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India–Japan maritime security cooperation: Secondary states' soft balancing in the Indo-Pacific

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ABSTRACT

India–Japan security cooperation is a critical component in the evolving security mechanism of the Indo-Pacific region. Both states are secondary states in the international system that opposes one country's emergence as a regional hegemon. China's rise and her ambition to dominate the Indo-Pacific would affect the security interests of India and Japan. The U.S., the current preponderant power in the region, seems unable to contain China by itself. So it is looking for strategic partnerships with regional countries who are militarily capable of challenging China, and persuading them to balance China. In this regard, the two powerful states in China's own backyard – Japan in the western Pacific and India in the Indian Ocean – have come together to counter the Chinese hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. In this effort, they have gradually built up naval cooperation sans a formal military alliance. They follow soft balancing strategies over hard balancing ones because neither wants to antagonise China. Similarly both countries seek to expand their presence through mutual cooperation beyond South-east Asia. This article explains the nature and context of soft power balancing strategies and the manner in which the India–Japan maritime security cooperation has evolved over the last two decades.

KEYWORDS

Indo-Pacific; maritime security; India and Japan; soft balancing

Introduction

Indo-Pacific is indeed a new strategic theatre in international politics. It is a confluence of the existing power, a rising power and a few secondary powers, and is also home to the world's fastest-growing economies. It emerged in the twenty-first century as a new strategic domain when two major democracies – India and Japan – began to cooperate for the protection of sea lines of communication connecting the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific.[1] Up until recently, India was never a part of the U.S.'s strategic policy towards Asia, but now India is very much integral to the U.S.'s Indo-Pacific strategy which can be seen in renaming its Pacific command (P.A.C.O.M.) into Indo Pacific command (I.N.D.O.P.A.C.O.M.). The military modernisation programme of China launched in the 1990s and its anti-access area denial strategy has enabled China to challenge U.S. supremacy in the western Pacific. As a result, the U.S. is not only seeking more

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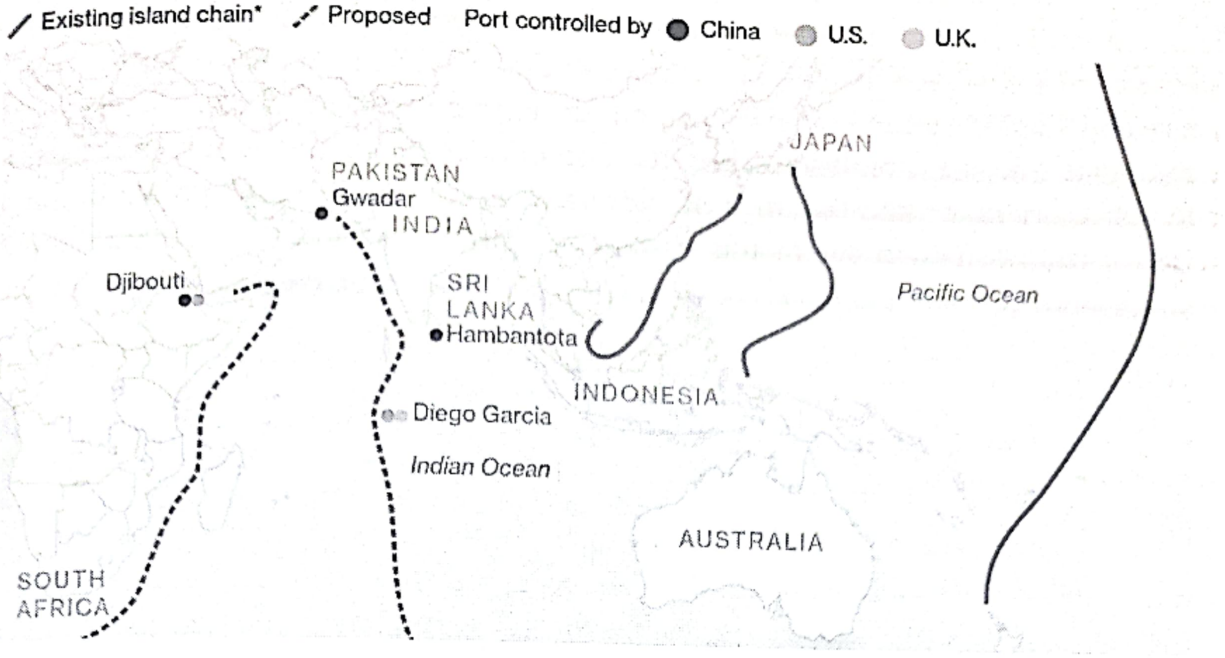
strategic partnerships with likeminded countries in terms of both financially stable and security concerns but also expects Asian countries to contribute more towards regional peace and stability. At the same time, the Indo-Pacific is also going to be the most contested place in the twenty-first century not only between the U.S. and China but between China and other regional powers as well. China, the rising power in Asia, is trying to establish its order in the western Pacific by marginalising the U.S. and has launched expansionist policies towards the Indian Ocean region (I.O.R.). The Indo-Pacific, thus, holds the key to global security and a new world order.

