

Will India and Japan rise to stop the mighty propeller of Chinese hegemony?
Simantik Dowerah - First Post

The sea symbolizes a vast expanse of strategic possibilities and challenges for India and Japan in the face of China's growing naval power and expansionist ideology.

The Indian Ocean Region holds immense importance for India's maritime trade, with over 90 per cent of the country's international trade, including energy imports, being carried out through these waters. The region is equally significant from a security perspective.

For Japan, being an island nation, the sea plays a critical role in its economy and national security. With a massive exclusive economic zone of approximately 4.5 million square kilometres, the sea is integral to Japan's interests.



Will India and Japan rise to stop the mighty propeller of Chinese hegemony?© Provided by Firstpost

China as a maritime threat to India and Japan

In the bilateral ties between India and Japan, the presence of the invisible yet omnipresent China whether it is trade or security cannot be ignored. The presence of the threat perception from China is so strong that all the strategic joint decisions are centred around it.

The increasing naval presence of China and the construction of aircraft carriers, submarines and surface ships at a furious pace has only given obvious signs of China's hegemonic ambitions.

In no less uncertain terms, China's Xi Jinping who recently began his third term as the president vowed in his address at the National People's Congress to strengthen

national security and transform the military into a “great wall of steel”. Although these words were primarily aimed at the United States, the other nations of the world could not turn deaf ears into it, particularly those which have uneasy ties with Beijing, India and Japan among them.

China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea and East China Sea, which are disputed by Japan and other neighbouring countries, are well-known, often leading to heightened diplomatic tensions.

In what is uncomfortable for India, China has been investing heavily in nations in the IOR like Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives on maritime infrastructure like ports and naval bases which signals Beijing’s clear intentions of projecting power beyond its immediate neighbourhood.

In this ultimate kuddelmuddel, there is a chance China will quietly slip away towards its goal if the world gets too used to diplomatic niffle-naffling.

Whatever the assurances from Beijing might be, the reality is very different on the waters and a heightened partnership between India and Japan is not only practical but important and necessary.

Deeper India-Japan defence ties need of the hour

Perhaps the maxim — In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice, there is — applies aptly to the India-Japan defence ties. While rapid cooperation has been happening between the two countries, there are a few areas where a faster conclusion of negotiations will bode well for both countries.

The purchase of Shin Maywa US-2 Amphibian aircraft, which is a search and rescue aircraft that can also be used for maritime surveillance and reconnaissance, for India has been still lingering on for a long time despite New Delhi giving a go-ahead for 12 such aircraft from Japan for a whopping for \$1.3 billion.

For its Project 75I, the Indian Navy needed six air-independent propulsion submarines for greater reach into the ocean and even eyed Japan’s Soryu-class submarines but nothing much happened.

The Soryu-class submarines are diesel-electric submarines that are operated by the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force and are known for their stealth capabilities and highly advanced sonar systems.

In 2018, although it looked like India would approach Japan for these submarines, there was still something concrete to happen in this regard.

In between, there were reports that India might be interested in jointly developing the Mitsubishi X-2 Shinshin stealth fighter with Japan but no development has been on this front as well.

Military-to-military ties are deepening between India and Japan with joint exercises being held for all three arms of the armed forces. The naval exercise “Japan-India Maritime Exercise” (JIMEX) is held every two years to improve interoperability and mutual understanding between the two friendly navies.

Then there is the annual naval exercise called Malabar Exercise in which the navies of the United States and Australia also participate alongside counterparts of India and Japan.

The Japanese navy also participated in the multilateral naval exercise MILAN held off the coast of Visakhapatnam in February 2022.

This year the Malabar Exercise will happen off the Sydney coast although the dates are yet to be finalized. The militaries of India and Japan also participate in the Dharma Guardian exercise held for the ground forces of the two countries and in Veer Guardian which brings the air forces of the two nations together. The joint air exercise was held for the first time in January this year.

