

A Comparison between the Indian Navy and the Japanese Navy

Written by Wang Yinghui

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Both Japan and India are major regional maritime powers in the Asia-Pacific region. Both of their navies are growing in potency and have the ambition to dominate the region, and to become “blue-water” navies which can operate in the high seas. Therefore, the contrast and comparison between the development of the Indian Navy and the Japanese Navy will be of relevance in understanding the Asia-Pacific maritime security environment. Also, because of their ambitions for, and standing in, the Asia-Pacific region, Japan and India see China as a potential rival and threat, and so they consider China in their naval developments. However, they both enjoy advantages, as well as limits, that will shape the future development of their navies. Japan has a technological edge and possesses a defence industrial base, but its naval development is limited by its post-war constraints. While the Indian Navy has no constraints, it has problems in indigenous production capability, and its development is always hindered by its bureaucracy. This essay will look at the two navies’ respective maritime ambitions, naval force building, and naval operations, which will provide a comparison which will shed light on the prospects for their development, as well as the implications for the security situation in the Asia-Pacific region.

Maritime Strategies of the Two Countries

During the first 50 years of its independence, India remained a land power focused on threats from across the Himalayas and its western borders. Its maritime concern was limited to the defense and protection of coastlines and island territories. According to Professor Geoffrey Till, India’s “markedly maritime turn” comes from “look east” policies initiated in 1991.[1] In this policy, India found its destiny by linking itself more with its Asian partners and engaging with rest of the world, especially with East and Southeast Asian countries. In 2002, the Indian Navy formulated a 15-year modernization plan.[2]

A landmark event in India’s naval development must be mentioned, which became the incentive that contributed to the Indian Navy’s shift in strategy and development. During the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake, the Indian Navy contributed much to the disaster relief work. It was one of the largest relief mobilizations that the Indian Navy had undertaken, and was a testing ground for the navy’s amphibious and force projection capabilities. It also exposed deficiencies, which made Indian leaders take on a faster modernization drive of the naval forces after the tsunami. More importantly, it greatly liberated India’s strategic thought from the “land border,” to the horizon of the Indian Ocean. India learned the lesson that “without a strong navy, India could not aspire to occupy its rightful seat at the high table of the comity of nations.”[3] After a half century of negligence, the Indian Navy is now on the agenda.

In the same year, India issued its 2004 Indian Maritime Doctrine, which explicitly shifted strategic thought from the “land border” to the horizon of Indian Ocean.[4] With the liberation of the maritime mindset, India began to see beyond the Indian Ocean and has been striving to build its “blue water capacity.” In the Indian Navy’s own words, “it is vital, not just for India’s security but also for her continued prosperity, that we possess a Navy which will protect the nation’s vast and varied maritime interests...and underpin India’s status.”[5] In particular, the 2007 doctrine declared the ambitious goal of safeguarding energy imports vital for India’s development.[6] In fact, in pursuing such self-interest, India has also offered to protect the sea lanes from the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca.

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Unlike India, Japan has always been a maritime power. Japan's Royal Navy emerged as a powerful force in East Asia at the end of the 19th century. It defeated Russia and China at the turn of the century, and dominated the region for half a century until it was defeated in World War II. The JMSDF was formed following the dissolution of the Imperial Japanese Navy after WWII as one branch of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) in 1954. During most of the Cold War period, Japan's military activities were strictly restricted by Article 9 of its constitution, and the JMSDF's role was limited to strict coastal defence. In 1978, the U.S. and Japan formulated new guidelines for their cooperation, and their relationship became more of an "equal partners" instead of "winner-loser" relationship.[7] After the Cold War, Japan's attempts to become a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council prompted it to revise its constitution so as to become a "normalized country" and to allow for the right of collective self-defence. With Japan's ambition to re-emerge as a major political and military power, and its right-wing domestic forces influencing internal politics, Japan's maritime build-up intensified. The United States acquiesced to this tendency, as it needed Japan's "interoperability" in its military alliance to help maintain dominance in East Asia.

This more assertive tendency has been explicitly reflected in a series of Japanese defence documents. In December 2001, Japan amended its International Peace Cooperation Law to remove the clause that limited JSDF participation in the core operations of peacekeeping forces. Also, according to NDPO 2004, Japan's defence capabilities should be "multi-functional, flexible and effective," which would become the ultimate guarantee of national security.[8] It also stipulated concrete capabilities for the MSDF, which include new postures so that new destroyer units can have more effective responses.[9] In the Ministry of Defence's White Paper for 2008, Japan seeks to shift Japanese forces from the employment of "deterrent effects" towards a "response capability." In seeking to respond to diverse security concerns, the White Paper emphasizes continued proactive involvement from Japan in international peace cooperation.

