

INDIA-JAPAN MARITIME RELATIONS: IMPACT OF CHINA'S GROWING PRESENCE IN THE INDO PACIFIC

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ABSTRACT

Twenty first century international politics is radically different from what it used to be in the Cold War era and the immediate Post-Cold War era. The present world is witnessing a growing presence of China in the Indo-Pacific. This has led to various bilateral and multilateral endeavours in the region with an objective to contain China. As two strategic partners, Japan and India share common interests and concerns in the region. The article argues that a common threat perception, the increasing military and economic presence of China, has led to deeper maritime cooperation between India and Japan. China has played an influential role in their journey from Asian Acquaintances to Asian Amigos.

KEY WORDS: *India, Japan, Indo-Pacific, China instead*

The present century is significant due to certain developments that led to a radical strategic reconfiguration in international politics. To begin with, power and influence of the traditional superpowers declined considerably and many non-western states emerged as important actors. Many of these states started to come out of the shadow of the superpowers and started acting more independently to protect and further their economic and strategic interests. During this process, these states have identified a convergence of interests with those states who, as a norm, do not fall in the category of traditional partners. This has also led to alliances which would not have been perceivable during the Cold-War era.

A very significant development during this period is the rise of China and its increasing influence in its neighbourhood which it keeps redefining. The world has witnessed a confident China steadily trying to expand its influence through increased military presence and a robust economic and infrastructure assistance programme. This has forced many countries to rethink their foreign policy priorities and realign their policies in order to contain China. This has resulted in many coordinated and cooperative efforts by various states. While the manifest objective of these endeavours is commonly mentioned as protection and promotion of economic and strategic interest, it is undeniable that containment of China has always been an important latent objective.

Given this context, this paper argues that the growing presence of China in the Indo-Pacific has played an important role in the deepening of maritime relations between India and Japan. At the outset, this paper will give a brief account of the journey of India and Japan from being aloof Asians to Asian amigos. The subsequent section will attempt to define the concept of Indo-Pacific and will try to gauge the impact of Chinese activities in that region with special reference to the

concerns of India and Japan. The last section will sum up the coordinated efforts of India and Japan in the field of maritime cooperation.

INDIA-JAPAN BILATERAL RELATIONS

India and Japan can not be termed as traditional partners. Despite both being Asian powers, sharing common culture and traditions, India and Japan had not developed close relationship till the first decade of the present century. During the Second World War while Japan was one of the Axis powers, India, a British colony, was in the Allied camp. In the post war years, the relationship remained cold and formal mainly due to India's proclaimed policy of non-alignment and its close relationship with the former Soviet Union. "In the 1980s, the relation between Japan and India saw an upward trajectory...There were exchange visits by the heads of the two states and closer economic ties were developed".(Hassan, 2019:15) At this stage the relationship was majorly restricted to field of economics and the other areas of bilateral relations were not given much attention. The bilateral relations touched its lowest point in 1998 when, after Pokhran II, Japan condemned India's action and imposed sanctions. S. Jaishankar, presently India's Minister of External Affairs who was serving as the Deputy Chief of Mission at the Embassy of India in Tokyo at that time had noted that, "Pokhran-II caught India-Japan relations at the very time when efforts were underway to repair the relative neglect of the previous decades".(Jaishankar, 2000: 487) But this phase did not last too long. The then Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori visited India in 2000 which marked the beginning of a new era in bilateral relations. In 2001, Indian Prime (Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee visited Japan and both the Prime Ministers issued the Japan-India Joint declaration which could be termed as the first document to set the framework of a Comprehensive Security Dialogue.

(Paneerselvam, 2013:71) A watershed moment came in 2005, when the US announced its intention to get into a civil nuclear deal with India. It was evident that the US was ready to accept India as a security partner. The US attitude brought changes in the Japanese policy towards India and it had to shed its "ideological fault lines of cold war and start engaging with India".(Hassan, 2019:15)

Moreover, it was around this time that both India and Japan started re-defining their role in Asia. Japan, alarmed not only by the rising economic power of China, but also by its rapidly growing military power (Hughes,2009:841) began to bring changes to its foreign policy, especially while dealing with other Asian countries. This had its impact on India-Japan relations also. This was made easier by the fact that at that time India was also pursuing the Look East policy which helped India to look beyond South Asia and mend its relations with other Asian countries. As Hassan points out, "(i)n May 2007, US-Japan Security Consultative Committee proposed for an enduring security partnership with India because of India's sustained growth rate, shared values of democracy, rule of law and most importantly for the security of the sub-continent."(Hassan, op cit, 15-16)

THE NOTION OF INDO-PACIFIC

Indo-Pacific is more than a geo-spatial concept. Udayan Das explains it as "a mental map that has gained currency in recent time" (Das, 2019). Das adds that "in terms of geo-spatiality the Indo-Pacific is broadly to be understood as an interconnected space between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Its expanse is debated to be ranging from the Eastern Shores of Africa to the Western Coast of the United States" (Ibid).

