

VOL
60



Japanese engagement in the Indian Ocean region

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INDO-PACIFIC ANALYSIS BRIEFS 2026

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The Perth USAsia Centre's Indo-Pacific Analysis Briefs seek to provide perceptive and contemporary insights from across the region. The series features leading analysts from Asia, Australia and the US to deliver up-to-the-minute assessments on issues of national and regional importance. This series will shine a light on the issues that remain critically important to Australia and the Indo-Pacific at a time when global events may otherwise dominate the news cycle.



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KEY MESSAGES

- 1** Though an ocean away, Japan's prosperity is directly linked to the Indian Ocean region as it relies heavily on its sea routes for energy and trade.
- 2** Tokyo's deep integration across the breadth of the region – reaching from Southeast Asia to the East coast of Africa – reflects this importance. It has engaged the ocean's littoral through diplomacy, economic investment, aid, and security initiatives.
- 3** Its Official Development Assistance in the Indian Ocean region – especially for infrastructure and the blue economy – is significant, rivalling the initiatives of other external powers like China.
- 4** Japan also has a strong security presence in the Indian Ocean, anchored in its military base in Djibouti. Nearly 40 per cent of its Self-Defense Force missions have taken place in the region, including anti-piracy missions, humanitarian assistance, and multilateral military exercises.
- 5** As a like-minded and established bilateral partner, Japan's Indian Ocean engagement presents an opportunity for Australia to deepen its own regional connections and maintain strategic balance in a key geopolitical arena. This opportunity is critical for Australia while it considers how to broaden its limited regional engagement.

Strategically vital and central to global trade, the Indian Ocean region has become a key geopolitical arena for both the littoral states linked by its waters and external powers alike.

Much has been written on major players extending their reach in this region – from China's expansive Maritime Silk Road to US military presence – but the great powers are far from the only countries with vested interest.

While less in the spotlight, Japan has made quiet but significant inroads into the Indian Ocean region, with its influence spanning diplomatic, development, and security spheres. As major external players like China and Russia ramp up their own engagement, Japan continues to play an important role in maintaining regional strategic balance – providing a path for Australia to deepen and expand its own limited Indian Ocean engagement alongside one of its most significant partners.

Why the Indian Ocean?

Though an ocean away, Japan's connections to the Indian Ocean region are far from new. Its historical linkages span centuries, evolving from largely cultural exchanges – especially with India – into more trade-oriented relations as new sea-routes opened over time.¹

However, in the last century, these connections have taken on a renewed significance. Much like its neighbour China, the Indian Ocean is a lifeline for Japan – the 'great veins' of the Japanese economy.²

As Japan supercharged its manufacturing economy in the mid-20th century, it began to look increasingly abroad to fulfil its resource needs. Tokyo's quest for diversified markets, raw materials, and cheap labour increased its engagement with South Asia and Africa, while the Middle East became the source of its most valuable resource – energy.³



Resource-poor and dependent on seaborne trade, Japan's energy insecurity drives much of its strategic thinking. It receives more than 95 per cent of its crude oil imports from the Middle East, transported along sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) that intersect the Indian Ocean and cut through its vital and vulnerable chokepoints.⁴

This dependency has seen Japan's interest in the Indian Ocean gradually increase across the 20th Century and into the 21st. And, although Japan is not commonly considered an Indian Ocean power, it gives it a vested interest in the security, stability, and prosperity of the region as a whole.

Japan's engagement in the Indian Ocean should come as little surprise. Beyond these economic ties, Japan is one of the few nations to include the entire Indian Ocean region in its Indo-Pacific concept – a vision for the broader geographic region that it has advocated for since former prime minister Shinzo Abe's landmark 'confluence of two seas' speech in 2007. Since then, Japan has built on this concept, championing the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision as a means of upholding the rule of law across both oceans.⁵

So, as a torchbearer for the Indo-Pacific concept, how does the *Indo* portion factor into Japan's international engagement and outlook?

Diplomatic engagement

Japan's diplomatic engagement in the Indian Ocean region reflects its broader commitment to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, underpinned by a strong desire to uphold regional stability, security, and economic prosperity. It does so through a mix of both bilateral (especially India, see Box 1) and multilateral engagement.