Up until now, regional security has been largely managed by the preponderance of the United States and its hub-and-spoke model alliance networks established at the beginning of the post-World War period. However, on the one hand the rise of China as a regional maritime power with strong naval and associated systems, and the other the inability of the U.S. to prevent China from seeking a more assertive position in the contested waters, especially in the South China Sea, has complicated the security environment of the region. China, the rising power in Asia, both in continental and maritime domains, has demonstrated its intention and strategies to counter the U.S. naval presence in the western Pacific, which is considered as the major stumbling block in its aspiration of becoming a regional hegemon.[2] According to a Pentagon report, China has developed a sophisticated defence ecosystem to counter the U.S. in the western Pacific, which includes submarines, precision-guided cruise and ballistic missiles as well as combat aircraft that can be used to counter U.S. intervention in a regional crisis, such as one involving Taiwan.[3] China's anti-access area denial (A2/AD) is capable of reducing the U.S. influence in the western Pacific and Beijing is confident about establishing its naval superiority within the first island chains are forward defense lines in the maritime domain coined by former Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) commander Admiral Liu Huaqing during the 1980s,[4] if not a full-spectrum sea control in the Taiwan Strait. The most prominent in the A2/AD systems are the DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missiles, which are designed to target U.S. aircraft carriers as well as the DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missiles which can reach as far as the U.S. military bases at Guam.[5] The former U.S. National Security Advisor, Stephen Hadley has recently remarked that these weapons could "prevent the United States from honouring treaty obligations and other security commitments to American friends and allies in Asia".[6]

Of late, China's expansionist strategy towards the Indian Ocean is also getting fructified. It has opened a military base in Djibouti, right at the mouth of the India Ocean from the north-western point, and has made a permanent presence in the ocean in the guise of sea lines of communication (S.L.O.C.) protection. It frequently sends its submarines and naval ships to the region and considers the Indian Ocean as a "buffer zone" until China gets its naval supremacy up to the third island chain by around 2040 (see Map 1). China considers the area within the third island chain as a "buffer zone", but is unable to exercise its naval supremacy.[7] China has already established its supremacy within the first island chain and is seeking to marginalise the U.S. beyond the second island chain, but aims to create a buffer area between the second and third island chains so that no country, whether a regional power or an extra regional state, shall get a hegemonic position until China has a true blue water naval capability by 2040. In this regard China seeks to prevent India from obtaining a dominant position in the Indian Ocean region and continues its naval presence there.[8] Undoubtedly, Chinese dominance in the water-



Map 1. Map of China's Island Chains. Source: James Stavridis, "China's Military Seeks New Islands to Conquer", Bloomberg, 22 February 2019. https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-02-21/china-military-threat-seeking-new-islands-to-conquer. Last accessed 20 December 2019.

body of Asia is counterproductive to the security interests of other regional actors. Many of the regional countries see China's rise as a "threat" in the context of the Middle Kingdom's growing regional ambition.[9] Though regional countries want to avoid a conflict between the U.S. and China in the region, there is a growing realisation in various capitals across Asia that China needs to be constrained from pursuing its ambition. However, the sequestration policies of the Pentagon during the previous Obama administration and the present President, Donald Trump's "America first" policy cast a shadow over the effectiveness of the American security commitment to regional peace and security as well as to maintain its military preponderance. As a result, regional countries are looking for a regional mechanism to face the challenges posed by China. The increasing maritime cooperation between India and Japan can be seen in this context that both India and Japan are involved in a balancing mechanism against the rising regional hegemon – China.

The maritime security cooperation between India and Japan can be seen as two secondary states in the Indo Pacific, joining together in order to prevent one country from getting the dominant position and for that matter to preserve a free and open Indo-Pacific. The terminology maritime security is different from maritime interests; the latter is more generic, referring normally more to economic interests, while the former is in the category of "high politics" in I.R. theory and nexus with the grand strategy of states.[10] In maritime security cooperation countries tend to focus on politico-security matters and practice hard power methods such as naval cooperation, joint exercises, mutual visits of high dignitaries and so on. Basically two countries join together only when there must be a synergy of interests between them, which are inherently connected with their strategic interests. As a major power in the western Pacific, Japan seeks to expand its presence in the India Ocean through cooperation with India and India also looks for the same in the western Pacific. At the same time both consider the rise of China as potentially dangerous for their security interests.

India and Japan had cultivated a robust bilateral strategic partnership by the beginning of the twenty-first century. Though started as a cooperation for the protection of their respective S.L.O.C. in the Indian Ocean, the India–Japan strategic partnership now deliberates upon adopting common strategies to balance China in the Indo-Pacific.[11] China's rise, especially its modernisation of its navy and Beijing's intention to establish its will in the maritime domain surrounding Japan has now become a major security concern for Tokyo. For instance, Japan's Defence Ministry's "National Defense Program Guideline for FY 2005" expressed concern that

> China, which has a strong influence on the security in this region, has been modernizing its nuclear and missile capabilities as well as naval and air forces, and expanding its area of operation at sea. We have to remain attentive to its future course.[12]

This cautious approach has necessitated Japan to expand its strategic landscape beyond the U.S.-led alliance system concerning East Asia and it has courted India as a strategic partner. Japan believes that by strengthening its relationship with New Delhi, Tokyo can give a warning signal to China, who considers both India and Japan as potential challengers to its supremacy in Asia.[13] Both India and Japan are regional heavyweights, so China's dominance in the maritime domain would affect them the most. In his address to the U.N. General Assembly in September 2018, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe unambiguously reiterated his vision of making a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" by cooperating with fellow minded countries including India, the U.S. and Australia to ensure peace and stability, including freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific.[14] In this regard, this article analyses the growing nature of India–Japan relations and argues that it is the counter-mechanism of secondary states against the rising hegemony of China in the Indo-Pacific. It further states that both India and Japan have adopted a soft balancing strategy to counter China's hegemonic ambition in the Indo-Pacific region.

