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To cite this article: Ulupi Borah (2020) The South China Sea dispute: Will it impact Japan's security policy?, *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, 16:1, 6-29, DOI: [10.1080/09733159.2020.1785033](https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2020.1785033)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2020.1785033>



Published online: 09 Jul 2020.



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# The South China Sea dispute: Will it impact Japan's security policy?

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## ABSTRACT

Japan is heavily dependent on the Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs) of the South China Sea for its external trade including the critical energy imports from the Persian Gulf region. Any kind of instability or disruption over the contested waters will have an adverse effect on Japan's trade and economy. The increasingly assertive actions of Beijing, especially the military buildup have raised concerns in Tokyo as it might eventually lead to the strategic control of the SLOCs. Thus, developments in the South China Sea are a major reason why Japan has brought about several changes to its defence and security policies. This paper will explore how Chinese assertions in the South China Sea have encouraged Japan to steadily revise its security policies in a more fundamental way since the end of World War II.

## KEYWORDS

South China Sea; Sea lanes of communication (SLOCs); Japan; security legislation; military modernisation; offensive capabilities

## Introduction

Japan which has almost no natural resources and is totally dependent on energy imports via the sea route is highly concerned with the changing Robert Kaplan has described the South China Sea as the economic tissue of the region acting as the connecting lane of the Western Pacific and the Indian Oceans.<sup>1</sup> Further countries such as India and China, which were earlier continental powers are today investing in their maritime prowess realising the inherent potential of the resources available in the maritime domain.

dynamics of the South China Sea. Therefore, Japan has realised that there is no escaping the need for augmenting its sea power to play a bigger role than to remain in the shadows of the U.S. Under the changing circumstances, Japan too is shedding its post-war pacifism and reviewing its constitution, which would facilitate enhancement of the role of its Japanese Self Defense Forces (JSDF).

The paper focuses on how the changed security dynamics due to the dredging activities as well as creation of artificial islands in the South China Sea by an economically and militarily strong China has impacted Japan's security perceptions. It will critically examine some of Japan's responses arising from the rapidly changing geo-political, geo-strategic and geo-economic situation in the region. Its endeavours to enter into security partnership with its neighbouring countries apart from its ally, the U.S. including investment in offensive maritime platforms in order to enhance its defense capacities will also be examined in this paper.

## Japan's strategic culture in the formation of its security policies

The historical background of Japan's strategic culture has been mostly shaped by the fact that Japan is an island nation and it isn't rich in natural resources. This makes Japan dependent mostly on its maritime trade to import energy, natural gas and many raw materials. Thus, three basic phases characterised Japan's strategic culture. First, until 1850s Japan was an isolationist and a non-military state. It didn't open up to the international system until the United States and European powers wanted it to do so. This phase forced Japan to sow the seeds of Japanese imperialism and in 1895 it started with the island now called Taiwan. Later Japan annexed the Korean Peninsula in 1910.

Japan looked beyond and aspired to extend its control till China and towards Oceania by 1942. The second phase of Japan's strategic culture was mostly about obtaining advanced technology and military power. The third phase was followed by its defeat in the World War II. This was the phase when Japan followed the principle of anti-militarism. They developed military alliance with the U.S. and focused on portraying itself as a "peace loving contributor" to the international community.

Later, Japan's Ministries for Defense and Foreign Affairs worked together on the formation of the Japan's Self Defense Force. This post war military force was expected to be involved only in defensive and not in offensive activities. However, the third phase of Japan's strategic culture faced changes in the international security environment. Changes were observed in the domestic political environment as well in the 1990s. This idea of an evolving security policy under a changing strategic culture gained salience under the leadership of Prime Minister Jun'ichiro Koizumi (2001–2006).<sup>2</sup> Later, with Shinzo Abe coming into power in 2012 (his second tenure), the changes in security policy were intensified with a shift in its strategic culture. Thus, Macmillan, Booth and Trood have defined strategic culture as

a distinctive and lasting set of beliefs, values and habits regarding the threat and use of force, which have their roots in such fundamental influences as geopolitical setting, history and political culture.<sup>3</sup>

Analysts and researchers have observed that Japan's strategic culture is on the verge of seeing a fourth phase with a broader security identity. But this evolution may not be up to expectation mostly due to institutionalised anti-militarism. With the interaction of various elite "subcultures" arose a new question among them as to whose beliefs would be more dominant. This had been a common question in most of the democratic countries including South Korea, Australia and the United States along with Japan.

This was soon followed by both narratives and counter-narratives. Although positive viewpoints had been considered, two counter-narratives emerged. The first set of counter narrative was led by political actors such as Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, big officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense including many Americans who had been a part of the Japan-U.S. alliance. They believed that anti-militarism would create hindrances in the formation of security co-operation both at the regional and international level.

They emphasised on the formation of a strategic culture, which would be more militarily active. The second counter narrative appreciated Shinzo Abe and the nationalists for their ideas about representing an active military culture in Japan. However, this narrative

of an active military culture could escalate conflicts disturbing the peace and stability of the region. In the process the Abe government had to face several challenges including the ones in the Diet. Although the role of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau was to provide legal suggestions and advice during the formation of a legislation, the body's 2008 interpretation challenged Abe's agenda. It clearly stated:

International law permits a state to have the right of collective self-defense, which is the right to use force to stop an armed attack on a foreign country with which the state has close relations, even if the state itself is not under direct attack. Since Japan is a sovereign state, it naturally has the right of collective self-defense under international law. Nevertheless, the Japanese government believes that the exercise of the right of collective self-defense exceeds the limit on self-defense authorized under Article 9 of the Constitution and is not permissible.<sup>4</sup>

Despite facing challenges in the Diet, the Abe administration strove to bring changes in its security policies. Although the 11th September attack on U.S. in 2001, North Korea and its nuclear capabilities were the major factors behind modernising Japan's security approaches. But the South China Sea dispute gave a new dimension to Japan's security outlook because the developments in the water body were made by China.

China is a country with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) three times more than Japan. China's military development and the advanced technologies it is introducing to its security sphere is notable. As an economic and military power, China is capable of initiating any kind of offensive activities in the water body by breaching the international laws. For example, China rejected the ruling of the International Court of Arbitration, which was in favour of Philippines in 2016. Apart from this, unlike the East China Sea and the Senkaku islands, the South China Sea has more economic salience for Japan. Japan's maritime trade is heavily dependent on the SLOCs of the South China Sea. Thus, any sort of suffocation in these routes will have an adverse effect on the Japanese economy.

### **The geo-strategic and geo-economic significance of the South China Sea**

According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) reports of 2018, the global sea borne trade has seen an upswing of 4 per cent in 2017. It is the fastest growth rate within a period of five years and surged the global maritime trade. The total volume of trade commodities traversing the seas has reached 10.7 billion tons. UNCTAD reports an increase of 4 per cent in 2018 and the annual growth rate is expected to increase by 3.8 per cent by 2023.

