

The Nautical Significance of India-Japan Relationship

Rinreichon H. Shimray, North Eastern Hill University, India

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Abstract

With the Indo-Pacific region gaining traction in the geopolitical dimension of the current global political theatre, India and Japan with their geostrategic locations stand at key positions to play necessary roles in ensuring a free, open and secure seas in terms of both trade and security in the region. Sharing similar views with regard to the freedom of navigation and securing the open seas and facing common security dilemma and threats, the importance of the relationship between two of the oldest civilisations of the continent becomes significant especially in the maritime dimension. Hence, this paper seeks to study the importance of the Indo-Pacific region, the nautical relationship between India and Japan and the role that the two countries can play with each other and collectively with others to ensure that the security of the region remains intact while maintaining the sovereignty of the region and not become a pawn in the greater political theatre.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, India, Japan, Nautical Significance, Naval Engagements

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Introduction

Becoming the catch phrase of the current geopolitical theatre of the world, the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) has gained immense attention among key players and world powers. Geographically, the IPR is understood as an interconnected space between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. (Das, 2019). In a system where the sea carries 80 percent of trade by volume and 70 percent by value, the IPR carries 60 percent of that volume. (Francoise, 2021). The region contains key maritime choke points, some of which includes the Panama Canal, the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca among others. The Strait of Malacca, one of the world's narrowest choke points, provides a critical connection between China, India and Southeast Asia. (Ang, 2021). The Strait's significance can be underlined in the reality that it links the two oceans i.e., the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean and is the shortest route between the Middle East and the emerging Asian markets. If the Strait of Malacca were blocked, nearly half of the world's fleet would be required to reroute around the Indonesian archipelago, such as through the Lombok Strait between the Indonesian islands of Bali and Lombok, or through the Sunda Strait between Java and Sumatra. Rerouting would tie up global shipping capacity, add to shipping costs, and potentially affect energy price. (eia, 2021) About more than 70 percent of China's petroleum and liquified natural gas exports is shipped through the Strait of Malacca, making it critical for China's energy security policy. (Paszak, 2021). While the region has gained immense limelight, nations like China, India and Japan are heavily dependent on the safety and security of such sea lanes for meeting their energy and trade requirements. Geographical location of India and Japan also inextricably links their security, commerce and trade with the maritime domain. Both India and Japan are heavily dependent on oceans, for 90% of their trade is carried via crucial International Sea Lanes (ISLs) in the IPR. (Pandey, 2021) The need to secure the sea lanes while maintaining free and open seas, the criticality of having efficient maritime infrastructure and building resilient corridors across the region occupy significance for the India and Japan.

India-Japan's relations: Its Nautical Significance

India and Japan, two maritime nations, located strategically in the IPR share common views in ensuring free movement of goods and services and in securing the freedom of navigation and open and secure seas. They share the rare advantage of being two friendly nations that have, since the establishment of its diplomatic ties in 1952, freedom from conflict of any kind. The year 2022 marks the golden jubilee celebration of establishing diplomatic ties between India and Japan, two democratic nations that have rich historical and cultural linkages. From gifting of an elephant in 1949 by the Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru to the Ueno Zoo, Tokyo bringing a ray of light into the lives of the Japanese people who were yet to recover from the defeat in the war (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 2021) to Japan supporting India during the latter's balance of payment crisis in 1991 the relationship between the two countries stands out in being free from any kind of dispute be it ideological, cultural or territorial. (Ministry of External Affairs, GOI, July 2013) The progressive development in the ties between the two nations has continued towards a growing trajectory. Visits by the leaders of the two nations continue to bring about benefits for the two friendly nations. Be it the establishment of 'Global Partnership' between the two in 2000 during Prime Minister's Yoshiro Mori that led to a qualitative shift in the relations between the two, the commencement of the 'Annual Summits' between them in 2006 when the two countries decided to establish 'Strategic and Global Partnership' that eventually led to the upgradation of the relation to that of 'Special Strategic and Global Partnership' in 2014

during Prime Minister's Narendra Modi's visit to Japan. (Ministry of External Affairs, GOI, February 2021)

Harbouring the universal values of democracy, open society, human rights, rule of law and market economy and share common interests in promoting peace, stability and prosperity in Asia and the world, India and Japan share the understanding that the bilateral relationship between them has the largest potential for growth and that a strong, prosperous and dynamic India is in the interest of Japan and a strong, prosperous and dynamic Japan is in the interest of India. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August, 2007) Japan has therefore continued to invest in critical infrastructure projects in India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) closely located to the Strait of Malacca. (Ministry of External Affairs, GOI, March, 2022). Hence, not only have the two countries established strong economic ties with India continuously being one of the largest recipient of Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 2021) and Japan being one of the key infrastructural investors of India, the two countries have also started joint collaborations in third countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Africa to promote equitable and transparent growth for all in the Indo-Pacific region. (PM India, October 2018)