As a concept, it has been evolved and defined over time by its various proponents. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe while addressing the Indian Parliament in August 2007, mentioned that "the Pacific and Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and prosperity."(Retrieved from <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>) A few years later, in 2012, while addressing the Indo-ASEAN Commemorative Summit, Dr. Manmohan Singh stressed the importance of a "a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region." (Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/09/how-the-indo-pacific-concept-is-changing-the-power-dynamics-in-asia/>) In 2013, Australia, in its Defence White Paper, had mentioned about the 'emerging Indo-Pacific strategic arc' which would have a significant influence on Australia's security environment. While each of these definitions is influenced by respective countries national interests, it is possible to find some common underlying principles or aspirations that have been instrumental in building a common platform for the coordinated efforts. They are security, stability and prosperity. There is a general consensus

among the actors concerned that the safety and security of the Indo-Pacific region is an inevitable pre-condition to protect their economic and strategic interests.

China's growing presence in the region has been a matter of concern. China has been seen by many as "a "long term challenge" that is "disrupting the potential for prosperity, openness and inclusivity" in the Indo Pacific." (Rej, 2019) China implements a two-edged policy in Indo-Pacific. It is gradually increasing its military presence in the region and at the same time it has been increasingly engaging with the island countries of the region by providing infrastructure assistance and economic aid. "(E)ver since it initiated its antipiracy mission off the coast of Somalia in 2008, Chinese Naval vessels have maintained an ongoing presence in the Indian Ocean".(Nagao,2019) Former Indian Navy chief had corroborated this view. (Economic Times, 2019) In the South China Sea, China has been engaged in reclamation of islands and building them artificially. Similar activities have been reported in Maldives also.(Rej, op cit) China has developed ports in Djibouti, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar.(Hassan op.cit)

There is a striking commonality between India and Japan vis-à-vis their relationship with China. Both have territorial disputes with China. India has a long-drawn border dispute with China, while Japan and China have irreconcilable views regarding Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Despite these prolonged disputes, both enjoy strong economic relations with China which is vital for both the countries' economic strength. Moreover, the China's presence in the Indo-Pacific region is a cause of concern for both India and Japan. A strong Chinese presence in the region is likely to adversely impact their economic and strategic interests.

CHINA IN THE INDO-PACIFIC AND THE CONCERNS OF INDIA AND JAPAN: POINTS OF CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE

The following section makes an attempt to gauge what is at stake for each country and how different or similar are their policies. An attempt is made to look at their respective policies on South China Sea and Indian Ocean.

South China Sea :In a globalized world security is not just defined in geographical terms. Though both do not belong to the Southeast Asian littoral,(Nagao, 2017) India and Japan have reasons to be concerned about Chinese incursive activities in the South China Sea. It is estimated that roughly 55 percent of India's trade passes through the South China Sea and the Malacca Straits.(Indian Express, 9 Feb 2017) And 90 percent of Japan's oil imports pass through South China Sea. (Retrieved from <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/japans-delicate-balancing-act-the-south-china-sea-213430>)Resultantly, ensuring the freedom of navigation and safety of the sea lanes of communication are of utmost importance to protect the economic interests of both India and Japan. Besides ensuring a

safe transit of trade, India has also been concerned about the safety of its commercial activities. For instance, China has been highly critical of the joint venture by India's ONGC Videsh Ltd and Petro Vietnam for oil exploration of in the South China Sea.(Granados, 2018, p128) Nevertheless, India's involvement in the South China Sea is rather limited and India has always followed a policy of non-intervention. As Abhijit Singh points out, "when it comes to South China Sea security issues, India chooses to play it safe".(Singh 2019)

