

Japanese Naval Diplomacy in the Indian Ocean: Prospects and Possibilities

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Japan's strategic advancement into the South Asian geopolitics comes at a time when the Abe administration is restructuring and expanding the scope of their military architecture. South Asia holds enormous strategic significance in the Indo-Pacific security order. In addition, Japan's extensive relations with India, especially in the maritime domain, are making the region a potential destination for the island nation, to manifest its aspirations as a regional power. How have Tokyo's maritime security ties in the South Asian littorals been so far? What could be the prospective role and avenues of the Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force (JMSDF) in the Indian Ocean? To what extent would the India-Japan proximity be instrumental in making JMSDF a regional stakeholder?

As a part of a push to promote the "Free and open Indo-Pacific strategy", Japan is presently looking at extending its reach to South Asia, primarily, through their JMSDF assistance. Sri Lanka is expected to be the first in line to receive special support from the JMSDF in the region. Tokyo's maritime engagement with Colombo includes a major port facility in Galle. The upcoming port is only over a 100 kilometres away from the Chinese sponsored Hambantota and could later serve as a vital check over Beijing. The Abe government had granted 1.8 billion Japanese Yen in 2016 towards improving [maritime safety capabilities](#) of the Sri Lankan Coast Guard (SLCG). The deal seeks to provide regular training to SLCG personnel in addition to equipping them with the means to carry out anti-piracy operations, countermeasures for transnational crimes and to prevent the over exploitation of marine resources. Since 2009, a number of port calls have also been made from the JMSDF and the Japanese Coast Guard (JCG) to the island.

Japan seeks to play a proactive role in contributing to peace and stability through cooperation in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), funding development projects and maritime capacity building. This comes at a point when China is flexing its military muscle in the Indo-Pacific. Due to a pacifism-driven security doctrine, the island nation has thus far been largely dependent on its “coast guard diplomacy” to keep its leverage over the maritime space going. Tokyo has also been using it as an effective tool to propagate a peaceful maritime order and secure sea trade. Japan has a standing partnership with the Indian Coast Guard(ICS) in building [maritime domain awareness](#) in the region. Extending support in strengthening the coast guard along the rest of the South Asian littorals would facilitate a safer movement of goods. Such an engagement is already in place with Sri Lanka.

Similarly, piracy has been an impinging issue all along the critical International Shipping Lanes (ISL) of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Tokyo is part of various regional and international mechanisms to combat piracy and organized crime alongside other regional powers, like Beijing and New Delhi, which share similar security-related apprehensions. These include the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS), and the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) mechanism.

The Japanese government plans to facilitate the development of [port infrastructure in the Indian Ocean nations](#) for capacity building in order to connect Asia and Africa through the Middle East. Under this, the island nation has proposed to jointly develop a deep sea port at Matarbari in Bangladesh. If the former acquires rights over using the port as a military facility, it might help Tokyo gain access to major choke points along the Bay of Bengal (BoB) and the eastern Indian Ocean. It could also operate as a strategic response to Beijing’s ongoing plans to establish a naval base in the Sonadia islands of Bangladesh. The development of geo-economic arrangements such as the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) would later add value and strength to the proposed creation of a [Quad-led investment mechanism](#).

Interestingly, there was a courtesy visit by the Bangladeshi Naval Chief to Hiroshima Yamamur, the Assistant Vice Chief Admiral of JMSDF during the sixth Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) held in 2018 at Tehran, signalling an affirmative interest

in associating with Japan's naval diplomacy. Multilateral naval mechanisms like the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) and IONS works as a subtle signal to Chinese assertive foreign policy. On the flip side, the inking of the [Grant Agreement of 2017](#) with the Republic of Maldives allows the introduction of terrestrial digital broadcasting facilities which would play a key role in making meteorological assessments and reducing disaster risks there. Japan's association with Pakistan on the maritime security front has been limited or very little. However, the recent three nation visit (Sri Lanka, Maldives and Pakistan) from the island nation called for emphasis on increased cooperation in maritime security and stability, indicating the latter's evolving security architecture in the region.

The 1971 United Nations Declaration categorized the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace (ZOP). This called for the elimination of foreign military presence in the region. JMSDF's possible advance into the South Asian maritime theatre would violate the ZOP and thus, more engagement might even mean more power rivalry. Furthermore, Japan faces the problem of tyranny of distance to the Indian Ocean waters. If the island nation intends to establish its permanent naval presence in the region, it might have to work on force restructuring and move towards "forward deployment," which could require more military and diplomatic capital. The revival of the Quadrilateral as a collective security arrangement could provide a significant opportunity for Tokyo to diversify the scope of its self-defence forces and look beyond assistance. In this regard, Japan's combined exercises with India and the US like the MALABAR helps in building interoperability between maritime forces and shared Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). The former could also look at strengthening its maritime-military through enhanced logistic agreements with Quad partners.

Japan endorses India's quest to act as a "Net Security Provider"(NSP) in the IOR. The latter's bid for NSP could offer a more favourable environment in catering to JMSDF's interests in the region. Besides, the island nation has already been able to use New Delhi's political clout in maintaining closer engagement with its regional maritime neighbourhood. For instance, both nations have jointly proposed the redevelopment of the existing port in [Trincomalee](#), and converting it into a trading hub in a possible joint venture with Sri Lanka which was otherwise part of a Chinese project. On the other hand, the renaming of the US Navy's Central Command into the [Indo-Pacific Command](#) could be seen as a positive signal in support of the Abe administration's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy" from a prime

ally. This would further enhance a previously well-established India-Japan relations and increase the latter's role in the IOR.

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