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Enhancing Maritime Security Cooperation between Japan and Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

The year 2012 marked a significant shift in Japan-Sri Lanka relations, particularly in maritime security cooperation, driven by both global and domestic changes. While initiatives were taken, including a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2019, deeper cooperation remains elusive due to constraints such as Sri Lanka's domestic political situation as well as Japan's economic limitations and diplomatic concerns. This study uses a qualitative approach to examine avenues for enhancing maritime security cooperation between the two nations and identify the existing challenges and future opportunities for deeper cooperation. Drawing on the theoretical framework of new levels of cooperation, this paper explores how asymmetric countries can deepen collaboration based on mutual principles and pragmatic approaches. Through interviews with government officials, policymakers, naval personnel, and maritime experts along with analyses of secondary sources, this study identifies challenges and opportunities for Japan and Sri Lanka in maritime cooperation. Despite Japan's proactive stance in promoting its 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' policy, inherent collaboration has yet to be accomplished. Research contends that enhanced maritime security cooperation would serve the mutual interests of both nations, addressing their maritime security challenges in the Indian Ocean. By focusing on issue-to-issue, event-to-event, and unit-to-unit

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cooperation, this study advocates for a nuanced approach to maritime security that aligns with international norms and fosters mutual benefit.

Keywords: *Maritime Security, Free and Open Indo-Pacific, New Level of Cooperation, Sea Lines of Communication*

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of transnational affairs, maritime relations have served as a vital source of connectivity. From the famous Maritime Silk Route to the development of monumental navies, maritime affairs have played a major role in globalization and interaction among states. In this context, the Indian Ocean has always been focal to maritime affairs, steadily playing a crucial role in the development of nations and intertwining with their economic, resource, and security interests. The regional transformation of the Indian Ocean due to the development and integration of various actors and their interests in the region affects the global as well as regional political landscape. In this sense, Japan and Sri Lanka have larger interests in partaking in discourse recognizing the Indian Ocean. This cooperation has the capacity to leverage strategic significance, economic implications, security, stability, sustainability, and diplomatic ties. Sri Lanka could potentially be a hub in the Indian Ocean for the aforementioned areas and alliances could be effectively utilized for its own development and the creation of a new cooperation model,² especially concerning Japan-Sri Lanka relations.

Japan's active participation in the Indian Ocean emerged in 2012 under the leadership of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who declared Japan's interest in engaging the Indo-Pacific region.³

² 'Sri Lanka's Role in the Indian Ocean and the Changing Global Dynamic' Speech by Dep. Foreign Minister Dr. Harsha de Silva at the Institute of South Asian Studies – Foreign Ministry – Sri Lanka." n.d. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. <https://mfa.gov.lk/depfm-isas/>

His subsequent visit to Sri Lanka in 2014 marked a significant milestone in the maritime relations between the countries.⁴ The visit resulted in the ‘Japan-Sri Lanka Dialogue on Maritime Security and Oceanic Issues’.⁵ The memorandums signed under this initiative and others highlighted the mutual interest in enhancing maritime security cooperation between the two nations.⁶

Purpose of the Paper

Changing geopolitical landscapes and pragmatic self-interest in international affairs necessitate pursuing new levels of cooperation to secure the strategic interests of states. This paper aims to provide insight into the benefits of asymmetric relations between small and global powers. A lack of research conducted on this topic has been identified, and this paper fundamentally hopes to add to the literature on the challenges and opportunities of maritime cooperation between Japan and Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean.

Structure of the Paper

This paper draws a timeline of Japan-Sri Lanka relations to the present day, highlighting the various maritime interests of both parties, displaying the power dynamics in the Indian Ocean, and examining how Japan-Sri Lanka relations will be reiterated based on these and on their national interests pertaining to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The paper will discuss the challenges and opportunities presented by these relations while articulating the nature and future of Japan-Sri Lanka relations in maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean.

³ Abe Shinzō, “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond | by Abe Shinzō,” Project Syndicate, December 27, 2012, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/magazine/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe?barrier=accesspaylog>.

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Japanese Prime Minister Abe to Visit Sri Lanka – Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Sri Lanka.” Accessed February 22, 2024. <https://mfa.gov.lk/japanese-prime-minister-abe-to-visit-sri-lanka/>.

⁵ “Joint Statement between Sri Lanka and Japan: A New Partnership between Maritime Countries.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 4, 2014. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000051016.pdf>.

⁶ Memorandum on Defence Cooperation and Exchanges between the Ministry of Defence of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and the Ministry of Defense of Japan

Methodology

The research mainly focuses on the theoretical approach of ‘new levels of cooperation’. This refers to how small, middle, and great powers can build cooperation initiatives based on common principles adhering to the international norms and adopting a pragmatic approach such as ‘issue to issue’, ‘event to event’, ‘unit to unit’ levels of cooperation rather than statist levels of cooperation. This research adopts a qualitative research approach to collecting and interpreting data from primary and secondary data resources. The primary data was collected through focus group interviews with relevant stakeholders, including government officials, policymakers, naval personnel, and maritime experts from both countries. The secondary data from academic journals, research articles, reports, and policy documents were studied to identify gaps in the research and fill out the literature in the field. This data will be employed to decipher challenges and opportunities for Japan and Sri Lanka in maritime cooperation. This will help in investigating the current conditions in the Indian Ocean and exploring possible areas for enhancing cooperation between them.

Literature Review

The literature used in this research is twofold:

- i. literature associated with maritime terminology, and
- ii. literature in the field of existing maritime security cooperation in the Indian Ocean between Japan and Sri Lanka.

The novelty of the subject allows limited research regarding Japan-Sri Lanka maritime security cooperation. The existing literature predominantly focuses on cooperation among the United States, India, and China in the Indian Ocean.⁷

⁷ It has been observed that academic discourse in the field of maritime security predominantly focuses on the dynamics among the United States, India, and China, with limited attention paid to the maritime security partnership between Japan and Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean. This observation underscores a notable gap in scholarly inquiry, wherein the strategic collaborations and security implications arising from the maritime engagements of Japan and Sri Lanka remain comparatively underexplored.

Christian Bueger's analysis of maritime security is the primary influence on this paper's understanding of maritime security.⁸ The lack of precise definitions for maritime security cooperation has prompted the embrace of progressive and pragmatic interpretations of the term. Statistical approaches have also been adopted to define maritime security. However, it is important to note that such perspectives may hinder comprehension of the implications posed by non-state actors and global political dynamics on the subject. Therefore, conceptualization in Japan-Sri Lanka maritime security cooperation has been primarily limited to agreements and joint statements issued since 2012.

Based on an analysis of the existing literature, the following **TABLE 1** presents the conceptual parameters for comprehending the dynamics of maritime security.

Maritime Security

TABLE 1: Conceptual parameters for comprehending the dynamics of maritime security

Terms	Meaning	Deficits	Focus/ Scope
Maritime security	Ole Waever and Barry Buzan explain maritime security through different levels of analysis ⁹	No accepted definition of scope	Statist approach visible
Security threat	Combination of traditional and non-traditional threats	Indecisive about situations	Grounds for countries to increase cooperation
Sovereignty	Coastal states exercise jurisdiction over territory	Asymmetric challenges	Prioritized national security

⁸ Bueger, Christian. "What is Maritime Security?" *Marine Policy* 53 (2015): 159-164. doi: 10.1016/j.marpol.2014.12.05.

⁹ Buzan, *People, States and Fear*, esp. pp. 363-368. Buzan uses the term "dimensions of security" in "Is International Security Possible?" in Booth, *New Thinking about Strategy and International Security*, pp. 34-39. Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, *Security*, pp. 5-7, alternatively employ five levels of analysis: international systems, international subsystems, units (actors), subunits (groups) and individuals.

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SLOC	Link up international trade among states	Highly contested and built around presence on SLOC	Possible cooperation at multi- and mini-lateral levels
Freedom of navigation	Safety/security of navigation.	Increases in non-traditional issues and conventional security concerns	Cooperative approach needed
Choke points	6 choke points identified: 1. Strait of Hormuz: located between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman 2. Bab el-Mandeb: situated between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden 3. Strait of Malacca 4. Strait of Hormuz 5. Lombok Strait 6. Mozambique Channel	Highly pregnable	Vulnerability and strategic importance
Transit/provision of facilities	Sri Lanka is identified as a transit point in Indian Ocean trade with the Middle East, Europe to Africa	Lack of strategic vision and balancing approach has hindered Sri Lanka from being a naval hub in South Asia	Contested but increased interdependency

Source: Author's analysis based on various sources

The literature also identifies available research on the evolution of Sri Lanka's maritime partnerships and on geopolitical dynamics in the Indian Ocean. The narrative highlights the significance of maritime security cooperation, strategic interests, and geopolitical competition shaping the Japan-Sri Lanka relationship.

Anne-Léonore Dardenne's "*Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy: The Importance of Sri Lanka*" analyses Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy in the context of Sri Lanka, emphasizing Prime Minister

Abe's proactive engagement with South Asia.¹⁰ The author highlights how Sri Lanka's location whets the interest of major powers such as China, Japan, and the US, concentrating on the importance of bilateral and mini-lateral security cooperation and positioning Japan as a potential security partner to Sri Lanka.

The above argument is used in support of Sri Lanka's effort to bring Japan into the region to balance India-China power dynamics. It also focuses on potential regional turmoil in the context of Prime Minister Abe's revising of Japan's pacifist defence policies from a more open stance¹¹.

The visit of the Japanese defence minister in 2018 marked a pivotal moment in Sri Lanka-Japan relations, setting the stage for increased maritime collaboration between the two nations.¹² The subsequent joint maritime exercise between the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force and the Sri Lanka Navy displayed a shared commitment to addressing challenges in the IOR.

