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# INDIA-JAPAN MARITIME PARTNERSHIP: A VISION FOR CONNECTIVITY, SECURITY, AND RESILIENCE

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## CENJOWS

**INDIA-JAPAN MARITIME PARTNERSHIP: A VISION FOR CONNECTIVITY, SECURITY, AND RESILIENCE**



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### Abstract

*The Indo-Pacific is a maritime region that encompasses the Indian and Pacific Oceans, as well as the surrounding countries and islands. It is a region of growing strategic importance and economic activity, containing several of the world's major economies and military forces. India and Japan are two countries in the region who have enough potential to collaborate in the region and benefit from it. Cooperation in maritime connectivity remains crucial in creating a shared future in the Indo-Pacific. This would enable Tokyo and New Delhi to foster economic and inclusive growth. The paper delves into the various initiatives and connectivity projects both the nations have undertaken. It discusses the frameworks in which the objectives of both the states align. However, there are several impediments to materialise these objectives. The paper explores these challenges and makes an effort to offer a few recommendations to address them effectively.*

## Introduction

India's friendship with Japan dates back to ancient times owing to the strong spiritual, civilizational and cultural ties.<sup>1</sup> India and Japan have cooperated on a diverse range of issues including, but not limited to, trade, politics, culture, technology, education, infrastructure and defense.<sup>2</sup> And as the Indo-Pacific region started to attract international attention, India and Japan began to focus more effort into maintaining the stability and security of the region.

The Indo-Pacific region is a confluence of the two oceans: Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. It boasts some of the world's largest maritime trade and sea lanes, like the Malacca Strait. However, the rapid rise of China along with its aggressive policies and ambitious initiatives, such as the "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)", posed a challenge to the established status quo in the region. This prompted the global powers, especially those in Asia, to recognise that a comprehensive approach was needed towards security in the region.<sup>3</sup> To this end, India and Japan have undertaken several initiatives and projects in the Indo-Pacific.

Furthermore, Tokyo and New Delhi are immensely dependent on the maritime trade. Almost 90% of Japan's crude oil imports are carried through the South China Sea.<sup>4</sup> The majority of Japan's imports come from "Middle Eastern" suppliers and are transported through the "Strait of Malacca" and subsequently the "South China Sea".<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, India's maritime sector accounts for the country's trade with 95% by volume and 70% by value.<sup>6</sup> While discussing trade, it is also crucial to understand maritime connectivity and supply chain resilience as they are inherently linked.

There has been a disruption in the global supply chain in the post COVID-19 era. Resilience in the maritime supply chain remains crucial to prevent the global trade from being impacted adversely. Collaboration, flexibility, robustness, infrastructure automation and risk management are important and should be introduced in a conceptual framework to mitigate a challenge like this.<sup>7</sup> As India and Japan are focused on securing its maritime trade and developing maritime infrastructure, they have a lot of potential to promote the regional supply chain resilience and enhance mutual trade and strategic interests.

In light of this, the paper examines the trajectory of India Japan maritime connectivity exploring the various connectivity projects, frameworks and initiatives. It also identifies the various roadblocks and the recommendations to address them.

## **Japan's Vision of Connectivity Aligns with India**

### **Free and Open Indo-Pacific**

Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)" initiative commences the establishment of a stable and secure Indo-Pacific. This would involve a rules-based order with freedom of navigation and economic prosperity in the region.<sup>8</sup> The FOIP has three pillars, and the second pillar discusses 'physical connectivity' extensively. It states the importance of improving 'physical connectivity' by developing excellent infrastructure such as ports, trains, and highways, as well as energy.<sup>9</sup>

There are many similarities between Japan and India and their vision of FOIP. This ranges from supporting territorial integrity, sovereignty to capacity building initiatives.<sup>10</sup> Late Prime Minister Abe met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his official visit to India in December 2015.<sup>11</sup> The two Prime Ministers agreed to transform the "Japan-India Special Strategic and Global Collaboration" into a profound, broad-based, and action-oriented collaboration that represents their long-term political, economic, and strategic interests.<sup>12</sup> They issued a joint declaration titled "Japan and India Vision 2025 Special Strategic and Global Partnership Working Together for Peace and Prosperity of the Indo-Pacific Region and the World" to serve as a guidepost for the "new era in Japan-India relations."<sup>13</sup>