While the strategic gain from the \$368-billion Aukus submarine deal under which Australia will acquire eight nuclear submarines — Virginia class and next-generation SSN-Aukus submarines — is still being debated, the importance given to naval upper hand and China's rapid naval capability expansion cannot be undermined.

Apart from the tactics that are being tested through these military exercises, equal importance to technology and highly advanced military equipment will only bring all participating nations on an equal footing. In fact, the military debacle that India suffered at the hands of China in 1962 was also largely due to inferior weapons.

In the Japan-India Summit Joint Statement focusing on Partnership for a Peaceful, Stable and Prosperous Post-Covid World at the 14th Japan-India Annual Summit in March last year, Japanese prime minister Fumio Kishida and his Indian counterpart, Prime Minister Narendra Modi “appreciated the significant progress made in security and defence cooperation and reaffirmed their desire to further deepen it”.

The two prime ministers welcomed the operationalisation of the Agreement Concerning Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services between the Japan Self-Defence Forces and the Indian Armed Forces and the ongoing collaboration in Unmanned Ground Vehicle and Robotics.

The need for future cooperation in the area of defence equipment and technology was also stressed which is extremely crucial given the nature of combat that might suddenly befall either country.

While the 2+2 meetings of foreign and defence ministers of both countries are very important the spirit will also have to reflect on the ground. In the joint statement after the first India-Japan 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meeting in November 2019, both countries vouched for the early conclusion of the negotiations under the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) which had started in October 2018.

As both nations realize the “importance of ensuring maritime safety in achieving a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific”, the quicker the bottlenecks are removed for arms export and technology transfer to India the better.

In 2014, Japan lifted its long self-imposed ban on arms export and in December last year, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida made it abundantly clear that Japan needs to develop capabilities to counter-strike changing a policy that was in place since World War II. With China and North Korea as neighbors, there is little choice for Japan other than this.

The joint statement issued after the Second Japan-India 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meeting in September last year gave ample indication that Japan will exponentially develop its defence capabilities including offensive ones within five years and a huge defence budget hike.

However, what is a bit disheartening is that in the multiple joint statements issued on various occasions, there is hardly any mention of any weapon system that is being negotiated between the two countries.

Japan needs to understand that if Tokyo is viewing New Delhi as a partner it can't allow the Indian military to be dependent mostly on obsolete weapons alone. Since 2014-15, India and Japan have held the sixth edition of the Joint Working Group on Defence Equipment and Technology Cooperation (JWG-DETC) but it needs to be expanded.

Even as international groupings like QUAD and AUKUS have shaped up keeping China in mind, the new troika of Russia-Iran-China cannot be simply ignored although India shares fairly good ties with Iran and Russia but just in talking terms with China. Significantly, China is key and China can be a catalyst to God knows what when it comes to the global power equation.

Indo-Pacific akin to a stormy sea

The Indo-Pacific is literally the entire planet from the Indian sub-continent to the western US shores and literally, one country alone — China — has now set eyes on the whole of it by trying to establish a single axis of power being dictated from Beijing.

In its ambition to change the power dynamics in the region, China is not only pushing hard its Belt and Road Initiative but has also entered into maritime territorial disputes with many of its neighbors.

The question of Chinese hegemony poses a significant challenge for the world far more for its neighbors like India and Japan. A year ago both Indian and Japanese prime ministers had emphasized a safe maritime domain with freedom of navigation and respect for sovereign boundaries as per international law particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. With China in the backyard, this is easier said than done as Beijing often shows scant regard for international decorum in its quest to wrest power.

The Japan Times reported on Wednesday (15 March 2023) that Prime Minister Fumio Kishida will unveil a new plan to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific to counter China's growing influence in the region.

The Japanese prime minister arrives in New Delhi on 19 March on a three-day visit where he will share the blueprint of the Japan-led initiative with his Indian counterpart, Prime Minister Modi.

There is little time to be gobsmacked by what China is doing on the seas or get caught by diplomatic gobbledygook but rather accept the bitter truth of China flexing its well-toned muscles to change the strategic landscape. High time for the rest to find ways either to contain or counter.