India enjoys a more favorable maritime strategic environment than Japan. It boasts long borders with the Indian Ocean and there is no obvious competitor for this maritime space. Even so, India is very much concerned about China's "string of pearls" strategy. One of the Indian Navy's preoccupations is now to constrain China's influence in the Indian Ocean, as well as in the South China Sea. In 2001, India established the Far Eastern Command as a strategic area of defense. It was a joint Navy, Army, and Air Force command created to safeguard India's strategic interests in Southeast Asia and the Strait of Malacca.

Unlike India, which is the biggest power in the Indian Ocean region, Japan is located in complicated sea waters, with a variety of big powers in the area. Japan has territorial disputes with China over the Diaoyu Islands, with South Korea over the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands, and with Russia over the Kuril Islands. Japan also has disputes with neighboring countries on EEZ spheres. Moreover, Japan pays attention to China's military modernization, including its fast naval development. After an incident in which Japan's Coast Guard detained a Chinese trawler's skipper, Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan expressed his great concern about "China's lack of transparency in strengthening its defense capabilities and about how China's maritime activities from the Indian Ocean to the East China Sea have intensified." [10] Therefore, Japan's pursuit of sea power will never decline. Instead, with the adjustment of the Japan-U.S. alliance, and with the Japanese constitution beginning to falter in its peaceful nature, Japan will become more assertive in traditional maritime strategy and expand its sea power.

Naval Development and Ship-Building Capability

In regard to quantity, the two countries have comparable capacities. With its large quantity of ships and armaments, the Indian Navy now possesses a strong mobile operational ability in the sea and air, and is still investing heavily in naval building. The Indian Navy now has 16 tactical submarines, 45 principal surface combatants, and 28 patrol and coastal combatants.[11] Japan's naval capability has not increased significantly in quantity over the years. The JMSDF has 16 tactical submarines, 52 principal surface combatants, and 7 patrol and coastal combatants.[12] However, the JMSDF has restructured its capability several times to make it more effective.

One advantage that India definitely has is that it has an aircraft carrier, while Japan does not. The Indian Navy presently has one aircraft carrier in active service, the INS Viraat. However, the carrier is going to be decommissioned after the induction of the first domestically built Vikrant class aircraft carrier. The Indian Navy will

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also induct the Russian-built INS Vikramaditya in 2012.[13] Japan, because of its constitutional bindings, cannot have offensive weapons or platforms like aircraft carriers. The JMSDF is known, in particular, for its anti-submarine and mine-sweeping capabilities. However, the JMSDF still feels its capacity to provide ship-based anti-air protection is limited by the absence of aircraft carriers. The fleet is also short of replenishment ships and is generally deficient in all areas of logistical support. These weaknesses seriously compromise the ability of the MSDF to fulfill its mission and operate independently of the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Seventh Fleet.

Japan has always tried to fix this weakness. In August 2003, a new “helicopter destroyer” class was ordered, the Hyuga Class helicopter destroyer. The size and features of the ship could be classified as a helicopter carrier. However, it is stipulated in Article 9 of Japan’s constitution that the JSDF cannot have “offensive weapons,” and the JSDF cannot possess ICBMs, long-range strategic bombers, or offensive aircraft carriers. In November 2009, the MSDF announced plans for an even larger “helicopter carrier,” though this has not yet been approved by the Japanese Government.[14]

In terms of its defence industry, India is not comparable to Japan. Japan has a sophisticated technology base, and for many years boasted the largest ship-building capacity in the world. India’s defence industrial base has undoubtedly lagged behind Japan for many years, but is striving forward. Indian shipyards are building vessels, including second and third Shivalik-class stealth frigates, two air-defense ships, and the first of 6 *Scorpene* Submarines. Though, India’s defense industry suffers from low budgets, inefficiency, delays, high costs of production, and low-to medium-level technology, arms, and equipment. India aspires to develop and build sophisticated weapon systems and have its own indigenous R&D programs, and to move away from the historical pattern of foreign kit assembly and licensed production. However, due to its budget constraints, bureaucracy, and other factors, this change will take decades to realize.