BOX 1 Bilateral engagement with India

At the heart of Japan's regional diplomacy is its strategic partnership with India, a relationship grounded in a shared regional vision – in line with Japan's FOIP – and mutual interests in maritime security, infrastructure development, and technological cooperation. In 2014, the relationship was elevated to a 'Special Strategic and Global Partnership' in recognition of their shared outlook on long-term political, economic, and strategic goals, marking a 'new era' in Japan-India relations.⁶

Japan and India have cooperated across a range of areas, notably:

- infrastructure, seen in Japan's investments in India's Northeast and the Mumbai-Ahmedabad high-speed rail corridor;
- economic security and supply chain resilience efforts, including in critical minerals and semiconductors; and
- scientific and technological innovation, including in AI, quantum, and digital infrastructure^{7,8,9}.

Though their strategic outlook has diverged in recent times – most notably on Russia – Japan and India continue to view each other as key partners in regional security and development. Between 2023 and 2025, the two nations signed over 150 memoranda of understanding, amounting to more than USD13 billion in bilateral agreements.¹⁰ And, at their 15th annual bilateral summit in 2025, India and Japan unveiled an ambitious 10 trillion yen (approximately USD65 billion) investment target and committed to deepening defence cooperation.¹¹

Japan's bilateral relationship with India is further deepened by the Quad multilateral grouping.

The Quad – consisting of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States – and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) are Japan’s most established avenues of multilateral engagement in the region.

Initially established through humanitarian efforts in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the Quad today serves as a strategic platform to advance the FOIP concept and areas of shared interest across the Indo-Pacific, primarily maritime domain awareness, infrastructure development, climate resilience, and humanitarian assistance. And, with half its members located in the Indian Ocean and the other half with vested interest in the region’s stability and prosperity, the Quad remains a pivotal platform for advancing Indian Ocean security and stability.

As one of 12 IORA dialogue partners, Japan is engaged in the region through its premier multilateral forum, actively contributing to IORA’s priority areas: maritime safety and security, disaster prevention and resilience, blue economy growth, trade and investment, academic exchange, tourism, and women’s economic empowerment. Japan’s New Plan for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific – announced by former prime minister Fumio Kishida in 2023 – emphasises its efforts to promote regional cooperation based on these priorities.¹²

JAPAN’S ENGAGEMENT WITH MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS

Multilateral institution	Membership status	Institutional focus
INDIAN OCEAN RIM ASSOCIATION (IORA)	Dialogue partner	IORA is the region’s foremost intergovernmental organisation, bringing together 23 Member States from around the ocean’s rim, as well as 12 Dialogue Partners, including Japan. IORA aims to foster regional cohesion and consensus for Indian Ocean prosperity and stability. Dialogue Partners provide support to IORA’s Special Fund and assist in the fields of technology transfer, environmental issues, promotion of trade and investment, and technical cooperation.
INDIAN OCEAN COMMISSION (IOC)/ COMMISSION DE L’OCÉAN INDIEN (COI)	Observer	The IOC is a sub-regional organisation comprising five member states from the southwest Indian Ocean – Mauritius, Madagascar, Seychelles, Comoros, and Reunion (France). Its primary aim is sustainable development of the region. Japan works with the IOC to promote its FOIP and strengthen maritime security and connectivity in the western Indian Ocean.
INDIAN OCEAN TUNA COMMISSION (IOTC)	Member	The IOTC is a Strategic Partner of the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations. It seeks to ensure the conservation and optimum utilisation of tuna stocks and the sustainable management of tuna fisheries. Japan is a member of the IOTC because it fishes for tuna in the region.
SOUTH ASIAN ASSOCIATION FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION (SAARC)	Observer	SAARC is a South Asia regional cooperation framework, promoting regional integration and economic development. It has 8 member states – all South Asian nations – as well as 9 observers, including Japan. Japan established the Japan-SAARC Special Fund in 1993 to support the Association’s activities. ¹³

Development and economic assistance

Japan has positioned its Official Development Assistance (ODA) as a central pillar of its global engagement. Since the post-war period, ODA has been used strategically as an instrument for achieving Japan's national interests, expanding its influence, and, more recently, as a means of realising its FOIP vision^{14,15,16,17}. ODA has even become embedded in Japan's security policy, clearly outlined in its National Security Strategy.¹⁸

Approximately half of all Japanese ODA goes to the Indian Ocean – a clear indicator of Japan's strategic interest in the region and its development. This assistance is seen across the breadth of the region, especially in infrastructure.

