**Brief Overview**

This article is an integral part of the ongoing research being undertaken at the NMF to assess the degree of long-term commitment that Japan has to the Indian Ocean and hence, its attractiveness to India and the Indian Navy as a reliable and enduring maritime partner. This piece, which examines the dexterity with which Tokyo is playing the ‘JMSDF card’ to support its energy-related game-moves in the West Asian maritime space, complements another major facet of this research project, which seeks to identify the specific drivers (such as food security, energy security, export-imperatives, etc.), which individually and collectively compel Japan to remain deeply engaged with the countries of the Indian Ocean and its rim.

Within the West Asian sub-region of the Indo-Pacific, the Strait of Hormuz (connecting the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman) and the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb (connecting the Gulf of
Aden and the Red Sea), both of which are depicted in Figure 1, are the two most critical passageways for a substantial percentage of the world’s oil trade. In 2017-2018, some 21% of the world's oil-shipping passed through the Strait of Hormuz in 2018,1 while the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb witnessed the passage of 9% of all petroleum products traded by sea.2 As Figure 2, drawn from the US Energy Information Agency (EIA)3 shows, some 76% of the oil shipped through the Strait of Hormuz was destined for countries in East Asia/South Asia.

![Graph showing oil flow through Strait of Hormuz](image)

**Fig 2: Oil Flow through Strait of Hormuz**
**Source:** EIA

Japan, with its highly industrialised economy, remains very significantly dependent on oil supplies from the Persian Gulf. Figure 3, drawn from the London-based market-analysis firm, IHS Markit, 4 depicts this unambiguously.

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3 “Hormuz is the World’s Most Important Oil Transit Chokepoint”, EIA op cit
Given the severity of its oil dependence it is extremely likely that Japan would retain an enduring interest in West Asian sub-region (also known as MENA [Middle East and North Africa]) for the foreseeable future. As such, Japan needs to ensure three separate but interlinked facets of its import-driven, energy-based, economic wellbeing:

- First, Tokyo needs to ensure that these source-countries are, in and of themselves, socio-politically stable so that the import of oil from them can be assured over time. If Japan assesses that some socio-economic buttressing is required to ensure this socio-political stability, it must find ways and means by which this can be done at the lowest possible geopolitical cost.

- Second, Japan must ensure that the means of transportation of the oil from its source-ports to its destination-ports in Japan are both safe and secure. Japan's entire import-quantum of crude-oil from the Persian Gulf area moves over the sea. This predicates Japan's involvement in the safety and security of the ships carrying the crude oil. It must be remembered that safety and security, although often clubbed together, are very different problems with very different sets of possible solutions.

- Third, Japan must ensure that the sea-areas that these oil-laden ships must traverse, are themselves stable, safe, and secure. These three facets, taken in aggregate, constitute Japan's economic lifeline vis-à-vis petroleum-based energy.

Tokyo must plan and execute a variety of geostrategies to assure that this economic lifeline is maintained despite the several pulls and pushes of regional and extra-regional players of international geopolitics within this turbulent but important sub-regional space.
coalition, led by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, currently enjoying its second consecutive term in office, appears to have decided to elevate the country’s bilateral relations not only with its traditional ally, the USA, but also with the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran). Prime Minister Abe even mediated between the two sparring countries and conveyed a message from the US Government to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei.

This attempt by Japan to foster bonhomie with the USA and Iran despite their bilateral antagonism, reflects a geostrategy that is certainly bold in its sweep, but one that nevertheless requires careful formulation and extremely nimble-footed execution. While the former ability has traditionally been a strength-area of Japan, the latter one is much more of a new skill whose mastery Japan will need to demonstrate.

It is important to place recent developments related to Japan’s execution of its geostrategy against this backdrop. The continuing geopolitical tension between the United States of America (USA or US) and the Islamic Republic of Iran has tended to exacerbate Japan’s sense of vulnerability. Following the attack on two oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman in June 2019, the USA announced a ‘maritime security initiative’ for the region and invited its allies and other countries in the region to be a part of the initiative. With the Japan’s alliance with the USA is the predominant factor that shapes (and occasionally circumscribes) Tokyo’s foreign-policy options, this US ‘invitation’ has predictably placed Japan in an awkward position. Japan clearly sees the necessity to walk a tightrope between the stridency of the US demand for demonstrable support through Japanese presence on the one hand, and Tokyo’s need to avoid alienating Tehran, on the other.

In seeking to balance these seemingly incompatible imperatives — showing the Americans reasonable proof of Japanese commitment while keeping the welcome-mat in place for Iran, Japan appears to have decided to field its most calibratable instrument — the Japan Maritime Self Defence Force (JMSDF).

