

JAPAN AND THE JMSDF AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Jay Maniyar
11 June 2020

The COVID-19 or the Coronavirus pandemic – a virus that originated in Wuhan in the Peoples’ Republic of China in late last year — claimed a handful of lives in its initial days and months, but has since spread rapidly across the globe and has accounted for deaths to the tune of over 200,000 people. The pandemic worsened towards end-March 2020, with several governments implementing stringently-enforced nationwide lockdowns in the last week of the month and bringing thriving economies to a standstill. It has been predicted that several governments and nations will continue to operate in limited working capacities till the pandemic subsides or its impact reduces to reopen economies to everyday business. Routine life has been brought to a standstill by the raging pandemic. The last influenza-based pandemic to wreak global havoc before the COVID-19 surfaced was the H1N1 virus of 2009 that claimed over 284,000 lives, which was followed by the Ebola and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) pandemics.¹

An enraged President Donald Trump initially refused to call the virus the ‘Coronavirus’, and, instead, chose the term ‘Wuhan Virus’, a reference to the city on the Chinese mainland believed to be where the virus originated. Trump, later, withdrew the usage of the term and called it the ‘Coronavirus’.² The United States has also publically confirmed its plans to sue China for the man-made virus, with a Florida-based lawyer having filed a lawsuit against the Communist regime and President Xi Jinping.³

China, for its part, reacted with matching vigour. The Chinese Embassy in France, through its official Twitter account, angrily and scathingly dismissed American statements that accused China of ‘biological warfare’.⁴

¹ Sharon Begley, “2009 Swine Flu Outbreak was 15 times Deadlier: Study”, 26 June 2012, Reuters News Agency, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-swineflu/2009-swine-flu-outbreak-was-15-times-deadlier-study-idUSBRE85O1DF20120626>

² Al Jazeera, “Trump defends calling coronavirus the ‘Chinese virus’”, Al Jazeera News (English), 23 March 2020 <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/newsfeed/2020/03/trump-defends-calling-coronavirus-chinese-virus-200323102618665.html>

³ Jay Weaver, “South Florida Lawsuit Accuses China of Coronavirus Cover-Up, Fueling Loss of Lives and Jobs”, 10 May 2020, Miami Herald, 10 May 2020, <https://amp.miamiherald.com/news/coronavirus/article242588091.html>

⁴ Kevin Krause, “Lawsuit in Dallas Federal Court Accuses Chinese Government of Creating Coronavirus as ‘Biological Weapon’”, Dallas News, 18 March 2020,

Japan was one of the first few countries in the world to be affected by the COVID-19. Yet, unlike several other countries, including allies such as the United States, Japan's only notable steps in regard to blaming China for the spread of the contagion of the Coronavirus or by way of seeking reparations for losses of people and money, involved the closure of the country's airports to Chinese tourists. A visit to Japan by Chinese President Xi Jinping was also cancelled. The present state of relations between China and Japan is a comfortable one, with the two countries having agreed to cooperate in a number of areas. Seeking to avoid jeopardising this 'happy state of affairs', Japan has stayed away from risking Chinese reprisals akin to those dished out by Beijing to the United States in response to American lawsuits against China and accusations of the country having intentionally spread the Coronavirus.

In mid-March, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sought to calm what *The Japan Times* described as a "nervous" nation.⁵ However, in the very next month, on the 7th of April, after cases spiralled over the first week of the month,⁶ a nationwide emergency was declared, with particular focus on the highly-infected prefectures of Tokyo and Osaka. The emergency was lifted on 25 May 2020,⁷ but the situation remains grim, as witness the fact that for the first time since World War II, the summer Olympic Games, which were to have been hosted by Tokyo in 2020, were postponed (to 2021), with the government of Japan bearing enormous losses.⁸

Since the initial days, the Coronavirus has consumed close to 700 Japanese lives. Cases continue to increase, as does the number of critical patients highly likely to succumb to the virus.⁹ The country has been criticised for being slow in undertaking rapid and effective testing, and has been unfavourably compared with neighbouring South Korea (ROK) — a country with whom Japan's relations are presently poor. An article by the magazine *Foreign Policy* claimed that only 0.185% of the Japanese population had been tested to date.¹⁰ In contrast, South Korea has garnered worldwide acclaim for its quick and efficient response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Tokyo has defended its stance and rejected the need to test, with the country's leadership emphasizing social distancing and other safety norms, instead. Japan and the ROK are presently involved in a host of disputes ranging from issues relating to wartime-labour reparations to export controls on items such