In February 2022, in the "4th Japan-Australia-India-U.S. Foreign Ministers Meeting", the countries reached an agreement on further development of cooperation in several sectors such as maritime security, quality infrastructure etc.<sup>14</sup> In the October 2018 India-Japan Summit Meeting, the "India-Japan Development Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" was published under the FOIP.<sup>15</sup>

## **Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)**

The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) was launched in 2019, at the East Asia Summit held in Bangkok. Out of the seven pillars that make up the IPOI, Japan took the lead in the seventh pillar i.e., “Trade, connectivity and maritime transport”. To this end, it has established the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) with the aim to diversify cross-border production networks and supply sources and various connectivity projects which have been discussed in the paragraphs below.<sup>16</sup>

### **Connectivity Projects**

As a part of those initiatives, India and Japan have contributed significantly to other connectivity projects as well. Some of them have been discussed below:

- **Sri Lanka**

Petronet LNG Ltd, India's largest gas importer, and its Japanese partners collaborated to invest \$300 million to build Sri Lanka's first liquefied natural gas (LNG) facility in Colombo, according to CEO Prabhat Singh.<sup>17</sup>In August 2024, Petronet and Sri Lanka's LTL Holdings Limited signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to improve Sri Lanka's LNG infrastructure.<sup>18</sup> The project calls for the construction of LNG unloading, storage, and regasification facilities in Kerawalapitiya, Colombo.<sup>19</sup>

- **Myanmar**

China's expanding dominance in the nations like Myanmar, bordering the Northeast, particularly in the construction of infrastructure and improving communication, poses a challenge to India.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, Japan also recognises the need of a robust bilateral relationship with Myanmar in maintaining its regional dominance. Meanwhile Japan and India enjoy a strong bilateral relationship and jointly initiated the development of the ‘Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project’ and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway.<sup>21</sup>

- **Bangladesh**

The strategic importance of Bay Bengal in the region is immense. Hence, Tokyo and New Delhi have made several noteworthy initiatives to enhance connectivity in Bangladesh. Japan's "BIG-B" plan is primarily centred on economic, infrastructure, energy, and development imperatives, wherein Japan aspires to contribute to the prosperity of emerging nations. Bangladesh is viewed as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia under the 'BIG-B' strategy.<sup>22</sup> Such a project aligns with 'India's Act East Policy' which is mostly focused on enhancing integration between the Southeast Asian region and the Northeastern states of India.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, the 'Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)' is assisting Bangladesh in financing the Matarbari project.<sup>24</sup> India is also considering connecting Matarbari Port with the northeastern states as it is projected to boost economic links and provide new development opportunities for the region, including Tripura.<sup>25</sup> The effort is the product of Japan, Bangladesh, and India's plans to bring manufacturing to the Northeast and Bangladesh while also establishing a new industrial value chain in South Asia for exports to Indo-Pacific markets.<sup>26</sup> The progress of these projects maybe affected due to ongoing turbulence in Bangladesh.

In precise, the progress of such projects mostly hinges on logistical, operational and strategic support between the two countries. Hence, frameworks like Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement have a critical role to play in enabling seamless cooperation between the two parties.

- **Asia Africa Growth Corridor**

In November 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made a joint declaration proposing the "Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC)".<sup>27</sup> The AAGC envisioned a people-centric sustainable growth plan, the details of which were developed through a series of extensive discussions across Asia and Africa with various stakeholders.<sup>28</sup> It has four pillars: development and cooperation projects, quality infrastructure and institutional

connectivity, capacity and skill building, and people-to-people partnerships.<sup>29</sup> The initiative mostly emphasis on people-to-people partnerships. Its strengths are aligned with the development priorities of various African countries and sub-regions, leveraging their simultaneous homogeneity and variety. This would be done to boost growth and interconnection between and within Asia and Africa, resulting in a free and open Indo-Pacific region. The major focus of New Delhi is to leverage the cultural and historical ties with Africa while Tokyo emphasises on bringing in advanced technologies to the region. It is also viewed as a platform that provides an alternative to China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' for countries that are overly dependent on China.

