



# ANCHORING INDO-JAPANESE MARITIME RELATIONS

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*Ensuring security of energy supplies and safeguarding sea lines of communication are underpinning increasing maritime ties between the net-energy importers of India and Japan. At the same time, argues Rupakjyoti Borah, strategic cooperation is being spurred by mutual concerns regarding China's increasingly assertive posture and ambitions in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea.*

Japan and India have long-standing historical ties, but for much of the post-World War II period their relations were rocky as they found themselves on different sides of the Cold War divide. While Japan became a steadfast U.S. ally, India became one of the founding members of the non-aligned movement, albeit fostering close ties with the Soviet Union. Moving into the twenty-first century, the two countries have sought to bolster their relations. Japan was the first country to be visited by Narendra Modi outside the immediate neighbourhood after he became prime minister in May 2014. Underpinned by their common concerns in the Indo-Pacific region, not least increasing the security of energy imports, maritime cooperation has become an important dimension of their bilateral relations. While such cooperation is still in its nascent stage, the growing synergy between the two nations may also lead to the sharpening of competition with China over naval power and energy supply routes in the Indian Ocean.

## Developing Maritime Ties

Naval relations between India and Japan started to develop in earnest only after the rescue of the Japanese-owned *Alondra Rainbow* by the Indian Coast Guard and Navy in 1999. Since then, relations have progressed steadily with joint exercises between the coast guards of the two countries which started in 1999. Furthermore, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force participated in joint naval exercises with the Indian Navy and the U.S. Navy as part of the “Malabar” exercises for the first time in 2007. In a highly significant move, the Indian and Japanese navies held their first-ever bilateral naval exercise in 2012. In addition, the two countries held their first-ever maritime affairs dialogue in January 2013.

Japan and India, along with the navies of Australia and the United States, also cooperated in the relief and rescue efforts after the disastrous Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. In 2007, these four countries came together once again to form the “Quadrilateral Initiative.” Entailing cooperation to ensure joint military interoperability and joint response to natural calamities, among others, it was subsequently aborted after protests from China. Nevertheless, cooperation has extended to other formats such as a trilateral dialogue between Japan, India, and the U.S., which started in December 2011. In January this year the foreign ministers of India and Japan resolved to strengthening the “trilateral alliance,” a component of which is Japan’s Self-Defense Forces continuing to take part in joint naval exercises between India and the U.S. Japan has further stationed some Self-Defence Forces in Djibouti for anti-piracy operations, and the Indian Navy plays a key role, together with other international actors, in ensuring the safety of the sea lanes of communication in this part of the world.

Cooperation also encompasses the purchase of maritime military hardware. India is negotiating with Japan for the purchase of Japanese-made ShinMaywa US-2 amphibious aircraft. If and when the deal for the supply of these US-2 aircraft to India goes through, it will represent the first time that India has bought military hardware from Japan and, notably, the first sales of weapons systems by Japan in the post-World War-II era.

## Common Stakes and Concerns

So what then is driving this increased cooperation? Shared concerns regarding freedom of navigation and the safe transportation of energy cargo in the Indo-Pacific region are two of the main factors bringing Japan and India closer



together in the maritime realm.

With the exception of the United States, the Indian Navy is the predominant naval power in the Indian Ocean and hence is very critical for Japan's energy security. Japan is a net-energy importer and the bulk of its energy imports come from the Middle East and are transported through sea lanes in the Indian Ocean. In the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan following the Great East Japan earthquake of March 2011, Japan's nuclear power sector has been paralysed. Hence, for the foreseeable future, Japan's reliance on energy imports will further increase and therefore its maritime cooperation with India is bound to become still more important.

As one of the fastest growing economies in the world, India has a burgeoning demand for energy imports of its own. Accordingly, for India's continued growth, keeping the sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean open is sine qua non. India is also a member of organizations like the East Asia Summit (EAS) and is increasingly looking to nations such as Indonesia and Australia to quench its thirst for energy resources.

Though India and Japan have made it very clear that their growing maritime ties are not directed at any third country, it is clear that they also harbor common concerns about China's increasingly aggressive posture in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean region. India in particular has expressed concern over China's building of a series of ports and naval facilities across India's neighborhood—from Gwadar (Pakistan) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka) to Kyaukpuy (Myanmar) and Chittagong (Bangladesh). During Chinese President Xi Jinping's recent visit to Islamabad, for example, Beijing pledged US\$ 46 billion in investments to Pakistan, which will be used to fund the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) between Kashgar in Western China to Gwadar in Southern Pakistan. The goal is to allow energy supplies meant for China to be directly sent overland through Pakistan, thereby allowing China to bypass the much-lengthier alternative through the Straits of Malacca. This forms part of China's "Maritime Silk Road" initiative, which aims to establish a maritime version of the historical Silk Road, which connected China to Europe and other parts of Asia in the distant past.

India has also started making its concerns about China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea clearer, a concern also shared by Japan. During the visit of the U.S. President Barack Obama to India earlier in January this year, India and the U.S. issued a joint statement noting that "we affirm the

importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea." In fact, India's stakes in the South China Sea region are increasing and, at times, these are at odds with China's interests. The Indian state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) has been exploring for oil off the coast of Vietnam which, in the past, has prompted China to warn the ONGC against undertaking exploration activities in what China has termed its "territorial waters."

## Conclusion

In the light of the mutual interests that India and Japan share in ensuring freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea region and since both of them are net-energy importers and alarmed by China's increasingly assertive posture and ambitions, it is only natural for them to pool their efforts and resources in the maritime domain. Such cooperation is likely to expand further as both countries seek to strengthen their strategic partnership.

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