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Shinzo Abe's Struggle in the Indian Ocean Region

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Tomoko Kiyota, Resident Sasakawa Peace Foundation Fellow at Pacific Forum CSIS, explains that “Shinzo Abe’s strategy in the Indian Ocean region and South Asia seems to be a good way to offset the stagnation of Japan’s diplomacy in East Asia. His success will depend on whether the Japanese people can understand his goals and how cooperative they are.”

Japan’s entrance into the Indian Ocean has a significant value today. Especially for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and South Asia could provide great opportunities to reverse the wind that is currently against Japan. To halt the decline of Japan’s international relevance, Abe is now trying to transform the traditional diplomacy and security policies of the post war period. While Japan’s neighboring countries view Abe’s policy as a revival of militarism, there are no political and historical shackles in the IOR, so it could be an ideal stage for him to act freely. The fact that this region is becoming increasingly important in global geopolitics also creates space for Japan to gain leverage. It may be no exaggeration to say that whether or not Japan succeeds in this region will decide its future.

In the post war period, Japanese national power was fueled mainly by its economy. Economic power upgraded Japan’s status, providing it with certain diplomatic influence and military might. Today, Japan has lost its drive to revive that economic power, as growth rates in the last three years were consistently less than 2 per cent. Soon, Japan will not be able to practice checkbook diplomacy while also maintaining its military budget. It is an urgent requirement that Japanese policy-makers abandon outdated policies in the post war period, and develop new strategies. Abe’s policies, including Abenomics, Womenomics, and the revision of Japan’s security policies, including the reinterpretation of collective self-defense, are all struggles for Japan’s revival. His South Asia diplomacy is also in this line, and his direction might be correct.

The Indian Ocean is host to important sea lanes of communication, which Japan depends on for more than 70 per cent of its oil trade. India has a robust, growing market, and other South Asian countries, such as Bangladesh, are in the process of becoming globally significant manufacturing centers. More importantly, the region’s security environment is also changing. While the US Seventh Fleet remains the number one force in the Indian Ocean, India has been making efforts to strengthen its Navy, especially since 2000, and China is also increasing its naval footprint in this region. Japan has room to be more active in the security outlook of the region because no country there has a diplomatic or lingering historical dispute with Japan. While other East Asian countries are concerned about Japanese military development, no country in the IOR raises concerns when Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) assets enter the Indian Ocean. This could be an ideal environment for Abe to restore Japanese confidence.

In fact, Japan has gradually but successfully expanded its activities in the IOR region since the early 1990s. The minesweeping operation in the Persian Gulf after the Gulf War in the 1990s was the first overseas mission for the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF). Although JMSDF operating beyond Japanese territorial waters was very controversial for the Japanese people and neighboring countries at the time, the mission was feasible

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because the Gulf is geographically remote from Japan. Triggered by that operation, the JSDF became a more active participant in various overseas peacekeeping operations and other missions, including disaster relief. After the 9/11 terror attacks in 2001, Tokyo quickly decided to dispatch JMSDF warships to the Indian Ocean to supply fuel to military vessels which participated in the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom-Maritime Interdiction Operation. Anti-piracy operations also followed. Due to the increase of piracy attacks in the seas around Somalia, the Japanese government decided to participate in international counter-piracy initiatives and enacted the Anti-Piracy Act in July 2009. Since 2009, JMSDF’s ships together with the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) have conducted operations to escort merchant ships to deter pirates in the IOR.

Moreover, those activities led to security cooperation with India. From a logistical perspective, India’s location is significant for the JMSDF and JCG. For the JCG, the Alondra Rainbow incident in 1999 led to the establishment of annual joint exercises and exchange visits of Director-Generals with the Indian Coast Guard since 2000. The JMSDF has also participated in several bilateral and multilateral exercises since 2007, including the Malabar and JIMEX series of exercises. They are backed by political leadership and several agreements such as the “Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between Japan and India,” enacted in October, 2008.

Abe is one of the most active politicians who initiated those activities in the IOR. He already visited India twice, in 2007 and 2014. During his 2007 visit, he delivered a speech at the Indian Parliament, stating that “a strong India is in the best interest of Japan, and a strong Japan is in the best interest of India.” In 2014, he was an official guest at the Indian Independence Day ceremony. Soon after Narendra Modi won the election, Abe called him to invite him to Japan. This resulted in Modi’s official visit to Kyoto and Tokyo from August 30 to September 3. During this visit, Abe emphasized the India-Japan “special relationship.” Following that meeting, Abe then visited Bangladesh and Sri Lanka from September 6 to 8. Abe became the first Prime Minister of Japan to visit Sri Lanka since Toshiki Kaifu in 1990. Abe and Sri Lanka’s President Mahinda Rajapaksa agreed to elevate the two countries relations into “a new partnership between maritime countries,” and “further strengthen the cooperative relations to play significant roles in the stability and prosperity of the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions.”

Abe is keen to maximize leverage before Beijing can drain Japan of most of its assets in the region. During his first term from September 2006 to September 2007, he was very active in trying to form a four-country alignment, dubbed the “Quadrilateral Initiative” with the US, Australia, and India, which was seen as containment of China. Soon after he returned to power in December 2012, Abe published an article entitled “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond,” where he warned that the South China Sea seemed set to become a so-called “Lake Beijing”. Some of the media, such as Jiji, covered his South Asia trip in September from the perspective of Abe contesting Chinese “strings of pearls” strategy. This impression was enhanced further because Chinese President Xi Jinping also visited the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and India from September 15.

Abe characterizes himself as a conservative who seeks to strengthen the country in his book *Utsukushii Kunie* (Towards a Beautiful Country). His strategy in the IOR and South Asia seems to be a good way to offset the stagnation of Japan’s diplomacy in East Asia. His success will depend on whether the Japanese people can understand his goals and how cooperative they are with these goals. While surviving as a prime minister as long as he can, Abe has to continue to reform Japanese security policy, as well as reactivating the Japanese economy. At the same time, while countering Beijing’s aggressiveness, he has to strengthen cooperation with South Asian countries, which seek to benefit from both Japan and China. There is still a long way to go for Abe before his efforts are rewarded.

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