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The Role of Japan–India–Sri Lanka Maritime Security Cooperation in the Trump Era

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ABSTRACT
This paper focuses on the importance of Japan–India–Sri Lanka cooperation in the Trump era. Japan's security policy gains even greater salience after Donald Trump's victory in the US Presidential elections. Although President Trump has promised to enhance US military might, the US' influence as a security provider has been declining. The Trump administration may also need time to re-establish a security policy and to evaluate its influence effectively. US allies and friendly countries now require a new security framework to adjust to the situation, one which seems to be emerging. This framework is a security network of numerous bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral, and other multilateral cooperative relationships among US allies and friendly countries. Under this new system, Japan–India–Sri Lanka cooperation has an important role. In the new security order, there is a high probability that India will be the most influential sea power in the Indian Ocean. The strategic location of Sri Lanka has a significant influence on the security of the entire Indo-Pacific. To gainfully obtain its support, Japan and India need to find out what kind of support Sri Lanka needs, for which the Japan–India–Sri Lanka Trilateral Strategic Dialogue will be the best structural mechanism.

Introduction

In January 2017, Japan's Prime Minister (PM) Shinzo Abe visited the Philippines, Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam. To bolster regional defense and security, he emphasised that changing the status quo by force was not acceptable. He underscored the importance of rule-based approaches, simultaneously highlighting the need for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy"[1]. These were the main themes of this visit.

In fact, this visit was not related directly to the outcome of the US presidential election, but was extremely important in the context of Donald Trump's victory therein. During the election campaign, he demanded that US allies share a heavier burden of the security proffered by the US. In this respect, Abe's visit in January reflected on this subject and presented a fixed response.

Under PM Abe, Japan has also promoted maritime cooperation with littoral countries of the Indian Ocean. Together with the Pacific, the Indian Ocean is also a core area of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy".

This article therefore analyses Japan's maritime security policy by using PM Abe's visit as an example. The basic outline of the article is mapped through three questions, i.e. What

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security activities has Japan initiated, why has Japan attempted to assume a greater security burden, and how is Japan's new security policy related to the Indian Ocean?

What Security Activities Has Japan Initiated?

Currently, Japan has assumed a two-pronged strategy in the regional security canvas. Firstly, it has enhanced security cooperation with other US allies and friendly countries. Australia, the UK and France have a long record as US allies. Japan has cooperated actively with these countries by sharing information, holding joint exercises, and by developing and producing defense equipment jointly. For example, during PM Abe's visit in January, Japan and Australia signed a new Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, which will facilitate mutual logistical support, including materials and ammunition for joint exercises, United States Peace Keeping Operation (UNPKO), etc. Japan is also planning to export P-1 indigenous patrol planes to New Zealand. In 2014, Japan started a joint Air-to-Air Missile development project with the UK. Last October, for the first time ever, Japan and the UK held joint air combat exercises. Japan and France are also negotiating joint arms development projects.

Secondly, Japan is building capacities of the defense forces in Southeast Asia. For instance, when the Malaysian airplane MH 370 was lost in 2014, coastal countries were unaware of the plane's whereabouts because they had insufficient radar systems to detect it. To resolve that situation, they needed radar and sensor systems, and to address such situations by dispatching planes and ships. During PM Abe's visit to Vietnam in January, Japan decided to donate six newly built patrol vessels. Japan has already donated patrol vessels to Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia. Donating and exporting defense equipment are effective means of promoting long-term relations as the recipients need training and maintenance support for a considerable period of time.

Why Has Japan Tried to Assume a Greater Security Burden?

A salient feature of the new evolving security landscape is the changing US–China military balance. For example, during 2000–2015, the US commissioned 13 new submarines, while during the same period, China commissioned at least 42. Although it is expected that the US would prevail if war should break out, it is also true that US military influence has been declining gradually.

In addition, from the second term of Barack Obama's administration to the new Trump administration, the relative influence of US military power has continued to decline. Despite US failure to deter Russian actions in Crimea, Ukraine and Syria, it is expected that the new US government will seek cooperation with Russia. From the perspective of countries such as Ukraine and Moldova, which rely on the US, the US is likely to abandon them. For that reason, Moldova is seeking negotiations with Russia.