Therefore, the Indian military’s systems depend on foreign acquisitions to a large degree; over 70% of its arms are imported.[15] India has an ambitious procurement plan for its navy. The first submarine is named INS Chakra, and was handed over to the Indian Navy in August 2010.[16] According to navy Chief Admiral Arun Prakash, the Indian Navy is looking to acquire almost 100 aircraft, with a mix of fighters, patrol planes, and trainers, by 2020.[17]

Naval Operations and Activities

The new century witnessed both Japan and India greatly expand the scope of their naval activities and become increasingly engaged internationally and regionally.

In the new century, the Indian Navy has increased its engagement with countries in the Indian Ocean region. The Indian Navy helped Sri Lanka and other neighbors after the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, and has worked closely with Australia, Japan, and the U.S. in the relief work. Indian warships have also guarded American vessels in the Malacca Strait and protected multilateral summits in Mozambique. There is also active collaboration in anti-piracy activities. The Indian Navy sank a Thai trawler being used by pirates and has coordinated patrols with Indonesia. Under India’s Look East policy, India has made efforts to step up ties with Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand. The Indian Navy also engages with nations like South Africa, Japan, France, Russia, and Oman. The most recent engagement was Indian Defense Minister A.K. Antony’s visit to South Korea in September 2010, which was seen as a part of India’s “Look East policy,” and an urgent measure to counter the Chinese military build-up in Gilgit-Baltistan.[18]

In 1992, Japan decided to send its JSDF forces overseas on U.S. peace-keeping operations for the first time. This move institutionalized Japan’s ability to dispatch units from the JSDF for peacekeeping purposes under U.N. auspices. During the 1990s, Japan also sent its naval personnel to Cambodia, Mozambique, Zaire, East Timor, and so on. In 1995, the new NDPO allowed more flexible operations for the JSDF. In the new century, Japan demonstrated an impressively expeditionary outlook. Following the September 11th terrorist attacks, Japan deployed the MSDF to the Indian Ocean in support of the U.S. and their coalition partner’s operations in Afghanistan. In 2004, Japan also dispatched 600 troops to Iraq for reconstruction work.

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It is also worth noting that the cooperation between the Indian Navy and Japanese Navy has expanded over the past years. A prominent development was seen when the MALABAR 2009 exercise was held off the coast of Japan in April and May, which involved the Indian Navy, Japan JMSDF, and U.S. Navy, which was believed to be an act of expanding their maritime partnerships.

Conclusion

Comparatively speaking, there is little geopolitical, as well as domestic political constraint, confining India's naval development. As the only big country in the Indian Ocean, it does not have obvious competitors. Domestically, there has emerged a consensus in beefing up its navy. However, India's relatively small economic power, though rapidly growing, will make it hard to sustain its ambitious naval building plan. Also, its indigenous defense R&D, and its ship-building capacity are fairly problematic, which will be a major hindrance for its future development. Japan, on the other hand, enjoys an advanced ship building industry, technological edge, and R&D. Its major problem is its identity, which is connected to its historical legacy of restraining military development. Another problem comes from the challenge of the regional strategic environment, with China as its maritime competitor. However, with Japan's effort to revise its constitution, and with U.S. appeasement and indulgence towards its expansive military buildup, Japan is breaking its restraint and scope of operation step by step.

Therefore, it is hard to say which navy has a better future. As major powers in the Asia-Pacific region, the development of both the Indian Navy and the JMSDF will have deep implications for the prospect of security in the whole region. One thing is for sure, both will further strengthen their naval development in the following decades and the maritime competition in the Asia-Pacific region will be increasingly intensified.

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[6] Indian Maritime Doctrine 2007.

[7] Naoko Sajima and Kyochi Tahikawa, *Japanese Sea Power: A Maritime Nation's Struggle for Identity*, Sea Power Centre-Australia, 2009, p. 75.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid. p. 92.

[10] Yoko Nishikawa, "Japan seeks good China ties, frets over navy actions," *Reuters*, Oct 1, 2010. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/10/01/us-japan-china-idUSTRE68I06520101001>.

[11] Military Balance 2010, p. 36.

[12] Military Balance 2010, p. 409.

[13] "Russia, India to Sign Addendum on Admiral Gorshkov Deal," *Daily News and Analysis*, Jan 22, 2010, http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_russia-india-to-sign-addendum-on-admiral-gorshkov-deal_1337947.

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