### **India-Japan Maritime Affairs Dialogue and the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA)**

The India-Japan Maritime Affairs Dialogue was initiated at New Delhi in 2013. It was a step towards discussing mutual issues of interest in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain as well as enhancing the maritime cooperation between the two countries. In 2021, the 6th round of the dialogue was held in a virtual format.<sup>30</sup>

The "Agreement Concerning Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services" between the Self-Defense Forces of Japan and the Indian Armed Forces was inked in 2020. This agreement is also known as the "Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement" (ACSA). Operationalised in March 2022 during the MILAN 2022, the agreement has been used by the forces of both nations in all visits and exercises by contingents, aircrafts and ships.<sup>31</sup> It establishes a reciprocal framework of cooperation between the Indian and Japanese armed forces while they are engaged in bilateral training activities, United Nations Peacekeeping Operations, Humanitarian International Relief and other mutually agreed activities.<sup>32</sup> The agreement commences the access of the Japanese bases to Indian Navy including Djibouti. At the same time, the Japanese Self-Defence Forces could have access to Indian facilities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This expected to further enhance the interoperability between the two forces, leading to better defence engagements under the "India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership".<sup>33</sup>

## **Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA)**

MDA refers to the demand for situational awareness at sea and is becoming increasingly required for the effective and safe conduct of maritime activities.<sup>34</sup> To guarantee that information acquired as part of it is disseminated through domestic inter-agency and international coordination, the “Indian Maritime Security Strategy of 2015” emphasises the necessity of MDA, focussing on the “Information-Decision-Action (IDA)” cycle.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the text views MDA as an “enabler for maritime security across the conflict spectrum”.<sup>36</sup> Ensuring marine security throughout the maritime environment necessitates exceptionally high levels of situational awareness. While situational awareness of the entire maritime environment may not be possible or necessary, MDA of certain zones of interest is crucial.<sup>37</sup> In its Tokyo Summit of 2022, the QUAD introduced the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA).<sup>38</sup>

The aim of the IPMDA is to monitor “dark shipping” (a vessel that operates while turning off its Automatic Identification System or AIS) as well as creating a precise and comprehensive real-time overview of the maritime waters of partner nations.<sup>39</sup> This is done by using innovative technology like “commercial satellite radio frequency data collection”, allowing partner countries to promptly respond to maritime challenges. Additionally, regional pilot programmes have been launched which deliver radio frequency data to the region’s maritime agencies. Regional information centres under the initiative further help in establishing a common maritime operations picture of the region.<sup>40</sup> The Information Fusion Centres existing in India (Gurugram), Solomon Islands, Singapore and Oceania (Vanuatu) are slated to be linked.<sup>41</sup>

In the QUAD’s July 2024, “Foreign Ministers’ Meeting” held in Tokyo, the “South Asia Programme” was announced to begin its early operationalisation via the IFC-IOR in Gurugram.<sup>42</sup> It was further announced that a “space-based climate warning system” would be deployed in Mauritius, and an Open-RAN network would be deployed in Palau.<sup>43</sup> Both India and Japan as QUAD members are actively involved in this initiative. India’s IFC-IOR and Japan’s Maritime Situational Indication Linkages (MSIL) are significant platforms which have the capability to enhance maritime connectivity and bolster the security architecture of the region.



To this end, the role of Coast Guard to Coast Guard cooperation is equally noteworthy. They undertake surveillance and patrolling to monitor maritime trade and combat piracy and smuggling.

### **Coast Guard to Coast Guard Cooperation**

The Indian Coast Guard received its first tip-off in November 1999. A ship that bore striking similarities to the missing Japanese ship Alondra Rainbow was found idling off the coast of Sri Lanka.<sup>44</sup> Since, the vessel evaded, the Indian Navy had to step in and deployed a task force. They were successful in intercepting the Japanese vessel. This demonstrated the critical role played by the Indian Coast Guard and Indian Navy in fighting piracy as well as the importance of international collaboration between coast guards and naval forces.

