

From The CEO

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The Normalisation of Japanese Policy in the Indian Ocean Region

I was invited to visit Japan in August 2017 by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The five-day visit, which included a stay at Okinawa, provided a unique opportunity to understand Japanese perceptions, attitudes and policy objectives with regard to a wide-range of geostrategic issues that confront the country. Briefings and discussions with a number of senior academics, policymakers and service officers highlighted the challenges facing Japan and how Japan might respond to them.

Of particular interest, recognising Future Direction International's geostrategic interest in the Indian Ocean Region, was Japan's attitude and policies for operating in that part of the world.

Analysis

One of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's major endeavours has been to normalise Japan's political and military environments. A major impediment to that endeavour, however, has been the country's pacifist Constitution, particularly Article 9 within it. The Article has been interpreted over time to suit contemporary factors. In the aftermath of the Korean War, for instance, Clause 2 of Article 9, which states that "land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained", was reinterpreted so as to permit a "military capability that does not exceed the minimum necessary level for self-defence." Prime Minister Abe used that interpretation during his first administration in 2006 because he believes it has become outdated over the seventy years since it was promulgated on 3 November 1946. As he [remarked](#) during his first stint in office in 2006, 'I believe we should revise Article 9 from the point of view that we should protect Japan, and that the country should make a global contribution (to security).' In other words, Abe wants Japan to become a "normal" country again, one with the capacity to defend its interests and citizens, whenever they may be threatened. It is hardly surprising, then, that he has continued to work towards that goal in his current term.

As background, the military normalisation reflects the political normalisation in 2006. The transformation of Japan's Indian Ocean policies began in 1992, when a ban on its troops abroad was lifted to enable the Self-Defence Force to send armed troops to Iraq. In 2001, in-flight tanker-aircraft and helicopter carriers (the latter, for all intents and purposes, aircraft carriers) were procured, thus effectively nullifying a ban on power projection. In 2003, Tokyo announced that it would explore ballistic missile defence systems with Washington, negating a ban on joint military research, and in 2014, announced that it would supply missile interceptor componentry to the US and UK, thus ending its self-imposed ban on arms exports. Its offer to export its *Soryu*-class submarines to Australia 2016 underlined former South Korean ambassador to Japan Kwon Chulhyun's [observation](#) in 2012 that Japan was 'getting rid of the obstacles [raised by Article 9] one by one as the opportunity offers.' These developments, when viewed together with [reports](#) of Mr Abe's nationally-televised address in May 2014 that Japan should provide military aid to allies under attack, appear to demonstrate that Article 9 is indeed being radically re-interpreted in order to normalise Japanese foreign policy and its overall politics.

Those developments have produced several outcomes, one of which is Japan's renewed interest in the Indian Ocean. Since the Japanese Constitution came into effect in May 1947, Japan's naval policy has been contained to the direct defence of the home islands. In order to eliminate any suggestion of force projection, strict limitations were placed on the number of replenishment ships capable of supplying vessels at sea, that task being left to the United States Navy. As Tokyo's attempts at re-interpreting Article 9 progress, however, that self-restraint is increasingly giving way to increased air and sea patrols, increased joint training with US forces and, due to the current "America First" policy that many in Japan interpret as American isolationism and a reluctance to involve itself in foreign disputes, an increasingly-independent and self-sufficient approach towards ensuring its security. Since Japan is critically dependent on its exports that cross the Indian Ocean and, just as importantly, is at least equally dependent on its energy supplies that are also shipped across the Indian Ocean, it behoves Tokyo to securitise those sea lines of communication (SLOCs).

Japan is careful to ensure that its efforts to securitise its Indian Ocean SLOCs do not alarm its neighbours and those countries that are close to its SLOCs. To that end, it has begun offering security and economic partnerships to potentially strategic partners. As one noted analyst has [remarked](#), 'Japan's "Partnership for Quality Infrastructure" initiative, first announced in 2015, involves infrastructure spending, over five years, of around US\$110 billion in Asia. In 2016, the initiative was expanded to \$200 billion globally (including in Africa and the South Pacific).' Brewster highlights some of Japan's infrastructure projects since 2016 (with spending calculated in US dollars):

- Nacala, Mozambique: port (\$320 million)
- Mombasa, Kenya: port and related infrastructure (\$300 million)
- Toamasina, Madagascar: port (\$400 million)
- Mumbai, India: trans-harbour link (\$2.2 billion)
- Matarbari, Bangladesh: port and power station (\$3.7 billion)
- Yangon, Myanmar: container terminal (\$200 million)
- Dawei, Myanmar: port and special economic zone (\$800 million)

Those investments and co-operative efforts equal China's in many metrics but differ significantly in that they are 'focused on transparency, economic sustainability, and a rules-based order that should become part of regional norms.' Under Mr Abe's "free and open Indo-Pacific strategy", Japan plans to provide [yen-based loans](#) to three Indian Ocean rim countries – Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka – to develop ports in Matarbari (which will be large enough to handle fifty per cent of the country's cargo), Dawei and Trincomalee, respectively. These projects would, interestingly, be combined efforts. The port at Dawei, for example, will be a joint effort, with Japan, Myanmar and Thailand working jointly to construct it at a final cost that could reach around US\$1.83 billion. A special economic zone, it is planned, will be created alongside the port and a highway built between Bangkok and Dawei, which would lead to a new economic bloc. India, Japan and Sri Lanka will, similarly, combine to expand an existing small port in Trincomalee into a trade port that could be used by large ships. The cost of this project is expected to be between ¥10 billion (US\$91 million) and ¥13 billion (US\$118 million). One of Japan's objectives in enabling these projects is to ensure that they will lead to the development of coast guard forces in those countries, which would lead, in turn, to the securitisation of its SLOCs.