Secondary states and soft balancing

Balancing an emerging threat is the currency of realist politics. Kenneth Waltz argues that "unbalanced power, whoever wields it, is a potential danger to others".[15] The rising hegemon is a threat to both the existing hegemon and the local powers – the secondary states in the region. It is important that if one country emerges as a great power then the behaviour of secondary states is seen to be sensitive to the distribution of great power capabilities in the immediate vicinity.[16] Secondary powers are the states who "can disrupt the system, but not change it, through unilateral action".[17] Secondary states come below the great powers but ahead of the middle powers in the hierarchy of states in the international system.[18] Secondary states' behaviour is largely being influenced by the evolving regional security environment.[19] If the regional security dynamics are multipolar then they compete for primacy and sometimes they seek the support of great powers. If regional political dynamics is going in the direction of unipolarity, then the secondary states come together and contest the dominance of a certain state. In this process they adopt hard balancing, soft balancing, blackmail and leash slipping to oppose and limit the rising hegemon's power.[20] Also, they do not follow bandwagoning or appeasement, as these reduce their power and prestige in the international system.

In general, major powers have commonly balanced against indirect as well as direct threats to their security.[21] Stephen Walt says that strong neighbours of strong states are likely to balance; small and weaker neighbours of great powers may be more interested in bandwagoning.[22] The secondary states' balancing can occur in two ways; either the existing hegemon will lead a balancing coalition against the rising power and the local powers follow the bandwagoning or the secondary states form a coalition and challenge the rising hegemon with the outside support of the existing great power. Indeed, in the Asian theatre it is highly unlikely that regional countries will adopt a bandwagoning under the U.S. against China. As a result, secondary states can form a balancing mechanism without formally joining with the great power, but the great power's support is necessary. As and when they feel their combined power cannot mount any challenge to the rising power, the great power can come in and lead a coalition.

T. V. Paul succinctly explains

> *Soft balancing* involves tacit balancing short of formal alliances. It occurs when states generally develop ententes or limited security understandings with one another to balance a potentially threatening state or a rising power. Soft balancing is often based on a limited arms build up, ad hoc cooperative exercises, or collaboration in regional or international institutions; these policies may be converted to open, hard-balancing strategies if and when security competition becomes intense and the powerful state becomes threatening.[23]

Generally, soft-balancing becomes a strategy when two or more countries have a common treat perception on the actions of a rising hegemon. The purpose of soft balancing is to hamper and constrain further rise of the regional power instead of creating a bipolar regional order. It aims to even out or ameliorate the existing asymmetric distribution of power and to frustrate the most powerful actor's fulfilment of its foreign policy goals by increasing its costs of action.[24] Successful soft balancing today may lay the foundations for more significant shifts tomorrow. Soft balancing will impose additional costs on the rising power or obtain additional benefits for themselves. Then, the rising power's possible dominant position could be eroded and its ability to impose its will on others would decline.[25] Soft balancers, by combining their military forces or through conducting joint operations, effectively utilise diplomatic assets in order to defend their interests. They can continuously maintain their balancing efforts through periodic visits of defence delegations including port calls of naval ships, joint exercises and strategic dialogues at the highest level, joint production of defence systems and so on.

Realists predict that China seeks great power status and the ultimate aim of every great power is to maximise its share of world power and eventually become a hegemon.[26] However, none of the regional countries are interested in hard balancing tactics against China. Why are regional countries afraid of external hard balancing against China? The answer lies in three main reasons: first, hard balancing is a costly affair. Countries will have to increase their military spending substantially, which will further lead to an arms race in the region. To build an offensive force for power balancing, countries need to strengthen their economic base and convert that economic benefit for military preparedness. None of the regional countries in Asia are economically strong and even the economically strong nation Japan has not completely recovered from the bubble burst of the 1990s. Many Asian countries have spent billions of dollars on modernising their armed forces. For instance, according to the S.I.P.R.I. report of 2016, "Military spending in Asia and