The JMSDF as Tokyo’s Instrument-of-Choice

Japan is a mature and experienced maritime power and it fully recognises the several advantages that it can leverage from the deployment of surface combatants of the JMSDF. These advantages stem from the inherent characteristics of warships, namely ‘access’, ‘mobility’, ‘lift-capacity’, ‘sustained reach’, ‘versatility’ (incorporating adaptability in roles [the same warship can instantly change between its military-, diplomatic-, constabulary-, and, benign roles] and flexibility of response within any given role), ‘poise’, ‘resilience’ and ‘leverage’.

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7 British Maritime Doctrine, Joint Doctrine Publication 0-10 (JDP 0-10), (Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, Ministry of Defence, Shrivenham, SWINDON, Wiltshire, SN6 8RF; UK, August 2011), 2-1 to 2-6
This is not something newly-discovered by Tokyo. The JMSDF has long been involved in a number of maritime engagements in the Persian Gulf and its environs. Indeed, from April to October 1991, upon closure of the first Gulf War (wherein Iraq invaded Kuwait), Japan dispatched six minesweepers for mine-clearance operations in the Persian Gulf. The JMSDF teamed-up with warships from the USA, the UK, Germany, France, Belgium, and Saudi Arabia, to clear some 700 mines. The JMSDF itself destroyed or neutralised 34 mines.\(^8\)

Coalition Task Force 151 (CTF-151) (which is one of three a US-led multinational naval task forces operating as part of a 33-nation naval partnership collectively known as ‘Combined Maritime Forces’ [CMF]) was set-up in January 2009 to conduct counter-piracy missions off the Horn of Africa (HoA).\(^8\) The JMSDF, which has been involved in CTF-151 since its inception, has had its officers commanded the Task Force for as many as four three-month command-rotations — from end-June to end-August of 2015; from early-March to end-June of 2017; and again from early-March to end-June of 2018. On 20 February 2020, an officer of the JMSDF assumed command of CTF-151 for the fourth such command-rotation.\(^9\)

Insofar as surface deployments of the JMSDF are concerned, these are collectively known as DSPE (Deployment of Surface Force for Counter-Piracy Enforcement) missions.\(^10\) These missions involve JMSDF warships on two basic forms of tasking: the first of these is the direct escort of merchant ships across the Gulf of Aden, while the second is through deployments within a specified ‘box’ or zone within the Internationally Recognised Transit Corridor, under the aegis of CTF-151.\(^11\) The JMSDF’s DSPE missions began in March 2009, after approval had been received from the Cabinet under the provisions of Article 82 of the Self-Defense Forces Act. In July 2009, the “Act concerning the Punishment of Acts of Piracy and Measures to Deal with Acts of Piracy”\(^12\) was enacted, enabling the JMSDF “to protect the vessels of all nations from acts of piracy”.\(^13\) It is important to bear in mind that in both cases, the ‘Rules of Engagement’ (RoE) to be followed by the JMSDF warships are those laid down by Tokyo. In other words, once the JMSDF warship has taken up position in its assigned zonal-defence ‘box’ Tokyo — and NOT the CTF-151 — decides (through its promulgated RoE) which actions are permissible to be undertaken by the JMSDF vessel in question, and which are not. The JMSDF-DSPE is pictorially depicted in Figure 4.\(^14\)

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9 Ibid
11 Ibid
In 2011, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) established a military base in Djibouti, as part of its counter-piracy deployment. The base, with an area of 12 hectares is located adjacent to the USA’s own base (Camp Lemonnier) and is connected to the Ambouli International Airport. Despite the fact that piracy in the region has certainly witnessed a decline, with the High Risk Area (HRA) being reduced in a graduated manner, Japan has enhanced its presence in Djibouti, both in size and in the scope of the missions that the base will support. For instance, between 2012 and 2017, the base supported Japan’s participation in the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in 2012. Since Japan imports oil and natural gas from countries of North Africa, such as Algeria, Libya, Sudan, etc., it has a number of its nationals working in several of these politically troubled countries (Fig 5 refers).

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18 Indian Ocean Piracy HRA to be further reduced. OCEANUSLive.org https://www.oceanuslive.org/Main/ViewNews.aspx?uid=00001272
19 Melvin, “The Foreign Military Presence in the Horn of Africa Region”, SIPRI Background Paper, Supra 16
The role of the Japanese base in Djibouti has accordingly moved from its original function as a support for the JMSDF’s counter-piracy operations, to a broader and more enduring one of providing for extrication of Japanese workers on the one hand, and for regional capacity-building and capability-enhancement in countries of North Africa on the other. As pointed out earlier, Japan needs to ensure political stability in almost the entire Middle East and North Africa (MENA) sub-region, so as to ensure the reliability of its energy-imports.