Japan's interest in maritime ties with Sri Lanka is based on its strategic location in the Indian Ocean vital sea lines of communication (SLOC). Japan recognizes the importance of securing these routes for its energy imports.¹³

The existing research attempts to reflect Sri Lanka's interest in regaining and promoting its historical significance in the region.¹⁴ This is confirmed by Sri Lanka's decision to be an air and

¹⁰ Anne-Léonore Dardenne, "Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy : The Importance of Sri Lanka," IAPS Dialogue and South Asia @ LSE, May 1, 2018, https://www.academia.edu/36572800/Japans_Indo_Pacific_strategy_The_importance_of_Sri_Lanka.

¹¹ Gallo, William. 2022. "Japan's Abe Brought Lasting Change to Country's Defense Approach." Voice of America. July 8, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/japan-s-abe-brought-lasting-change-to-country-s-defense-approach-/6650690.html>.

¹² Embassy of Japan in Sri Lanka. " Japanese Defense Minister Onodera to visit Sri Lanka". Accessed September 07, 2023. https://www.lk.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_en/00_000635.html.

¹³ Anne-Léonore Dardenne, "Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy: The Importance of Sri Lanka," IAPS Dialogue and South Asia @ LSE, May 1, 2018, https://www.academia.edu/36572800/Japans_Indo_Pacific_strategy_The_importance_of_Sri_Lanka..

¹⁴ "The Indian Ocean and Sri Lanka's Emerging Maritime Identity." Accessed February 17, 2024. <https://csep.org/blog/the-indian-ocean-and-sri-lankas-emerging-maritime-identity/>.

naval hub in the Indian Ocean. Accordingly, Sri Lanka hosted the Indian Ocean Conference and Galle Dialogue in which Japan was an active member.¹⁵

Dr Pooja Bhat contextualizes various concerns about geopolitical aspirations. The security threats to trade, combined with the deficit of a common vision, create challenges that require careful manoeuvring. The Japanese geopolitical approach is to increase its presence in the Indian Ocean through connectivity with smaller countries. On the other hand, Sri Lanka, in need of infrastructural investment, faces the dilemma of navigating the interests of powers such as China, India, and the US. The research gap identified in this paper is in research pertaining to Sri Lanka's strategies for navigating its relationships with major powers, particularly research examining its collaboration with Japan.

3. Historical Evolution of Japan-Sri Lanka Relations

Japan-Sri Lanka relations date back to the 18th century, beginning with the visits that fermented cultural and religious ties between the two nations. Significant visits from the Imperial Family of Japan¹⁶ showed the growing nature of Japan-Sri Lanka ties, and the stagnation in relations throughout the colonial period until the conclusion of the Second World War ended with the post-colonial recognition of Japan by Sri Lanka at the San Francisco Peace Conference in 1951. Leftist governments in Sri Lanka and their ties to China at various instances distanced Japan-Sri Lanka relations from time to time. Since the post-war rebuilding of Sri Lanka, this has been especially apparent during the Rajapaksa governments.

The unilateral decision by Gotabhaya Rajapaksa to abandon Japan's \$1.5 billion Colombo Light Rail Project created a heavy rift in Japan-Sri Lanka relations. The pro-China foreign policy of the Rajapaksa governments led critics to believe that the decision was a result of external influence. President Ranil Wickremesinghe eventually apologized to the Japanese government in

¹⁵ "Conference E-booklet 2023." 2023. Accessed September 25, 2023.
https://www.galledialogue.lk/assets/files/2023/ebooklet/conference_ebooklet_2023_10_19.pdf.

¹⁶ "Information about the Embassy." Embassy of Japan in Sri Lanka. Accessed September 06, 2023.
https://www.lk.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_en/00_000028.html.

2022 for the unilateral cancellation during his visit to Tokyo on May 25, 2023,¹⁷ explaining the grounds of the controversial decision made by the previous president.

Examining the above incidents, it can be presumed that leadership, intentions, and interests primarily determine the relationship between the two nations. The ties being stronger during the Jayawardena regime and limited during the Rajapaksa era is a testament to the above observation.

4. Present Power Dynamics in the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean is a vital ocean connecting the East and the West and contains some of the major choke points in the world. The power dynamics at play in the region are paramount to the various players acting for economic and strategic reasons in the IOR.

The IOR has emerged as a focal point for several geopolitical and geoeconomic reasons for major powers such as India, China, and the United States. Interaction and possible rivalry between these major powers within the realm of the Indian Ocean is inevitable.

China's "Belt and Road Initiative" providing financial aid for infrastructural development in the region shows China's geopolitical and geoeconomical interest in the region, while Indian initiatives such as the SAGAR doctrine¹⁸ aim to enhance maritime security and cooperation as well as foster sustainable regional development.¹⁹ Finally the American "Indo-Pacific Strategy" has had significant impacts on the IOR.

¹⁷ Himel Kotelawala, "Sri Lanka President Apologises to Japan for Cancellation of Light Rail Project," EconomyNext, May 25, 2023, <https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-president-apologises-to-japan-for-cancellation-of-light-rail-project-121471>.

¹⁸ G. Padmaja, "Revisiting 'SAGAR' – India's Template for Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region," National Maritime Foundation, April 25, 2018, <https://maritimeindia.org/revisiting-sagar-indias-template-for-cooperation-in-the-indian-ocean-region/>.

¹⁹ The United States' active engagement in the Indian Ocean is justified by its Indo-Pacific Strategy, which aims to safeguard American interests and enhance regional stability. Emphasizing security, economic prosperity, and adherence to international norms, this strategy underscores the importance of sustained American involvement in the region to address security challenges, ensure freedom of navigation, and promote peace and prosperity in the broader Indo-Pacific area.

China’s growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean has raised concerns pertaining to Sri Lanka among many countries, including Japan²⁰. Further, India’s multilateral approach of bringing Australia, Japan and the US into the Indo-Pacific has increased geopolitical and geoeconomic activities in the region to strategically balance China’s power. Western foreign policies have shifted their focus from the Middle East to Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific²¹ with heavy geoeconomic implications. Japan itself diverted onto this same path under Abe. The Indian Ocean accounts for 80% of seaborne oil trade and 50% of container traffic per year, making it a promising geo-economic and geo-strategic location.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, emphasizes the vitality of maritime cooperation and the need for upholding a rules-based order in the IOR, and AUKUS, signifying a deeper strategic alignment, has created a geopolitical shift within the Indian Ocean in the realm of defence and technology sharing²².

TABLE 2 depicts the rise of defence expenditures between 2010 and 2022 among major competitors in the Indian Ocean (excluding Japan and Sri Lanka), which showcases the potential for heightened aggression over interests. These trends raise concerns regarding the possibility of intensified rivalries and security competition in the area. The defence expenditure increments of the selected countries in 2010 and 2022 respectively are visualized in **Figure 1**.

TABLE 2. Military Spending 2010 and 2022

Country	Year		Difference
	2010 (\$B)	2022 (\$B)	
Japan	54	46.0	-14.8
US	778.0	877.0	12.7
China	105	292.0	178.1

²⁰ Premaratne, S.P, and Asha Thrishali. n.d. “Sri Lanka and the Geopolitics of Indo-Pacific: Perceptions, Opportunities and Challenges.” University of Colombo.

²¹ *ibid*

²² Air University (AU). n.d. “Future of Maritime Security: Navigating Complex Waters in the Indo-Pacific.” <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3703796/future-of-maritime-security-navigating-complex-waters-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

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India	46	81.4	77.0
Russia	58	86.4	49.0
South Korea	28.18	46.0	63.2
Sri Lanka	1.53	1.5	-2.0

Source: https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/2304_fs_milex_2022.pdf

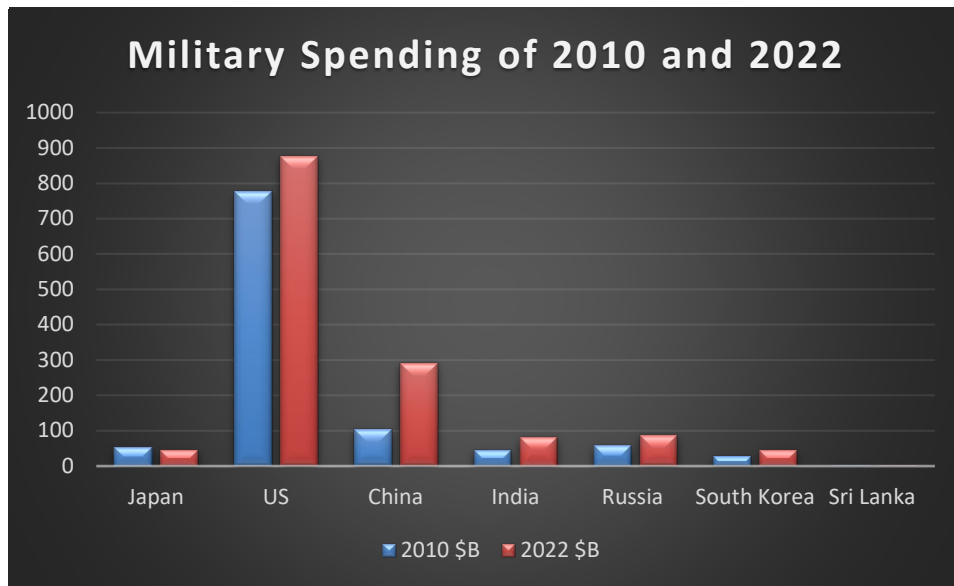


Figure 1: Author compiled from World Bank Data and SIPIRI website

Resource exploitation and exploration take non-cooperative approaches, especially for fishing, minerals, oil, and gas. Self-interest and unsustainable maritime activities pose severe threats such as resource depletion, environmental damage, and conflicts. The disorder and lack of coordination in these resources have clear economic implications that require coordination to ensure the smooth functioning of the IOR.