With increasing sea borne trade, shipping industries have gained momentum out of which 90 per cent of the ship building activities have occurred in China, Japan and the Republic of Korea.<sup>5</sup> Such a boost in the global maritime trade makes the SLOCs of the South China Sea critical. UNCTAD estimates that approximately 60 per cent of this global maritime trade traverses through Asia with the South China Sea carrying one third of it.

China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are all dependent on the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait, which by extension connects the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.<sup>6</sup> It has been estimated that 60 per cent of the Chinese trade occurs at the sea, making its economic security closely dependent on the South China Sea. In 2016, \$240 billion

Japanese trade happened on the South China Sea. This contributed 19.1 per cent of all trade in goods.<sup>7</sup>

The huge collection of trade commodities flowing through the Malacca Strait makes it a strategic chokepoint and it has been estimated that approximately \$5.3 trillion worth of goods transit the South China Sea annually. However, China Power reports that in 2016, approximately \$ 3.4 trillion worth of goods passed through the South China Sea making it critical for global maritime trade.<sup>8</sup>

Table 1 shows that China has the highest amount of trade passing through the South China Sea followed by Japan. Thus, any kind of disruption in the SLOCs could adversely affect Japan's economy. A week long closure of the SLOCs in the region could lead to an additional shipping cost of approximately \$64.5 million.<sup>9</sup>

South China Sea also has rich oil reserves of approximately seven billion barrels and 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and fisheries. Chinese sources claim that the South China Sea can become "the second Persian Gulf" considering its capacity to yield approximately 130 billion barrels of oil. If these estimates are to be considered correct, then South China Sea will contain more oil than any other part of the world except Saudi Arabia.

The South China Sea also has more than two hundred islands, rocks, coral reefs out of which nearly three dozen of them are permanently above water making it geo-strategically important. It is also home to 3000 migratory and indigenous species of fish along with the richest reef systems of the world. The South China Sea comprises 12 per cent of the total global fish catch, which has been 10–12 million tons per year for decades.

### Japan's interests in the South China Sea

Since the late nineteenth century, Japan had been mostly dependent on maritime trade. Post war maritime trade mostly contributed towards Japan being recognised as an economic power house. However, Japan had been following an American written constitution after the World War 2 which constrained her from engaging in any war or use of military capabilities. This led to the formation of the Japan-U.S. alliance. Meanwhile Japan's economy reached its peak in the 1970s and protecting the sea lanes for its maritime trade became a major focus.

The Ministry of Defense of Japan began to publish an annual white report titled *Defense of Japan* (DOJ). The DOJ described the significance of the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) and its protection.<sup>10</sup> In the late 1970s Japan and U.S. signed maritime agreements to cooperate each other in protecting the lanes of the Indian Ocean and the adjacent waters. The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation, 1978 stated:

The Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) and U.S. Navy will jointly conduct maritime operations for the defense of surrounding waters and the protection of sea lines of

**Table 1.** Value and per cent of the trade passing through the South China Sea in 2016.

Country	Trade value through South China Sea (USD billions)	South China Sea trade as % of all trade in goods
United States	208	5.72
China	1470	39.5
Japan	240	19.1
India	189	30.6

Source: CSIS China Power Project 2016 International Monetary Fund. <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/#easy-footnote-bottom-1-3073> accessed on June 21, 2019.

**Table 2.** Carrying capacity by type of ship.

(Thousands DWT)	2005	2010	2015	2018
Total fleet	16,013.0	17,707.2	30,670.1	37,536.1
Oil tankers	5504.0	5028.5	6681.6	10,141.4
Bulk carriers	6757.0	6607.9	17,609.9	19,627.7
General cargo	2133.0	2491.2	2655.0	2787.4
Container ships	474.0	123.9	124.3	805.2
Other types of ships	1145.0	3455.7	3599.3	4174.4

Source: Data released by United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/CountryProfile/MaritimeProfile/en-GB/392/index.html> accessed on June–July 13, 2019.

communication ... U.S. Naval Forces will support MSDF operations and conduct operations, including those which may involve the use of task forces providing additional mobility and strike power, with the objective of repelling enemy force [...] the JSDF and U.S. Forces will provide necessary support for each other's forces in various activities related to operations, such as intelligence, logistics, etc.<sup>11</sup>

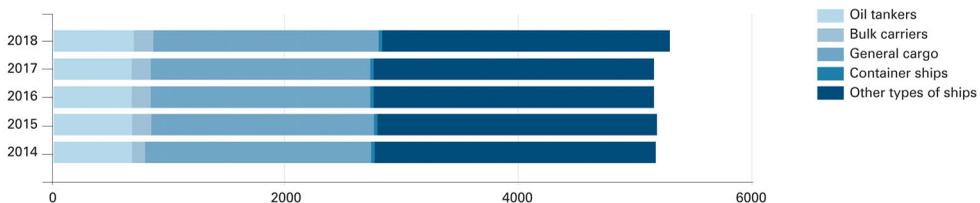
Thus, it can be observed that Japan enhanced its interests in the South China Sea. However, its interests in the water body were manifold in character. They can be discussed under the following heads:

*Energy security and the SLOCs:* Japan has a very limited natural resources and approximately 80 per cent of its oil comes from the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Iran and Russia contribute to a huge amount of the Japanese oil imports. Apart from the oil imports, approximately 70 per cent of Japanese trade with South Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe, Central Asia and Africa is dependent on these SLOCs.

Any disruption in these SLOCs due to strife between the claimant countries of the South China Sea or control by any single dominant power will have severe implications on the Japanese trade. Thus, it has become a 'national security concern' for Japan to protect these SLOC.<sup>12</sup>

Table 2 shows the amount of goods by thousands DWT (deadweight tonnage) carried by the different types of Japanese commercial ships, which pass through the SLOCs of this region. It shows the increase in the carrying capacity of the total number of fleets from 2005 to 2015 from 16,013.0 thousand DWT to 37,536.1 thousand DWT. The highest increase in carrying capacity has been observed in the oil tankers and the bulk carriers. This implies that huge amounts of oil traversed Japan through the sea lanes.

Figure 1 shows the number of ships passing through the region from 2014 to 2018. The number of ships carrying oil, cargo and other commodities are in thousands. This reveals Japan's dependency on the SLOCs. Any blockage to the SLOCs could affect the free flow of Japanese trade.

**Figure 1.** Fleet by type of ship (*Number of ships*).

Source: Data released by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2018. <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/CountryProfile/MaritimeProfile/en-GB/392/index.html> accessed on July 13, 2019.