<https://www.dallasnews.com/news/public-health/2020/03/18/dallas-federal-lawsuit-accuses-chinese-government-of-creating-coronavirus-as-biological-weapon/>

⁵ "Abe seeks to calm a nervous nation, vowing new steps amid coronavirus outbreak", *The Japan Times*, March 14, 2020 https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/03/14/national/politics-diplomacy/abe-seeks-to-calm-nervous-nation-vowing-new-steps-amid-coronavirus-outbreak/#.Xr6J_2IX4wA

⁶ "Japan's Abe warns virus surge in invoking emergency", April 7, 2020, Bloomberg <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-07/japan-s-abe-declares-state-of-emergency-over-coronavirus>

⁷ Satoshi Sugiyama, "Japan Cautiously Lifts Last of Virus Emergency Controls", *The Japan Times*, 25 May 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/05/25/national/japan-lifts-state-of-emergency-coronavirus/#.XuGFXkUzY2w>

⁸ "The Eye-watering Cost of Tokyo 2020 Olympics Postponement", May 15, 2020, *Sydney Morning Herald* <https://www.smh.com.au/sport/the-eye-watering-cost-of-tokyo-2020-olympics-postponement-20200515-p54t8n.html>

⁹ "Coronavirus Update (Live)", Worldometer, <https://worldometer.info/coronavirus>

¹⁰ William Sposato, "Japan's Halfhearted Coronavirus Measures are Working Anyway", *Foreign Policy*, 14 May 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/>

as semiconductors. Reactors in the Fukushima power plant continue to release radioactive waste into the Sea of Japan, much to the ROK's fury.¹¹ Tokyo's apparent obduracy notwithstanding, the ROK's pertinent and improvised measures are believed to have played an important role in curbing the spread of the virus, while Japan continues to grapple with the novel Coronavirus.

A significant amount of the criticism of Japan has centred upon Tokyo's failure to ensure a timely enough response. Perhaps nowhere has this been more striking than in the maritime domain. The example of the British-flagged cruise liner, the *Diamond Princess*, offers a good case in point. This cruise ship, which was steaming through the Yokohama Bay in the early days of the virus, witnessed a surge in infections on board, after an eighty-five year old man had tested positive for the coronavirus.¹² Japanese authorities were criticized for their laggardly response in terms of rescuing the predominantly-Japanese passengers and ensuring timely de-boarding, resulting in an exponentiation of cases aboard the ship. The *Diamond Princess* reported 13 deaths and over 700 cases.¹³ An Italian cruise liner, too, was docked at a Japanese port with infections having been reported on-board.¹⁴ In both these cases, Japanese authorities were heavily criticized for having been unable to ensure quick de-boarding and the consequent repatriation of the stranded passengers.

Naval Dimensions of COVID-19

With a US Navy aircraft carrier, the *USS Theodore Roosevelt*, having been forced to quarantine naval personnel following a rise in onboard infections, and the controversial suspension of the ship's captain having dampened morale in the US Navy, the Coronavirus displayed its quiet but lethal impact on ships and seafarers, with several warships suffering infections of portions of their crew, and the *Theodore Roosevelt* reporting recurring positive cases.¹⁵

France's sole aircraft carrier, the *Charles de Gaulle*, which was on a West Asian deployment intended to improve the French Navy's capabilities in dealing with Islamist terrorism, had to abandon its

¹¹ "South Korea urges action over radioactive Fukushima water", September 16, 2019, YouTube video <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=K-1YfWoXJro>

¹² "Japan quarantines 3500 on cruise ship after an 85 year-old tests positive for Coronavirus", February 4, 2020, NEWS18, <https://www.news18.com/amp/news/world/japan-quarantines-3500-on-cruise-ship-after-85-year-old-tests-positive-for-coronavirus-2485625.html>

¹³ Figures obtained from "Coronavirus Update (Live) - Diamond Princess", on 27 April 2020, Worldometer, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