As a result of the uncertainty in US foreign policy, its allies and friendly countries in the Indo-Pacific view the future with some anxiety. The US has not been able to dissuade China from building artificial islands in the South China Sea. US allies and friendly countries including the Philippines and Vietnam are concerned about the possibility that the US may strike a deal with China and abandon their interests.

Although President Trump promises to increase the number of warships and fighter jets to "make America great again", the US' influence as a security provider has been

declining. US allies and friendly countries now require a new security framework to adjust to the situation.

Since the Obama administration, a new security framework has emerged. For a long time, bilateral alliances led by the US, such as Japan–US, US–Australia, US–Philippines, and US–South Korea, have maintained order in the Indo-Pacific as an "old" security framework resembling a "hub and spoke system". In this system, a deep defense relation is lacking among the allies. For example, both Japan and Australia are US allies, but they share no close security relations. Under this system, US allies and friendly countries are heavily dependent on US military power. US influence is declining. Therefore, the reliability of the entire security framework is declining.

Consequently, a new security framework has emerged. This framework is a security network of numerous bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral, and other multilateral cooperative relationships among US allies and friendly countries. This includes not only US-led cooperation such as Japan–US–Australia, Japan–India–US and Japan–India–US–Australia, but also Japan–India–Australia and India–Australia–Indonesia, which do not include the US (see Figure 1).

This new security framework presents several strong points of marked benefit. Firstly, because this system is not heavily dependent on US influence, the adverse impact of declining US influence will be minimal. Secondly, because this system includes India and Southeast Asian countries that have rising influence, the security framework can maintain sufficient power for a long time. Furthermore, a multilateral system demands that countries adopt a rule-based approach. For that reason, if China and Russia act

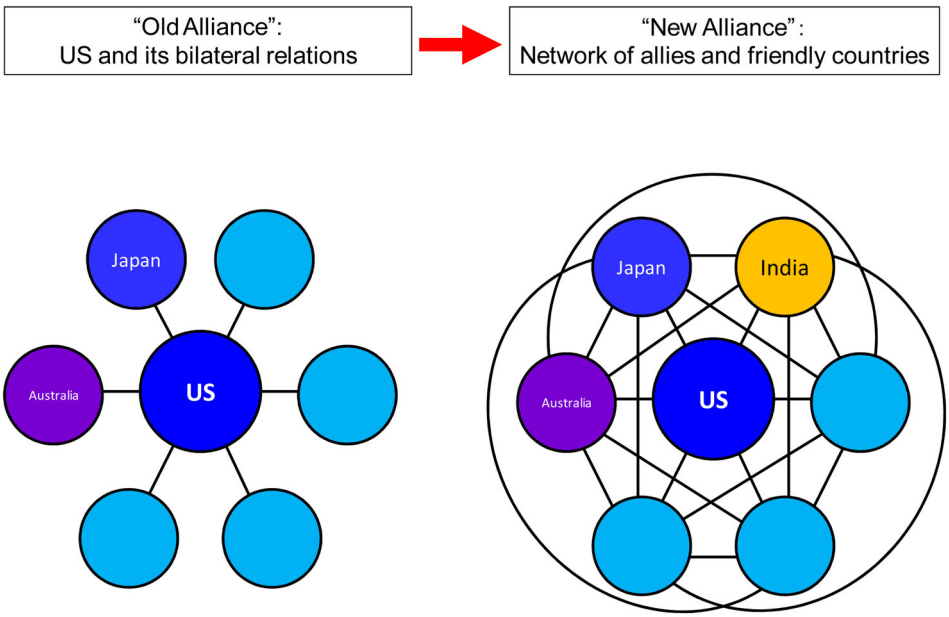

Fig. 1. "Old" and "New" Security Frameworks.
Source: Satoru Nagao, "The Japan–India–Australia 'Alliance' as Key Agreement in the Indo-Pacific", *ISPSW Publication* September 2015, Issue No. 375 (Berlin: The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy [ISPSW]), http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?en&id=193713 (accessed 23 September 2015).

responsibly under the agreed set of rules, they might be allowed to integrate into this framework. Therefore, the new security framework offers the important possibility of reducing tensions in this region.