3 ports being considered by the Japanese govt for construction or development aid

Matarbari, Bangladesh

- Joint development by Japan, Bangladesh
- Development of a new port for commercial use

Dawei, Myanmar

- Joint development by Japan, Thailand, Myanmar
- Special economic zone, development of a new port

China's "String of Pearls"

Indian Ocean

Trincomalee, Sri Lanka

- Joint development by Japan, India, Sri Lanka
- Urban planning, expansion of an existing port

Source: The Jakarta Post

It is worth noting that so successful has Japan been in this endeavour that China, which has also sought to construct ports near Dawei and Matarbari had its proposals rebuffed because of the advanced Japanese efforts. Just as interesting is the fact that these ports are situated close to those being built by China that allegedly form part of that country's "String of Pearls" in the Indian Ocean. Japan could possibly be assisted in its outreach efforts by the observation that it does not co-operate on the development of port facilities that could be used as military or naval footholds by China. Be that as it may, the fact remains that Japan has enjoyed a large degree of success in its efforts to work alongside countries from the South China Sea to Africa in creating infrastructural development projects.

Japan is pursuing another tactic in its attempts to securitise its SLOCs and, simultaneously, ensure stability in the overall region by supporting the maritime security capabilities of countries that share common perceptions, such as freedom of navigation, on the Indian Ocean rim, starting with Djibouti and Sri Lanka. According to one [report](#), Japan despatched a coast guard team to Djibouti to train coast guard personnel in Djibouti to use and maintain patrol boats provided by Japan and to deal with suspicious vessels. This action, if correct, is an extension of those Japan has undertaken vis-à-vis the Philippines and Vietnam, both of which countries have overlapping territorial claims with China in the South China Sea. Japan has provided those countries with patrol boats and training for their crews.

It is likely that Japan plans to deepen its ties with Djibouti by enabling the latter to develop its own capacity to use and maintain patrol boats to ensure its security. Tokyo similarly plans to offer Colombo two patrol boats by July this year and to offer similar training in their use and maintenance to Sri Lankan crews plus further training in dealing with oil spills and other disasters. These initiatives, as Tokyo points out, follow calls for assistance from Djibouti and Sri Lanka to tackle piracy.

It is the Indo-Japanese nexus, however, that is becoming increasingly geopolitically prominent. The bilateral relationship is developing rapidly with Japan offering to sell high-speed trains and the related technology to India, *Shinmeiwa-2* amphibious aircraft, an economic corridor between Bengaluru and Chennai and annual joint naval exercises, codenamed Malabar, in conjunction with the US. The two countries, arguably more importantly, are in the process of working together to 'develop industrial corridors and industrial network for the growth of Asia and Africa', as Prime Ministers Abe and Modi announced in a joint statement in September last year. That followed from the fifty-second annual African Development Bank meeting held in May 2017 in the Indian state of Gujarat, during which India and Japan announced that they would establish an "Asia-Africa Growth Corridor" in which they would partner with African countries and organisations to enhance the continent's development. The two countries plan to create a network that connects the Pacific and Indian Oceans, with a special focus on Africa. They plan to augment India's political and diplomatic relationships with Japanese funds to finance a variety of development projects across Africa. Prior to that, Mr Abe announced while in Nairobi in 2016 that Japan would invest US\$30 billion for infrastructure development, education and healthcare expansion over three years beginning in 2016. That amount was in addition to the US\$32 billion that Japan pledged to invest in Africa over five years beginning in 2013.

India announced that it would provide a US\$10 billion line of credit to Africa during the India-Africa summit in New Delhi in 2015. It has since been involved in development and capacity-building

projects across Africa and has invested in sectors such as agriculture and telecommunications. New Delhi is also working with Tokyo on enhancing strategic partnerships, including defence relationships. The Indo-Japanese relationship, it appears, is growing by leaps and bounds, aided by common goals.

Conclusion

Japan's political and military normalisation under the stewardship of Prime Minister Abe is well and truly underway. The country has taken a proactive approach to the Indian Ocean Region, as is evident from its various regional endeavours. Its partnerships with countries that lie along the Indian Ocean rim and within it to build capacity and to develop infrastructure demonstrate a genuine attempt to enable them to develop their economies and raise their standards of living. These are welcome efforts from a country that seeks to demonstrate that the offer of aid does not necessarily imply that the recipient would come to experience an overwhelming dependence on the donor. To that extent, at least, Japan's normalisation is to be welcomed.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

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