¹⁴ "Coronavirus tally rises to 91 on Italian cruise ship in Japan", India Today, 24 April 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/amp/world/story/coronavirus-italian-cruise-ship-japan-1670452-2020-04-24>

¹⁵ "Five USS Theodore Roosevelt Sailors Test Positive for Coronavirus for a Second Time", 15 May 2020, TIME <https://time.com/5837531/sailors-coronavirus-second-time/>

mission due to a rise in onboard COVID-19 cases.¹⁶ It is understood that over a thousand sailors had to be evacuated from the *Charles de Gaulle*.¹⁷

Thanks to a series of robust preventive measures enforced by the Indian Navy, no warships of the India have thus far been affected. However, a sailor from one of the Indian Navy's shore-support establishments in Mumbai was reported, on April 17 2020, to have been infected.¹⁸ This resulted in a spate of infections — but, fortunately, only ashore and not on board Indian warships — with twenty naval personnel subsequently placed under quarantine. The spread appears to have been effectively contained by the Indian Naval authorities in Mumbai, with the total number of infections, being limited to 26.¹⁹

These incidents of warship-infections illustrate the vulnerabilities of seafarers and maritime forces to the COVID-19 pandemic. The maritime domain is a critical area for national security, if not *the* critical area. Navies the world over, with their established ability to rapidly bring very large quantities of medical aid and other supplies to the scene of a humanitarian crisis or disaster are perceived as being extremely effective first-responders to a variety of humanitarian crises. It is a matter of serious concern if the would-be redeemers are themselves to be counted amongst the victims, as seems to be the case in the present pandemic. Once again, the Indian Navy has proven to be an exception, as adequately expounded-upon by Commander Anand Kumar and Mr Suriya Narayanan of the National Maritime Foundation.²⁰ Sadly, however, its successes have gone largely unsung and underappreciated.

The transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 is largely attributed to viral droplets with the medium of air offering a vital passage. As such, ships and seafarers remain highly susceptible to contracting the virus as the maritime domain involves a high degree of day-to-day human contact, and ships are duty-bound to call at ports of countries that may be affected by the pandemic. Transporting emergency and relief material can also have a detrimental effect, unless stringent measures are implemented, which need to include preliminary checks for COVID-19 through prevalent medical facilities or makeshift clinics and hospitals at the disembarkation points. Likewise, ports and

¹⁶ “French Aircraft Carrier Abandons Middle East Mission after Suspected Coronavirus Cases”, 08 April 2020, Al Masdar News, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/french-aircraft-carrier-abandons-middle-east-mission-after-suspected-coronavirus-cases/>

¹⁷ “France Investigating how 1,000 Sailors Became Infected with Coronavirus Aboard Charles de Gaulle Aircraft Carrier”, 18 April 2020, ABC News Australia, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-18/france-investigates-coronavirus-cluster-on-charles-de-gaulle/12151156>

¹⁸ “Most of 25 Navy Men who Tested Positive for Covid-19 Traced to Single Sailor”, 18 April 2020, Hindustan Times https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/most-of-25-personnel-who-tested-positive-for-covid19-traced-to-single-sailor-indian-navy/story-ihUL4509r4pH7UJrio3EsJ_amp.html

¹⁹ “Coronavirus India: 26 Navy Sailors in Mumbai Test COVID-19 +ve, No Infections on Warships, Submarines”, 18 April 2020, NDTV, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/15-to-20-indian-navy-sailors-in-mumbai-test-positive-for-coronavirus-quarantined-at-naval-hospital-2213852?amp=1&kamai-rum=off>

²⁰ Commander Anand Kumar and Suriya Narayanan, “Mitigating COVID-19: The Indian Navy in the Vanguard — As Always”, National Maritime Foundation Website, 16 May 2020, <https://maritimeindia.org/mitigating-covid-operation-samudra-setu/>

shipyards need to utilise existing facilities for dedicated COVID-19 quarantine-centres for the safety of seafarers, apart from implementing rapid-testing mechanisms in congested harbours. The safety of doctors and nurses is an obvious imperative as evinced by the increasing incidences of hospital nurses and doctors engaged in treating Coronavirus patients, themselves being infected by the pandemic.

