



Ensuring Freedom of Navigation and Maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond; How close Indo-Japanese cooperation can be the anchor of strategic stability in this crucial region

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Abstract

The headlines of the latter part of the year 2023 were dominated by the Israel-Hamas war. Overshadowed by the war were two critical developments in the Indo-Pacific and adjacent regions that could have far-reaching implications for global maritime shipping and international trade – the attack by Houthi rebels in the Red Sea and the brewing tensions in the South China Sea. The incessant attack by Yemen’s Iran-backed Houthi rebels in the Red Sea, Bab-al-Mandab strait (a strategic choke-point)* and the Gulf of Aden has prompted insurance companies to jack up premiums significantly and cargo shipping companies to re-route their ships avoiding the Suez Canal. Initial assessment of the impact of these attacks suggests that India alone may see a reduction of \$30 Billion worth of exports due to the surge in commercial shipping rates. Meanwhile, tensions are increasing in the South China Sea between Philippines and People’s Republic of China (PRC) with People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) using water cannons on Filipino vessels fishing in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)*. Both events can spiral into a wider conflict with dire implications for the global economy. The article explores how Indo-Japan maritime cooperation can ensure peace and stability in this crucial region.

Introduction

On December 27th, 2023 United States Central Command (USCENTCOM) spokesperson released a press statement announcing the downing of twelve one-way attack drones, three anti-ship ballistic missiles, and two land attack cruise missiles by USS Laboon and F/A-18 super hornets of the Eisenhower carrier strike group fired by the Yemen’s Iran-backed Houthi rebels in the Southern Red Sea. The downing marked the 21st attempted attack by the Yemeni Houthis on International shipping since the start of the Israel-Hamas war. The move comes against the backdrop of an unprecedented and unprovoked drone attack on the Indian merchant ship MT Chem Pluto in the Arabian Sea heading towards Mangalore and transporting crude oil. The attack elicited a fiery reaction from New Delhi, with Defense Minister Rajnath Singh vowing to find the perpetrators “from the bottom of the ocean” and taking stringent action against them. The Indian Navy, on its part, deployed five frontline guided missile destroyers along with a logistics tanker, Boeing P8-I anti-submarine warfare

aircraft, and long endurance Sea Guardian drone for surveillance and reconnaissance* in the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea to protect commercial shipping and deter further attacks against Indian merchant ships.

Meanwhile, the hostility of Beijing in the South and East China Sea continues, the latest victim being the island nation of Philippines. On December 10th, 2023, Philippines coastguard spokesperson Jay Terrela accused the PLAN of engaging in reckless and dangerous maneuvers, deploying and firing water cannons on civilian fishing vessels, and intentionally ramming supply vessels and coast guard ships in a bid to assert its sovereignty in the South China Sea and coerce Manila to acquiesce to its unlawful claims. The nine-dash line, the basis of China's claim to sovereignty in the South China Sea, was rejected by an international tribunal based in the Hague in July 2016. The final and binding arbitral ruling, as per the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS)*, decided that Beijing has no legal basis for its maritime claim in the South China Sea, a ruling that PRC rejected as null and void.

The aggression against the island nation of Philippines is the latest example in a pattern of belligerent behavior of Beijing against its neighbors, including other ASEAN countries* and Japan. The aggression has prompted Manila to reverse the policy initiated under the previous regime of Mr. Duterte, moving away from the United States and pivoting towards other regional countries, including China. Under the premiership of the newly elected President, Mr. Ferdinand Marcos, Manila has strengthened its defense cooperation with the United States to enhance its defense capabilities and reinforce its deterrence posture in the region. Both sides have reiterated their commitment to the 1951 US-Philippines mutual defense treaty (MDT) with the US Indo-pacific command (USINDOPASCOM) conducting joint patrols with the armed forces of Philippines in the South China Sea as a signal of US commitment to upholding freedom of navigation in the region. It is pertinent to mention that Japan has a longstanding dispute with the PRC over the Senkaku island in the East China Sea. Both events allude to the volatility and insecurity building up in the Indo-Pacific region, an essential driver of global maritime trade and global economic growth in the future.

Trade Dynamics of Indo-Pacific Region

The Indo-Pacific region is home to the world's fastest-growing markets. Stretching from the US West Coast to India's west coast, the region has the dynamic Association of South East Asian Countries (ASEAN) at its center. Encompassing 40 economies and over four billion people, the annual economic activity in the region is one-third of the global economic activity, exceeding a whopping \$47 trillion US dollars. According to several projections, by 2040, the region will account for more than half of the global economy and will be home to more than two-thirds of the global middle class. As of today, 50% of the global trade and 40% of the oil passes through the Indo-Pacific region. More than 20% of global shipping passes annually only in the South China Sea.