*South China Sea in the context of the “confluence of the two seas”*: The South China links the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean which, elevates the maritime connectivity between the East Asian countries. The elevation of maritime connectivity can enhance the industrial and commercial dynamism of the region. Japan has been keen on boosting its economic connections with Southeast Asian countries. Hence, strengthening maritime connectivity is an integral part of its foreign policy.<sup>13</sup>

In 2007, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe gave a speech on the “Confluence of the Two Seas” at the Parliament of the Republic of India. His speech highlighted the dynamism of the Pacific and the Indian Oceans. Along with dynamism he emphasised on the transparency of the seas. He stated:

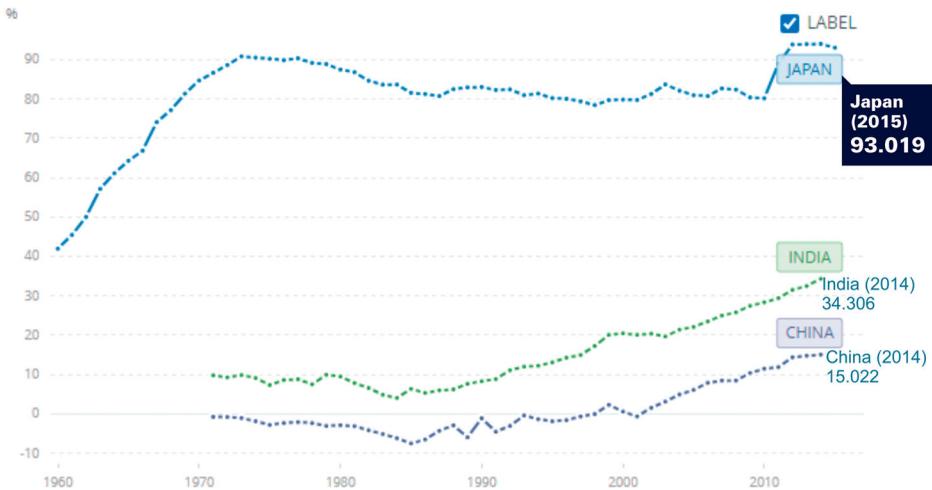
By Japan and India coming together in this way, this ‘broader Asia’ will evolve into an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the United States of America and Australia. Open and transparent, this network will allow people, goods, capital, and knowledge to flow freely ... Now, as this new ‘broader Asia’ takes shape at the confluence of the two seas of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, I feel that it is imperative that the democratic nations located at opposite edges of these seas deepen the friendship among their citizens at every possible level.<sup>14</sup>

However, in the twenty first century Chinese developments in the South China Sea became rampant. In 2007, Abe spoke about transparency in the seas in the context of a “broader Asia”, which would mean that any instability in any water body of the region would have a direct impact on the entire region. The South China Sea held a critical position in the region due to its economic salience. Since Japan is heavily dependent on maritime trade, a huge per cent of its trade traverses through the Malacca Strait, which connects the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean before entering the South China Sea. [Figure 2](#) shows how Japan is heavily dependent on energy imports. The figure has revealed the World Bank data in per cent of the energy imported by the three countries China, Japan and India in 2015 and 2014. Japan showed the highest dependency per cent on the energy imports. This shows that 90 per cent of the Japanese maritime trade traverses through the SLOCs of the South China Sea.<sup>15</sup>

*Geostrategic significance*: The maritime routes of the South China Sea offer naval forces of the region an area to carry out military drills, joint exercises, etc. The Woody Island, Fiery Cross and Sanya in the South China Sea have major strategic importance. Thus, Japan can be seen relating the East China Sea with the South China Sea and believes that the Chinese existence in the South China Sea can change the status quo of the region. This could have a direct impact on the Japanese interests in the East China Sea.<sup>16</sup> In 1992, China made an effort to systemise its claims in the South China Sea implied by the nine-dotted line and passed its “Law on Territorial Waters and Contiguous Areas”. Article 2 of the law stated:

The PRC’s territorial land includes the mainland and its offshore islands, Taiwan and the various affiliated islands including Diaoyu Island, Penghu Islands, Dongsha Islands, Xisha Islands, Nansha (Spratly) Islands and other islands that belong to the People’s Republic of China. The PRC’s internal waters refer to the waters along the baseline of the territorial sea facing the land.<sup>17</sup>

This clearly propounded China’s sovereignty over four islands and reef groups in the South China Sea including the Senkaku/ Diaoyu islands. Controlling the water body could also



**Figure 2.** Energy imports of Japan, China and India in 2014 and 2015.

Source: World Bank Data Resource, 2009, URL: [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.IMP.CON.SZ?end=2015&locations=JP-IN-CN&start=1960&type=shaded&view=chart&year\\_high\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.IMP.CON.SZ?end=2015&locations=JP-IN-CN&start=1960&type=shaded&view=chart&year_high_desc=false).

provide military deterrence for China in the maritime domain. This perturbed Japan and made it believe that rising tensions in the South China Sea can risk its maritime interests.

*The International laws:* Japan's interests also adhere to respecting the international laws, particularly the UN Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS) and the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, which is a global common. Although Japan has a land area, which is approximately 380,000 square kilometres but its territorial waters encompasses an area of 430,000 square kilometres and an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 4.05 million square kilometres. To protect this extensive maritime domain, Japan is mostly dependent on international laws.

Although Japan has its coast guards and the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force, their power is limited by their pacifist constitution. Therefore, to prevent any third party intrusion or encroachment on its territorial water and distortion of its maritime rights, Japan relies on the international laws. In 1996, Japan manifested its support by proactively signing and ratifying the UNCLOS.<sup>18</sup> Both its Preamble and Article 9 express principles of pacifism. The Preamble of the Constitution proclaims,

We, the Japanese people ... resolved that never again shall we be visited with the horrors of war through the action of government ... We ... desire peace for all time ... and we have determined to preserve our security and existence, trusting in the justice and faith of the peace-loving peoples of the world.<sup>19</sup>

### China's assertiveness in the South China Sea impacts Japan's security policies

Although several factors are involved in changing the security policies of Japan, developments happening in the South China Sea concerns Japan the most. There are several reasons behind this concern which have been discussed below:

- China's Interests in the South China Sea
  - (a) *Increasing demand for energy*: After Deng Xiaoping initiated the “open door policy”, China opened up its economy and the demand for energy increased. With her inland oil reserves in Daqing becoming insufficient, China started searching for an alternative. According to the U.S. Energy Information Agency reports, the South China Sea holds 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, which is sufficient to meet the energy demands of China for more than two and a half decades. It has been estimated that Chinese oil reserves account for only 1.1 per cent of the total world oil reserves. On the other, the Chinese consumption of oil is over 10 per cent of the world oil production and over 20 per cent of all the energy consumed on the planet.<sup>20</sup>
  - (b) *Increasing demand for fisheries*: China has already overfished in its coastal waters, which has already led to a decline of its marine population. Therefore, Chinese fishing vessels look beyond its coastal waters and is advancing far south closer to the territorial waters of Indonesia.<sup>21</sup>
  - (c) *China's increasing trade and the SLOCs*: In 2016, approximately 40 per cent of the Chinese trade transited through South China to Southeast Asia, South Asia, Europe and West Asia.<sup>22</sup> According to the UNCTAD reports, in 2017 the fastest growth rates in exports (6.7 per cent) and imports (9.6 per cent) were recorded in Asia. China alone recorded half of the sea-borne trade growth in the region in that particular year.<sup>23</sup> China's “one belt one road” initiative is a revival of its ancient maritime trade connectivity with Southeast Asia making the SLOCs of the South China Sea critical.<sup>24</sup>

*Chinese Activities in the South China Sea*: The Chinese claims over the South China Sea dates back to 1951 immediately after the signing of the San Francisco Treaty. In 1974, China occupied the Paracels but this occupation was considered a regional issue then and was only between China and Vietnam. In 1984, China initiated a major naval exercise to occupy Spratlys which involved the circumnavigation of islands occupied by the Vietnamese. In 1986, China repeated the same till James Shoal (near Sabah). In 1988, China once again attacked the Vietnamese forces on Johnson South Reef and alarmed the ASEAN nations for the first time about Chinese actions.

The 1995 Chinese occupation in the Philippines-claimed Mischief Reef raised concern for the international community.<sup>25</sup> In spite of the several strikes it made, China's 2000 Defence White Paper stated:

However, in today's world, factors that may cause instability and uncertainty have markedly increased ... Certain big powers are pursuing 'neo-interventionism, neo-gunboat policy' and neo-economic colonialism, which are seriously damaging the sovereignty, independence and developmental interests of many countries, and threatening world peace and security.<sup>26</sup>

U.S. was the major concern behind all its apprehensions. Therefore, the 2000 Defence White Paper of China also stated:

There are new negative developments in the security of the Asia-Pacific region. The United States is further strengthening its military presence and bilateral military alliances in this region ... Encroachments on China's sovereignty and interests in the South China Sea are not infrequent, and some extra-regional countries are attempting to interfere in this issue.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the Chinese actions can be categorised in the following paragraphs:

- (a) *Sovereignty claims over the disputed waters*: Although China signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DoC) in 2002 with ASEAN nations to maintain peace, stability and co-operation, tensions started rising again in 2009. This involved enhancing naval patrols in the disputed waters and subduing the foreign oil companies that tried to initiate oil exploration activities in the South China Sea.<sup>28</sup> In June 2011, Chinese fishing boat had cut the cables of Viking II, leased by the PetroVietnam Technical Services Corporation (PTSC) under the Vietnam National Oil and Gas Group (PetroVietnam), which eventually affected the latter's operation.<sup>29</sup>
- (b) *Modernisation of naval capabilities*: China's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) weapons are advanced weapon programmes, which include anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), aircraft, submarines and supporting C4ISR (command and control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) systems.<sup>30</sup> After producing fourth generation fighters like JH-7, J-11, J-15, China has developed its fifth generation fighters such as J-20 and J-21. In order to expand its surveillance and operational areas, China is acquiring refuelling capabilities along with Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) capabilities.<sup>31</sup> As per SIPRI reports, China saw the largest military spending with an increase of 118 per cent between 2007 and 2016, which became a matter of concern for the entire region.<sup>32</sup>
- (c) *Creation of artificial islands and reclamation activities*: Piling sand onto reefs along with the creation of port facilities, airstrips and military buildings in the islands of the South China Sea are continuing. The former director of the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington research group, Mira Rapp-Hooper stated, "Although there are significant fisheries and possible large oil and gas reserves in the South China Sea, China's efforts serve more to fortify its territorial claims than to help it extract natural resources".<sup>33</sup>

Due to its strategic significance China constructed a long airstrip, which is sufficient to land any plane from fighter jets to large transport aircraft in the Fiery Cross Reef. It has completed the creation of two airstrips at the Mischief Reef and the Subi Reef.<sup>34</sup> However, China claimed such activities to be peaceful in nature. In 2014, at the 60th anniversary of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), the Chinese President Xi Jinping promised, "There's no gene for invasion in Chinese people's blood, and Chinese people won't follow the logic that "might is right". China will firmly stick to the path of peaceful development ..."<sup>35</sup>

However, it contradicts the 2014 Chinese Government report released by the "Position Paper on a Matter of Jurisdiction in the South China Sea Arbitration", in response to a legal challenge initiated by the Philippines. It stated:

Chinese activities in the South China Sea date back to over 2000 years ago. China was the first country to discover, name, explore and exploit the resources of the South China Sea Islands and the first to continuously exercise sovereign powers over them.<sup>36</sup>

When Xi met the U.S. defence chief James Mattis in 2018, Xi stated:

wouldn't give up any territory that China considered its own, an unusually blunt warning as security disputes simmer below a fight over trade. Our stance is steadfast and clear-cut when it comes to China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We cannot lose one inch of territory passed down by our ancestors ...<sup>37</sup>

Thus, Shannon Tiezzi argued, that although China's rise is peaceful, but China will not hesitate to use whatever means necessary to defend itself.<sup>38</sup>

## The South China Sea dispute impacting Japan's defence policies

Until 2007, the Ministry of Defense of Japan was not a ministry but an agency known as the Defense Agency of Japan. With various incidents, including the Japan Earthquake to ballistic missile launches by North Korea and the establishment of the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Program Guidelines under the Abe administration, many changes have been made in the security policies of Japan. An increase in the defense budget of Japan had been observed in the recent years.

In the past decade the security environment surrounding Japan became severe. The conduct of nuclear tests by North Korea, Chinese assertive behaviour in the South China Sea and the East China Sea became matters of grave concern to Japan. In the context of such a security environment, the former Defense Minister of Japan Itsunori Onodera in the Defense White Paper of Japan 2017 stated:

This has raised significant concerns over the impact on the security environment in Japan and the rest of the region, and in the world. Against this backdrop, we will focus on the following for maintaining the sovereignty and independence of Japan and for protecting its peace: (1) Japan's own efforts; (2) strengthening the Japan-U.S. Alliance; and (3) active promotion of security cooperation ...<sup>39</sup>

The 2017 Defense White Paper accused China of making false explanations during the U.S.-China Summit Meeting in 2015, when President Xi Jinping stated, "China does not intend to pursue militarization" in the context of the South China Sea. Meanwhile, China made large scale developments in the water body through its dredging and reclamation activities. The paper made mention of the so-called maritime militia who were to be held responsible for operating in the South China Sea.