Figure 2 clearly illustrates that Japan’s dependency on fossil fuels has gradually decreased from 94% to 87.4% over the years. Even though oil dependency has decreased, the usage of coal and oil in Japan increased from 2010 (**Figure 3**) to 2021 (**Figure 4**). **Figure 5** shows that Japan

depends on Middle Eastern countries for fuel imports, 40% of which are from Saudi Arabia. The sea routes through the Indian Ocean become even more significant while importing fuel from the Middle East. For instance, natural gas supply in Japan in 2022 was 3,454,797 TJ. Between the years 2000 and 2022, natural gas supply in Japan surged by 26%. The country’s total oil supply in 2022 was 6,339,066 TJ, following a 40% decline in the years between 2000 and 2022. Japan’s total coal supply in 2022 was 4,491,417 TJ²³, having risen 11% in the years between 2000 and 2022.

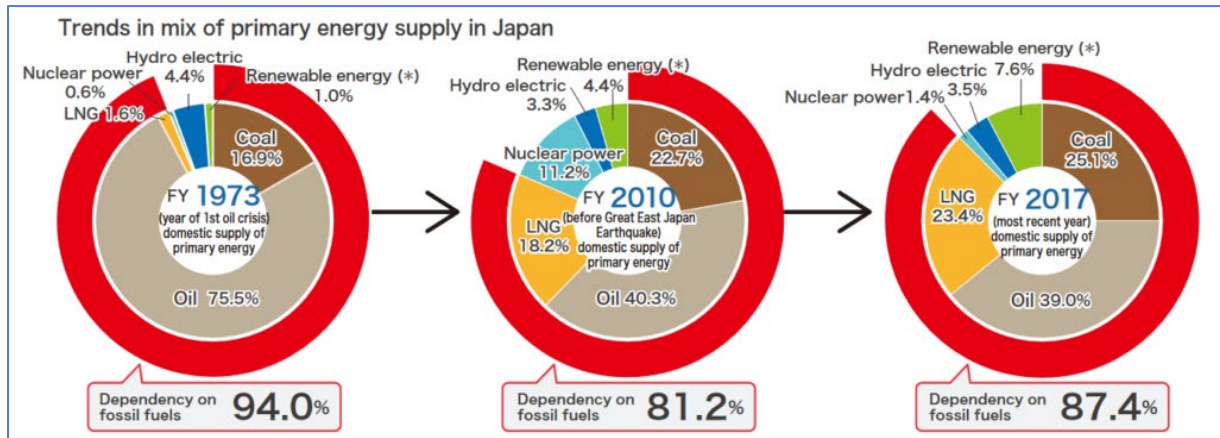


Figure 2 : Trends in Japan’s primary energy supply mix
https://www.enecho.meti.go.jp/en/category/special/shared/img/171_03.png

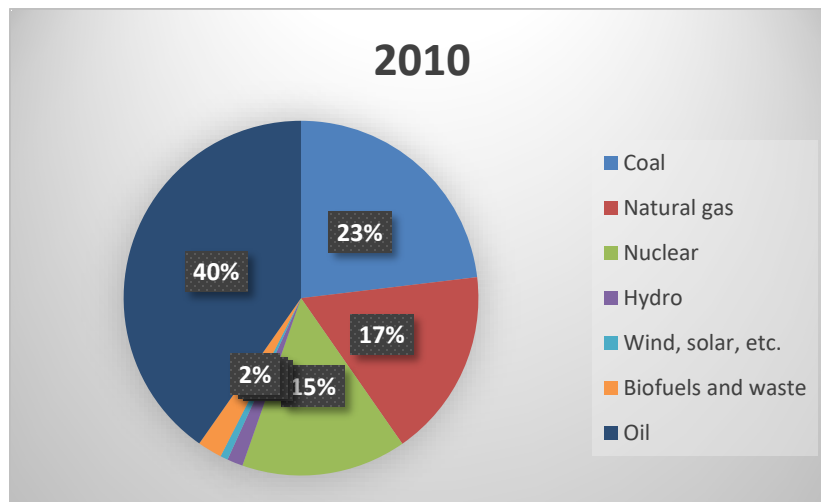


Figure 3: Author’s analysis using data from <https://www.iea.org/countries/japan>

²³ “Japan Oil Security Policy – Analysis,” IEA, August 18, 2022, <https://www.iea.org/articles/japan-oil-security-policy>.

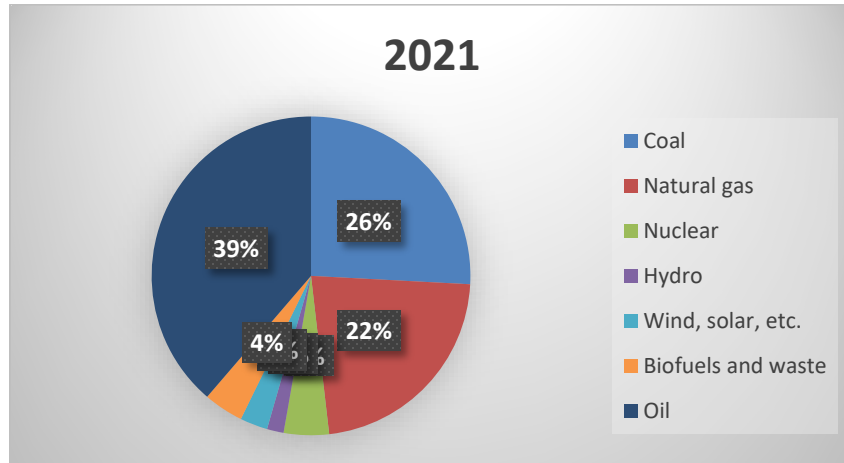


Figure 4: Author’s analysis using data from <https://www.iea.org/countries/japan>

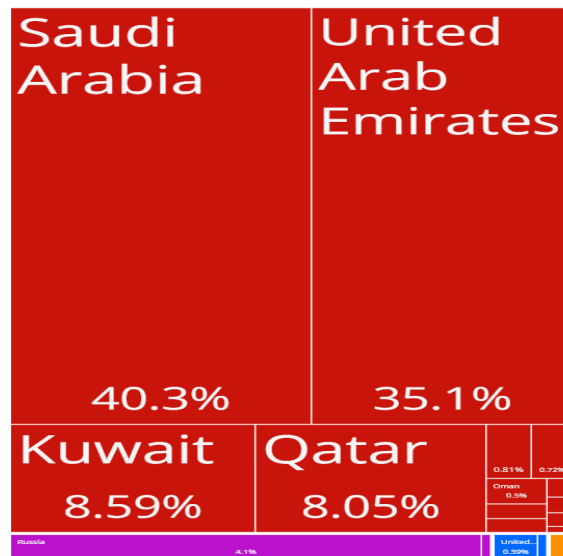


Figure 5: Import origins. Author’s analysis using data from <https://www.iea.org/countries/japan>

The militarization of the Indian Ocean began back in 2007 during pirate attacks in the Western Indian Ocean. The “Indian Ocean is indeed becoming the home of increased militarization” due to the ascent of India as a major naval power and the involvement of extra-regional forces such as the US that are developing foundations in the region.²⁴ On the other hand, China also enhanced its military existence in the region to firm up its Belt and Road Initiative. For instance,

²⁴ Zeeshan Mahmood, “Indian Ocean: Militarization and Regional Implications,” Global Village Space, April 5, 2018, <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/indian-ocean-militarization-and-regional-implications>.

555 warships from 29 countries visited Sri Lanka from 2009-2021²⁵, while more than 20 warships from India, China, Japan, France, Pakistan, the US, and other countries (**Figure 6**) made port calls in Sri Lanka in 2023.²⁶ Moreover, 120-125 warships are on standby in the Indian Ocean.

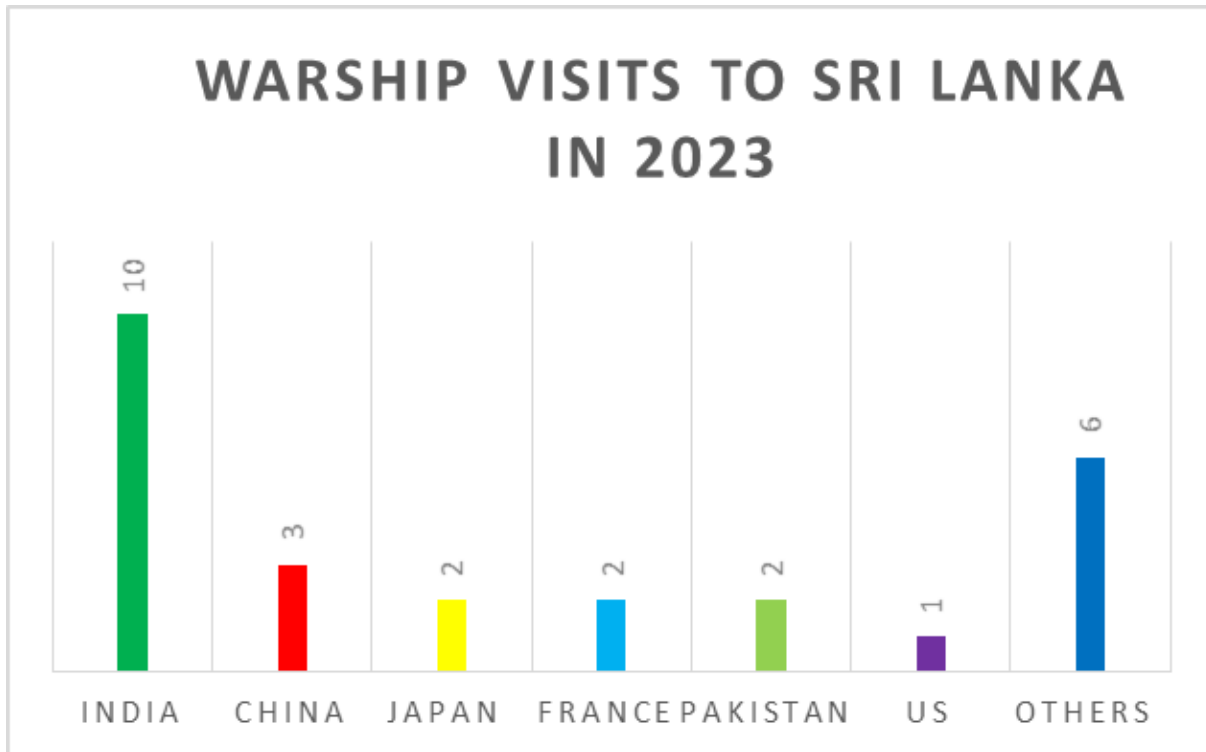


Figure 6: Warship visits to Sri Lanka in 2023 (compiled from data collected from various sources)

The proliferation of militant Islamic movements has increased threats to SLOC and chokepoints in the Indian Ocean and across the Middle East, East African, and South Asian sub-regions. Among these choke points are the Mozambique Channel, the Bab el-Mandeb, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz, the Malacca Straits, and the Sunda Strait.²⁷

²⁵ Admiral Prof. Dr. Jayanath Colombage, “Indian Ocean and Maritime Security - Admiral Prof. Dr. Jayanath Colombage,” [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IlkO-aqfLKI) (NIICE NEPAL, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IlkO-aqfLKI>.

