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Japan in the Indian Ocean: An integral and holistic involvement in South Asia

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ABSTRACT

Japan has had and continues to have a diverse set of interests pertaining to South Asia and the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean Region. The article below assesses the emerging maritime interests of Japan in the Indian Ocean and aspects of maritime security, maritime cooperation, infrastructure investments, food security, etc. and attempts to devise an approach for Japan in the twenty-first century security scenarios of the world's third largest ocean. The Indian Ocean is responsible for the passage of Japan's imports of oil, 90 percent of which are sourced from the oil-rich region of the Arabian Gulf. While the criticality of the Indian Ocean in terms of security threats such as piracy and armed robbery remains considerably behind the Pacific Ocean's and other critical sea bodies such as the South and East China Seas, a strategy for India, the Indian Ocean, and South Asia befits the drawing up of avant-garde strategies, doctrines, operational and tactical prowess.

KEYWORDS

Japan; Indian Ocean; Indian Ocean Region; India; infrastructure; South Asia; naval imperatives; Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force; JMSDF; East Asia; Official Development Assistance; future imperatives; IOR

Japan, the world's third largest economy in terms of real and nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP), is a major naval power in its neighbouring waters, and the world. The country is globally involved in the maritime domain in several areas critical to the domain – humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), anti-piracy missions, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions, combatting illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU), contingency responses in the wake of natural tragedies, joint exercises with the navies plying their trade globally, and coordinated patrols.

Infrastructure projects in the Indian Ocean: The east container terminal and the Sri Lanka-Japan-India agreement

More recently, Japan and India have undertaken the joint development of the East Container Terminal in Sri Lanka's Colombo Port, a major port for transshipment to the countries of the South Asian region, including India.¹

The Colombo Port has witnessed investments in the region of US\$ 1.4 billion from the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC). China Merchants Port operates the Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT) within the Colombo Port.² The contract for the

East Container Terminal in the Colombo Port between Japan, India, and Sri Lanka involves the joint development of three container berths, 18 m draught, quay length of 1200 m, capacity of 2.4 m TEUs.³ A Memorandum of Cooperation was signed between the two investor countries and the host country in May 2019. The stake in the East Container Terminal of the two countries is 49 percent.⁴

Infrastructure projects in the Indian Ocean: Japanese investments in India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh

Since 2016, Japan has announced a host of investments in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) countries of India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. Investment in the Mumbai trans-harbour link is to the tune of INR 8,600 crores, an amount sanctioned in March 2017.⁵ The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has sanctioned a total amount of INR 22,000 crores for key infrastructure projects in Mumbai such as the Mumbai Metro-3 project, with completion expected by 2022.⁶ In Bangladesh, the Matarbari port and power station deal is worth \$3.7 billion. The Dawei deep-sea port and special economic zone (SEZ) in Myanmar involves Japanese investments of US\$ 800 million, while investments in the Yangon container terminal are to the tune of US\$ 200 million.⁷

With Japan-India relations on a robust footing due to the productive bonhomie between the leaders of the two countries, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Japan has obtained several exclusive assignments in India's Northeast, and Andaman Islands. With the assistance of the JICA, the Electricity Department of Andaman & Nicobar Administration (EDA&N) has also planned for replacement of 15 MW diesel generators in the Andamans with solar-fuel efficient diesel or hybrid plants.⁸ The project aims to augment power generation capacity on the islands, and steady power supply, and is a Category B project.⁹

In 2014, the Guwahati Sewerage Project was sanctioned through the ODA programme, and in 2016, the Nagaland Forest Management Project was approved with a yen loan disbursement.¹⁰ Nearby states such as Odisha and Madhya Pradesh have also been recipients of aid from Japan for projects focussed on strengthening transmission systems. Health care, irrigation, and sanitation have also been areas where projects have been initiated through disbursed yen loans.