The Indian Coast Guard attended the “19th Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting (HACGAM)”, in Turkey, in 2023.<sup>45</sup> This multilateral event is a Japanese initiative to strengthen collaboration among regional coast guards following the Indian Coast Guard's arrest of the pirated vessel MV Alondra Rainbow.<sup>46</sup> The HACGAM's primary goal is to strengthen collaboration among Asian Coast Guards in order to ensure and promote safe, secure, and clean waters in the region.<sup>47</sup>

### **Navigating Obstacles**

To have a seamless cooperation, New Delhi and Tokyo would need to focus on a few hurdles which impede their objectives and plans. Some of them are discussed below:

- **Funding Constraints:** Political Instabilities and economic constraints at a domestic level have affected the progress of the connectivity projects. At the same time there are funding issues which slowed down the infrastructure development in most of these projects.
- **Delay in Execution:** The constraints in funding have delayed the execution of plans. This can be seen in terms of the AAGC where most of the objectives of the initiative have not been able to materialise due to lack of funding.

- **Supply Chain Affected:** In terms of the global supply chain, there are certain factors which impede a smooth maritime trade. They are gaps in infrastructure, labour shortage and geopolitical conflicts.
- **Discrepancies in Data Sharing:** IPMDA faces several challenges including discrepancy in "information sharing, capacity building, and coordinated action practices."<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, there is a persistent challenge in identifying and monitoring vessels in international waters. Challenges related to technological interoperability and "asymmetries in resource accessibility" must be solved by Tokyo and New Delhi in order to create a unified marine security architecture for the region.<sup>49</sup>
- **Evolving Export Regulations:** Japan has initiated the "Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology", but its export regulations are still evolving. There are certain complexities which persist in the bureaucratic and regulatory framework. Hence, despite its technological advancements, there has been insufficient transfer of technology between the two countries, particularly for underwater platforms like surveillance systems and robotics.
- **Dependent on the US:** For the military hardware Japan is mostly dependent on the US. Hence, transferring it to a third country becomes difficult for Tokyo.
- **Mismatch in Regional Focus:** Sometimes the regional focus between the two countries do not align. Keeping the national interest in mind, New Delhi's prime focus remains on the Indian Ocean Region while Tokyo focuses mostly on the East China Sea and the South China Sea.

### **Initiatives to Enhance Cooperation**

- **Enhance the Finance Mechanisms:** Since many collaborated projects have not progressed well and slow to materialise, enhancing the finance mechanisms have become noteworthy. While doing so, both the countries should make an effort to operate on an equal footing.

- **Collaborate with the Littoral Nations:** Tokyo and New Delhi could collaborate with littoral nations on capacity development and training in MDA. The demand for quality human resource training in MDA software and current technologies is high. Capsule training in marine security and law can also be implemented as part of regional joint projects.
- **Create a Resilient Supply Chain:** Post COVID-19 era witnessed the disruption of the global supply chain. Since maritime connectivity and supply chain are inherently linked, it is crucial that both the countries make significant effort to create a resilient supply chain. Although, they are a part of the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative along with Australia, there is a need to enhance its effectiveness in order to reduce their reliance on a single country.
- **Enhance the Role of Advanced Technologies:** To combat piracy, trafficking, dark shipping etc, New Delhi and Tokyo should emphasis on utilising advanced technologies such as satellite-based tracking. Sharing each other's expertise in this technology including AI driven analytics would enhance the monitoring capabilities of both JMSDF and Indian Navy.
- **Space Based Surveillance in Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean:** To monitor the vast water bodies, a space-based surveillance system would enable in providing real-time data to the naval forces of both the countries.
- **Collaborate in Co-development and Co-production of Undersea platforms:** Both the nations could focus on co-development and co-production of defence technology. This could involve undersea platforms such as underwater surveillance system and other stealth technologies.
- **Collaboration with the US:** Both India and Japan should collaborate with the US in terms of maritime situational awareness to enhance maritime security, safety and connectivity in the region.

## Conclusion

The partnership between India and Japan has evolved from its initial bilateral trade phase and extended to multiple sectors. Their strategic alignment on the Indo-Pacific region has further allowed the two countries to develop a “Special Strategic and Global Partnership”. Japan has stood by its commitment to augment the strategic partnership it shares with India. In return, India has offered a large market for investment and trade, along with a huge pool of skilled labour for Japan.

Be it the IPOI, FOIP, the Act East Policy, defence collaboration or economic and trade collaborations, the Indo-pacific strategies of India and Japan are synergised and complementary. With their strategic location, India and Japan are in a unique position to safeguard the maritime cooperation, security and stability of the Indo-Pacific region.

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