²⁶ Data gathered from the Sri Lanka Navy website. <https://www.navy.lk/>

²⁷ David Michel, “Indian Ocean Rising: Maritime Security and Policy Challenges” (Stimson Center, July 2012), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327792725_Indian_Ocean_Rising_Maritime_Security_and_Policy_Challenges.

Non-conventional security threats are the foundation for collaboration between asymmetrical powers in the IOR. Climate change, marine pollution, maritime terrorism, piracy, natural disasters, and arms smuggling are some of the major identified threats.²⁸

Furthermore, many countries and international organizations now focus on the IOR to leverage bilateral ties.

5. The Emergence of Japan's Interest in the Indian Ocean

Japan's burgeoning interest in the Indian Ocean is directly connected with its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) policy, reflecting a comprehensive approach to regional dynamics. This commitment revolves around the interconnected fundamental principles and issues shown in **TABLE 3**.

TABLE 3

Principles	Issues
1. Limit China's revisionist behaviour in the region	1. Protect Japan's sovereignty and territorial integrity
2. Provide Japanese assistance to develop the Indo-Pacific Region	2. Secure Japan's geopolitical interests in the fields of energy and trade
3. Promote and strengthen the liberal international order	

Source: Analysis by author

i. Limit China's revisionist behaviour in the region

Japan has expressed concern over the assertive nature of China's efforts in the South China Sea. This is a major international commerce route and any interruption caused by China may have

²⁸ "Indian Ocean: A Sea of Uncertainty", Defense and Strategic Studies, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University. Accessed August 18, 2023. <https://fdss.kdu.ac.lk/dss/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/IndianOceanASeaofUncertainty-.pdf>.

serious economic ramifications for Japan.²⁹ To counterbalance China's influence, Japan has sought to increase its presence in the Indian Ocean.

The Senkaku Islands, historically under Japanese administration, have become a point of contention due to their strategic location for access to natural resources³⁰, leading China to step up its maritime incursions into Japanese waters. China's unilateral actions and its growing military power pose a threat to Japan's sovereignty. Japan's Indo-Pacific policies aim to counter China's activities and safeguard its interests in the region.³¹ Japan is striving to maintain stability in the region amid escalating tensions caused by China's assertiveness.

Furthermore, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – which includes vast infrastructure projects spanning multiple Asian nations – has further stoked Japan's curiosity about the Indian Ocean. Japan views the BRI as a vehicle via which China hopes to encircle Japan and extend its sphere of influence by building a strategic corridor throughout Asia.³² Japan seeks to offset China's influence in the region by introducing investment alternatives to IOR nations.

Japan's geopolitical objectives of maintaining a rule-based international order and guaranteeing regional stability are consistent with its interest in the Indian Ocean. Professor Tetsuo Kotani has commented that “...revisionist actions by China, such as its growing militarization of man-made islands in the South China Sea and its contempt for international law, pose a threat to regional stability.”³³ Japan’s participation is a way to support a reliable, rule-based regional order in the Indian Ocean that restrains China's regressive acts.

1. Provide Japanese assistance to develop the Indo-Pacific Region

Japan functions across a large spectrum that encompasses connectivity projects, economic growth, security cooperation, and regional cooperation in the IOR in hopes of encouraging stability,

²⁹ Eto Naoko, November 9, 2023, based on a lecture/presentation given at The Japan Institute of International Affairs

³⁰ Interview with Hideshi Tokuchi, November 8, 2023, “Japan’s New National Security Strategy - Background and Challenges,” Research Institute for Peace and Security (RIPS)

³¹ Ibid.

³² McBride, James, Noah Berman, and Andrew Chatzky. 2023. “China’s Massive Belt and Road Initiative.” Council on Foreign Relations. February 2, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/background/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

³³ Meeting with Tetsuo Kotani, JIIA, October 27, 2023.

economic expansion, and prosperity in the area through its efforts. Its contributions to the development of Indian Ocean states has increased notably over the last decades.³⁴



Figure 7: Sri Lankan maritime boundary. <https://bmkltly13vb.compat.objectstorage.ap-mumbai-1.oraclecloud.com/cdn.ft.lk/ftadmin/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/25221622/DFT-16-011.jpg>

Japan has taken the initiative on various connectivity efforts, including the "Asia-Africa Growth Corridor" that connects Indian Ocean countries.³⁵ These programs are aimed at improving connectivity and encouraging economic cooperation among the nations in the area. Japan seeks to build a network of infrastructure projects to improve investment, commerce, and interpersonal interactions.

To maintain stability and protect its interests, Japan has been bolstering its IOR security alliances. It has participated in capacity-building initiatives, cooperative patrols, and military drills with nations including the US, Australia, and India.³⁶

³⁴ Presentation notes for JICA meeting, October 13, 2023.

³⁵ Ruchitha Beri, "Asia Africa Growth Corridor: Towards a Shared Philosophy | Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses," idsa.in, accessed February 22, 2024, <https://idsa.in/aficatrends/asia-africa-growth-corridor-rberi>.

³⁶ Michael Dunford, "China's Belt and Road Initiative and Its Implications for Global Development ACTA via SERICA" (ACTA VIA SERICA, August 2021),

Japan has demonstrated its commitment to regional cooperation by actively participating in venues such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).³⁷ These platforms give littoral states of the Indian Ocean a venue for collaboration. Japan's participation in these programs demonstrates its ambitions for Indo-Pacific development and its dedication to regional cooperation.

2. Promote and strengthen the liberal international order

Japan is known as one of the oldest actors in the liberal international order in the Asian region. The recent focus on India's role and the noticeable decline in the US presence in the IOR³⁸ underscores the need for major liberal democracies such as Japan to safeguard the liberal international order. With China's rise and its implications for global power dynamics, Japan has intensified its engagement with like-minded liberal nations to bolster international frameworks. China's regional influence is perceived by Japan as a possible threat to the liberal world order. Japan therefore hopes to offset China's increasing influence and advance a more equitable and inclusive regional order by increasing its presence and alliances in the Indian Ocean.³⁹

Japan has been active in forming partnerships with nations across the Indian Ocean. It has developed partnerships with nations in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and ASEAN, as well as reinforcing its strategic alliances with nations such as Australia and India.⁴⁰ These moves ensure better marine security and encourage regional cooperation by promoting multilateral relationships.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353971317_China's_Belt_and_Road_Initiative_and_its_Implications_for_Global_Development_ACTA_VIA_SERICA.

³⁷ Darshana M. Baruah Greely Nitya Labh, Jessica, "Mapping the Indian Ocean Region," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 15, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/06/15/mapping-indian-ocean-region-pub-89971>.

³⁸ Dr Satoru Nagao, "India Is Set to Play a Key Role in the Indian Ocean" (Institut für Strategie- Politik- Sicherheits- und Wirtschaftsberatung, November 2014), https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/185366/302_Nagao_final_II.pdf.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ "Japan's Foreign Policy to Promote National and Worldwide Interests." Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000106463.pdf>.

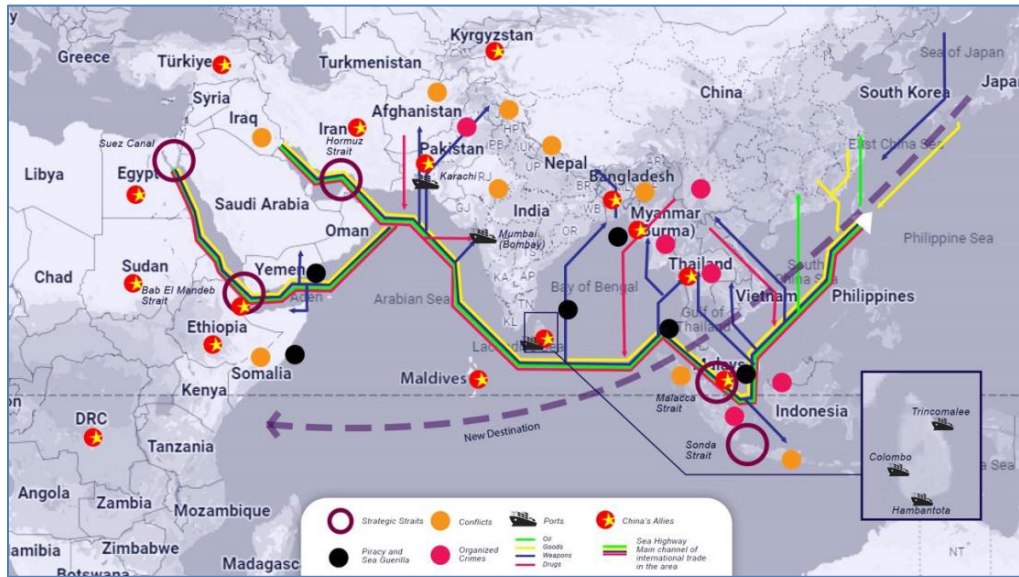


Figure 8: Analysis by author

Japan has acknowledged the significance of the Indian Ocean for commerce and economic connections in addition to energy-related factors. The area facilitates the movement of products among East Asia, Africa, and Europe by housing some of the busiest maritime routes in the world (Figure 8). Japan has been actively engaged in creating infrastructure projects that improve connectivity and commercial ties with nations such as Sri Lanka.⁴¹

Sri Lanka in particular has acquired relevance in Japan's Indian Ocean strategic considerations due to its advantageous location at the intersection of important maritime routes. To promote connectivity and marine trade, Japan has made investments in Sri Lanka's ports and airport infrastructure.⁴²

6. Japan-Sri Lanka Maritime Cooperation

Japan's maritime security cooperation with Sri Lanka has used a minimalistic approach despite desires to foster stronger ties and promote regional stability in the IOR. Sri Lanka's strategic

⁴¹ "Trincomalee Port Starts Night Operations with Japan-Funded Navigation System | Daily FT," [www.ft.lk](https://www.ft.lk/shippingaviation/Trincomalee-Port-starts-night-operations-with-Japan-funded-navigation-system/21-745494), accessed February 22, 2024, <https://www.ft.lk/shippingaviation/Trincomalee-Port-starts-night-operations-with-Japan-funded-navigation-system/21-745494>.