Oceania rose by 5.4 per cent in 2015 and by 64 per cent between 2006 and 2015, reaching $436 billion in 2015".[27] However, their increasing military spending is to protect their own security and territorial integrity. Second, the relationships among the regional countries are characterised by interdependence, even though they have adversarial interests.[28] Economically, China has assiduously made efforts to integrate the regional economy with its economy. Today, China is the largest trading partner of India, with a 10.03 per cent share of India's total trade.[29] Similarly, China is Japan's second export destination and the largest source of imports. The Chinese market is vital for Japan, while, for India, China has emerged as a major customer for India's raw materials and semi-finished goods and China is a supplier of cheap consumer goods for India.[30] In this situation, both India and Japan are hesitant to form an open alliance against China because it will hamper their economic growth. And, third, the internal political dynamics prevent both countries from forming a hard balancing mechanism. "Strategic autonomy" based on non-alignment is the underlying principle of India's security strategy.[31] Ever since its independence, not joining any alliance mechanism has been the hallmark of India's international policy. Even in the newly formed quad strategy comprising the U.S., Japan, India and Australia, India is reluctant to make any military commitment to an "open and free rules-based" order as it could result in the escalation of Sino-Indian geo-political tension. This can be seen in the latest policy formulations that both India and Japan followed towards China: India was keen to ease the tensions created after the Doklam standoff of June–August 2017 and a warmth in relations occurred during the summit meeting at Wuhan in April 2018 between the Chinese President, Xi Jinping and the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. Similarly, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe didn't follow the U.S. line on U.S. trade war with China or engagement with North Korea. For Japan, China is a major trade partner and a neighbour, so it cannot play hardball with Beijing and looks for a robust economic partnership with it. This was clearly expressed when Abe visited China just before Modi's visit to Japan in October 2018.[32] However, as Stephen Walt argues, states form balancing coalitions against threats and intentions are more important than mere statements and actions. China's long-term intentions and ambition for a Middle Kingdom regional framework will cast a shadow over the friendship and cooperation. Further, soft balancing will lead to a hard balancing when the threat becomes real and war imminent.

The most notable feature in the soft power balancing mechanism in Asia is the way India and Japan have launched their strategic cooperation at the beginning of the twenty-first century with the aim of securing a stable security order in the Indo-Pacific. Both are neighbouring states of China and come under the category of secondary powers. The 2008 "Japan–India Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation" is a landmark event in their relationship and is only the third such document on defence cooperation that Tokyo has signed with a foreign partner. With effect from 2015, Japan is a regular participant in the MALABAR series of naval exercises. Both countries are now dominant powers in their own backyard and are looking to expand their presence in faraway regions with a synergy of strategic interests.

Japan's maritime security strategy

As an island nation, maritime security is vital to Japan's security and economic growth. The Southwest stream trade-route (composed of several interlinking sea lanes passing

through the Indian Ocean) connecting Japan with Europe, the Middle East and Southeast Asia is critical to Japan's economic growth.[33] Other trade routes connecting continental Asia, Australasia and the trans-Pacific are less vulnerable and traverse through the ocean or sparsely populated areas. On the other hand, the south-western stream is also potentially vulnerable in peacetime because it passes through various choke points such as the Malacca Strait, Sunda and Lombok Straits and through the Indian Ocean. Importantly, oil remains Japan's most strategic commodity and 80 per cent of it comes from the Middle East. So any instability in the region or disruption in the supply route will immensely affect Japan's security calculations.[34] Importantly, Japan doesn't have a military partnership with any of the littoral countries in the south stream, while China is aggressively establishing its dominance in this route, especially in the South China Sea. As a result, S.L.O.C. traversing the Indian Ocean assumes particular importance in Japan's medium-to-long term security strategy.

Japan's current security strategy focuses principally, if not exclusively, on East Asian issues. Although the end of the Cold War has brought new security concepts in East Asia, the essence of the Japanese naval strategy remains intact. Japan's naval strategy seeks to contain the naval reach of hostile Asian land powers within the marginal waters along the Japanese archipelago, thereby restricting their access to the open ocean.[35] To ensure its territorial freedom and sovereignty, Tokyo has gradually strengthened its defence forces, particularly naval systems, including submarines and helicopter carriers, and has introduced a new concept of "dynamic defence" in Japan's Self Defence Force's operational strategy.[36] Still, Japan, with only modest power projection capabilities of its own, is vulnerable to various and intersecting forms of military and economic coercion.[37] In this regard, protecting its national interest beyond East Asia, especially disruption of the S.L.O.C. in the southern route, is a major security concern for Japan. This shows Japan's major geostrategic dilemma about allocating its naval assets for both territorial security and protection of the S.L.O.C.s. Both the East China Sea and South China Sea are critical for Japan; the former being the home to its territorial integrity while the latter is the lifeline for Japan's energy consumption.

China's assertive maritime activities around the Senkaku islands in the East China Sea from 2009 onwards caused Japan to believe that the Chinese grand strategy is by and large focused on attaining regional hegemony and extra regional power projection.[38] China has further expanded its assertiveness towards the South China Sea by creating artificial islands and claiming almost 90 per cent of the water body as its sovereign territory.[39] China, with its expanding diplomatic, economic, and military reach, is incrementally imposing its will on the region. A Chinese dominance in the South China Sea and its capability to interdict Japan bound shipping vessels is considered as one of the major maritime security concerns for Japan.[40] In this context, the Japanese government has shifted its strategic focus from the Cold War centric north to the south of Japan to meet the challenges emanating from the rise of China, especially its growing naval power in the region. At the same time, there is a growing realisation among strategic community and policy-makers in Japan that its entire dependence on the U.S. for security would not sustain for long and it must look beyond the U.S.-centric strategy.[41] Japan could not be sure that the U.S. would see the same level of threat that China could pose as Japan sees. As a result, Japan started diversifying its strategic relationships with other regional countries and explored pathways towards greater strategic independence.[42] This has made Japan enhance cooperation with

other countries, which has been clearly indicated in the 2010 National Defence Programme Guidelines that state:

> Japan will also maintain and enhance security cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, which are its traditional partners. Moreover, Japan will enhance cooperation with India and other countries that share common interests in ensuring the security of maritime navigation from Africa and the Middle East to East Asia.[43]

Although Japan's naval strategy and defence modernisation is focused on its surrounding region, it has not restrained itself from looking beyond the East Asia region. Former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi had initiated a "re-militarization" process in Japan's national security strategy to meet the future challenges and expand Japan's power and prestige beyond its neighbourhood.[44] Japan has further sought to equip its Self Defence Forces to meet the challenges posed by China and North Korea "independently".[45] The Japanese Coast Guard and the Maritime Self Defence Forces (J.M.S.D.F.) have accordingly received higher budget allocations to enhance their lethality so as to meet external maritime threats from China and North Korea.[46] In pursuance of this "re-militarisation" strategy, the revised 2013 N.D.P.G. stated that the security situation around Japan "is becoming more severe as a result of the continuous strengthening of China's armed forces and intensification of its maritime and air activities" and has called for a "dynamic deterrence" strategy by maintaining an operation-ready force through sustained training and practice.[47] One can see that Japan's "re-militarisation" strategy is largely focused on building strong defence forces, especially naval forces. Japan has since then focused on building large "helicopter carriers" and destroyers to equip its naval forces to meet immediate contingencies. It commissioned its second *Izumo* class 24,000-tonne helicopter carrier JS *Kaga* (D.D.H. 184), in 2017, which has been called an "aircraft carrier-in-disguise", and can carry 14 helicopters and have a crew of 520 officers.[48]

When Shinzo Abe came back to power in 2012, he sought to replace Japan's dependent foreign policy with an "activist international role" for Japan.[49] Abe resuscitated nationalist perspective in foreign policy and set up a National Security Council based on the U.S. model to get a firm control on the Prime Minister's office in foreign and security policy. The N.S.C. brought out Japan's first ever National Security Strategy document which argued the need for international collective responses, tighter alliance relations and closer security partnerships in the context of changing balance of power in Asia and a range of emergent threats from cyber to maritime security.[50] In his first term as Prime Minister, Abe had initiated a southward strategy, looking beyond from Northeast Asia, with a desire to enhance Japanese military balancing in collaboration with the U.S. and other likeminded countries.[51] From 2006 onwards, Prime Minister Abe has proposed multilateral security frameworks in the Indo-Pacific comprising Japan, India, the U.S. and Australia such as the "Alliance of Democracies and Security architecture for the Asia Pacific region";[52] "confluence of the two sea" of 2007;[53] "democratic security diamond" of 2012,[54] and "quadrilateral dialogue" in 2017.[55] In his all cooperative mechanisms, Japan considered India as an equal partner along with its traditional allies of the U.S. and Australia. This is a major shift in Japan's approach towards India, as earlier India–Japan relations were marred by nuclear stalemate. Further, in his "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" Abe announced that "Japan will strengthen strategic collaboration with India, which has a historical relationship with East Africa, as well as the U.S. and

Australia".[56] Japan believes that since India is the largest resident power in the India Ocean, it would be beneficial for Japan to expand the cooperation to other regions, including the African coast. And, the proposed Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (A.A.G.C.) mooted by India and Japan could counter the Chinese "debt-trap" model soft power influence under the Belt and Road Initiative (B.R.I.) in Africa.[57] Tokyo wants to send a clear message to the international community that a possible Chinese order in the Indo-Pacific created through B.R.I. will not be acceptable for Japan. Japan believes in a regional order that is based on the rule-of law; transparency; openness; high quality rules for trade, investment and infrastructure; and the prevention of coercive actions against smaller states.[58] Along with the U.S.–Japan alliance, Japan believes that strengthening the partnership with India would protect its interests and together they will be able to counter China's hegemonic ambition in the Indo-Pacific.

India and the Indo-Pacific

India's primary focus is the Indian Ocean region, a large body of water with high profile chokepoints and competition for dominance by major powers. The Indian Navy's Maritime Doctrine clearly stipulates the objective that whatever happens in the I.O.R. can affect India's national security so "maintaining stability, security and safety at sea, particularly in the I.O.R." becomes the primary area of interest for the Indian Navy.[59] India's power and prestige at the global level surely will determine how India can cope with the emerging security challenges, both traditional and non-traditional, in the Indian Ocean region. With a robust naval force in its arsenal, India is looking to emerge as a "credible and relevant" naval power in the Indian Ocean and is ready to provide assistance to other countries. At the same time, India is looking to cooperate with all major powers to avoid the region being termed as a contest for rivalry. As the 2007 Maritime Military Strategy of Indian Navy says, a credible and relevant naval power, India "can act as a strong deterrent to prevent conflict, or to respond, should it become inevitable" in the I.O.R.[60] The Indian Navy has planned to become a 200 ship Navy by the next decade, including three aircraft carriers, next-generation frigates, destroyers, corvettes, missile vessels and conventional as well as nuclear submarines.[61] This will not only help to consolidate India's dominant resident power status in the I.O.R. but also prop up India's power and prestige in the entire Indo-Pacific.