The Defense White Paper also focused on various incidents where China had been quite assertive in the Spratly and Paracels including the Fiery Cross Reef. It emphasised on following the principles of the UNCLOS for the freedom of navigation in the seas of the region. It opposed the fact that no country should unilaterally assert their rights over the water body.<sup>40</sup>

The 2018 Defense White Paper focused on a "free and open Indo-Pacific" in cooperation with the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy released by the Trump Administration. The paper stated that the main motive behind the Abe administration and the Trump administration were to bring new policies under a "free and open Indo-Pacific". Therefore, they encouraged negotiations for the denuclearisation of North Korea and maintaining Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea without China opposing them.<sup>41</sup>

With the coming of Kono Taro into power as the new Defense Minister of Japan in 2019, he too emphasised on the maritime security and stability of the region. However,

some difference has been observed in the making of the security policies under his guidance. He made a special mention of the role of the Self Defense Force (SDF) in the Defense White Paper of Japan 2019. Their role had been extended to mostly secure the surrounding seas of Japan primarily through mobile operations.

The intention of the government was to deal with the prevailing international situation and the use of advanced military technologies, which would be discussed through annual budget and by the Diet. The new policies of Japan encouraged the Maritime Self Defense Force (MSDF) to participate in multilateral exercises such as the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) in the seas of the Indo-Pacific including the South China Sea.<sup>42</sup>

The above-mentioned interests along with the changes in the international environment would bring salience in Japan's changing strategic culture. These structural changes would have further implications on Japan's security policies. Thus, an elaborate discussion on Japan's strategic culture since its emergence as a modern state in nineteenth century holds great salience to the study of Japan's changing security policies.

Under the prevailing circumstances, Japan is observing unparalleled changes in its security policies. Some of the radical changes are enumerated below:

*Reinterpretation of Article 9:* In July 2014, the Abe cabinet decided to draft a new bill to approve the reinterpretation of Article 9. After the reinterpretation, the use of force to defend another country under armed attack was allowed, even if Japan was not directly attacked. Along with this, there were three other conditions attached. First, the country in question should be "in a close relationship with Japan" and the attack endangers Japan's survival and its "people's right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness". Second, there is no other means to repel the attack. Third, the use of force is kept to a minimum.<sup>43</sup> Critics condemned it as it challenged the core element of the constitution.

*The Security Legislation:* In September 2015, Japan enacted the new security legislation to expand the role of Self Defense Force (SDF) and the right to collective self defense despite facing a lot of opposition in the Japanese Parliament.<sup>44</sup> Japan's Legislation for Peace and Security released in 2016 discussed the transformation of the security environment surrounding Japan. It highlighted the need for a shift in the global power balance, rapid progress of technological innovation, development and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction/ballistic missiles, international terrorism.<sup>45</sup>

The legislation pledged to contribute more proactively to maintaining peace and stability under the policy of "Proactive Contribution to Peace" based on the principle of international cooperation. This promoted the Japan-U.S. alliance for the peace and stability. A stronger role for the SDF also included logistics support and search and rescue operations to assist the military forces of foreign nations involved directly or indirectly in ensuring Japan's peace and security. The SDF is allowed to use arms in the overseas land when a crisis situation occurs endangering the lives of Japanese nationals. However, the consent of the territorial State is significant under such circumstances. SDF also has the power to rescue non-Japanese nationals who are with the Japanese nationals to be rescued by the SDF.<sup>46</sup>

*National Security Council:* The basic structure formed by the Abe administration to reorganise its foreign and security policy was by the creation of the National Security Council (NSC) in 2013. The NSC is regarded to be a potential watershed in Japanese

strategic policy-making. The Japanese leaders believed that the innate tension between Japan's desire to enhance alliance management and at the same time reducing dependence on the U.S. security umbrella could be achieved through the NSC.

The NSC helped in upgrading the intelligence and centralised security policy making and improving crisis management of Tokyo. The NSC has proven to be more efficient and met more frequently than its predecessor, Security Council of Japan (SCJ). Unlike the SCJ, the NSC has not been a mere “rubberstamp”. It has focused on some of the most sensitive policy issues, which include China's unilateral declaration of the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), maritime security in the East China Sea, North Korean missile and nuclear testing including the Russian behaviour in Ukraine.<sup>47</sup>

*Lifting ban on arms:* In 1967, under Prime Minister Eisaku Sato, the Japanese government adopted the Three Principles on Arms Exports. These principles interdicted Japan from transferring weapons to the communist bloc countries, countries subjected to embargoes on arms exports under the United Nations Security Council's resolutions and those engaged or likely to be engaged in international conflicts. In 1976, under Prime Minister Takeo Miki, Japan imposed veto on the export of arms across the world. This was considered in line with the pacifist spirit of the Japanese constitution.<sup>48</sup>

However, faced with a changing surrounding environment, Japan chose to adopt the National Security Strategy (NSS) in 2013. The NSS presented the guiding principles to deal with Japan's national security interests.<sup>49</sup> Based on this, Tokyo focused on setting coherent principles to suit the new security environment by the overseas transfer of defense equipments. Therefore, the cabinet council in line with the NSS guidelines created “The Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology”.<sup>50</sup> In July 2014, Japan's first deal under the new rules were initiated when it sold Patriot Advanced Capability-2 (PAC-2) missile interceptors to the United States.<sup>51</sup>

*Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP):* While serving as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (2016-2017), Tokyo made significant efforts to usher in Japanese diplomacy. In 2016, Japan hosted the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD). As mentioned earlier, Japan desired to create a stable and predictable international environment under the policy of “Proactive Contribution to Peace”. In that context, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, declared the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” for the first time in his keynote address at TICAD VI held in Kenya. He said, “the ‘two continents’, the rapidly growing Asia and Africa, which abound in potential strength, and the dynamism born from confluence of the ‘two oceans’, the free and open Pacific and Indian Oceans, hold the key to stability and prosperity in the international community”.<sup>52</sup>

Since 2017, the term FOIP has been gaining recognition in Japan and around the world well. According to *The Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, a Japanese economic Newspaper:

FOIP aims for economic growth throughout the region connecting the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, identifying growing Asia ... promotes free trade and infrastructure ... ocean based on the rule of law by constraining China's building of a military base in the South China Sea.<sup>53</sup>

Although, there are assumptions about FOIP and its measures to “constrain China”, but the Japanese government repudiates such assumptions. In January 2018, at a policy speech Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, affirmed: *Based on this overall direction, We will also work with China.*<sup>54</sup> In 2017, the then Secretary of State of the United States, Rex Tillerson, delivered a speech at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). In his speech he repeatedly used the phrase “FOIP” while discussing the Indo-U.S. relationship keeping China in mind. Later U.S. interest in FOIP was discerned, when the U.S. President Donald Trump promoted FOIP at the Japan-U.S. summit meeting held in Tokyo on November 2017. It can be analysed that FOIP’s focal point is to “strengthen the rule of law” and “strengthen connectivity”. Under these agendas Japan also wants to implement capacity building on maritime law enforcement.<sup>55</sup>

*U.S.-Japan Alliance:* Even after half a century of the signing of the original Security Treaty in 1951 between U.S. and Japan, the security alliance between the two nations are standing strong. In 1997 and 1999, both the countries again revised the U.S. Japan Defense Guidelines which continued Japan’s military assistance to the U.S. forces in the East Asian region. Under the Article 5 of the Japan-U.S. Treaty, both Japan and U.S. would bilaterally deal an armed attack against Japan and under the Article 6 of the Treaty, Japan would have to provide facilities and areas for the American forces.