⁴² Ibid

location has stimulated interest within Japan, indicating a quintessential connection between Japan and Sri Lanka.

Japan's contemporary relations with Sri Lanka fall within three major frameworks: peace negotiations, maritime security, and economic cooperation. Acknowledging the strength of Sri Lanka's maritime capabilities, Japan has reached a multitude of agreements in recent years, with the 2014 agreement between the two nations being of particular significance. The joint statement accompanying that agreement read:

“The two leaders noted the strategic geographical location of Sri Lanka ‘in the Indian Ocean sea lanes straddling Asia and Africa’. It is therefore quite obvious that ‘strategic location’ is an important consideration.⁴³

Sri Lanka with its geographical advantage has been considered a key partner in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. In 2018, Japan considered investing in Trincomalee Port with the idea of developing a free and open maritime order in the Indo-Pacific region as an international public good.

The FOIP vision is to “enhance the connectivity of the Indo-Pacific region, foster the region into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, free from force or coercion, and make it prosperous.”⁴⁴

Japan's vision exemplifies its desire for a secure future through maritime cooperation that entails actively engaging in capacity-building efforts and balancing security. As one major step in this approach, “The Japan Coast Guard (JCG) dispatched two members of its Mobile Cooperation Team (MCT), a special team that provides foreign coast guard agencies with technical support on maritime safety and security, to provide capacity-building support to the Sri Lanka maritime law enforcement agencies from 1 July (Sat.) to 9 July (Sun.) 2023, in cooperation with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).”⁴⁵ Japan thus aims to keep the gates open for

⁴³ Nagao, “India Is Set to Play.”

⁴⁴ “New Plan for a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)’,” 2023, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100477660.pdf>.

⁴⁵ JCG dispatched the Mobile Cooperation Team to Sri Lanka. Accessed February 16, 2024. https://www.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/e/topics_archive/article4227.html.

future access in the maritime arena by emphasizing its commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific, with Sri Lanka playing a crucial role in this cooperative endeavor.

Japan's approach towards Sri Lanka has been more open-ended, emphasizing soft power diplomacy. Sri Lanka's dependence on China has influenced Japan's approach, steering it towards maintaining positive relations without strict conditions. Japan understands that Sri Lanka's geopolitical position necessitates pragmatic engagement with both China and other regional powers. Such an open approach allows Sri Lanka to navigate this delicate balance.

A dilemma was created by China-Sri Lanka ties with respect to Sri Lanka's Port City project and the use of a Sri Lankan port as a naval base. Japan's strategic considerations concerning Hambantota Port have become multifaceted, especially in light of China's influence, and there have been peculiar speculations about China establishing a naval base there. A recent news report – "AidData Report Warns of a Chinese Naval Base in Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port" – hinted that China had identified Hambantota Port as a top choice in terms of regional maritime security dynamics. Visits by Chinese surveillance vessels have raised security concerns within Japan as well as in India and, accordingly, "the development has already sounded the alarm in India, which has viewed China's rising influence in the Indian Ocean with suspicion. Analysts say the *Yuan Wang's* moves will also be closely monitored by the US and Western allies as they have long criticised Beijing's dealings with Sri Lanka."⁴⁶

In 2019 a treaty was concluded between Japan and Sri Lanka and, "in order to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific, they shared recognition of the need to strengthen the partnership between Japan and Sri Lanka, an important maritime country at a strategic point on the Indian Ocean sea lane."⁴⁷ The two parties also signed a memorandum whose purpose "... is to facilitate and develop cooperation and exchanges in the field of defense on the basis of mutual interests."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Vincent Ni, "Chinese Navy Vessel Arrives at Sri Lanka Port to Security Concerns from India," *The Guardian*, August 16, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/16/chinese-navy-vessel-arrives-at-sri-lanka-port-to-security-concerns-from-india>.

⁴⁷ "Activities: JDF - Japan Defense Focus (No.116)." Japan Ministry of Defense. Accessed February 11, 2024. <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/jdf/no116/activities.html>.

⁴⁸ "Memorandum on Defense Cooperation and Exchange between the Ministry of Defense of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and the Ministry of Defense of Japan."

The Japan-Sri Lanka Defence Cooperation Dialogue exchanged conventional agreements during the signing event to arrange regular maritime exercises. The following were included as examples of wide-ranging exchange: “cooperation between the navies with a focus on training during port calls, cooperation between the air forces with a focus on unit-to-unit exchange during port calls and support for capacity building in search and rescue operations, and the possibility of initiating cooperation and exchange activities between the ground forces.”⁴⁹

The Defence Exchange Agreement between Sri Lanka and Japan signifies a milestone in their bilateral relations and highlights their historical connections. It marks a paradigm shift in Japan’s foreign policy towards Sri Lanka, initiating a new era of engagement and cooperation. Japan recognizes Sri Lanka's strategic capacity and seeks to deepen collaboration by formalizing defence ties.

The defence ministers of Japan, the United States, Australia, and the Philippines have agreed to step up security cooperation to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific amid China’s growing maritime assertiveness, according to Global Data’s “Japan Defense Market 2023-2028” report.⁵⁰ This assertion interprets Japan’s leniency towards Sri Lanka as reflecting a desire to prevent Sri Lanka from being exclusively tied to China and thereby ensuring more balanced bilateral connections.

The maritime security domain presents numerous opportunities for mutual benefit and cooperation between Japan and Sri Lanka. Being strategically positioned, both countries can collaborate on maritime security measures for peace and stability. The risk factors of transnational threats may be countered through maritime support by sharing intelligence, joint patrols, and coordinated responses. As per the 2018 discussions, “the two sides also discussed augmented cooperation in multilateral frameworks including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia

⁴⁹ “Activities: JDF - Japan Defense Focus (No.116).” Japan Ministry of Defense. Accessed February 11, 2024. <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/jdf/no116/activities.html>

⁵⁰ Harry McNeil, “Japan-Sri Lanka Goodwill Exercise Strengthens Indo-Pacific Cooperation,” *Naval Technology*, August 4, 2023, <https://www.naval-technology.com/news/japan-sri-lanka-goodwill-exercise-strengthens-indo-pacific-cooperation/?cf-view>.

(ReCAAP) recognizing the importance of increased engagement.”⁵¹ These measures emphasized strong bilateral support that would augment Japan-Sri Lanka relations.

Further, the capacity-building approach may give rise to tactical approaches in future relations between Japan and Sri Lanka, with one or both of the parties organising workshops on maritime law enforcement, disaster management, and cyber security that include crisis management exercises and boarding procedures that enhance their mutual maritime security. These would be in addition to sharing surveillance technology and introducing information mechanisms to detect security threats by fostering intelligence cooperation.

Apart from the aforementioned developments, the two nations have focused on their economic interests regarding trade routes, as both nations rely on maritime trade.

“According to Global Data’s report “Sri Lankan Defense Market – Attractiveness, Competitive Landscape and Forecasts to 2024”, Japan and Sri Lanka are strengthening their bilateral cooperation regarding maritime security to fight against piracy and other concerns, along with efforts to establish an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA).”⁵²

Sri Lanka’s decision to welcome maritime cooperation with Japan stems from delicate geopolitical dynamics. By prioritizing Japan as a strategic partner, Sri Lanka aims to foster the economic strength and the commitment to regional stability needed to generate an ally.

Sri Lanka received better exposure for its cooperation with Japan, allowing it to sidestep criticism or confrontation with major powers like India, China or the United States. Japan’s engagement is less likely to trigger intense criticism or power rivalry, making it beneficial for Sri Lanka in avoiding geopolitical tensions.

Moreover, Japan and Sri Lanka possess unique strengths in naval capabilities and technology infrastructure. A shared vision on upgrading bilateral ties as well as Japan’s vision of

⁵¹ “The 3rd Sri Lanka-Japan Dialogue on Maritime Security, Safety and Oceanic Issues Concludes Successfully in Colombo – Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Sri Lanka,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed February 22, 2024, <https://mfa.gov.lk/sl-jpn-maritime-eng>.

⁵² Harry McNeil, “Japan-Sri Lanka Goodwill Exercise Strengthens Indo-Pacific Cooperation,” *Naval Technology*, August 4, 2023, <https://www.naval-technology.com/news/japan-sri-lanka-goodwill-exercise-strengthens-indo-pacific-cooperation/?cf-view>.

a free and open Indo-Pacific region aligns with Sri Lanka's aspiration for maritime growth. Japan and Sri Lanka can thus forge a positive and well-balanced partnership for rational solutions and common goals.

The existing maritime security cooperation between Japan and Sri Lanka mainly covers the following areas:

1. Freedom and safety of navigation
2. Port development
3. Maritime capacity building
4. Maritime law enforcement, search and rescue, disaster risk reduction and environmental protection

7. Challenges and Opportunities

Economic and Security Challenges in Japan-Sri Lanka Maritime Security Cooperation

Maritime cooperation between Japan and Sri Lanka faces challenges attributable to their inherent differences and to external pressures. Japan established historic ties with Sri Lanka by serving as a mediator to facilitate the country's peace process and by offering extensive support for post-war recovery and economic reconstruction, stimulating economic growth within Sri Lanka.