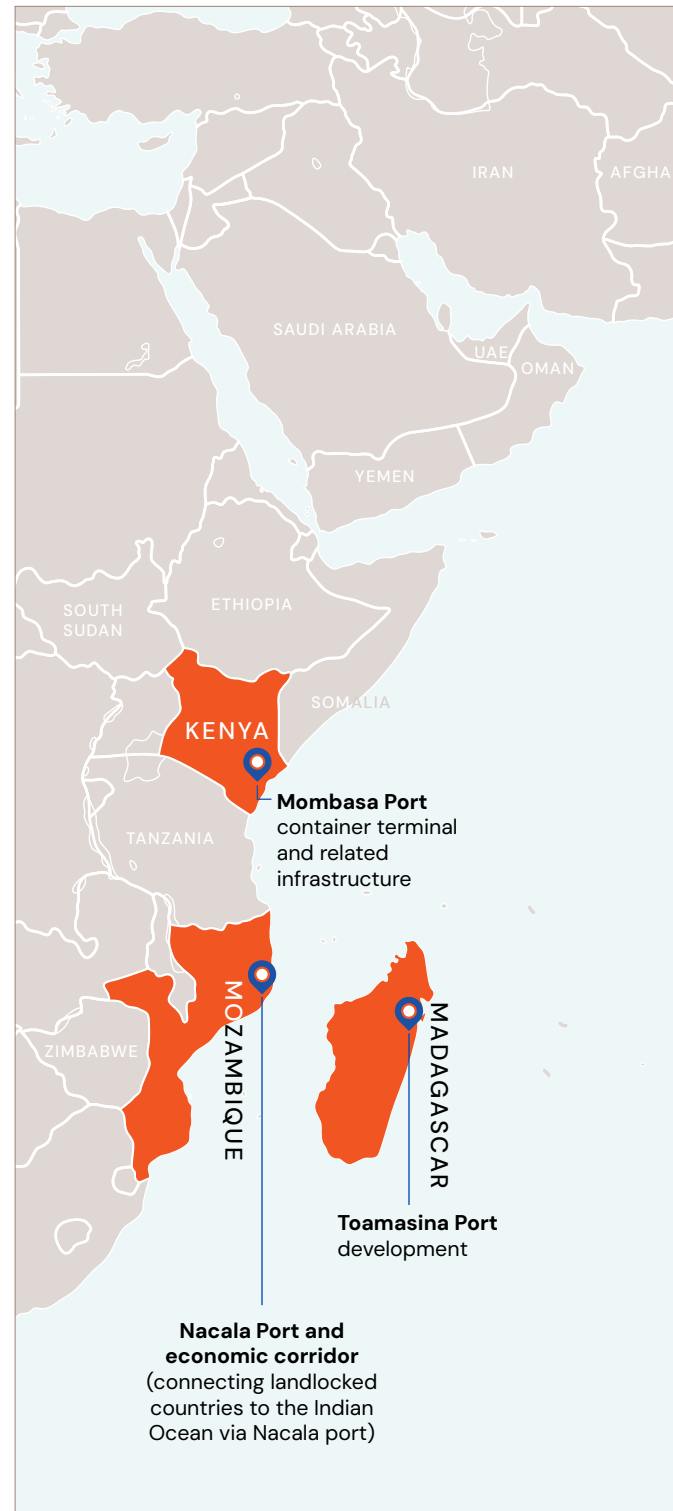
Japan's infrastructure assistance spans major port projects (see Map 1), transportation projects such as highways and railways, and the creation of special economic zones.¹⁹ In recent years, Tokyo has put particular emphasis on African infrastructure development, as well as education and healthcare projects. At the 2025 Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), former Japanese prime minister Shigeru Ishiba introduced the Economic Region Initiative of Indian Ocean–Africa, a proposed economic zone connecting Africa with the wider Indian Ocean region. The initiative, framed as part of Japan's FOIP strategy, aims to advance regional integration and industrial development in Africa through cooperation with Japan and other Indian Ocean nations^{20,21}.