A loan for Umiam Stage-III hydroelectric power station, located in the Umiam Umtru river basin in Meghalaya, was sanctioned by the JICA in October 2018.¹¹ Seven yen loan agreements were discussed between India and Japan prior to the approval of the disbursement, among them the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High Speed Rail Project, the Delhi Mass Rapid Transport System Project (Phase 3), the North East Road Connectivity Improvement Project (Phase 3), the Project for Sustainable Catchment Forest Management in Tripura, and the Technical Cooperation Project for Sustainable Agriculture and Irrigation Project in Mizoram. These projects amount to a total of INR 13,000 crores' or ¥205.784 billion worth of investments in India's Northeast region (See note 10 above).

In 2016, Japan and India announced the "Pacific, Indian Ocean Corridor" aimed at connecting the two oceans through infrastructure initiatives and capacity building projects.¹² The Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, wherein Japan seeks investments in countries such as India and continents such as Africa to improve infrastructure and connectivity, remains a pivotal encapsulation of Japanese investments in India.¹³ As a

matter of fact, India has been mentioned as an expanding and lucrative market for infrastructure investment initiatives by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Japan.¹⁴

Japan in the Indian Ocean: Naval imperatives

The table shares the figures of assistance, the amount of fuel utilised for refuelling, and the expenses undertaken during the assistance processes by the Japanese MSDF to the vessels of its allies, namely the United States (US), and the United Kingdom (UK) (Table 1).

Japan's more recent involvement in the IOR was primarily focused on the post-9/11 security scenarios of the region. With Allied vessels patrolling "India's ocean" as part of surveillance operations against potential maritime threats in the aftermath of the attacks on the American mainland, Japan enacted a Special Measures Anti-Terrorism Law in which innumerable ships participated in primarily maritime support activities ranging from fuel replenishment to humanitarian assistance.

The Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law of October 2001 was supplemented by the Replenishment Support Special Measures Law, which was enacted in January 2008.¹⁵ Japanese deployments in the Indian Ocean in the post 9/11 security environment were from 2001 to 2007. The achievements are highlighted in the table above. Japan has also dispatched Aegis-equipped ships to the Indian Ocean, the last of which was deployed to the Ocean in November 2005.¹⁶

Japan regularly participates in naval exercises in the IOR. The 2018 edition of the JIMEX, the annual bilateral drills between Tokyo and New Delhi, was held off the coast of Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh.¹⁷ The Japanese Izumo-class helicopter destroyer, *JS Kaga (DDH-184)*, and the guided-missile destroyer, *JS Inazuma*, participated in the exercises. The Japan Coast Guard (JCG) and the Indian Coast Guard are also involved in the *Sahyog-Kaijin* exercises. Sri Lanka and Maldives – two key Indian Ocean nations with security stakes in the region – are observers in the Coast Guard exercises. The dispatch also involved port calls to Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Singapore, and the Philippines – an affirmation of Japanese naval involvement in the Indian Ocean and the region.¹⁸

Japan donated two Fast Patrol Vessels (FPV) to the Sri Lankan Coast Guard in August 2018.¹⁹ The FPVs were donated by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and are an example of Japanese military diplomacy in the region. Initiatives to balance Chinese presence in Hambantota involve Japanese, Indian, and the United States' endeavours to the eastern port of Trincomalee. The Trincomalee endeavour by Japan also involved the Japanese destroyer, *JS Ikazuchi (DD-107)*, which docked at the port.²⁰

The transformation of the Japanese helicopter carriers, the *JS Izumo (DDH-183)* and the *JS Kaga (DDH-184)*, to aircraft carriers – equipped with 42 newly-acquired F-35Bs

Table 1. Assistance to Allied vessels from the Japanese MSDF during Operation Enduring Freedom (2001–2007).