Japan took the initiative in providing yen loans comprising fourteen yen loan agreements that included various infrastructure projects, namely, the expansion of Colombo Port, the development of irrigation infrastructure, the construction of Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall, the development of the Mahaveli River basin and many other such projects. The aforementioned agreements have faced the significant challenges presented by the early signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on debt restructuring between the Official Creditor Committee and the Sri Lankan government, and by the need to ensure transparency and comparability in agreements with creditors outside the Official Creditor Committee.⁵³

⁵³ “Japan-Sri Lanka Economic Cooperation Economic Cooperation Policy Dialogue.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Accessed April 3, 2024. https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_00084.html.

As previously mentioned, Sri Lanka halted a Japanese-funded light rail project during President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's tenure without providing clear justification. Analysts have suggested that this decision may have been influenced by the Rajapaksa administration's close ties with China. A comprehensive examination, including a national audit report, has yet to yield definitive reasons for the project's suspension.⁵⁴ Such incidents not only undermine Japan-Sri Lanka cooperation but also strain their bilateral relations. These complexities highlight the intricate dynamics at play within maritime cooperation, underscoring the need for comprehensive diplomatic engagement in addressing tensions.

The ongoing financial crisis in Sri Lanka calls for constraints on maritime infrastructure development. The significant costs associated with these development projects, coupled with its own financial constraints, make it difficult for Japan as well to boost maritime security cooperation with Sri Lanka. Moreover, Japan perceives the geographical distance separating the countries as a major hurdle in justifying broader investment initiatives in Sri Lanka.⁵⁵ These factors impede efforts to deepen Japan's and Sri Lanka's maritime security collaboration, highlighting the interplay between economic constraints, strategic priorities, and geographic considerations in shaping bilateral engagements.

This paper has identified the influence of global political dynamics on Japan's approach to enhancing relations with Sri Lanka. Japan's decision-making processes often align closely with those of its key allies, particularly the United States and other Western nations as well as India. However, Sri Lanka's increasingly close ties with China over the past few decades have led to a decline in Western influence and support both economically and politically. These shifting geopolitical alignments pose challenges to Japan's and Sri Lanka's maritime security cooperation.

⁵⁴ Auditor General's Office of Sri Lanka. Final Report on Light Rail Transit. p.129; accessed September 28, 2023. <http://auditorgeneral.gov.lk/web/images/audit-reports/upload/2022/special/Light-Rail-Transit/Final-Report-LRT.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Through discussions with experts conducted alongside the fellowship program, the author has observed that one of Japan's dilemmas pertains to Sri Lanka's geographical remoteness in comparison to East Asian nations.

Additionally, Sri Lanka's imposition of import restrictions amidst its financial crisis has directly impacted trade between Japan and Sri Lanka,⁵⁶ particularly in the automobile sector where the majority of Japanese imports are concentrated.

TABLE 4: Central bank reports on Sri Lanka and Japan

Year	Total Trade Turnover (US\$ Million)
2018	1809.84
2019	1156.85
2020 (January- June)	435.95
2021	675
2022	429.35
2023	36.3

Source: Central bank reports on Sri Lanka and Japan from official websites

<https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/srilanka/data.html> and
https://www.slembassyjapan.com/sri_lanka_japan_trade

⁵⁷ “The Effects of Import Controls on Sri Lanka’s Exports and the Economy | Institute of Policy Studies Sri Lanka.” 2021. www.ips.lk. June 10, 2021. <https://www.ips.lk/the-effects-of-import-controls-on-sri-lankas-exports-and-the-economy/>.

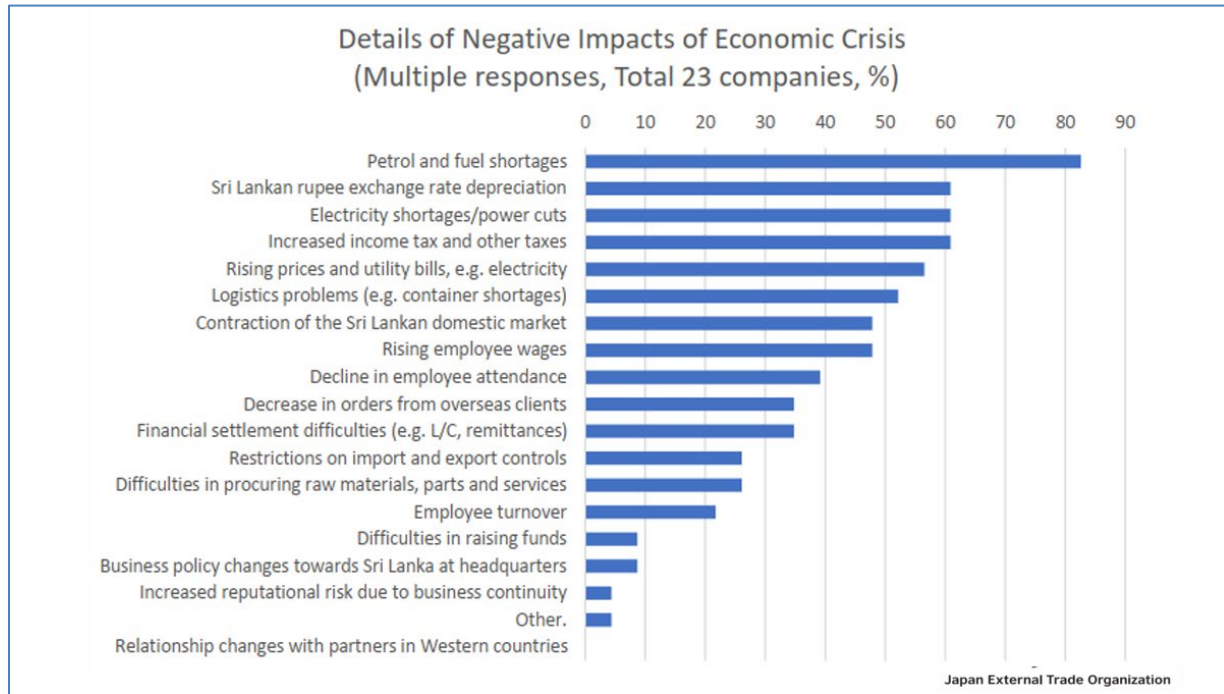


Figure 9: Details of the negative impacts of the economic crisis. <https://economynext.com/sri-lankas-japanese-firms-hit-most-badly-by-fuel-shortages-currency-depreciation-in-crisis-survey-146266/>

These developments have heightened concerns in Japan over the feasibility of enhancing avenues for maritime security cooperation. Among recent developments, the Japan-Sri Lanka economic cooperation policy dialogue held in 2024 to exchange views on matters pertaining to the Japanese-funded project portfolio, explore future developments, and consider prospective economic cooperation between Japan and Sri Lanka going forward⁵⁷ offered insights on the prevailing challenges inherent in bilateral relations amid economic constraints.

These security challenges foreshadow regional geopolitical competition, and China’s growing role in regional development and its unilateral actions imply a threat to relations between Japan and Sri Lanka. One such instance occurred on August 16, 2022, when the Chinese surveillance ship *Yuan Wang 5* arrived at Hambantota Port for a scheduled five-day visit, despite

⁵⁷ “Japan-Sri Lanka Economic Cooperation Policy Dialogue - 2024.” n.d. www.erd.gov.lk. Accessed April 5, 2024. https://www.erd.gov.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=282:japan-sri-lanka-economic-cooperation-policy-dialogue-2024&catid=29:press-releases&Itemid=226&lang=en.

Sri Lanka's request to postpone the visit amidst security concerns expressed by the United States and India⁵⁸. This drew widespread criticism, especially considering Sri Lanka's significant indebtedness to China, fueling speculation regarding China's debt-trap diplomacy and its impact on Sri Lanka's economic and political stability.⁵⁹

Another significant challenge highlighted is Japan's strategic dilemma regarding distance. Commander Keitaro Ushirogata, currently a faculty member at the MSDF Staff College, has emphasized the importance of Japan's strategic boundaries, cautioning against the risks of overreach.⁶⁰ To ensure the durability and effectiveness of cooperation, constraints must be carefully considered in strategic planning. Drawing upon the wisdom of B.H. Liddell Hart, it becomes evident that *aligning strategic objectives with available resources is essential to avoid overstretching*.⁶¹ There are thus concerns over strategic overextension in Sri Lanka's relationship with Japan, and understanding China's influence on the country is crucial for strong cooperation.

Opportunities for Japan-Sri Lanka Maritime Security Cooperation

Japan and Sri Lanka have strengthened their maritime security since 2012 and, through its Free and Open Indo-Pacific policy, Japan has proactively engaged with the international community on

⁵⁸ “Chinese High-Tech Ship Leaves Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port,” *The Economic Times*, August 22, 2022, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/chinese-high-tech-ship-leaves-sri-lanka-hambantota-port/articleshow/93710614.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

⁵⁹ It was noted during a meeting held with Dr. Eldridge that Japan is concerned about Sri Lanka's potential lack of full autonomy in shaping its foreign policy decisions due to its increasing dependence on China. This apprehension highlights broader geopolitical considerations and prompts scrutiny of Sri Lanka's ability to maintain its sovereignty and independence in contemporary international relations.

⁶⁰ David Brewster, “Indo-Pacific Maritime Security: Challenges and Cooperation” (Commonwealth Government and The Australian National University, July 2016), https://nsc.crawford.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publication/nsc_crawford_anu_edu_au/2017-05/indo-pacific_maritime_security_-_challenges_cooperation_-_final.pdf.