Under these security arrangements, the SDF and the U.S. Forces are bound to work together in various areas to strengthen their cooperation, which includes trainings and bilateral exercises.<sup>56</sup> In 2001, Japan dispatched its SDF forces in the Indian Ocean to provide logistical support for the U.S. led war on Terror in Afghanistan. This is a clear indication that the U.S.-Japan alliance has strengthened with time.<sup>57</sup> The policy of “rebalancing” towards Asia initiated by the Obama administration had been welcomed by Japan. Japan felt emboldened by the U.S. assurance of maintaining a strong and resilient army in the region.<sup>58</sup> In the year 2010, the then US Secretary of the State Hillary Clinton referred to the claims in the South China Sea and considered it a matter of American “national interest”. She said, “US is firmly aligned with Southeast Asia’s approach to overlapping claims in the South China Sea and US supports a collaborative process by all claimants for resolving the various territorial disputes without coercion and opposed the use or threat of force by any claimant”.<sup>59</sup>

U.S. motivated Japan to undertake greater security reforms, which include constitutional reforms. It is expected that U.S. support will mitigate the Japanese notion that reinterpreting the constitution would disavow the post war pacifist policy adopted by Japan. Moreover, a stronger Japan-U.S. alliance could help U.S. in maintaining a forward U.S. military presence in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>60</sup> Japan has made generous contributions as an ally, to the U.S. troops on its soil.

In 2004, according to the annual report entitled “Allied Contributions to the Common Defense” published by the U.S. Department of Defense, approximately ¥366 billion (\$3.2 billion) direct support and an indirect support worth \$1.18 billion was provided by Japan. This support contributed to approximately 74.5 per cent of the total cost. Among the other major U.S. allies, Japan contributed the highest fair share. In 2015, the Defense Minister of Japan Tomomi Inada said that “Japan had paid about ¥191 billion in 2015, about 86.4 per cent of the total cost”.<sup>61</sup> Both during the Obama administration and the Trump administration, U.S. has also been conducting several freedom of navigation operations in the

disputed waters of the South China Sea.<sup>62</sup> It initiated its first freedom of navigation operation in October 2015 near the Subi Reef.

Although China is greatly agitated by such operations, Japan has supported the U.S. freedom of navigation operations and agreed to enhance capacity building initiatives in the South China Sea. However, Japan has been very clear in stating that the Japanese Self Defense Forces will not participate in the U.S. freedom of navigation operations. In February 2017, Japan's Defense Minister Tomomi Inada promised the newly appointed US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis to enhance Japan's role in the South China Sea. Inada added:

I said that freedom of navigation operations and other actions by the US forces in the South China Sea contribute to maintaining maritime order based on the rule of *law*, and that I support these efforts... I told Secretary Mattis that Japan supports the US military's freedom of navigation operation in the sea. But the SDF will not be sent to the area.<sup>63</sup>

However, Japan is focused more on Maritime Self Defense Force (MSDF) joint training cruises with the U.S. Navy. This includes bilateral and multilateral exercises with regional and other navies, as well as providing capacity building assistance to coastal nations and did not approve of direct military involvement or patrols in the region.<sup>64</sup>

*Striving to become a "Normal" Country:* Several questions arose over Japan acquiring a normal military. Japan refrained from engaging in any kind of offensive activities in spite of acquiring fifth generation fighter planes and world-class submarine fleet. It has military capabilities mostly designed to initiate defensive activities. Japan also chose not to be a part of collective self-defence activities abiding by its post war constitution.<sup>65</sup> In 1980s, the conservative Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone strongly advocated the necessity of strengthening the military and issues of nationalism. He was also the first Prime Minister to visit the Yasukuni Shrine which was under a lot of controversy for being a memorial to the Japanese soldiers killed in World War II. Later, Prime Minister Koizumi was also criticised for visiting the shrine.

There were several objectives behind the political leaders and the nationalists supporting a normal military in Japan. Japan qualifies the definition of being a normal state if it goes by its huge material power resources and because of its huge stakes, both economic and strategic, in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>66</sup> According to the Japanese pragmatists there were several other reasons for Japan to acquire a normal military.

First, Japan has a "rough neighbourhood". Thus, a former Foreign Service officer and associate professor at the Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies, John H. Miller stated that the main catalyst has been the "rising threat perceptions of North Korea and China". North Korea's missile launch over the Japanese mainland in 1998 and the encounter with spy boats from North Korea were some of the incidents, which Japan highly condemned and the political actors took seriously.<sup>67</sup>

North Korea's nuclear power possession with advanced missile technology posed serious threat to Japan's security considering it to be neighbouring state. The Six Party Talks, which consisted of U.S., China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea and Russia to denuclearise North Korea had been unsuccessful. This became another concern for Japan.<sup>68</sup>

China's military power is growing at an advanced rate. It has already made major developments in the South China Sea. Moreover, Japan and China have an already strained

relationship over the East China Sea and the Senkaku islands. Japan's apprehensions increased after China declared the Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea in November 2013.

Second, the unpredictability of the Trump administration is a major concern for Japan's security. The United States might not always put Japan under its security umbrella. Yuko Nakano, research associate at the Centre for Strategic & International Studies has said,

There is some concern that the U.S. might not be there when Japan needs its support. When there was a [North Korean] Taepo Dong missile launch in 1998, a conspiracy theory appeared in the Japanese press that the United States was aware of the launch but didn't inform Japan in a timely fashion. So yes, I think this is a concern of the Japanese.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, Japan is beginning to acquire considerable offensive capability, particularly its naval power by acquiring helicopter carriers, aegis class destroyers and advanced submarines. In 2015, Japan commissioned its *Izumo* helicopter carrier, which was dispatched on a tour to the South China Sea. *Izumo* made stops in Singapore, Indonesia and Philippines. It is as large as Japan's World War 2-era carriers and can accommodate up to nine attack helicopters. This is a part of its "extended mission" and a means to test the capability of the carrier.<sup>70</sup>

On December 2015, the Japanese government presented an outline of a programme at the national security meeting at Prime Minister's office. The outline revealed that *Izumo* should be converted into an aircraft carrier. This would enable Japan to station the vertical landing and the short-take off U.S. built F-35 Fighters on the vessel.<sup>71</sup> The aegis-equipped destroyers will play a critical role in the ballistic missile defense that it is building with the US. The Japanese Navy is also inducting several ocean-going ships.