	Assistance (nos.)	Amount (kl, approx.)	Expenditure (¥)
Ships refuelled	794	490,000	22.4 billion
Shipboard Helicopters refuelled	67	990	58 million
Water Supply	128	6,930	8 million

Source: "The Replenishment Support Special Measures Law", Ministry of Defence, Government of Japan. <https://www.mod.go.jp/e/jdf/no09/policy.html>

– will considerably elevate the capabilities of the two destroyers towards accomplishing Japan’s blue-water objectives. Their deployments in the maritime expanse of the Indo-Pacific will have to factor in the prevalent sensitivities of the region such as the South China Sea territorial disputes, piracy and maritime terrorism, and Chinese objections to a broader security role for the MSDF in waters outside its territory, as well as constitutional restrictions to Japanese defense involvement abroad imposed by the contentious Article 9 of the Constitution of Japan.

Another step forward in the right direction is Japan’s joint initiatives with countries such as France, as evinced by the Strategic Orientation agreement²¹ of 2018 – which emphasised Japan-France cooperation in the Indian Ocean, alongside the Pacific Ocean. France is also a signatory to strategic vision statements with India and Australia for the Indian Ocean.²² With the US, France, Australia, and Japan having held the first combined exercises in the Indian Ocean in May 2019, multilateral security initiatives by Japan involving India will considerably strengthen the region’s maritime security apparatus and pave the way for a regional maritime security architecture.²³

Japan’s MSDF is a proactive provider of fuel and water replenishment to ships operating in the western IOR. The MSDF supports the Maritime Interdiction Operation (MIO) of countries such as France, the United Kingdom (UK), and Pakistan.²⁴ Post 9/11, Japan had deployed three MSDF destroyers as part of the *Operation Enduring Freedom* to replenish ships of its allies in the Indian Ocean. Japan’s assistance amounted to US\$130 million. In December 2002, Japan deployed the *JS Kirishima* – an Aegis-equipped destroyer – to the Indian Ocean to replace a damaged Allied destroyer and to achieve several other objectives such as the security of Japanese supply vessels and surveillance missions.²⁵ Given the pervasive security threats in the Indian Ocean, it may not be long before the MSDF’s attention is diverted to the southern South Asian expanse.

In September 2000, Japan dispatched ships to Southeast Asia as part of a “*Mission to Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships*” to implement special measures of assistance and cooperation.²⁶

Maritime security in the Indian Ocean: The quadrilateral security dialogue (qsd) and the security of Japan’s shipping lanes

The rejuvenation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), or the QUAD – a security cooperation initiative in the Indo-Pacific Region, between the four “like-minded” democracies of Japan, Australia, the United States, and India is intended to give a fillip to regional security cooperation, particularly in the wake of China’s increasing maritime assertiveness in its neighbouring waters.

The QUAD, founded by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007, was resuscitated in 2017 after a gap of nine years. A comprehensive joint maritime security policy with a focus on the Indian Ocean and South Asia and one that addresses the concerns of the four QUAD nations in the region can be spearheaded by India, given its unique geographical position in the realm of South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, and Japan stands much to gain from this as a member of the QUAD.

With India an important member of the QUAD and central to the maritime domain of South Asia, Japan’s involvement in the Indian Ocean will take into account the rise of India as a counterweight to China in the open oceans. The QUAD has held four official

meetings and the Dialogue has been officially elevated to the ministerial level, with the first ministerial meet having been held in New York in September of 2019.²⁷

An increased role in the Indian Ocean for the JMSDF will inevitably lead to deepened Japanese involvement in the South Asian region's India-led multilateral maritime security construct – the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).²⁸ This will ensure Tokyo's participation in the three IONS Working Groups (IWG) – Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), Maritime Security, and Information Sharing and Interoperability IWGs (Figure 1).