⁶¹ Mark Bridges, “Liddell Hart’s 8 Maxims of Strategy,” flevyblog, May 4, 2023, <https://flevy.com/blog/liddell-harts-8-maxims-of-strategy/>.

sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence. Sri Lanka, which has historically maintained relations with Japan, has consistently supported Japan's territorial rights, notably during the post-war San Francisco Peace Treaty.⁶² However, Japan faces escalating challenges to its sovereignty and territorial integrity, particularly concerning Takeshima Island, the Senkaku Islands, and the Northern Territories.⁶³ Japan seeks international support through rule-based governance and international law. Maritime security cooperation enables Japan to articulate and defend its maritime interests, facilitating diplomatic lobbying and garnering broader support for resolving territorial disputes.

Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian Ocean offers significant potential to support Japan's SLOC and ensure secure maritime services (**TABLE 5**). Japan's reliance on the Indian Ocean for trade and energy underscores the importance of Sri Lanka as a transit hub for energy resources destined for Japan. As of 2022, Japan's daily oil consumption stood at approximately 3,337,000 barrels,⁶⁴ with crude oil imports amounting to about three million barrels per day. A Very Large Crude Carrier (VLCC) can only satisfy Japan's oil demand for roughly 16 hours, necessitating 1.5 fully loaded VLCCs each day to meet its energy requirements. With the current route from the Middle East to Japan spanning 12,000 kilometres over a 45- to 50-day voyage, including loading and discharging operations, transit times and costs could be reduced by utilizing Sri Lanka's Trincomalee Oil Tank Farm.⁶⁵ Simulation studies conducted by the author, utilizing resources such as Ports.com, demonstrate that the voyage from Trincomalee takes just 19 days to Japan's Chiba Port and 20 days to Osaka. With only 10 days required from the Middle East to Trincomalee, the journey time can be significantly reduced.

⁶² "J.R. Jayewardene's momentous speech that changed world history", Daily News
<http://archives1.dailynews.lk/2021/09/03/features/258337/jr-jayewardene%E2%80%99s-momentous-speech-changed-world-history>

⁶³ Professor Fukamachi, JIIA, November 2023

⁶⁴ "Oil Consumption in Japan." CEIC Data, Accessed URL: <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/japan/oil-consumption>

⁶⁵ "Sea Route Information." Ports.com, URL: <http://ports.com/sea-route/>

TABLE 5

Port	Distance	Speed (Knots)	Days at Sea
Port of Ras Tanura to Port of Trincomalee	2726 nm	11	10.3
Port of Trincomalee to Port of Shiba	5372 nm	11	20
Port of Ras Tanura to Port of Osaka	5013 nm	11	19

Source: Analysis by author (<http://ports.com/sea-route/>)

Sri Lanka's role as a strategic intermediary for Japan's energy needs is reinforced by projections of major oil production in the Middle East and Africa (**Figure 11**), emphasizing the importance of optimizing sea routes.

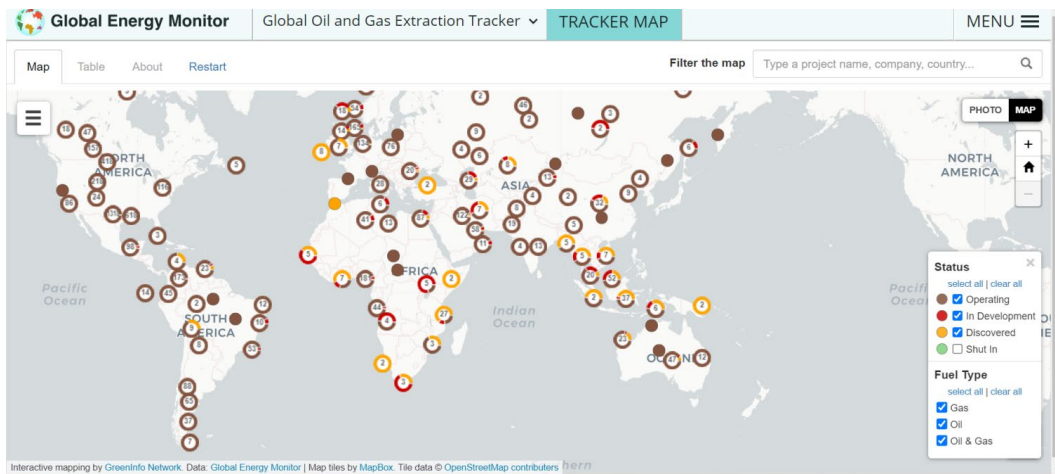


Figure 10: <https://globalenergymonitor.org/projects/global-oil-gas-extraction-tracker/tracker-map/>

Japan's economic strategy involves diversifying oil imports, with Africa as a key partner and with the Indian Ocean gaining importance due to Japan's SLOC. Colombo and Trincomalee ports offer dual-use capabilities for trade with India and Africa, while Hambantota port presents

opportunities for Japan's maritime interests. Leveraging Sri Lanka's strategic position is crucial for Japan to secure its energy supplies while dependent on Middle East oil imports.

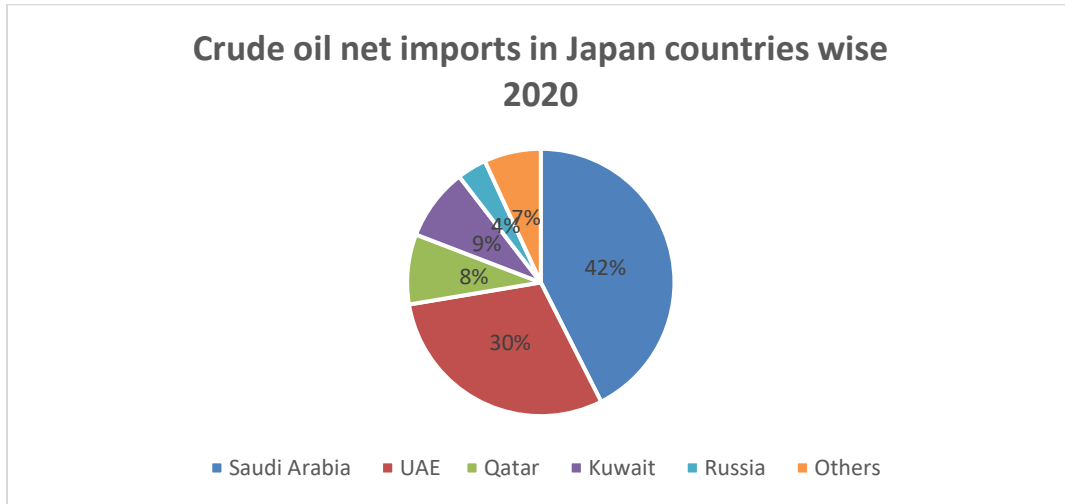


Figure 11: Crude oil net imports into Japan and other countries in 2020 (<https://www.iea.org/data-and-statistics/charts/crude-oil-net-imports-in-japan-2000-2020>
<https://www.iea.org/articles/japan-oil-security-policy>⁶⁶)

Food security could be enhanced by tapping into sea resources. Despite both nations' status as major seafood consumers, they lack joint fisheries agreements for sustainable fishing. With its advanced fisheries management technology, Japan could assist Sri Lanka in developing better monitoring and management systems. This collaboration is promising for putting in place sustainable practices, safeguarding marine ecosystems, and ensuring stable food supplies.

TABLE 6 illustrates the scope of Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, providing insight into various forms of malpractice within the fishing industry.

⁶⁶ “Indian Ocean and the Safety of Sea Lines of Communication.” n.d. Ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu.
https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_aug01sav01.html.

TABLE 6: Scope of Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing

Illegal	Unreported	Unregulated
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Fishing in a state's waters without permission or in violation of laws ii. Fishing by vessels of states in a regional fisheries management organization that do not follow conservation measures or relevant international law iii. Fishing that breaks national laws or international obligations, including agreements within regional fisheries management organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Fishing activities that go unreported or misreported to the national authority, and are in violation of national laws ii. Fishing activities within the jurisdiction of a regional fisheries management organization that are not properly reported or misreported, contrary to the organization's reporting procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Vessels without nationality that fish in an area managed by a regional fisheries management organization, and vessels flying the flags of a state that fish in RFMO waters to which that state is not a party ii. Vessels that fish in areas outside the purview of any conservation or management measures in place

Source: FAO in Sri Lanka | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Findings indicate that Indian and Chinese vessels engage in hazardous fishing practices. However, there has been insufficient focus on Chinese fishing activities in the IOR, and this overlooking of crimes could be due to close diplomatic ties with China. A 2016 National Maritime Research Foundation report⁶⁷ reveals that 114 such cases regarding illegal fishing by China have been reported from different areas of the IOR. Japan's advanced monitoring technology could offer advantages in addressing this issue as a maritime security cooperation effort. Japanese management initiatives and monitoring methods could also enhance the quality and value of the IOR's fishing industry.

Under the 2015 Memorandum of Understanding between China and Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka banned several Chinese vessels from fishing in the region due to violations of the agreed conditions

⁶⁷ National Maritime Research Foundation, "ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT 2015-2016," maritimeindia.org, 2016, <https://maritimeindia.org/View%20Profile/636267828619675070.pdf>.

of the MOU⁶⁸. It has to be noted here that the responses to China's infringements change according to the governments in power.

Japan is a pioneer in the field of deep-sea mining technology in Asia, where it focuses on rare earth minerals. Conversely, Sri Lanka has yet to develop a comprehensive map of its deep-sea mining potential, suggesting untapped seabed resources. Furthermore, Sri Lanka is poised to receive a significantly expanded maritime territory under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) demarcation in 2025.⁶⁹ In this context, Japan can offer expertise, technology, and investment for sustainable seabed minerals exploration and gain access to energy resources. Collaborative efforts between Japan and Sri Lanka could moreover involve joint naval and coast guard exercises enhancing maritime security in the region, thereby ensuring safe access to resources⁷⁰. Given Sri Lanka's limited capacities, Japan's assistance could lend greater sophistication to Sri Lanka's capabilities in deep-sea mining and maritime security, leading to mutual benefits for both countries.

