

Wakon Yōsai: The hidden grammar of the India-Japan embrace

Hindol Sengupta • July 1, 2026,

More than ever, today India and Japan instinctively understand each other's nation building goals



The defining feature of India-Japan defence cooperation is its emphasis on co-development and co-production rather than off-the-shelf purchase. Representative Image: AI

As Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi arrives in India for the 16th annual India-Japan Summit, to observers, the warmth between India and Japan can look like a marriage of convenience — two democracies hedging against the same continental power, drawn together by the arithmetic of the Indo-Pacific. But strategic alignment of this depth and durability rarely rests on arithmetic alone. Beneath the joint statements and the carrier diplomacy lies a shared philosophical disposition toward the modern world, and to name it one must reach for a Japanese phrase: *wakon yōsai* — ‘Japanese spirit, Western technique’. Understanding this idea is the key that unlocks why Delhi and Tokyo so instinctively understand each other.

Wakon yōsai was the operating formula of Meiji Japan. Its genealogy runs back to the older *wakon kansai* — ‘Japanese spirit, Chinese learning’ — by which Heian Japan had absorbed the script, statecraft and Buddhism of the continent without becoming Chinese. When the black ships arrived, Japan simply changed the second character. The samurai-scholar Sakuma Shōzan distilled the wager as ‘Eastern ethics, Western

science': import the steamship, the rifle, the joint-stock company and the constitution, but refuse the proposition that to modernise is to Westernise the soul. Technology, in this reading, is detachable from the civilisation that produced it. A nation can industrialise its body while keeping its spirit.

This was not naïve. It was one of the most consequential bets in modern history — and Japan largely won it, becoming an industrial and military power within two generations while remaining recognisably itself. China attempted a cognate move with the *ti-yong* formula of Zhang Zhidong — Chinese learning as the substance, Western learning for use — though it fared less happily. The point is that the great civilisations of Asia, when confronted with Western power, all faced the same question: can we take the tools without taking the worldview?

India never coined so crisp a slogan, but the impulse pulses through its entire modern history. The *swadeshi* movement was, at bottom, an economic and spiritual assertion that India would build with its own hands and on its own terms. Vivekananda's project was explicitly a synthesis — Western organisational energy and science yoked to Vedantic depth. Aurobindo, in *The Renaissance in India*, made the wager explicit: India should take in the gifts of the modern West but assimilate them to her own spirit — Indianising the borrowing rather than being Europeanised by it — mastering the instruments of the age without surrendering her inner law. It is almost a Sanskritic gloss on *wakon yōsai*. Even Gandhi's quarrel with the spinning wheel against the mill was less a rejection of technology than a demand that technology serve *dharma* rather than dissolve it. Tagore worried, presciently, that nations could win the machine and lose the man.

What India lacked in a phrase it possessed in instinct. And in our own moment that instinct has acquired a name in all but translation: *Aatmanirbhar Bharat*, self-reliant India. This is *wakon yōsai* in Sanskritic dress — the determination to acquire frontier capability without becoming a dependency, to be modern without being mimetic. India, like Japan, refuses the package deal in which the price of the aircraft is the adoption of someone else's civilisational software.

This is the deep common ground. Both are civilisational states — old, continuous, self-conscious — that modernised, or are modernising, on their own authority. Neither is a revolutionary power seeking to overturn the order; neither is a satisfied status-quo

power content to be a junior partner in someone else's. Both are, to borrow a formulation, not so much rising as *returning* — re-entering a world they once shaped, carrying their own memory of what civilisation is for. Two such powers do not need to explain themselves to each other. They share a grammar.

Seen through this lens, the substantive agenda between Delhi and Tokyo becomes legible as a single project rather than four unrelated baskets.

The defining feature of India-Japan defence cooperation is its emphasis on *co-development* and *co-production* rather than off-the-shelf purchase. This is *wakon yōsai* as an industrial policy. Both nations have learned that the buyer of finished platforms remains a perpetual client; the maker of platforms acquires sovereignty. Japan's post-war easing of its arms-export posture and India's drive to indigenise its defence base meet at exactly this point — the shared refusal to be merely a market for foreign primes. The aim is not to import power but to internalise the capacity for power.

In semiconductors, artificial intelligence, robotics and clean energy, the partnership is about building sovereign capability in the technologies that will define the century. Here the Meiji logic is at its purest: absorb the technique, but locate the design authority, the fabrication, the intellectual property at home. Neither country wishes to be a node in a value chain whose brain sits elsewhere. The instinct to keep the *yōsai* while protecting the *wakon* — to take the tool without ceding the command of it — is the connective tissue of every technology dialogue between them.

Japan's signature export to India has been a *model* as much as capital — 'quality infrastructure', patient finance, the bullet train as a transfer of an entire engineering culture rather than a turnkey gift. This contrasts sharply with development models that leave the recipient indebted and dependent. Both nations grasp that an economy, too, has a soul; that growth which hollows out a society's identity is a poor bargain. They are building a developmental partnership in which modernisation strengthens rather than erodes the civilisational self.

The maritime convergence is the most resonant of all, because both India and Japan are maritime and continental civilisations rediscovering the sea. The "free and open Indo-Pacific" is usually read as a security formula, and it is one. But beneath it lies an

older memory — of the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea as highways of Indic and Buddhist transmission, of monsoon-borne trade and pilgrimage that bound this oceanic world together long before any Western fleet. India's SAGAR doctrine — Security and Growth for All in the Region — and Japan's vision of open seas are, at root, a shared civilisational reading of the ocean as a 'commons' to be kept open, not a domain to be enclosed by a single hegemon.

The India-Japan relationship, then, is not best understood as two states balancing a third. It is the meeting of two civilisations that asked the same question in the nineteenth century and are answering it together in the twenty-first: how does an ancient people become powerfully modern without ceasing to be itself? Japan named the answer *wakon yōsai*. India is living it as *Aatmanirbhar Bharat*. That each instinctively recognises the project of the other — the *wakon* beneath the *yōsai* — is the quiet foundation on which everything else is built.

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