Starting with the look-east policy in the 1990s and then the act-east under the current Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has steadily expanded its presence in the east of the Indian Ocean region. What began as an economic cooperation with the nations of South-east Asia, the cooperation has expanded into a full-spectrum engagement with major powers of East Asia, including Japan.[62] The maritime cooperation with the western-pacific littoral countries has emboldened India's presence in the western Pacific in recent times. Undoubtedly, India is apprehensive of China's assertiveness in both the East and South China Sea because if China gets a dominant position in the western Pacific, marginalising the U.S., Beijing will apply the same tactics towards the Indian Ocean region. To counter that, India is increasingly expanding its strategic presence in the western Pacific, including the South China Sea, in collaboration with friendly regional countries.[63] India wants to give a signal to Beijing that India is not a passive power when China tries to encircle India in the Indian Ocean region. This is done through maritime

exercises and naval ship's port calls as well as regular top level visits by both civilian and military leaders to East Asian countries. The trilateral Malabar naval exercises comprising India, the U.S. and Japan now alternatively takes place in the western Pacific and the Bay of Bengal. India is a regular participant in the Rim of Pacific (R.I.M.P.A.C.) Exercise, a U.S. led initiative of 25 countries to enhance maritime security operations in the region. India is an observer to the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (W.P.N.S.) comprising navies whose countries border the Pacific Ocean. India conducts bilateral naval exercises with Singapore and Indonesia as well. India's continuous naval presence in the South China Sea littorals through maritime exercise and port visits with friendly countries has irked China.[64] For instance, when the 2017 edition of S.I.M.B.E.X. (Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercises) was conducted in the South China Sea, China made its protest by saying that such activities should not hurt the "interests of other countries".[65]

India–Japan maritime security cooperation

India–Japan maritime security cooperation began at the dawn of the current century. Geostrategic developments in the maritime front have generated the necessity for close cooperation between India and Japan. It is a result of Japan's growing realisation of India's naval prowess in the I.O.R. that has brought it to build a stable and closer partnership with India for its security imperatives in the region. Japan initially looked upon the bilateral cooperation mainly to protect the S.L.O.C.s and India's security assistance for Japan-bound ships in the Indian Ocean after the *MV Alondra Rainbow* fiasco.[66] This rescue operation of *Alondra* was well appreciated by Japan and realised the importance of India in Japan security calculations, which has subsequently led to a closer coordination between the naval forces of Japan and India.[67] The first ever defence ministerial-level meeting took place in 2001 when the then Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes visited Japan. This was followed by the first Japan-India Security Dialogue and the Japan-India Military-to-Military Consultation. This has led to Japan's decision to discontinue the measures taken against India following the 1998 nuclear tests. It was a major boost for the relationship as the nuclear issue had been a major stumbling block in India–Japan relations during the previous decades. As a gesture of enhancing maritime cooperation, Japan participated in the International Fleet Review organised by India in Mumbai in February 2001. This was followed by the visit of a Maritime Self Defence Force (M.S.D.F.) squadron to Chennai in May 2001 and both countries hosted each other's naval chiefs. To commemorate the 1999 incident, a Coast Guard naval exercise on search and rescue operations along with port call visits and high-level meetings of both the services was also launched between India and Japan.[68]

Started by Japan's concern for S.L.O.C. protection in the Indian Ocean, the India–Japan relationship has now progressed to the next level, with the aim of balancing China. It is Japan's willingness to enhance its security cooperation with India to counter China that has brought both the countries much closer. When former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited New Delhi in 2005 he advocated to create a "new Asian era" in partnership with India and signed a "Japan–India Global Partnership" with an eight-point plan and launched High Level Strategic Dialogue on security matters.[69] The 2008 Joint Declaration strengthened bilateral defence cooperation and emphasised regular strategic dialogue including periodic staff talks between the respective ground forces and navies to enhance

cooperation and the "core ability" for maritime operation and disaster relief.[70] Considering India's strategic location in the I.O.R., Tokyo has identified India as a core strategic partner for Japan in the maritime domain. This has been stated in the 2011 *Defence of Japan* that, because of its location, India is an "extremely important country in a geopolitical sense for Japan".[71] Around 80 per cent of Japan bound oil and gas passes through the Indian Ocean, so protection of the Japanese energy route is critical to its security, which India can provide. This was highlighted in the 2013 National Security Strategy of Japan and states that

> India is also geopolitically important for Japan, as it is positioned in the centre of sea lanes of communication. Japan will strengthen bilateral relations in a broad range of areas, including maritime security, based on the bilateral Strategic and Global Partnership.[72]