Environmental, maritime, natural, and man-made threats should also be considered in this dialogue. The *X-Press Pearl* incident is a recent and devastating event affecting the entire IOR that occurred despite environmental concerns. It is imperative to understand that Sri Lanka by virtue of its central location will always be at risk of such environmental threats.⁷¹

This incident exposed Sri Lanka's lack of technology for evaluating the magnitude of damage and its inadequate marine data for conducting precise assessments to restore damaged marine environments effectively. Various allegations and refused claims often result for the aforementioned reasons. Japan faced a similar situation in 1997 (the Nakhodka oil spill) and

⁶⁸ S. Rubatheesan, "Govt. Cancels Fishing Licences of Eight Chinese Companies | The Sunday Times Sri Lanka," *The Sunday Times*, March 1, 2015, <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/150301/news/govt-cancels-fishing-licences-of-eight-chinese-companies-138453.html>.

⁶⁹ "Colombo awaits UN approval to seize 25-fold larger extent of sea than its landmass." TamilNet, November 24, 2018. URL: <https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=79&artid=39261>

⁷⁰ "Japan successfully undertakes large-scale deep-sea mineral extraction." *The Japan Times*, September 26, 2017. URL: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/09/26/national/japan-successfully-undertakes-large-scale-deep-sea-mineral-extraction/>

⁷¹ "Ministry of Defence - Sri Lanka," www.defence.lk (Institute of National Security Studies), accessed February 22, 2024, https://www.defence.lk/Article/view_article/27052.

subsequently suffered 82 oil spills from 2011 to 2021. Japan's technological superiority enables it to facilitate reparation and rebuilding procedures, making it a valuable partner for addressing various environmental threats.

As Japan advances its blue economy agenda, combating maritime pollution and safeguarding marine ecosystems becomes critical for both nations.⁷² Active involvement in pollution control and marine conservation enhances Japan's presence in the IOR. Collaboration between coastguards demonstrates a tangible commitment to aiding maritime law enforcement, search and rescue operations and environmental protection.

Nearly 90% of the world's goods are being transported through sea routes due to limitations in air cargo capacity and cost-effectiveness. However, maritime crimes such as piracy, armed robbery, terrorism, human trafficking, and drug smuggling pose threats to international security, impacting freedom of navigation and world trade⁷³. Japan's expertise in addressing these issues, particularly through high standards for preventing piracy and fisheries sector crimes, presents opportunities for enhanced cooperation with Sri Lanka. Japan's assistance through knowledge sharing and technology transfer could benefit Sri Lanka in combating maritime crimes and align it with Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific policy, which emphasizes freedom and security of the seas. Sri Lanka's agreement to host a center for sharing regional intelligence on transnational organized crime in 2018 demonstrates the country's commitment to addressing these challenges. Recent incidents such as seizures of heroin and other illicit substances highlight the pressing need to strengthen responses to maritime crimes in the IOR (**Figure 12**). Collaboration between Japan and Sri Lanka through technological and intelligence-sharing initiatives can significantly enhance maritime security and combat transnational organized crime.

⁷² Monika Chansoria. "Blue Economies of the Indian Ocean Region: Japan's Role in Transition to Sustainable Development and Growth." Policy Brief, August 24, 2020. URL: https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/policybrief/pdf/PolicyBrief_Chansoria_200824.pdf

⁷³ Jun Honna. "ASEAN-Japan Cooperation on Maritime Non-Traditional Security Issues: Toward a New Paradigm." In *Rethinking Asian Security: A Case for Cooperative Security Governance*, edited by Evelyn Goh and See Seng Tan, 149-172. Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018

Main heroin trafficking flows, 2012–2016

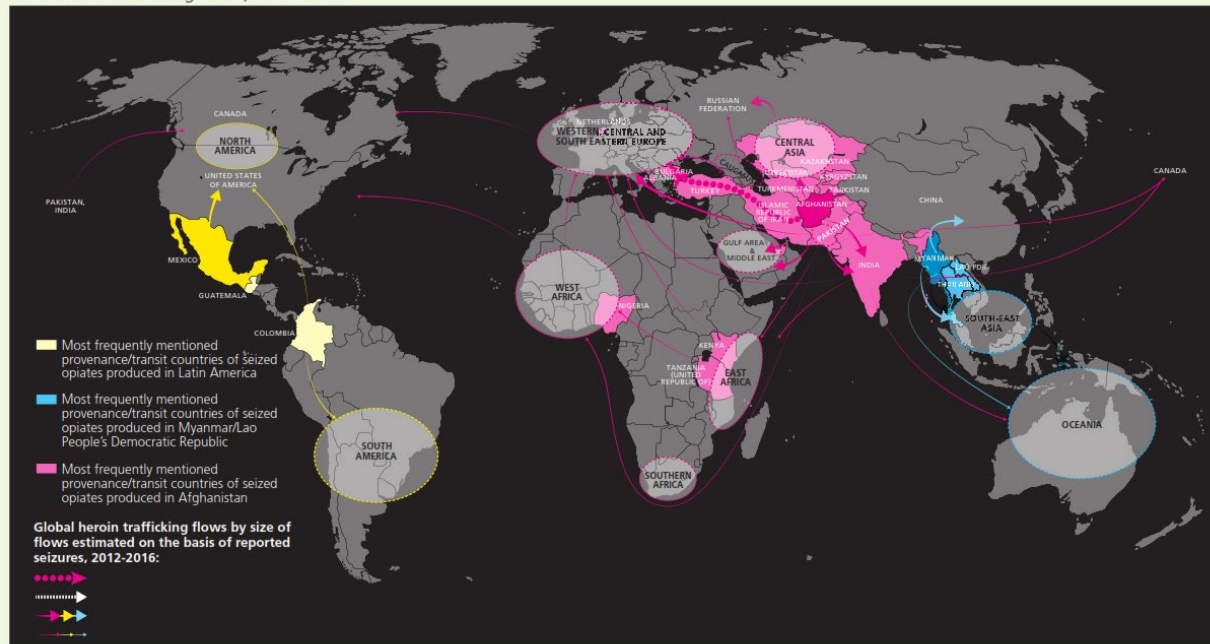


Figure 12: Main heroin trafficking flows, 2012-2016. UNODC, 2018, p 15

8. Proposed Policy Recommendations

Japan

- Embrace the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision as the principal guide to engaging with Sri Lanka and adopting Asian ways of decision-making to implement policies
- Advocate for partnerships aimed at mitigating vulnerability, overcoming geographical distances, and promoting mini-lateralism
- Serve as a bridge connecting the West and the emerging liberal order
- Intensify efforts to address maritime security issues and leverage advantages to garner support from countries concerned about China's regional presence
- Prioritize technical cooperation over competition in the financing sector to address the challenges posed by Chinese aid-dumping to developing countries
- Promote interests over a shared vision to make smaller countries more likely to find compatibility and pursue cooperation with Japan

Sri Lanka

- Adopt a multifaceted and segmented approach in managing foreign policy, trade, and security strategies to enhance maritime security cooperation with Japan
- Engage actively in regional political discourse while maintaining a balanced approach, fostering a more fluid and functional non-aligned policy orientation
- Promote mutual respect for sovereignty and multilateralism, focusing on shared interests rather than ideological alignment, as a solution to regional geopolitical dynamics; prioritize mini-lateral and bilateral initiatives to address challenges effectively
- Recognize that narratives of "the West versus the rest" or "democracies versus autocracies" still hold significance despite complex interdependencies; remain mindful of these narratives and their implications in managing relations with global power blocs
- Focus more on addressing issues on a case-by-case, unit-by-unit and event-by-event basis, allowing for more effective collaboration without negotiating on broader scopes, especially considering the current conditions where Sri Lanka may face challenges in bargaining with larger countries

Japan's foreign policy shift towards enhancing maritime security cooperation with Sri Lanka involves three domains: strategic competition, strategic dilemmas, and strategic convergence. Strategic competition drives Japan's presence in the Indian Ocean, fueled by its reliance on the region for resources and markets. Growing relations with African countries underscore the ocean's significance for Japan, given its heavy reliance on trade routes. Control over SLOC is vital for Japan's global position. Past Japan-Sri Lanka ties lay the groundwork for establishing Japan's presence in the IOR.

Regional instability in the Pacific and Indian oceans concerns Japan, particularly with the US' declining influence and China's increasing unilateral behavior. India's potential as a global power and its response to geopolitical changes also influence Japan's decisions on enhancing cooperation in South Asia.

Since 2012, Japan has signed multiple bilateral agreements on defense and maritime security cooperation, emphasizing its commitment to alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region. These efforts pursue common goals, mutual benefits, and shared resources, while Japan's maritime diplomacy and Indo-Pacific policy safeguard its national interests globally.

Conclusion

Japan's non-superpower, non-hegemonic mentality and its ability to engage with the West appeal to Sri Lanka, making it a preferred partner for enhancing maritime security cooperation. Given the thriving relations between Japan and India, Sri Lanka's approach to bolstering maritime security with Japan fosters a conducive environment and avoids zero-sum implications. As it recovers from its economic crises, Sri Lanka is showing a shift in foreign policy goals aligned with seeking deeper cooperation with Japan.

However, Japan's limitations and geopolitical concerns pose challenges to proactive cooperation, requiring Sri Lanka to shoulder more responsibility in convincing Japan of the benefits of enhanced collaboration.

This paper finds that enhancing maritime security cooperation between Japan and Sri Lanka is crucial for strengthening the security and stability of the IOR. As the famous saying goes, "Laws alone are not enough to safeguard national interests." Collaborative efforts with other nations become imperative. Japan and Sri Lanka share vital interests in maritime security cooperation, given their dependency on sea routes for trade and transport. With Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, these nations can fortify their efforts to ensure the safety and integrity of maritime activities, thereby advancing regional security and stability. The minimalist approach to maritime security adopted by Japan not only mirrors the relationship between the two countries within the maritime domain but also intertwines with economic, political, and foreign policy decision-making regarding critical issues.