On the other hand, naval expressions of assertions and contestations of national sovereignty continue apace. The tug-of-war between the world's sole superpower and the country best believed to have the global wherewithal to match its prowess did not witness Japanese interjections, but Japanese concerns over the security, safety, and stability of the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR), a region witness to the twenty-first century's 'great game' of American versus Chinese predominance, remain.

While the world remains focused on combatting the Coronavirus through an all-out effort — which includes cooperation, assistance, aid, emergency shipments of N95 masks, and day-to-day correspondence between heads of government across the globe — the People's Republic of China continues to assert territorial claims in the South China Sea. A Chinese vessel sank a Vietnamese fishing boat in April of 2020, prompting a scathing response from the USA's Department of State (DoS).²¹

On the 31st of March this year (2020), *The Mainichi Daily* reported a clash between a Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) destroyer, the *JS Shimakaze*, and a Chinese fishing vessel in the contentious waters of the South China Sea. Although no injuries were officially reported, there have been conflicting reports of at least a couple of injuries to JMSDF personnel.²² This incident has served to highlight the need for vigil among naval forces, not limited to the JMSDF alone, even in the face of the ongoing pandemic, which has resulted in the deaths of over 300,000 people across the world. Japanese Ground Self-Defense Forces (JGSDF) deployed Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) and Anti-Ship Missile (ASM) Batteries to *Miyakojima* island to maintain Japan's posture against Chinese activities in the South China Sea. 340 troops of the GSDF were also stationed on the island to maintain preparedness to knee-jerk Chinese provocations and manoeuvres.²³

The fact is that 'great power rivalry' on the high seas is an ongoing process, despite everything.

The *Defense of Japan*, in September last year, declared China to be the greatest security threat to Japan, even ahead of the DPRK.²⁴ The dubious activities of Chinese submarines has driven Tokyo to build

²¹ "China Coast Guard Sinking of a Vietnam Fishing Vessel", Immediate Release - US Department of Defense (DOD), 09 April 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2143925/china-coast-guard-sinking-of-a-vietnam-fishing-vessel/>

²² "Japan SDF Destroyer, China Fishing Boat Collide in East China Sea", *The Mainichi Daily*, 31 March 2020, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20200331/p2g/00m/0na/008000c>

²³ "Japan deploys SAM, ASM batteries to Miyakojima Island", *Janes*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.janes.com/article/95119/japan-deploys-sam-asm-batteries-to-miyakojima-island>

²⁴ Government of Japan, Defense White Paper, "Defense of Japan 2019", p. 2, Ministry of Defense (MOD)

its first new surveillance ship in over three decades and commission it into the JMSDF.²⁵ Likewise, JMSDF vessels have undertaken a series of joint initiatives with those of the United States Navy, during the ongoing crisis. Of note were the recent deployments in the West Philippine and East China Seas²⁶ — a clear show of strength against an assertive China whose focus upon establishing and expanding its claims in the South China Sea has remained unwavering right through the pandemic. In late April, the Japanese destroyer, *JS Onami*, and a crew of 200 departed for the standalone mission to the Middle East. The *Asahi Shimbun* reported that the JMSDF remained committed to its base in Djibouti, stating that 60 Japanese nationals had been stranded in Djibouti ever since the first outbreak of the pandemic.²⁷

Prior to the global manifestation of COVID-19 and the imposition of complete/partial lockdowns to curb the flow of the virus, two *Hatsuyuki*-Class destroyers of the JMSDF undertook anti-ship rocket-firing exercises and ship-to-ship transport training.²⁸ This was a clear indication of the JMSDF's commitment to its military (albeit defensive) role in its approach to regional and global maritime security, even amidst the already-discernible spread of the Coronavirus.