The base and the assets deployed in and from it, constitute elements of Japan’s ‘assurance’ and ‘insurance’ mechanisms that support Japan’s geostrategy — a geostrategy that is designed to enable Tokyo to attain its geoeconomic objectives of energy-security. This carefully planned and executed geostrategy has, of course, been complicated by the establishment by China of its own base in Djibouti, which was officially opened on 01 August 2017.\(^2\) Tokyo reacted rapidly to assure the access routes to and from its own Djibouti base and, in November 2017 itself, decided to expand the Djibouti base by leasing an additional 3-hectares of land.\(^2\) Two Long-Range Maritime-Patrol (LRMP) aircraft of the JMSDF are currently stationed in Djibouti and turned-around every three months.\(^3\) Some 180 Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF)....

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personnel provide security for the base, which is used as a turn-around port by surface combatants of the JMSDF.

All this makes it clear that Japan seeks to play a greater role in the entire maritime sub-region from the Gulf of Aden to the Persian Gulf and is wisely playing the ‘JMSDF card’ in its geopolitical ‘game-moves’. The attendant spin-offs of the JMSDF involvement are also significant. They are designed to ensure regional preparedness, increase maritime domain awareness (MDA), improve interoperability between partnering navies, and establish a strong maritime footprint.

Refocussing specifically upon the Persian Gulf, Japan’s decision to deploy the 4,650-tonne guided-missile destroyer, the Takanami in the troubled waters of the Gulf is evidence of Japan’s determination to leverage the substantial versatility inherent in this general-purpose warship so as to maximise its balancing-options as it walks the tightrope between Iran (a major source of energy) and the USA (its strongest ally in dealing with either China or North Korea or both). In and of itself, this deployment does not indicate whether or not Japan will remain committed to this sub-region over the long term. What it does do, and unambiguously at that, provide for some powerful strategic signalling indicating Japan’s effort to demonstrate its support to a US-championed ‘rules-based’ maritime order (targeted against Iran, no doubt, but with some tangential spin-off signals to China, as well!) while simultaneously not alienating Iran to the point where Tehran might actually launch a misadventure that would be disastrous to Japan’s energy-security. This is a move that requires considerable maritime finesse and, as such, it is one that Indian strategic analysts and policy-makers ought to watch and analyse in great detail. There are very many lessons to be learnt by New Delhi’s uniformed and civilian decision-making/policy-making echelons from the manner in which Japan is using its naval forces (even if the latter are still called the JMSDF!).

The manner in which the JMSDF’s air power is being used to complement its surface forces — this particular mission commenced with the dispatch of P-3C LRMP aircraft of the JMSDF on the 20th of January of 202024 — is another lesson to the worthies on New Delhi’s Raisina Hill, and most especially to the senior echelons of the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force who, all too often, have a propensity to ‘cut off their [collective] nose to spite their [collective] face’!

The 30-years over which the developments touched-upon in the foregoing paragraphs yield three preliminary but important inferences:

- Japan will remain deeply committed to the MENA sub-region unless disruptive technologies replace crude-oil and natural gas as major sources of energy that drive the Japanese economy.

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The adroitness with which Tokyo plays its JMSDF card merits very significant emulation by India which, like Japan, must balance its strategic need for the USA with its strategic need for the countries of the MENA sub-region. India’s political and integrated military structures can and must learn from the Japanese example, how a middle-power should ‘play’ its naval cards.

Naval deployments must be supported by airpower that is inherently familiar with both, the ‘maritime game’ and the ‘maritime domain’.

This is not to say that India should play the assiduous disciple to the Japanese master. Far from it. At the strategic and maritime-operational levels, India holds enormous advantages and should enter into an India-Japanese strategic partnership, within the maritime expanse of the Indian Ocean in general and the MENA maritime space in particular, as an equal at the very least, if not as the partner with the superior hand. India boasts the largest and undoubtedly the most capable and powerful navy amongst all resident powers of the Indian Ocean, and has by far the longest reach and sustainability. Most important of all, there is a marked commonality of interests between these two powers.