Maritime security cooperation with Japan has not only enhanced India's presence in the western Pacific but it helped India in playing a crucial role in the US' strategic policy choices towards the Indo-Pacific. If the India–U.S. 2005 nuclear deal was a catalyst for a strong Indo–U.S. relationship, the increasing profile of India in the Indo-Pacific contributed to consider an Indo–Japan–U.S. triangular security partnership in the region. In a way Japan had shown a keen interest in participating in the Indo–U.S. Malabar exercise. In April 2007, for the first time Japan participated in a naval exercise with India off the coast of Okinawa after the 2007 edition of Malabar which was held there.[73] A P.A.S.S.E.X. naval exercise was conducted between India and Japan near the Boso Peninsula in central Japan on 16 April 2007, which saw the participation of four destroyers from Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force and three warships from the Indian Navy; another was conducted in August 2008 near Mumbai, in which the M.S.D.F. Kashima Training Ship and *Asagiri* and *Umagiri*, two frontline guided missile destroyers, and one Delhi class and one Corvette class ships from the Indian side also participated.[74] Taking the maritime cooperation a step further, the Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force (M.S.D.F.) participated along with the U.S., Australia and Singapore navies in Malabar 07, held in the Bay of Bengal from September 2007, and this included A.S.W., maritime interdiction and anti-piracy search and seizure operations.[75] However, the quadrilateral maritime initiative had to be abandoned prematurely because it received sharp criticism from China. Chinese officials dubbed the cooperation as a security alliance against China in Asia and touted the naval exercise as the "resurrection of Cold War mentality" in Asia and "the formation of small N.A.T.O. to resist China".[76] At the same time, the Quadrilateral Initiative was not well received among the Southeast Asian elites who perceived that if such a mechanism became an institutional one, their voices would never be heard and the security of Southeast Asia would become a part of the major power game. Subsequently, multilateral maritime security mechanism involving Japan, India and the U.S. have quietly been shelved.

Although the multilateral naval exercise was abandoned, Japan was keen to continue a formal cooperation between the two navies. During the visit of Indian Defence Minister, A.K. Antony to Tokyo in November 2011, both countries decided to conduct the first official bilateral naval exercise and a bilateral *JIMEX* was subsequently launched off Sagami Bay in Japan in June 2012, in which two Japanese destroyers and one maritime patrol aircraft and a helicopter participated while the Indian Navy was represented by I.N.S. Rana, I.N.S. Shivalik, I.N.S. Karmukh and I.N.S. Shakti.[77] From then onwards, India and Japan have conducted regular bilateral exercises annually on both the Indian

Ocean and the western Pacific, alternately. Also, JMSDF and the Indian Navy have enhanced their cooperation in the anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden and exchanged schedules for escorts of civilian vessels.[78] Japan wanted to join in the Malabar exercise along with the U.S., but New Delhi was anxious about how China would react to the efforts to expand the bilateral exercises into trilateral. In fact, India has been hesitant to become a member of any formal multilateral mechanism and did not even endorse Abe's proposal of security diamond architecture. However, maritime security cooperation with Japan is something which India cannot ignore, since it provides a good platform for reaching out to the western Pacific. Subsequently, India found a way to include Japan in the Malabar. When it is being held in the Pacific, it was decided to become trilateral but in the India Ocean it would be purely bilateral and thus, the 2014 edition held at Sasebo near Nagasaki was converted into a trilateral one.[79] Earlier, in 2009 and 2011, Japan had a modest representation in the Malabar when it was held in the western Pacific.

Concurrently, the US expected firm contributions from both India and Japan to ensure freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. pushed for a strong India–Japan partnership because it could be a regional level counter mechanism against China and believed it would be beneficial for the U.S. interest in the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, the prevailing great power's support is necessary for soft balancing to make it a vibrant mechanism. When the Indian Prime Minister met the U.S. President Barack Obama in September 2014, both countries "agreed to upgrade their existing bilateral exercise MALABAR",[80] arguably to include Japan as a regular participant.

The 2016 edition of Malabar held near Okinawa was the largest ever naval exercise, with over 100 assets – warships, fighters and surveillance aircrafts. The U.S. brought its super carrier Nimitz class ship U.S.S. John C Tennis, Japan fielded JS Hyuga, a helicopter carrier and destroyer – the largest warship in the stable of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force and India represented with two stealth frigates, I.N.S. Sahyadri and I.N.S. Satpura, a fleet tanker, I.N.S. Shakti, and I.N.S. Kirch – a missile corvette. The Malabar 2016 was not just a multilateral naval exercise, but a combined show of strength of the three navies to China as it was held about 400 kilometres from the contested Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. In the next year the Malabar exercise was held in the Bay of Bengal, for the first time Japan participated in the Malabar in the Indian Ocean after the 2007 fiasco.

Of late, Japan is more interested in strengthening the maritime security cooperation in a multilateral way involving the U.S. and other security partners. Importantly, Tokyo is enthusiastic about including India in such a multilateral mechanism, including the latest Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) mechanism mooted by the Abe administration in 2017. For Japan, India's involvement in the multilateral groupings in the Indo-Pacific is a best hedge against China. Although India has endorsed Quad as a quiet partner compared to the other three members, they have participated in all the official meetings. India strongly supports a bilateral mechanism between India and Japan while keeping the multilateral one as low profile. Indeed, a strong maritime security cooperation with Japan aims not only to enhance India's primacy in the Indian Ocean but also to establish its strategic presence in both Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific. However for Japan, a robust regional security network with India and other friendly countries could deter China from using its military for coercive purposes in the future. Also, such a partnership will enhance Japan's ambition of being a

"normal" military power with good relationships with major countries in the international system.