How Is Japan's New Security Policy Related to the Indian Ocean?

The main factor is that Japan–India–Sri Lanka cooperation serves an important role in the new security network system. Japan has been actively promoting maritime security cooperation with India. Japan and India have held joint exercises such as the Japan–India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) and Japan–India–US Malabar Exercises. Japan has also participated in the Indian Ocean Rim Association and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium.

Japan's foreign policy towards Sri Lanka is also a new wave. Although Japan has been a stable supporter of Sri Lankan development for a long time, there has been little change effected until now, as far as maritime security is concerned. Nevertheless, Japan now regards Sri Lanka as an important partner in maritime security. Vessels of the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force called at Sri Lankan ports 22 times in the period April 2011–June 2016. Japan and Sri Lanka have progressed the Project for Maritime Safety Capability Improvement (worth approximately 1.8 billion yen), that includes the provision of two patrol vessels.[2] An analysis of three related points is presented next.

Why Is India Important?

The role of India is extremely important because of the likelihood that India will be the most influential sea power to fill the power vacuum in the Indian Ocean Region in the near future. Six factors were highlighted by Alfred Thayer Mahan, who analysed Britain's preponderant sea power: (1) "Geographical Position", (2) "Physical Conformation (especially, the length of coast line)", (3) "Extent of Territory (especially the balance between the extent of coastal line and military defence resources)", (4) "Size of Population (for working at sea)", (5) "Character of the People", and 6) "Character of the Government".[3]

India occupies an advantageous "geographical position" because of its location in the centre of the Indian Ocean. Consequently, it has maritime access to Southeast Asia, and the Middle East and East Africa. The history of Cholas, located in Southern India, includes an expedition to Southeast Asia in the 11th century, which underscores the geographical advantage held by India alone. India has a "physical conformation" because it has 7517 km of coastline (mainland only, 6100 km). Furthermore, the Indian Navy is the only strong maritime force in the Indian Ocean Region, meaning that India has sufficient "extent of territory". India is planning to increase its warships from 139 to 212 including three aircraft carrier battle groups and nine nuclear submarines.[4] India also has the sixth largest seagoing population, with 55,000 sailors employed on various merchant ships flying different flags. Consequently, India also satisfies the condition of "size of population" dependent on the sea. Based on the maritime history of India, the "character of the people", especially in peninsular India, is oriented towards the seas.. Recent emphasis on maritime development in India, together with the fact that the navy share of India's defence budget has increased from 12.7% in 1990 to 15.8% in 2015, points to a favourable "character of government" as well.

However, India will no longer be held trustworthy by Japan and the US if it too chooses to challenges the status quo and disturb stability in the region, as China has done. However, India has displayed a markedly more responsible attitude than China. For instance, the Permanent Court of Arbitration rejected China's ownership claim in 2016, but China has not accepted the verdict. In India's case, India accepted a United Nations tribunal ruling in favour of Bangladesh, on the India–Bangladesh sea boundary dispute in 2014.

As a result, it seems that Japan and the US would want India to play a more positive role in the Indian Ocean. India's rise helps reduce the burden of Japan and the US in the Indian Ocean and helps them to focus naval and air military resources in areas around Japan and the South China Sea.

Why Is Sri Lanka Important?

The role of Sri Lanka in Japan's maritime security calculus is noted clearly in a joint statement issued when Japan's Prime Minister visited Sri Lanka in 2014. The joint statement read: "the two leaders noted the strategic geographical location of Sri Lanka, in the Indian Ocean sea lanes straddling Asia and Africa".[5] It is therefore quite obvious that "strategic location" is an important consideration that has found mention here.

Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) has felt the effects of its geographical location throughout its history. Because of its location, Portugal, the Netherlands and the UK colonised the islands. For the same reason, then-Chinese Premier Zheng came to Sri Lanka on route to his visit to Africa. During World War I, Japan escorted convoys passing between Sri Lanka and Australia. All this highlights the importance of Sri Lanka's location to safeguard the sea lines of communication (SLOC) in this region. During World War II, a Japanese aircraft carrier battle group attacked British naval warships including aircraft carriers around Sri Lanka, to prevent British naval fleets from attacking Japan's interests in the Pacific. These historical observations demonstrate that the location of Sri Lanka is also connected closely to the security of the Pacific. One reason why India dispatched its Indian Peace Keeping Force to the island country is because of India's apprehensions that the United States might use Sri Lanka as a naval base at that time.[6] For anti-piracy measures near the coast of Somalia, private security guards embark and disembark the ships off Sri Lanka, because of its convenient location.

