and a shift to a more agile, lethal and integrated force. The review commits to more than 48 Lightning aircraft, though does not give exact numbers, and further investment in the Future Combat Air System (Tempest). It recommits to the Type 26 and Type 31 frigates and fleet solid support ships. The paper mentions a new Multi-Role Ocean Surveillance capability to safeguard critical national infrastructure (undersea cables) and a new Type 83 destroyer, to replace the Type 45 destroyers when they retire in the late 2030s.

The Command Paper has elicited some sharp reaction for hedging its bets too far in future and it bequeath a military (and specifically a British Army) reduced in size and capability to pay for the sunny uplands a decade or more in the future. Critics have also argued that the defence command paper is consistent with its predecessors as an exercise that is shaped more by finance than threat perceptions.

China and Iran sign 25-year cooperation agreement

During Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's two-day visit to Tehran, China and Iran signed a 25-year cooperation agreement to further deepen their engagements in several fields on March 27, 2021. While details of the deal were not disclosed, Iranian Foreign Minister Javed Zarif and his Chinese counterpart stated that the 25-year cooperation agreement focuses on mutual engagement in areas such as energy, trade, banking, telecommunication, infrastructure, and military as well as maritime projects. This cooperation agreement provides further acceleration to Iran's role in China's Belt and Road Initiative.



The agreement is likely to strengthen Iran-China relations as it will attract more Chinese investments to Iran. It is also speculated that the deal has been in work since Chinese President Xi Jinping visit to Iran in 2016, and both the countries intend to increase bilateral trade more than 10-fold, i.e., to around US\$ 600

billion in the next decade. According to Wang, China-Iran ties – forged when bilateral exchanges began 50 years ago – would be "permanent and strategic." Iranian President Hassan Rouhani also lauded the agreement stating that in addition to economic and trade cooperation, both Iran and China can work together to fight "terrorism and extremism in the region."

However, the deal has been subject of some internal consternation in Iran where a debate on its objectives and merits have divided the opinions of the people. One side argues that Iran will benefit from turning to China as the US and the West adopt an increasingly hostile approach towards Iran, while the critics argue that Tehran may be giving up too much in its quest to boost ties with China. Nevertheless, China and Iran strengthening cooperation in key areas sends a clear message to the US at a time when the latter is mulling over options to engaging Iran over the nuclear deal.