Indeed, the Japanese Navy is technologically the most advanced in the entire Indo-Pacific region in the conventional domain. The Defense Ministry's Maritime Staff Office of Japan has recently opened up that it will no longer remain a restriction for Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force to not initiate naval exercises in the South China Sea. After *Izumo*, Japan, dispatched three vessels including its second constructed helicopter carrier of the *Izumo* class, *Kaga* in the Indian Ocean. In October 2018, *Kaga* and another Maritime Self Defense Force (MSDF), vessel the destroyer *JS Inazuma* made a port call in Colombo. The visit was intended to deepen the maritime partnership between Japan and Sri Lanka. Japanese military expenditure has also increased from \$41,091 million in 2006 to \$41,569 million in 2016.<sup>72</sup>

## Japan and multilateralism

Japanese leaders actively participated in the multilateral summits and meetings including the East Asian summit, ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meetings and ASEAN summits to establish their voice at the regional level. While attending the 13th East Asia Summit in 2018 in Singapore, Prime Minister Abe made special mention of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" which would mostly imply a maritime order based on the rule of law. He stated:

We would like to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific for the development of this region. Included in this are the basic principles of ASEAN's centrality and openness shared by

EAS participating countries ... Japan has taken concrete steps towards cooperation ... in the Straits of Singapore and Malacca, we have worked to build capacity and strengthen enforcement of maritime law ... We would like to emphasize the necessity of international standards of openness, transparency, economic efficiency, and fiscal soundness of recipient countries.<sup>73</sup>

His words implied a concern over the Chinese expansionist attitude in the South China Sea. Therefore, he laid stress on obeying international laws and establishing peace and cooperation in the region. He didn't want the South China Sea dispute to be a regional issue anymore and wanted concern from the international community. While speaking about the South China Sea he said,

Disputes in the South China Sea should be resolved peacefully based on international law and not by force. From this perspective, we fully expect the formulation of an effective South China Sea Code of Conduct (COC) that can contribute to realizing a peaceful, open South China Sea ... Japan supports the fundamental principles of 'full respect for legal and diplomatic processes', 'freedom of navigation', and 'the importance of non-militarization and self-restraint' that ASEAN has stipulated. In response, many countries referenced freedoms of navigation and overflight as well as the importance of the peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.<sup>74</sup>

In his 14th East Asia Summit in 2019, Prime Minister repeatedly focused on the same issues of the maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific region especially the South China Sea dispute. This implied the intensity of the issue in the region and how it has impacted on Japan's security framing processes.<sup>75</sup> In 2017, the Minister of Defence Itsunori Onodera attended the 4th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM Plus) and the 3rd ASEAN-Japan Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting. The South China Sea issue was highlighted in the discussions of the meetings and attempts were made to change the status-quo unilaterally were highlighted in the session.

He mentioned various actions that Japan would initiate to protect the water body. This would include joint training with the U.S. Navy and navies of partner countries in the South China Sea. In the 3rd Japan-ASEAN Defence Minister's Informal Meeting, Defence Minister Onodera mentioned the significance of the Japan-ASEAN defense cooperation in ensuring peace and stability. Japan believed that such a co-operation would help in solving the current conflicting situations in North Korea and the East and South China Seas.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, we see that Japan seems to be establishing a cordial relationship with some of the Southeast Asian countries. Some of the significant agreements Japan had with them are discussed in the following paragraphs:

## **Japan and Southeast Asia**

The Japanese government has been emphasising on extending direct assistance to the Southeast Asian countries. Although maritime domain awareness in the context of the South China Sea remains a major factor but economic relations play a critical role. Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia are some of the states to whom Japan extended capacity building assistance along with official development assistance (ODA) and other economic aids.

*Philippines:* Japan and Philippines have already elevated their bilateral partnership to "Strategic Partnership", which eventually became a "Strengthened Strategic Partnership".

The Action Plan to implement such an initiative encouraged transfer of equipments and technology, expansion of bilateral and multilateral trainings, which included joint exercises with the Philippine armed forces.<sup>77</sup>

Both the nations signed the memorandum on “Defence Cooperation and Exchanges” in January 2015 and initiated talks and discussions on the sale of Japanese defense equipment to Manila.<sup>78</sup> In July 2013, Tokyo also promised to provide 10 patrol boats to Manila, which was delivered later. On the other hand Philippines also promised Japan to provide access to its Subic naval base.<sup>79</sup>

In October 2016, a new maritime cooperation agreement was signed between the two nations which amounted to 16.455 billion yen. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) also encouraged the second phase of the project Maritime Safety Capability Improvement Project (MSCIP) with Philippines. Prior to that, JICA extended 1.152 billion yen grant aid to PCG to install a satellite based communication system and Vessel Traffic Management System to address vessel movement and port traffic in 2014.<sup>80</sup>

Apart from being a strategic partner, Japan has been recognised as the second biggest trading partner to Philippines in 2018. This accounted a total trade of \$20.02 billion, which made Japan the third largest investor with a total investment at 19.73 billion Philippine pesos. Japan has been also the largest source of Official Development Assistance (ODA) contributing \$6.27 billion. Under Rodrigo Duterte’s “Build, Build, Build” initiatives, Metro Manila Subway’s contract has been handed over to a Japanese consortium. Within less than three years, both the countries formalised and approved \$8.17 billion worth of infrastructure projects.<sup>81</sup>

*Vietnam:* Japan also looks at Vietnam as a significant security partner and elevated their relationship to an “Extensive Strategic Partnership” in 2014. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe assured that Japan would enhance the capacities of maritime law enforcement agencies of Vietnam.<sup>82</sup> This involved the dispatch of a survey team to Vietnam at an early date to exchange opinions. Japan assisted Vietnam in its military modernisation, which included handing over of second-hand patrol vessels, discussions between the armed forces of the two countries along with joint naval exercises.