At the same time Japan has multi-layered and inter-linked concerns in South China Sea. Apart from the economic interest, Japan's south China Sea policy is also influenced by its relationship with the United States and especially with the Southeast Asian littoral countries.(Drifte, 2016:12) Besides, Japan's concerns are exacerbated by the interdependence of the security of the South China Sea and the East China Sea.(Ibid :15) This has resulted in Japan adopting a more active role in the South China Sea. Its policies are aligned with the US policies and since 2012, "Japan has consistently proposed that it is ready to participate more robustly in the international community's efforts to maintain the existing international order and norms."(Tatsumi, 2015)

Indian Ocean : Both India and Japan are cautious of the growing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. While India faces a direct threat by the presence of Chinese naval ships in the Indian Ocean, it is also concerned about the security implications of the growing Chinese influence on the Indian Ocean countries like Sri Lanka, Maldives and Seychelles. "China's economic leverage over these countries is fungible. Indeed, China seeks to circumscribe the foreign policy choices of these countries and in the process challenge India's pre-eminent position in the Indian Ocean."(Rej, op. cit) For Japan, the Chinese presence in Indian Ocean has a direct impact on its economic interests. The Strait of Malacca is the main passage between Indian Ocean and South China Sea and is vital life line for Japan's international trade. "A greater Chinese presence in the region might necessitate the deployment of Japanese ships to defend the Indian Ocean, which is a vital sea lane for Japan."(Nagao, op cit no 15) While their concerns pertaining to the Indo-Pacific could be the same as what other actors in the region may have, a shared set of values and beliefs make it easier for India and Japan to join hands in this quest for peace and security. Democracy, respect for international law and sovereign rights of states are some such values which are deep rooted in both these political systems. Both want and are committed towards a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region based on a rules-based order.(Economic Times 4 Nov 2019)

STRENGTHENING MARITIME COOPERATION

These shared concerns have definitely resulted in deeper maritime cooperation. Initially, maritime cooperation was limited rare goodwill visits and interaction between Indian and

Japanese Coast Guards. There were also deployments of JMSDF vessels in the Indian Ocean since 2001, to support the US's 'war on terror'.(Paneerselvam, op cit,92) Presently, India-Japan maritime cooperation is conducted at three different levels: joint exercises (bilateral and multilateral), dialogue and exchange of information like Navy to Navy Staff Talks and assistance in infrastructure development and facilities. In 2007, Japan participated in the MALABAR Exercise for the first time much to the chagrin of China. In June 2007, days after Japan, India, the US and Australia held a quadrilateral consultation, China issued demarches to all the four countries. (Varadarajan, 2007) Following this Japan did not participate in then MALABAR till 2015.

India-Japan Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) was first held in 2013 and then again in 2018 which is "indicative of an upswing in the Indo-Japanese defence relations and the continued efforts of both governments to work closely to enhance safety and security of the global commons in keeping with rule-based order."(Economic Times, 7 Oct 2018) Since 2015, Japan has been a permanent participant of MALABAR exercise. (Raghuvanshi, 2015)

Both the countries have been keen on exploring more avenues of cooperation. There have been unconfirmed reports that Japan is interested in funding for construction new Electronic Intelligence (ELINT)/Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) stations along the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.(Paneerselvam, op. cit, Gupta, 2016) They are also collaborating in laying submarine optical fibre cables connecting Chennai and Andaman Island.(Baruah, 2018) Some reports also mention Tokyo's interest in partnering with New Delhi in a composite infrastructure project at Chabahar, including the construction of port and an industrial complex" (Gupta, 2016). Besides these bilateral developments, both are part of the revived Quad. In November 2017, on the sidelines of the ASEAN and East Asia Summit, India, Japan, the US and Australia held a meeting and issued separate statements calling for a free and open Indo-Pacific; a rules-based order; freedom of navigation and overflight; and respect for international law and maritime security. (Choong, 2018)

Along with the increased cooperative activities is what is evident and more significant is the fact that both have been ready to explore more areas of cooperation and is brazenly vocal about it. Both India and Japan have been vocal about their cooperative endeavours in the Indo-Pacific. Though both India and Japan have avoided directly referring Chinese threat as a major driving force behind increased bilateral maritime cooperation, these concerted efforts do indicate the impact of china on the bilateral relations. China is unlikely to adopt a policy recourse in the near future. This would mean that China will continue asserting itself in the Indo-Pacific. This is very

likely to lead to more robust cooperation between India and Japan, especially in the maritime field.

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