The marked importance of IPR with specific regard to the ties between India and Japan could be traced back to the speech made by the Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, during his visit to India in 2007. Titled, "Confluence of the Two Seas", Prime Minister Abe pointed out the dynamic coupling of the Indian and the Pacific Ocean as seas of freedom and prosperity and how the being of a "broader Asia" breaking the geographical boundaries have begun to take form. He further pointed out the responsibility of the two nations in ensuring that the seas become the seas of clearest transparency. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 2007) The two countries have also launched a bilateral Shipping Policy Forum, a Maritime Security Dialogue, Cybersecurity Dialogue alongside their strategic Dialogue Forum. Moreover, the two countries are party to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) alongside the United States and Australia which was formed primarily with the objective to work for a free, open prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific. (What is Quad?, Business Standard)

The naval engagements between the two nations have seen steady growth and development. The navies of the two countries have been paving the way for stronger relations between the two countries. (Roy, 2020) While India-Japan maritime security cooperation began with the Coast Guards of the two countries in the aftermath of the Alondra Rainbow incident in 1999 and later gained traction with the formation of the ad-hoc Tsunami Core Group in 2004 with other two countries, the USA and Australia, (Pannerselvam, 2016) India and Japan continued to carry on their maritime cooperation activities with each other and other countries. The move towards greater maritime engagement between the two was given a push when the two nations began their maiden bilateral naval exercise Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) in 2012 enhancing greater maritime security cooperation and interoperability. (Press Information Bureau, 2013). Increased cooperation in terms of naval engagements through participation in exercises such as MILAN and MALABAR have been witnessed with both the countries making efforts to strengthen their maritime ties. The two countries have also signed strategic agreements for greater mobility and interoperability with their armed forces. Partnership between India and Japan to continue anti-piracy efforts under Share Awareness and De-Confliction (SHADE). (Pannerselvam, 2016)

India and Japan apart from being key players in the region have key stakes in maintaining secure and open seas and they share the interest in preventing any country from establishing hegemony in the region. (Jeffrey Hornung, 2013) While heavily dependent on the maritime trade routes for their needs and requirements, the security and strategic dimension have heavy bearing on the nations making it imperative for both the countries to develop synergies with each other and also with like-minded countries to ensure that the region remains free from any source of conflict. Having policy synergy between the two points out an important factor in developing such cooperation. With India's Act East Policy and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiative that aims to promote and establish rule of law, freedom of navigation and free trade while pursuing economic prosperity and commitment to establish peace and stability, provide the two countries to work together and with other countries to achieve these objectives. Strengthening the maritime ties with the countries in the region will therefore play an important part in ensuring that the seas remain free and open. It is also significant as in the realisation that both the countries accept and respect the centrality of the Association of South East Asian nations (ASEAN) in the IPR. India and Japan, hence through their naval engagements can broaden the sphere of engagements and solidify the ASEAN as the centre towards achieving a free and open IPR. The two countries should work towards enhancing cooperation in terms of building greater naval capacity, enhancing greater naval multilateral and bilateral exercises providing technical capacity and encourage better sharing information efforts among the littoral states among others to maintain the balance in the region.

The other countries in the region are not unaware of the political and strategic reality. Protecting their interests and autonomy remains their objectives and having dependable and reliable partners to balance the weight cannot be undervalued or underestimated. India and Japan, in their respective position, can work together and with others to develop the capacity to balance the weight.

Conclusion

The relationship between India and Japan continue to stand the test of time. The two countries face similar security concerns, both in their territorial areas and beyond their territories. They also face the same dilemma of ensuring a rule-based order while witnessing the rise of their neighbour, China. Well aware of the changing world order and realities that such changes will bring about in the region in particular and the world in general. As reiterated by Shinzo Abe, India and Japan are key players that will play a significant role in the region. With the region termed as the most dynamic region, it is imperative that the region remains stable to exploit its full potential. The need to form consensus and promote cooperation while containing any form of escalation of conflict will be the responsibility of not one but all the nations and here in India and Japan can work together and with others to bring about the collaboration to ensure that the Indo-Pacific region remains not only open and secure but also a peaceful one functioning under the principles of rule-based order.

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