Given this background, upholding freedom of navigation and protecting rules-based international order is crucial to ensuring the prosperity and economic well-being of the people of the region and beyond. This is especially true for an import-dependent economy

like India, which relies heavily on imported energy from abroad to fuel its economy. In light of this, the relentless attack by Houthis, a Yemen-based militant group, on international shipping raises some profound questions for maritime security in capitals around the world. The notion that a rag-tag militant group of one of the poorest countries in the world can carry out low-cost sea-denial operations with impunity and disrupt close to 20% of the international shipping in one of the busiest and most important shipping lanes in the world while the sea control operations come at an exorbitant cost, requiring years of hefty financial and manpower investment by responsible actors around the world, raises questions on the approach to counter these threats going forward. ([A \\$2M missile vs. a \\$2,000 drone: Pentagon worried over cost of Houthi attacks - POLITICO](#)). As highlighted by the MT Chem Pluto incident, the disruption, allegedly by Iranian-backed militants, has moved beyond the Red Sea, in the Arabian Sea, in India's backyard and exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The escalation must elicit a strong response, as highlighted by the speech of the defense minister, to deter malign actors from engaging in any further disruptive activity to commercial shipping and undermining India's maritime interest.

Contemporary situation of Indian Navy

The heightened tensions in the region come at a time when the Indian Navy is undergoing a slow but steady modernization drive to overcome the challenges to maritime security in the future and become a net security provider in the region. The aspiration to be the net security provider in the region, as repeatedly highlighted by the defense minister over the years, hasn't translated into adequate capital expenditure to modernize and equip the Navy with the resources needed to establish deterrence in the region. Plagued with anaemic capital expenditure for years, the lack of adequate sea control assets with the Indian Navy is accentuated during such a crisis. Given the current situation, it is imperative that the country finds willing partners that share a common vital interest in ensuring maritime security and forges a close alliance that can be leveraged during such times of crisis.

Scope of Indo-Japan maritime security cooperation

India and Japan are part of the QUAD*, a maritime alliance of four powerful countries with a common interest in ensuring strategic stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Both countries are two robust democracies in the region that share a common value set and virtually identical maritime interests in the region. The defense budget of both countries added together exceeds 110 billion US Dollars, and the combined strength of the navies of both countries constitutes a formidable military force in the region. With the US election looming large this year and the possibility of the resurrection of the 'America First' political force potent, the question of burden sharing will inevitably surface in domestic US polity. In such a scenario, it is imperative that both countries further explore ways to deepen cooperation to protect rules-based international order in a region that both countries call their home. (Incidentally, MT Chem Pluto, the ship allegedly attacked by Houthi rebels, was owned by a Japanese company).

Historically, Japan has had a pacifist defense posture in the region. Reeling from its defeat in World War II, the island nation concentrated much of its national resources on revamping the country economically and transforming it into an industrial powerhouse in the 21st century. Recognizing the need for an aggressive defense posture as a means of deterrence, Japan, under the visionary premiership of Mr. Shinzo Abe, pivoted from a pacifist defense approach to a more aggressive one. Under Mr. Abe, the country breached the post-World War II ban on exercising the right of collective defense, boosted defense spending, expanded its military alliance with the US, and implemented a slew of reforms in the country's security establishment. In December 2018, the Japanese cabinet approved the Japanese maritime defense forces plan to modify the Izumo class destroyer into an aircraft carrier, the first since World War II. Given that the island nation has recently embarked on developing its armed forces, it will take decades to strengthen the sinews of its defense posture adequately to defend its interests on its own.

Exploring different contours of Indo-Japan Maritime cooperation

The constraints of both countries, heightened tensions in the region, and the subsequent inadequate response further serves as an impetus for both countries to deepen cooperation in the maritime domain. Historically, both countries have given sea control assets* precedence over sea denial assets*. For this to continue while maintaining the required deterrence posture in the region, considering the budget constraints, both countries should explore the development of complementary interoperable systems or joint development of maritime security assets. Concomitantly, this would also lead to better understanding and close cooperation between the navy personnel of both countries. This should be supplemented by technology transfers, technical collaboration, and sharing of best practices and methodologies of naval cooperation. The annual Japan-India maritime exercise (JIMEX) has proved to be an effective way to improve understanding and interoperability and ensure maritime domain awareness (MDA)* between both navies. Expanding the scope, size, and complexity of the exercise should be prioritized to build on the initial success of this exercise.

Although India remains wary of signing any mutual security deal, both countries should contemplate signing a NATO-esque maritime security alliance. In light of recent incidents in the Red Sea, the maritime security alliance should mandate a joint military response (Equivalent to Article 5 of the NATO Alliance)* in case of any unilateral aggression by any "disruptors" in the region. The deliberate ambiguity for the term "disruptor," which might or might not mean a sovereign state, can serve as a means to unplug for India while enhancing the deterrence posture of both the countries in the region and signaling to Beijing the commitment of both the countries to ensure mutual security and deepen cooperation in the maritime domain.