Because of this location, it seems that Sri Lanka faces one important dilemma. Currently, China is building a port there. Furthermore, Chinese submarines visit Sri Lanka because of its important location as a naval base. However, from India's perspective, Chinese activities in Sri Lanka represent an encirclement strategy limiting India's influence in the Indian Ocean. In addition, China has difficulties with other countries around it, including Japan. Although receiving China's support is economically beneficial for Sri Lanka, receiving this support has created new difficulties with India and other countries including Japan, strategically.

What Is the Role of Japan–India–Sri Lanka Maritime Security Cooperation?

What can Japan–India–Sri Lanka do? There are at least three recommendations. Firstly, as Sri Lanka is increasingly accepting Chinese support, they should also emphasise co-operation with India.

Secondly, India and Sri Lanka should enhance security co-operation with other countries that are friendly to India. India has not been able to provide the extent of support that Sri Lanka needs. Furthermore, because of the ethnic Tamil (Sri Lanka)–Tamil (India) connection, Sri Lanka has been concerned about India's intervention in its domestic issues. To maintain its independence, Sri Lanka has great motivation to co-operate with other countries. Consequently, Japan has an important role. Japan has also been a stable supporter of Sri Lanka for years. Furthermore, Japan has a strong political will to support India's rise. If Japan and India collaborate, then the two countries can support Sri Lanka more effectively. For example, if Japan and India collaborate to establish a maritime communication network system in Sri Lanka that would span the entire Indian Ocean, it would be easy for the three countries to be aware of what occurs in the Indian Ocean. Further, Sri Lanka is seeking six of Japan's used P-3C patrol planes now. This will give Japan–India–Sri Lanka cooperation another dimension as the P-3C aircraft is an effective platform to enhance situational awareness. Compared with other military platforms such as the China–Pakistan-made JF-17 fighter jets, this will not limit India's naval activities. In addition, because both India's P-8A patrol plane and the Japanese P-3C are made in US, Japan–India–US–Sri Lanka can share best practices on the exploitation of these platforms. Thus, this is a good chance to enhance Japan–India–Sri Lanka maritime cooperation. By exploiting this opportunity, Japan–India–Sri Lanka should establish maritime and air information sharing systems in the Indian Ocean to enhance situation awareness. These collaborative projects are preferable to accepting China's support, which would create strategic difficulties. Therefore, under Japan–India–Sri Lanka cooperation, a win–win–win situation can be created.

Thirdly, to achieve this goal, what kind of systems ought to be established? The joint statement referred to "the first round of the Policy Dialogue at the senior official level of the two Foreign Ministries and the inaugural Sri Lanka–Japan Dialogue on Maritime Security, Safety and Oceanic Issues in January 2016 in Colombo, where the two maritime states reconfirmed the importance of maintaining the freedom of the high seas and maritime order based on the rule of law".[7] It will be useful if such dialogue will promote a more practical Japan–India–Sri Lanka strategic trilateral dialogue. Through such dialogue, both Japan and India can share information, better identify Sri Lankan needs, and choose courses of cooperation or support. Furthermore, the possibility exists that the network of these trilateral security initiatives would culminate in and contribute to Indian initiatives including the Indian Ocean Rim Association and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium as a collective security system in the near future.

Conclusion

To summarise the salient points of the article, from the second term of the Obama administration and into the new Trump administration, US influence has been somewhat declining. The possibility exists that the Trump administration may need more time to re-establish a security policy and show its influence effectively. During this transitionary period, Japan's role has vital importance. Japan should allay the concerns of US-supported Asian countries. Since the Obama administration, a new security framework has emerged. Under this new system, Japan–India–Sri Lanka cooperation has an important role. Now is the best time to promote such a trilateral partnership.

Notes on Contributor

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Notes

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