As far as the security of Japan's shipping lanes in the western IOR are concerned, the Straits of Hormuz and the Bab-el Mandeb are critical passageways for Japan's energy imports from the Middle East. As mandated by Asao Mihara of the now-defunct Japan Defense Agency (JDA) in the 1980s which exercised central authority over Japanese defense policies, Japan is mandated to defend its sea lanes up to a 1,000 nautical miles from its territorial baselines.²⁹ Japan must consider the defence of sea lanes that are responsible for the carriage of Japan's vital energy imports, in waters well beyond the exclusive economic zone of the island nation and this suggestion was staunchly advocated by Hideo Sekino, a former MSDF Commander, who even suggested the setting up of a maritime safety zone in which commercial Japanese vessels could securely operate.³⁰

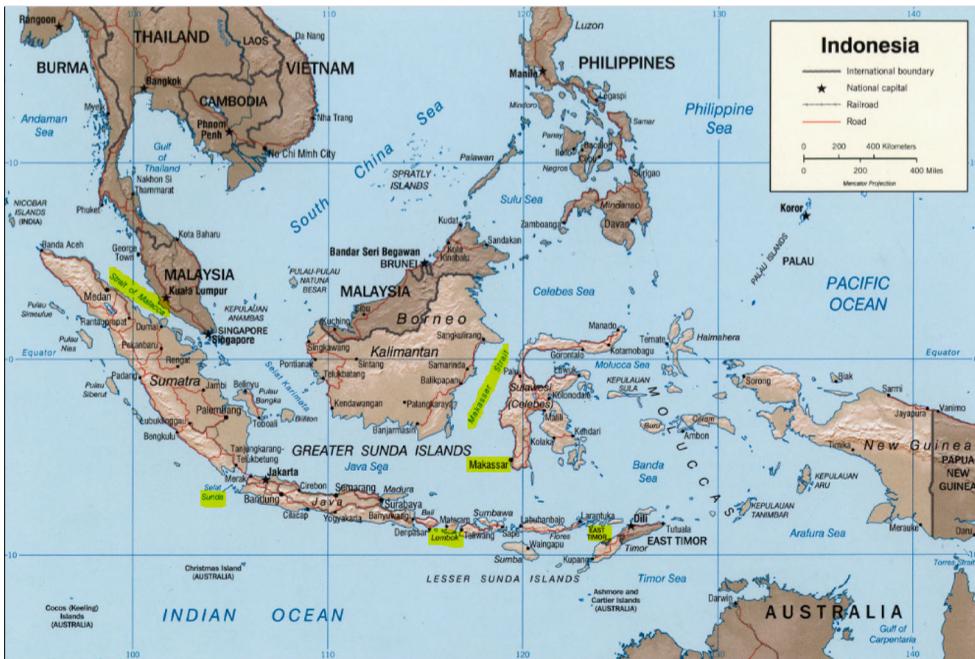


Figure 1. Japan's energy imports traverse through the Straits of Malacca and the three key Indonesian straits of Sunda-Bangka, Lombok-Makassar, and Ombai-Wetar. (three of the four straits have been highlighted in yellow in the figure above, while the Ombai-Wetar straits lie west of East Timor, also highlighted in yellow). Source: Map of Indonesia. Library of Congress, Government of the United States of America. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g8070.ct000982/?r=-0.471,-0.008,1.935,0.846,0>.

Several scholars have endorsed the security of the sea lanes that carry Japanese energy through improving MSDF blue-water capabilities. Japan, an energy-deficient country, is heavily dependent on the region for more than 90 percent of its energy needs. In fiscal 2017, 87 percent of Japan's imported oil was from the Middle East.³¹ In the next year, Japan imported 68 million kilolitres of crude oil from the Middle East.³²

The Indian Ocean is the only viable route for oil transits from the Middle East to Japan, and its security is of the highest priority for the East Asian nation. The joint Japan-India Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) will receive an impetus with increased Japanese focus on the Indian Ocean and South Asian waters, and improved connectivity through the South Asian maritime domain between the continent of Africa and Japan. The security of maritime projects such as the construction of the joint India-Japan East Container Terminal in Colombo's transshipment port will also be considerably aided through MSDF deployments in the Indian Ocean.