As highlighted by the recent speech of the US ambassador to Japan, an essential aspect of enhancing deterrence posture in any theater is the round-the-clock presence of naval military assets and concomitant 'ecosystem' of other maritime security assets for surveillance, reconnaissance and other related activities. As part of that goal, the United States has recently launched Ship Repair Council Japan to link the defense industries of both countries and take

advantage of Japanese ship expertise. The initiative would allow US ships in the theatre access to Japanese shipyards to undergo extensive repair, maintenance, and overhauls and leverage Japan's existing maritime shipyard infrastructure. The measure helps US ships to stay for an extended period in the South China Sea and East China Sea theatre, eliminating the requirement for US ships to travel to the US mainland for maintenance and overhaul activities, while strengthening defense cooperation between both countries. The proposed Indo-Japan Joint Maritime Security Treaty (IJJMST) also must include an elaborate means for both countries to use the existing shipyard infrastructure for ships in nearby theaters to undergo repair, maintenance, and overhaul activities. This would not only allow the naval assets of both countries to stay for extended periods in different theatres in the region but facilitate the vital exchange of technical expertise and technology transfers and in the process strengthen the defense cooperation between both countries.

Another important contour of this relationship should be exporting cutting-edge technology to ASEAN countries to enhance their deterrence posture against Chinese expansion in the region. Japan recently announced its first Air surveillance radar system delivery to the Philippines Air force (PAF). On the Other hand, India has signed a 375 million US dollar deal with the Philippines to deliver supersonic cruise missile Brahmos to the island nation to counter the expansionist design of China. Moreover, Indonesia and Vietnam have also expressed their interest to buy Brahmos supersonic cruise missile. Developing interoperable complementary naval systems or joint maritime security assets can further advance this objective to arm other ASEAN countries to counter Beijing's unlawful claims in the South China Sea.

Conclusion

If done assiduously, the Indo-Japan alliance can ensure a free and open Indo-pacific that alleviates the region to become the melting pot of overarching global economic activity that ushers in a bright future for the people of the region while protecting the legitimate rights of all regional actors including China. The recent maritime incidents only reinforce the need for close cooperation between both countries under the umbrella of a formal alliance. They should incentivize both countries to forge a close alliance to avoid further maritime disruptions in this crucial region.

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Darsh hails from the industrial city of Vadodara in the state of Gujarat. He is a mechanical engineer and has two years' experience in capital equipment sales and marketing. During his work experience he has dealt with some of India's biggest clients of pharmaceutical and chemical industry. He is abjectly interested in marketing analytics and worked extensively on Power-Bi to seamlessly integrate sales with analytics during his work experience. Fuelled by a deep-seated interest in history, geopolitics, economics, and the Indo-Japan relationship, Darsh is captivated by Japan's post-World War II economic resurgence. Eager to delve into this transformative period, Japan's political economy and national security policy, he envisions making substantive contributions to the academic excellence of the Indo-Japan Research Center, aligning his practical insights with a scholarly exploration of the intricate dynamics of Japan's history and politics and delving into the potential for enhanced collaboration between India and Japan across different sectors.

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Terminology:

1. **Choke point:** In Maritime Security strategy, a choke point or sometimes called a bottleneck, is a maritime passage through a critical waterway such as strait that can block access to critical regions for commercial shipping. Some of the important choke points in the world are Bab-Al-Mandab, Strait of Hormuz and the Malacca Strait.
2. **Exclusive Economic Zone:** An exclusive economic zone, as prescribed by the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, is an area of the sea in which a sovereign state has exclusive rights regarding the exploration and use of marine resources, including energy production from water and wind.
3. **Reconnaissance:** In military operations, military reconnaissance or scouting is the exploration of an area by military forces to obtain information about enemy forces, the terrain, and civil activities in the area of operations.
4. **ASEAN Countries :** An abbreviation for the Association of Southeast Asian Nation, ASEAN is a political and economic union of 10 states in Southeast Asia. The member states include Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia.
5. **Sea Control vs Sea Denial:** Sea denial is a military term for preventing an enemy from using the sea. It does not necessarily imply that the denier can itself use the sea. It is a parallel concept to sea control, which implies that that controlling force cannot be successfully attacked. Sea denial assets example includes naval mines, anti-ship missiles, drones, and submarines. Sea Denial operations seek to hinder access to certain areas.
6. **United Nation Convention of the law of the Sea (UNCLOS):** The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), also called the Law of the Sea Convention or the Law of the Sea Treaty, is an international agreement that establishes a legal framework for all marine and maritime activities. As of May 2023, 168 countries and the European Union are parties to the convention.

7. **QUAD:** According to Australian foreign Ministry, The Quad is a diplomatic partnership between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States committed to supporting an open, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and resilient. It is a key pillar in Australia's foreign policy and complements our bilateral, regional, and multilateral cooperation, including with partners in Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

8. **Maritime Domain Awareness:** Maritime domain awareness is the effective understanding of anything associated with the maritime domain that could impact security, safety, the economy or the marine environment,” according to the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

9. **Article 5 of the NATO Alliance:** North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is an intergovernmental military alliance of 31 member states – 29 European and two North American. Established in the aftermath of World War II, the organization implemented the North Atlantic Treaty, signed in Washington, D.C., on 4 April 1949. NATO is a collective security system: its independent member states agree to defend each other against attacks by third parties. During the Cold War, NATO operated as a check on the threat posed by the Soviet Union.

Article 5 provides that if a NATO Ally is the victim of an armed attack, each and every other member of the Alliance will consider this act of violence as an armed attack against all members and will take the actions it deems necessary to assist the Ally attacked.