In fact, cooperation of defence forces at various levels will enhance the effectiveness of the balancing strategy. Both countries are now gradually stepping up their naval cooperation to make the balancing process more fruitful. When the Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh visited Japan in early September 2019 both countries decided to strengthen the maritime security cooperation to promote a "free and open Indo-Pacific", with an eye on countering China's creeping assertiveness in the water.[81] In the 11th Annual Summit Meeting between the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi and the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, held in October 2018, both countries decided to begin negotiations for Acquisition and Cross Service Agreement (A.C.S.A.) on the lines of India–U.S. Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (L.E.M.O.A.) inked in 2016.[82] The A.C.S.A. would facilitate navies of both the countries to use each other's bases, either at home or overseas, thereby fundamentally increasing a country's ability to sustain its presence in an expanded region. Accordingly, Indian warships operating in the western Pacific can refuel and replenish supplies at Japanese military bases and the Japanese ships in the Indian Ocean at Indian bases. This will ensure both navies broaden their scope of interaction and more synergy between the two that will foster an understanding of each other's operational strategies. Importantly, India could use Japan's recently set up military base in Djibouti. With Japanese support, the Indian Navy can conduct enhanced operations and frequent deployment of its naval ships in the western Pacific, akin to what the Chinese navy does in the Indian Ocean region.

At the same time both countries have not utilised the economic potential of maritime security cooperation. The sustainability of security cooperation is also dependent on economic dividends which can accrue through trade in defence products, joint development of systems and technology transfers. Both countries have not been able to resolve the Indian purchase of the Japanese U.S.-2 ShinMaywa amphibious aircraft. On the one hand Japan is not aggressive in searching the market for its defence products, while for India Japanese systems are too expensive. If both countries strengthen their cooperation in this area then it would not only be beneficial for them but would benefit the regional countries such as Southeast Asian states who are also enhancing their defence preparedness.

Conclusion

India–Japan maritime security cooperation is becoming a determining factor in the security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. Indian strategist Brahma Chellaney points out that the India–Japan partnership "serves as the linchpins for establishing an Indo-Pacific order based on the principles of the rule of law, free trade, freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of disputes".[83] Compared to China, India and Japan are democratic states and pursue a similar policy of transparency and openness in their dealings with the outside world. Similarly, both countries oppose a single country's dominance in Asia and endorse the need for a free and open Indo-Pacific. They want the U.S. to remain committed to ensuring security of the Indo-Pacific and do not want them to reduce their naval presence in the region. As both India and Japan are secondary powers in Asia, if a Chinese hegemony were ever to take place, then it would affect the independence and sovereignty of the secondary states and China would start asserting over them because

hegemons never want their position to be challenged. In this regard, it is imperative for the secondary states to join together and ensure that China should not get a hegemonic position in the Indo-Pacific. As a matter of fact, both countries will have much to say about the future trajectory of China's hegemonic rise. Their synchronised voice will have significant weightage in defining and establishing the rules of the Indo-Pacific region, shaping the evolving geostrategic landscape over the coming decades.

At the same time, India and Japan will continue with their internal balancing strategy with lesser external hard balancing. A hard balancing would provoke China, which would affect their bilateral relationship with Beijing, which both countries want to avoid. However, soft balancing can be converted into a hard balancing when the situation demands. Internal balancing will ensure that Japan will become a major challenger for Chinese supremacy in the western Pacific and the same for India in the Indian Ocean. However, currently, soft balancing would work better than hard balancing because both countries traditionally pursue a defensive approach in their security policy: India follows a "strategic autonomy" in which opposition to alliance formation is the fundamental principle of strategic autonomy, while Japan's pacifist constitution restricts it from making any military commitment to the India–Japan bilateral mechanism. Even Southeast Asian countries expect more contributions from both the states to the security of Southeast Asia. Indeed, the newly formed quadrilateral mechanism works well only if India and Japan become powerful states in their own backyards. Importantly, the preponderant power in Asia, the U.S., endorses a strong cooperation between India and Japan, powerful states in their own backyards, which would allow the U.S. to focus more on China and reduce its attention to safeguard the security of allies and partners. In such a way, if a regional balancing mechanism were to emerge in Asia in which India and Japan become active participants in collaboration with the U.S. and other likeminded countries, the region would become more stable and secure. The Trump administration has openly acknowledged the critical importance of the Japan–India relationship to achieving a "free and open" Indo-Pacific. In a way a strong India–Japan maritime security cooperation is critical to not only ensure freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific but also to the security of the whole of Asia. At the same time, the balancing tactics can be strengthened further through cooperation in the defence technology sector especially in naval platforms, an area which has not been fruitfully utilised. If India and Japan are involved in joint production of defence items, which can be sold to friendly countries in Asia, that will definitely embolden the balancing strategy well.

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