Japan's various infrastructure efforts can be seen as a means of ensuring both influence over, and the security of, ports and nodes vital to its trade.

It can also be viewed through the lens of strategic competition, with Japan's investments paralleling China's own mammoth spending in the Indian Ocean through its Belt and Road Initiative – especially as the US increasingly withdraws from the region.

Japan has also made marine sustainability and development a priority. At the 2017 United Nations Oceans Conference, it identified marine debris, ocean acidification, sustainable fisheries, and support for Small Island Developing States (SIDS, for example, the Maldives and Mauritius) as key priorities, announcing 11 voluntary commitments in these areas.²²

MAP 1. **Port projects with Japanese investment**



Source: Japan International Cooperation Agency



As a developed maritime nation, Japan is well-placed to provide essential training, expertise, and technological support to advance Indian Ocean region blue economy efforts – a priority area for IORA. This ranges from more traditional capacity-building assistance in fisheries, shipping, and ports, to less traditional, more advanced work in aquaculture, renewable energy, bio-production, carbon sequestration, and desalination – areas in which Japan is a pioneer.²³



Security engagement

As an island nation, Japan shares a maritime security focus with the Indian Ocean littoral. Though Japan's immediate, often-tense neighbourhood will remain its priority, the Indian Ocean's stability and security still holds significant strategic weight for Tokyo.

As the proclaimed 'great veins' of the Japanese economy, the security of the Indian Ocean's SLOCs and chokepoints directly impacts Japan's prosperity.²⁴

The resources it devotes to the region are a reflection of this; nearly 40 per cent of Japan's Self-Defense Force (JSDF) missions have occurred in the Indian Ocean region, including development projects (Japan's National Security Strategy clearly outlines ODA as part of Japan's security policy), peacekeeping, and antipiracy efforts.²⁵ In fact, following a targeted relaxation of Article 9 (Japan's constitutional clause which prohibits it from maintaining offensive military forces or waging war), the Indian Ocean saw the first official dispatch of Japanese forces during an ongoing conflict (Afghanistan in 2002, and later Iraq in 2004).²⁶

Japan's commitment to regional security is seen on the ground in Djibouti, where, in 2011, it established its first full-scale, long term overseas base. Initially set up in response to a spike in piracy in the Gulf of Aden, the base has since grown in size and scope, supporting anti-piracy operations, disaster response training, logistics for UN peacekeeping missions, and the evacuation of Japanese nationals from crisis zones, as seen in Sudan (April 2023) and Israel (October 2023). Japan aims to use this facility long-term to strengthen its operational readiness in Africa.²⁷ It is also viewed as a key site from which Japan counterbalances China's growing influence, which also has a base on Djibouti.²⁸

Given the Indian Ocean's importance to Japan's economic security and Djibouti's strategic location along the vital Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, Japan's ongoing presence in the region is unsurprising. In addition to its heavy reliance on Middle Eastern oil, a 2022 Japanese government report on anti-piracy operations noted that roughly 1,700 Japan-affiliated commercial vessels pass through the Gulf of Aden each year.²⁹ Japan's regional JSDF missions have not only ensured the security of these vital SLOCs, but have also given its forces valuable combat and operational experience.³⁰ This is notable given the constitutional constraints of Article 9 and Japan's efforts to expand its defence capabilities in recent years.

