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India's Strategic Convergence with Japan in the Changing Indo-Pacific Geopolitical Landscape

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The geopolitical landscape in the Indo-Pacific region is undergoing unprecedented developments with the rise of new powers, growing power disparity, and the ensuing new challenges to regional security. In the changing and complex regional security environment, few relationships among the major powers have undergone such a remarkable turnaround as the relationship between India and Japan. The India-Japan civilian nuclear cooperation agreement, Japan-India maritime security partnership, and Japan's permanent membership in the Indo-US Malabar exercises are some of the major developments which have transformed the low-intensity relationship into one of the fastest growing bilateral relationships in Asia. The 'Indo-Pacific' construct, which conceives the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean as an interconnected geopolitical and economic space, has assumed key importance in the emerging geopolitics of 21st Century Asia. One of the driving factors behind this region's growing importance is the great dependence of international trade on the Indo-Pacific sea lanes of communications (SLOCs). The security of and access to the important sea lanes have factored in the formation of strategic partnerships among the central regional actors. In the changing regional security architecture, the converging and competing interests of the three major Asian powers — China, India and, Japan — have driven them to articulate different strategic frameworks as indicated in Japan's "Confluence of the Two Seas" idea, China's "Maritime Silk Road" initiative, and India's "Act East" Policy.

Japan's security dialogue with India emphasizes enhancing maritime security given that both are maritime countries with economies heavily dependent on sea-based transport. India's strategic location in the Indian Ocean has impelled Tokyo to engage with Delhi in maritime security cooperation. India is centrally located between two 'choke points' of global oil supplies, the Malacca Strait on its east and the Strait of Hormuz on its west. The Malacca Strait, which is the main passage between the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, is the vital lifeline for Japan's international trade. Over 80% of Japan's energy supplies are transported from the Persian Gulf through the Malacca Strait which makes India's location strategically vital for Japan.

Since the opening of the India-Japan security dialogue in 2002, deepening bilateral maritime security cooperation is evident from anti-piracy operations, which expanded from the Malacca Strait to the Gulf of Aden, as well as coastguard-to-coastguard exercises and joint naval exercises in the Pacific and Indian oceans. All of these developments indicate the keenness of the two states to maintain regional maritime safety and security. It needs to be noted in this context that India attaches considerable importance to Japan as its maritime security partner. This is revealed in Modi government's October 2015 decision to include Japan as a permanent member in the

Dr. Madhuchanda Ghosh, Assistant Professor at Presidency University, Kolkata, explains that "In the changing regional security architecture, the converging and competing interests of the three major Asian powers — China, India, and Japan — have driven them to articulate different strategic frameworks as indicated in Japan's "Confluence of the Two Seas" idea, China's "Maritime Silk Road" initiative, and India's "Act East" Policy."

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Malabar exercises, traditionally a bilateral India-US exercise. The deepening maritime security cooperation between the US, India, and Japan indicates the intent of the three states to jointly contribute towards maintaining the regional balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

As India and Japan collaborate with the United States to collectively enhance regional maritime security and stability, the growing military assertiveness of China has caused security challenges in the region. Beijing’s declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands over which it has competing claims with Japan has caused trepidation in Tokyo. Beijing’s “string of pearls” policy, which consists of setting up military and naval facilities in India’s immediate neighborhood including in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Bangladesh has raised fears in New Delhi about naval encirclement of India. PLAN’s (People’s Liberation Army Navy) nuclear submarine, patrolling the crucial sea-lanes in the Indian Ocean, also contributes to these fears. As PLAN expands its footprint in the Indian Ocean, India’s decision to upgrade civilian infrastructure in Andaman and Nicobar Islands is noteworthy. This Indian archipelago in the Bay of Bengal, strategically positioned at the mouth of the Malaccan Strait, is an immensely valuable geopolitical asset for India which New Delhi perceives as a critical asset to safeguard freedom of navigation in this region. India’s seeking Japanese collaboration for upgrading infrastructure in these islands indicates a major change in its longstanding policy of rejecting foreign investment on this strategically important island chain.

The rising tensions in the South China Sea (SCS) also figure as an area of common concern for India and Japan. The SCS has emerged as a global flashpoint as China locks horns with neighbouring states including Vietnam, Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, and Taiwan over control of three sets of islands: the Spratly Islands, Scarborough Shoal, and Paracels. More than half of India’s overseas trade flows through the SCS shipping lanes, which is one of the underlying factors behind the Indian Navy’s prioritizing of the issue of ensuring a stable maritime security environment in the SCS region. More than half of Japan’s energy supplies pass through this region. In the 2015 and 2016 India-Japan joint statements, the two Prime Ministers voiced serious concern over the developments in the SCS region and stressed the importance of resolving the disputes by peaceful means, in accordance with the principles of international law including UNCLOS.

The Indo-Pacific region is on the cusp of a major change as India and Japan propose the creation of a sea-corridor, the Asia-Pacific Growth Corridor (AAGC), linking the two continents, Asia and Africa, amidst China’s OBOR initiative, which entails the development of a land corridor connecting these two continents. AAGC reflects the growing strategic convergence of India and Japan over the issue of promoting freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific. Both of the states have reasons to support freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific — including the SCS — to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the Pacific and together contribute toward maintaining the regional balance of power. The common strategic interests and concerns have propelled Prime Minister Abe to call Japan and India “natural allies.” With Abe seeking closer ties with India, India-Japan strategic engagement will have a decisive impact on the Asian balance of power.

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