Food security as a Japanese imperative in the IOR

The food security of Japan remains a critical concern for the island nation. Japan ranks last in the list of developed countries secure in their production and supply of food. Several Indian Ocean countries produce surplus foods (such as India's production of fish and wheat, the second-highest in the world at 6.7 percent of the world's production³³), which could contribute to improving Japan's food security and boost India's exports to Japan.

Food security is the holistic security of a nation's vital food resources, to meet the optimum caloric intake, the protection and physical security of a nation's food produce, and the implementation of robust and advanced systems that govern aspects such as food safety, food storage, and food longevity.

The scarcity of food in the country has led to Japan relying on Australia, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and several other prosperous countries worldwide to meet its food requirements.

Integral Japanese involvement in the Indian Ocean: A case for more

In 1991, Japan dispatched four minesweepers to the Persian Gulf as part of a mine-clearing mission post the Gulf War. Further, Japan deployed ships to the Indian Ocean in the wake of *Operation Enduring Freedom* to assist US and British vessels operating in the area. These ships were meant to refuel Allied ships in the Indian Ocean, as a precautionary measure against security threats in the maritime domain in the aftermath of 9/11.

Given the economic and military progress of Japan in the international domain, its rapid industrialisation, its advanced Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces (JMSDF), the policies formulated within the country's National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), defence procurements through its Mid-Term Defense Program (MTDP), its security partnerships with the United States (since 1978) following the announcement of the NDPG, Australia, and India, a case for more Japanese involvement is the need of the hour in the fragile security scenarios of the Indian Ocean and its extended region. Increased involvement will also prove to be a critical test of the Maritime Self-Defense Forces' capabilities in the vast maritime expanse of the region. Japan was granted access

to facilities in India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This would afford Japan a strategic presence in the IOR.

Japan has decided to deploy a destroyer and two P-3C surveillance aircrafts to the Persian Gulf along with an escort vessel – an operation outside the aegis of the United States' coalition against Iran. Unilateral involvement and accompanying actions by Japan in the Indian Ocean is demonstrated successfully to a certain degree by the Japanese deployment of anti-piracy vessels off the Horn of Africa since 2009, and have strongly exhibited Japanese potential for involvement in Persian Gulf anti-piracy missions on its own.

The primary reason for initiation of involvement, as per a *Mainichi Daily* editorial,³⁴ is the threat posed by pirates to Japanese commercial vessels and Japan-flagged ships, along with research and survey of the region's critical passageways and tumultuous waters. The present state of relations between Japan and Iran are prosperous, and neighbouring Oman and the United Arab Emirates has also offered the MSDF's Middle Eastern mission access to its ports for strategic purposes.³⁵

While the security dimension continues to remain of immense importance, Japanese involvement in the region in other areas such as investments in ongoing projects and the development of new ones, can potentially rival Chinese endeavours, such as China's 99-year lease of the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota,³⁶ and the country's interest in the Chabahar port in Iran – where Indian investments in the *Shahid Beheshti* terminal (two berths) in the port are to the tune of ₹100 crores (See note 36 above).

Net security provision in the Indian Ocean, a concept envisaged by Anit Mukherjee from Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), which involves capacity building, military diplomacy, military trade, and direct military deployment, would enhance the MSDF's standing substantially.³⁷

Japan can also broaden the scope of naval deployments for exercises in the Indian Ocean with the navies of the South Asian region. Tokyo's *Indo Southeast Asia Deployment* of 2018 (ISEAD18),³⁸ which involved enhancing the operational capabilities and interoperability of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces (JMSDF) vis-à-vis its partner navies, can be expanded to include deployments to other South Asian countries, alongside the Indo-Pacific Deployment (IPD19) of 2019,³⁹ which involved exercises with partner navies from the ASEAN.

The unilateral deployment of the MSDF of the destroyer *JS Takanami* and two P-3C maritime surveillance aircrafts to the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf on a year-long maritime security mission aimed at curbing incidents in the region caused by pirates and irregulars is a step forward, and complements Japan's deployment of its anti-piracy missions to the Gulf of Aden. Japan had announced that it will deploy two MSDF destroyers on rotation⁴⁰ – although not as part of the US-led coalition undertaking regular anti-piracy missions through the 33-nation CTF-151 (Coalition Task Force). It will not, however, participate in an “exercise of force” that may be undertaken in the region by the US military.