Nor does this piece propound the view that the prevailing scenario is one of ‘gloom-and-doom’. Once again, far from it. There are certainly a host of encouraging features to the India-Japan seascape. The seriousness with which both countries and their respective navies are engaging in naval exercises not just those of the MALABAR series, but, far more significantly, the annual bilateral naval exercise JIMEX, is a matter of the utmost strategic significance. The first edition of JIMEX was conducted off Japan in 2012, while the most recent iteration took place off Visakhapatnam on India’s eastern seaboard, in October 2018.25 The 2018 edition was conducted over as many as eight days, and both, the JMSDF and the Indian Navy fielded major surface combatants (the JS Kaga — an Izumo Class Helicopter Destroyer, the JS Inazuma – a guided-missile Destroyer, the INS Satpura — a guided-missile stealth Frigate, the INS Kadmatt — an Anti-Submarine Warfare Corvette, and INS Shakti — a Fleet Tanker). In addition, one submarine, a P-8 (India) LRMP aircraft, and a number of integral helicopters also be participated. Quite apart from the several naval benefits, the strategic signalling is unmistakably effective. Since these exercises involve clearances from India’s ministries of ‘defence’ and ‘external affairs’, it is fair to conclude that the Indian Navy has made a strong case for its continued engagement of the JMSDF and that the case has been well-supported by both the nodal ministries. All this augurs well, but it is essential for the exercise to become more regular and more frequent in its conduct. The next edition of JIMEX is likely in 2021 or 2022, depending on how the current COVID-19 pandemic plays out. Strategic signalling is also being sustained through the now-trilateral annual naval exercises of the MALABAR series, involving the navies of the USA, India, and Japan. MALABAR 19, which was the 23rd iteration, was hosted by Japan in September 2019 and future editions may yet see the inclusion of Australia, which would send a much firmer strategic signal to the entire region. Of course, there is much that would first need to be done to stiffen the backbone of the more timorous sections of the

25 Indian Navy Website, “Bilateral Maritime Exercise Between Japan and India (JIMEX 18) Commences at Visakhapatnam”, https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/node/20996
Indian establishment and this is precisely where a deep understanding of the Japanese game play might prove to be the most helpful.

The strategic closeness between India and Japan is clearly growing. In 2018, there were a plethora of media reports to the effect that discussions between Japan and India to facilitate logistics Indian naval access to Japan’s Djibouti base were in an advanced stage.\(^{26}\) Expectations were once again raised in 2019, in the run-up to the India-Japan ‘2+2 Dialogue’ (involving the Defence and External/Foreign Affairs ministers of the two countries), with “top diplomatic sources” being referred-to in respectable sections of the Indian print media\(^{27}\) as having indicated that “India and Japan will soon extend logistical support to each other’s Navies when Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) is inked later this year. This agreement is expected to further deepen the defence cooperation between the two countries.” The Inaugural ‘2+2 Meeting’ was, indeed, held in New Delhi, on 30 November 2019, and the bilateral ACSA Agreement was discussed, but not concluded.\(^{28}\) On the other hand, Japanese support to the announcement by India’s Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, of the “Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative” (IPOI)\(^{29}\) was clearly and unambiguously expressed in the 2+2 Meeting.\(^{30}\)

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, an important point that merits reiteration is that single-commodity-vulnerabilities such as petroleum-based energy, food, mineral ores, etc., invariably generate mitigation geostrategies that seek to prevent societal (and hence “political”) instability of the source of the commodity concerned. These often include the setting-up of educational and vocational structures, the promotion of primary and secondary healthcare through the creation and/or funding of primary healthcare centres, clinics and hospitals, assistance to set-up manpower-intensive small-scale medium-scale, and even large-scale industries, and so forth — all of which are designed to promote societal stability (and, by corollary, prevent instability that could then threaten the availability of the commodity desired). When nations fail to do this (as in the case of both India and China in Sudan\(^{31}\)), the results are often deleterious to their attainment of critical geo-economic objectives and hence to their geopolitical interest. However, even when they do manage to do these things successfully — as in the case of Japan, which uses its Official

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Development Assistance (ODA) to great effect\textsuperscript{32} — this creates new interests (perhaps ‘secondary interests’ might be an appropriate term), which themselves become important enough to merit the creation and execution of strategies/geostrategies designed to preserve, promote and protect them, thereby generating assurance and assurance mechanisms and structures of their own. Commodity-vulnerability mitigation, therefore, rapidly become a complex and complicated matter. Retaining clarity and about the core issue (namely, the commodity-vulnerability itself) and retaining it at the centre of one’s strategic thinking and analysis is a policy-relevant skill to which Indian scholarship can and must contribute very significantly. It is hoped that the foregoing paragraphs will serve as a small step in this direction.

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