Japan's Coping Mechanisms

How Japan copes with the fallout of COVID-19 will be determined largely through the resilience of the Japanese people and its determined leadership. The country has historically been the victim of a host of pandemics, ranging from the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic, which killed a staggering 500 million people worldwide,²⁹ to the more recent H1N1 or the 'Swine Flu' pandemic of 2009-10. The latter resulted in 200 Japanese deaths and over 15 million cases of infections.³⁰ The number of Japanese infected by COVID-19 as on date, is over 17,000, with 916 deaths.³¹ While it continues to face criticism over some elements of its response, Tokyo's fiscal coping-mechanisms are entirely praiseworthy. On 27 May 2020, the Government of Japan, which had, a few weeks earlier, provided an economic stimulus of ¥117.1 trillion, approved an additional ¥117 trillion yen to combat the virus fallout. The total fiscal stimulus of 234 trillion yen (\$2.18 trillion) represents about 40% of Japan's GDP and is the world's second-largest fiscal package to deal with the coronavirus,

²⁵ "Japan Builds First Surveillance Ship in 30 Years to find Chinese Subs", The Asahi Shimbun, 11 March 2020, <http://www.asahi.com/sp/ajw/articles/13150666>

²⁶ "Chinese Aggression in South China Sea & East China Sea Face Strong Pushback", The Economic Times, 24 April 2020, <https://m.economictimes.com/news/defence/chinese-aggression-in-south-china-sea-east-china-sea-face-strong-pushback/articleshow/75344181.c>

²⁷ "MSDF Unit Stuck in Djibouti won't be Relieved due to COVID-19", The Asahi Shimbun, 22 April 2020, <http://www.asahi.com/sp/ajw/articles/13318600>

²⁸ "Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force Conducts Rocket Firing Exercises" Navy Recognition, 10 March 2020, <https://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/news/defence-news/2020/march/8144-japan-maritime-self-defense-force-conducts-rocket-firing-exercises.html>

²⁹ Robert J Barro, José F Ursúa, and Joanna Weng, "The Coronavirus and the Great Influenza Pandemic: Lessons from the "Spanish Flu" for the Coronavirus's Potential Effects on Mortality and Economic Activity", National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) Working Paper 26866, April 2020, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w26866.pdf>

³⁰ "Swine-Origin Influenza A Outbreak 2009", 2011, BMC Public Health <https://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/11/79>

³¹ "Covid Update (Live)", Worldometer Website, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/japan/>

approaching the size of the \$2.3 trillion aid programme of the USA.³² Given these numbers, Japan is likely to succeed in reinvigorating its economy through rapid job creation, safety guarantees and free insurance to workers in a post-COVID-19 scenario, including incentives and economic programs to ensure worker motivation remains high. All this, of course is entirely befitting an economy such as that of Japan.

Given the country's experience in recovering from several earlier human disasters epidemics and natural disasters, Japan and its able leadership may reasonably be expected demonstrate the prerequisite capabilities and the political will to reposition the country as one of the world's foremost nations.

However, insofar as the maritime domain is concerned — and as has been proven by infections aboard the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* and several other cases of navies being stricken by the virus — Japan's vast fleet of the JMSDF continues to remain susceptible to the pandemic that has resulted in over 300,000 deaths globally.³³

In the case of generalised, mercantile shipping, of course, ship-safety measures, onboard sanitization, strict implementation of social distancing measures aboard ships when at sea, quarantine and self-isolation of infected members of the crew, and their immediate and emergency disembarkation at convenient ports and shipyards, are measures that all sea-dependent countries are implementing in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic. How far a major naval power can blindly copy these measures and paste them onto its warships is a much more complex matter, as had been brought out by Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan and Commander Saurav Mohanty of the NMF had brought out earlier.³⁴ The JMSDF, which otherwise has a marked tendency to simply follow its senior alliance partner, the US Navy, is doing, might do well to also take a look at lessons that are on offer from the Indian Navy.

Jay Maniyar is a Research Associate at the National Maritime Foundation (NMF), whose current research is focussed upon maritime issues vis-à-vis Japan and South Korea insofar as these are relevant to India's own maritime endeavours. He can be contacted at researchassociate1.nmf@gmail.com.

³² Business Standard, "Japan Approves Fresh \$1.1 Trn Stimulus to Combat Covid-19 Economic Fallout", 27 May 2020, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/japan-approves-fresh-1-1-trn-stimulus-to-combat-covid-19-economic-fallout-120052701117_1.html

³³ *Ibid*

³⁴ Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan and Commander Saurav Mohanty, "Impact Of COVID-19 and other Viral Outbreaks Onboard Ships", National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi, 30 March 2020, <https://maritimeindia.org/impact-of-covid-19-and-other-viral-outbreaks-on-board-ships/>