Japanese Self-Defense Force missions in the Indian Ocean – examples

Minesweeping missions	Minesweeping missions, alongside the US, the UK, Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Saudi Arabia, after the end of the first Gulf War in 1991. ³¹
Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) (the US' military operations in Afghanistan)	Non-combat refuelling operations for coalition ships in the Indian Ocean from 2002 to 2009. This was made possible by the then-administration passing an Anti-Terrorism Special Measure Law to enable Japan's support of the US. ³²
Operation Iraqi Freedom (the US' military operations in Iraq)	Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF) on non-combat reconstruction missions in Iraq, Maritime Self-Defense Forces (MSDF) dispatched as support. ³³
Anti-piracy missions	MSDF anti-piracy support in the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia from 2009, and as part of the US-led multinational Combined Task Force 151 from 2013. ³⁴ Japan contributes by conducting surveillance and escort missions and has commanded the Task Force four times since its inception. ^{35,36} Japan's involvement in anti-piracy missions was made possible by a specific amendment to its Self-Defense Forces Act in 2009. ³⁷ In 2011, it established its permanent military base in Djibouti to support its anti-piracy efforts.

Beyond economic drivers, Japan's security presence can also be seen as an effort to uphold its FOIP vision and boost its regional influence. To support the rule of law and freedom of navigation, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has provided capacity building assistance to maritime law enforcement agencies throughout the Indo-Pacific, including in the Indian Ocean.³⁸ In 2022, Japan also introduced the security-focused counterpart to its ODA – Official Security Assistance (OSA). OSA aims to improve regional deterrence capabilities, including through the provision of defence equipment, to ensure broader Indo-Pacific stability. Its initial phase focuses on four countries, two of which are in the Indian Ocean region – Bangladesh and Malaysia.³⁹

The JSDF's involvement in the region extends to multilateral and bilateral security exercises, dialogues, and arrangements. As outlined in the 2024 Defense White Paper, Japan's Ministry of Defense and Self-Defense Forces have been promoting high-level and unit-to-unit exchanges to 'build and strengthen cooperative relations' with regional countries.⁴⁰ Most notably, Japan has been a permanent participant in the annual Malabar naval exercise since 2015. Initially established by the US and India, Malabar exercises are aimed at jointly addressing shared maritime challenges and improving interoperability between participating navies. This includes exercises in anti-submarine warfare, search and rescue, and counter-piracy, as well as practicing complex sea, air, and subsurface operations. Though it is also conducted in the Pacific, Malabar has predominantly occurred in the Indian Ocean, especially surrounding India.

Through exercises like Malabar, Tokyo safeguards its interests in the region by enhancing its ability to protect critical sea-lines of communication, contribute to regional security architecture, and project a rules-based Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Moreover, cooperation with regional states like India allows Japan to share security burdens and extend its influence beyond its immediate neighbourhood – something pertinent to Japan given China's growing maritime presence in the Indian Ocean region.

Next steps: for Australia

Japan's commitment to the Indian Ocean region, though less in the spotlight, is clear. Tokyo is making its presence known across diplomatic, development, and security spheres, ensuring its economic health, its energy security, and safeguarding its national interests across the breadth of the ocean.

As a fellow Quad partner and Indian Ocean nation, it is essential for Australia to understand Japan's role and growing presence in the region. Acknowledged as a priority area in Australia's Defence Strategic Review, the Indian Ocean is a key area of future engagement – but has so far been under-served. Japan's existing connections, projects, and security initiatives are a clear way for Australia to work with a like-minded partner to ensure regional security and strategic stability.⁴¹

Australia and Japan are already engaged in the Indian Ocean – through diplomatic channels such as IORA, and through major defence cooperation, such as Australia and Japan's regular participation in Malabar since 2020. But there is more to be done, not only to boost Australia's connections with its western ocean, but to ensure regional stability, security, and prosperity as this geopolitical arena intensifies. Great power competition, conflict, environmental and humanitarian disasters, and seaborne threats such as piracy will continue to challenge the Indian Ocean, its littoral, and its beneficiaries. With a shared vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific and as an established bilateral partner, Japan offers a reliable pathway for Australia to deepen its connections and support for the littoral in the face of these challenges.

Japan's connections with India make this opportunity especially pertinent – two of Australia's most important partners and fellow Quad members, prime for future cooperation. And, as the US increasingly withdraws from the region, now is a perfect time for Australia and its partners to step up.

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