

# 11 The China factor in Indo-Japan strategic relations

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## Japan's interests in the Indian Ocean Region

In the ongoing century the strategic viability of the Indian Ocean has been on a constant rise. It has become a major flashpoint for conflict among the major powers. One of the reasons for the mounting significance of the Indian Ocean is rising economies of Asia and their growing surge for raw materials, including the vital energy resources from the Middle East, to boost their respective economies. Apart from this, the collapse of communism which marked the end of Cold War and the post-9/11 Iraq and Afghanistan crises on the one hand have undermined the significance of Atlantic Ocean and on the other hand boosted the geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the significance of the Indian Ocean, the postwar period after realizing the significance of the Indian Ocean, Japan like other major powers also showed keen interest in the strategically vital Indian Ocean Region. The reason for this was its mounting trade and dependence on the littoral countries of the Indian Ocean for feeding the raw material demands of its industry. Almost one-third of Tokyo's oil supplies and overseas trade runs through the sea lines of the Indian Ocean. Agriculture and food security also occupies a central position as far as the Japan's interests in food import are concerned. Tokyo is widely known for being a major agricultural importer, and in 2010, the Economic Research Service estimated the rising naval imports at \$50 billion approximately.<sup>2</sup>

The rising naval activity of the major powers in this strategically important region also invited Japan to take active notice of the events directly in the Indian Ocean. These developments directly or indirectly in Washington and has emerged as a major contributor as far as

superpower rivalry in the Indian Ocean Region is concerned. It seems quite apparent that the main motive behind US-India-Japan's Malabar exercise is to balance the China's naval expansion and its assertiveness in the region. Speaking in this line, the former prime minister of India, Manmohan Singh, had reiterated that in order to ensure peace, prosperity and stability in the Indo-Pacific region, the Indo-Japan partnership becomes crucial.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike other major powers like America, China, and India, Japan's involvement in the Indian Ocean Region has been given less significance. Since 2008, its involvement in the Indian Ocean Region has witnessed a significant rise. Despite the fact that strong limitations on the Tokyo's post-Second World War military continue to persist, it has successfully deployed its forces with the aim of meeting the requirements of its energy security.<sup>4</sup> Given the scarcity of important energy resources required to feed the Japanese economy, the sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) running through the Indian Ocean, Malacca Strait and the South China Sea and also the stability of coastal areas are of critical significance to Japan.<sup>5</sup>

Japan's prime interest in the Indian Ocean Region is to ensure energy security. It is also looking for ways to have robust trade relations with the countries of the Indian Ocean Region. Towards this end, Tokyo has been able to make its place in enhancing its trade and other economic initiatives in the countries of region. Japan in the current scenario is successfully utilizing its soft power in the Indian Ocean Region and is also attempting to make its presence apparent in the business sectors of the various countries across the Indian Ocean Region.

Combating piracy constitutes another interest of Japan in the Indian Ocean. This is also in line with ensuring energy security. Japanese commercial ships, including many oil suppliers, witnessed attacks from the pirates, which impelled Keizo Kitagawa, captain of the Japanese navy, to declare that the security and stability of strategically significant Indian Ocean are crucial for the interests of Japan. Given the mounting intensity of the competition regarding the oil supplies from the resource-rich Middle East accompanied by the augmented priority attached to safer passage of these supplies, Japan like other major powers realized that it can no longer ignore the piracy issue.<sup>6</sup> Towards this end (i.e., to combat piracy and to ensure its energy security), Tokyo in 2011 constructed and opened Djibouti naval base. Djibouti constitutes the Japan's first and the only foreign military base ever since the Second World War. This base facilitates the Japanese aircraft to carry out patrol operations over the crucial Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden. It also provided a significant boost to Japan