In 2013, when Shinzo Abe became the Prime Minister of Japan for the second time, he chose Vietnam as his first destination for his overseas trip. Also in 2013, the then Defense Minister of Japan Onodera Itsunori was invited for the first time by Vietnam to the former Soviet Cam Ranh Bay base as a foreign defense official. The Extensive Strategic Partnership stressed on further strengthening and enhancing the capacity of maritime law enforcement agencies of Vietnam.<sup>83</sup>

The Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc made the most recent visit to Tokyo in June 2017 when he initiated talks with his counterpart Shinzo Abe on the Chinese aggressive attitude in the South China Sea. Though both the leaders never referred to China by its name to avoid escalation of any sort of conflict but the South China Sea dispute and the complex developments happening there grabbed the focus of their discussion. It led to the signing of several agreements, which included Japan’s development aid worth 38 billion yen (USD 350 million) to boost and upgrade the Vietnamese coast guard vessels and their patrol capability.<sup>84</sup>

Economically, Japan had been one of the largest investors in Vietnam with flows exceeding \$14 billion making it the third largest recipient within ASEAN in 2017.

Japan contributed 10.6 per cent and 25.4 per cent in 2016 and 2017 respectively to the total investment in Vietnam.<sup>85</sup>

*Indonesia:* Indonesia and China are not directly involved in any territorial dispute in the South China Sea. The Natuna islands belong to Indonesia and China recognised its sovereignty over the island, which is in proximity of the Chinese 10-dash line. Indonesia was not ready to accept the historical claims made by China as the Chinese initiated fishing activities within the Indonesian exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which overlapped with China's line.

Indonesia became a part of Japan's offshore balancing strategy and received aid in its capacity building initiatives. Both the nations signed bilateral agreements on maritime cooperation. In November 2006, the then Indonesian President Sushilo Bambang Yudhoyono visited Japan and held a summit meeting with the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. They elevated their relationship to a higher plane under the "Strategic Partnership for Peaceful and Prosperous Future".<sup>86</sup>

In March 2015, they signed the "Japan – Indonesia Joint Statement-Towards Further Strengthening of the Strategic Partnership Underpinned by Sea and Democracy" in a summit meeting held between Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan and President Joko Widodo, of Indonesia. The joint statement mainly emphasised on the international laws and peaceful resolution of the conflict.<sup>87</sup> In January 2017, Japan and Indonesia signed "Japan-Indonesia Joint Statement on Strengthening Strategic Partnership", when Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan paid an official visit to Indonesia. The leaders of both the nations held discussions on regional and global issues which were considered as matters of significance and hence stressed on strengthening their defense partnership further.<sup>88</sup>

Indonesia and Japan are still trying to strengthen their economic connections. Japan had signed agreements with Indonesia, which guaranteed stable supply of natural resources from Indonesia to Japan. In the last three decades it has been estimated that 70 per cent of Indonesia's fuel, mineral and metal have been exported to Japan. In 2007, the largest supply of non-oil and gas which accounted for 14.6 per cent, had been exported to Japan from Indonesia.<sup>89</sup> The data released by the Indonesia Investment Coordinating Board (BKPM) showed Japan's investments in the country between 2010 and 2015 was USD \$14.9 billion.<sup>90</sup>

*Malaysia:* Although Japan and Malaysia were not too close strategically, in the recent times, they have initiated strategic cooperation. In 2015, Japan and Malaysia signed the "Japan-Malaysia Joint Statement on Strategic Partnership". The Joint Statement mainly focused on the security of the SLOCs mainly in the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea, which is significant for trade and economic prosperity. The statement also emphasised on maintaining peace and stability in the maritime domain of the region in accordance with the international laws including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982).<sup>91</sup> Both the nations have been organising workshops, which would examine the upcoming challenges and how to deal with them. They are also looking forward to elevating their strategic partnership and dealing with the maritime issues of the region in cooperation with each other.

As mentioned earlier, Japan is also elevating its strategic ties with the U.S. The Diplomatic Bluebook of Japan clearly mentions the lynchpin of Japan-US. Alliance. The significant visits of the leaders of both the nations included the significant Japan-U.S. Joint

Vision Statement, Japan-U.S. consultative committees along with the new Guidelines which focused more on the security and stability of the region.

Both Japan and the U.S. emphasised on the significance of engaging China and that the region should be free and open based on the rule of law. Their main concern is China's lack of transparency and its rising military expenditure including its expansionist attitude in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Hence, the blue print highlighted more on the security legislation which enhanced the capabilities of the Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF), strengthened the Japan-U.S. Alliance and emphasised on a greater contribution to the international community. It also stressed on the significance of the new Guidelines which established an alliance for further coordination of the Self-Defense Forces and the U.S. Armed Forces.<sup>92</sup>

### **Dual strategy: Offensive capabilities or enmeshment of China**

The gravity of the South China Sea dispute has facilitated Japan to shed its long-held, anachronistic defensive strategy and to take measures to play an active role in regional affairs and also assert that it has a key role in shaping the regional security architecture.

However, to predict a changing security culture in Japan is quite difficult. Although the security policies are adapted to changes, it has various limitations and constraints. Japan doesn't want to shed its U.S. security umbrella but anticipating the Trump administration is difficult. Japan could create a normal military which would be independent of the American security shadow. Therefore, a major fallout could be that Japan can potentially emerge as a major supplier of arms, given its highly sophisticated manufacturing base and its hold over several advanced technologies. Hence, it can help carve a niche for itself in the world of arms manufacturing and supplies.

Thus, it can be observed that Japan is adopting a dual strategy as it is trying to carve greater strategic autonomy. It is emphatically stating that the dispute should be resolved peacefully according to the established international norms, freedom of navigation and airspace is not disrupted under any cost, and access to maritime commons is not impeded under any circumstances. On the other hand, Japan is trying to acquire offensive capabilities and helping the Southeast Asian claimant countries to enhance their defence capabilities.

The South China Sea dispute, consequently in many respects, has triggered a fundamental shift in its security policies as well as its policies towards the Indo-Pacific. As the above discussion demonstrates, the South China Sea dispute and the developments surrounding it are having a huge impact on Japan leading to unprecedented shifts in its security policies and attitude towards the rest of the region. Apart from the changing security policies, Japan also had a strained economic relation with China since 2012 after Japan nationalised the Senkaku Islands. Such a strained relationship dealt a heavy blow to the Japanese automobile sector, which eventually moved Japanese exports to China. Japan realises the significance of the Chinese market and China as an economic partner. In spite of having competition in the East China Sea and China's expanding attitude in the South China Sea, Japan still makes an effort to continue its economic connections with China. It was evident when Japan sent its delegation to the summit meetings of the China initiated international economic project Belt Road Initiative held in Beijing.

Thus, it can be inferred that acquiring military capabilities can't be the only solution to resolving the dispute. In fact, such actions have the tendency to further aggravate the situation while having a lasting impact on the region. Instead, the policy of "enmeshment" could be acknowledged. Involving China through more trade and economic connections should be encouraged. The magnanimity of China's economic power cannot be discarded, which is only likely to rise in the future. Hence, it will be prudent to build stronger diplomatic, political and economic ties with China.

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