The IOR, the Indian Ocean, and South Asia – increasing involvement

Japan's present involvement in the Indian Ocean, by way of bilateral exercises with the region's major influencers, and large-scale investments in Sri Lanka, India, and

Myanmar, are symbols of the importance Japan attaches to the region. It also points towards the cognisance within Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government, which underwent a Cabinet reshuffle last year that resulted in the re-allotment of its defence and foreign ministry portfolios, of the fragile security scenarios prevalent in the region by the world's third-largest economy and its Self-Defence Forces, particularly in the maritime domain.

While Japanese involvement in the extended IOR in comparison to just the countries of the Indian Ocean will require long-term strategizing, its initiatives in the Indian Ocean can continually be scaled up. If Japan is to holistically involve itself in the region, the Abe administration must scrutinise the prevalent security dimensions of South Asia in depth and supplement any official strategizing in the IOR with a coherent strategy for the Indian Ocean's maritime domain, both unilaterally and alongside the major powers operating in this region.

Different strategies for the maritime domains of the IOR (particularly the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal), the Indian Ocean, and South Asia will elicit tailored responses in the wake of a multitude of potential maritime crises that the region is prone to, from countries such as Japan. Devising a distinct Indian Ocean strategy, on the lines of the 2019 declarations of the US Department of Defence's (DoD) enunciation of a security strategy for the Indo-Pacific Region in the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* and the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, will better focus Japan's security imperatives in the South Asian maritime domain.

For Japan, India is an indispensable partner given the strategic bonhomie between the two countries in maritime domain since Prime Minister Modi's ascendancy to power. The elevation of the *Strategic and Global Partnership* to an all-encompassing *Special Strategic and Global Partnership* in 2014⁴¹ with the maritime domain figuring purposefully alongside other areas of cooperation through the Maritime Affairs Dialogue – a dialogue which held its fifth round⁴² – is a robust symbol of the state of relations between the two countries.

Maritime security cooperation, maritime safety, and enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) have all figured in the two countries' 2 + 2 foreign and defense ministerial meetings,⁴³ while the JIMEX and the expanded trilateral naval exercise "MALABAR" continue to remain on a strong footing. Japan is also involved in the Search And Rescue Exercises (SAREX) aimed at improving joint SAR capabilities, organised by India, and held biennially between the two countries.⁴⁴

As a pivotal advocate of free and open oceans (well referenced in Prime Minister Abe's "*Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy*" announced in 2016⁴⁵ at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development-VI), freedom of navigation (FoN) in international waters, the United Nations Convention on the Law Of the Sea (UNCLOS)-mandated rule of law in the high seas, Japan's responsibilities (and accompanying actions) in the global maritime domain are in need of augmentation. *The Strategy*, which has now assumed the role of a vision, is the embodiment of Japan's approach to the Indo-Pacific.

Successive defence white papers have stressed upon evolving security relations between Japan and India, as also have highlighted Japan's long-term security partnership with the United States. The 2019 *Defense of Japan*, released by the Ministry of Defence (MOD), mentions New Delhi as a strategic partner in the Indian Ocean, given the two countries'

converging interests and India's increasing economic and security mettle in its neighbouring waters.

With the *Defense White Paper* having expressed concern over Chinese intentions in the Indian Ocean in particular and highlighted China as the major threat to Japanese national security⁴⁶ ahead of the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK), an increased role in South Asia and its tumultuous waters, hence, appears inevitable.

The writer is a Research Associate at the National Maritime Foundation, and researches on issues related to the maritime domains of Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the ASEAN.

The views and opinions expressed above are entirely his own, and all references to data have been factually double-checked for accuracy with their sources mentioned below.

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