

Patterns of China's Provocation: What Should We Do?

Satoru Nagao*

Recently, China's provocations against its neighbours, including Japan, Taiwan, and countries around the South China Sea, have been escalating. China has deployed warships and unmanned vehicles in the Indian Ocean. With 36 destroyers equipped with Dragon Eye combat systems similar to the American Aegis system, and 30 modern frigates, along with an emerging nuclear powered submarine fleet, the Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has arrived as a force to be reckoned with in East Asia.¹

Further, in June 2020, approximately 5,000 Chinese troops crossed the Indo-China border and clashed with Indian troops. At least 20 Indian soldiers sacrificed their lives and 76 Indian soldiers were injured. Noting these actions, countries in and around China must find a way to deal with these provocations. The analysis in this paper focuses on three questions to consider when determining that path: What activities is China

* Dr. Satoru Nagao is a fellow (non-resident) at Hudson Institute, Tokyo, Japan.

1 Cristopher Colley, "A Future Chinese Indian Ocean Fleet?", *War on the Rocks*, April 2, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/a-future-chinese-indian-ocean-fleet/>.

undertaking? What are the significant features of China's provocations? What should China's neighbouring countries do?

WHAT ACTIVITIES ARE CHINA UNDERTAKING?

The Sea around China

China's activities have been escalating in the maritime areas (Sea of Japan, East China Sea, etc.) in and around Japan. For example, in 2004, a Chinese nuclear attack submarine violated Japan's territorial seas in the East China Sea. China has also been carrying out naval exercises on the Pacific side of Japan since 2008. Figure 1 showcases the routes used by the Chinese Navy. Their activities have expanded from the first island chain to the second island chain, which makes up China's defensive line.

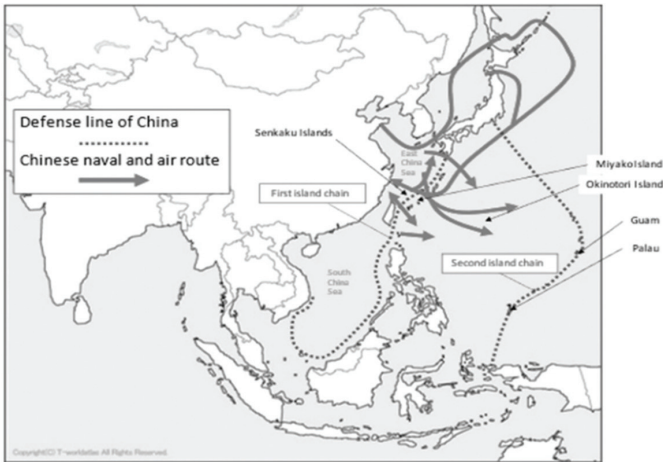


Figure 1: China's Naval and Air Activities around Japan.

Source: Ministry of Defense, Japan, 2020.

China has stepped up its activities in the region, both militarily and paramilitary. In the sea around the Senkaku

Patterns of China's Provocation: What Should We Do?

Islands of Japan, China has deployed its Coast Guards and increased its activities. In 2011, only 12 Chinese vessels were identified within the contiguous zone in the waters surrounding Japan's Senkaku Islands, but this number has increased drastically since that year. There were 428 identified vessels in 2012, 819 in 2013, 729 in 2014, 707 in 2015, 752 in 2016, 696 in 2017, 615 in 2018. There were 1097 vessels identified in 2019 (see Figure 2).

This near constant Chinese presence in the contiguous zone, which lies between 12 and 24 nautical miles (nm) of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, is no doubt irritating and appears threatening to Japan. Japan's Defense White Paper released in the month of July 2020 stated that China has "relentlessly continued attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by coercion in the sea area around the Senkaku Islands..."² Nevertheless, although Japan's Ministry of Defense reported that the number of times Japan's military had to scramble jets in response to Chinese air incursions went down 41 percent in 2017, that number increased in 2018 and is on trend to continue increasing in 2019. Lately, Japan has built new military bases on nearby islands, supposedly to monitor the Miyako and Tokara Straits and interdict China from further developing its military capabilities in the region.³

The situation is escalating, as Japan has focused on its defensive capabilities and prudently avoids using the word 'military' for its troops. But then again as it looks to protect its territorial and military interests against the assertive

2 Mike Mochizuki and Jiaxiu Han, "Is China Escalating Tensions with Japan in the East China Sea?", *The Diplomat*, September 16, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/is-china-escalating-tensions-with-japan-in-the-east-china-sea/>.

3 "Global Conflict Tracker", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/tensions-east-china-sea>.

combination of China, North Korea and Russia, officials in Tokyo are pushing citizens to put aside widespread unease over a more robust role for the military and to support increased defense spending. As it is, tens of billions of dollars each year have built an arsenal of nearly 1,000 warplanes and dozens of destroyers and submarines. Japan’s forces rival those of Britain and France, and show no sign of slowing down in a pursuit of the best equipment and weapons money can buy.⁴

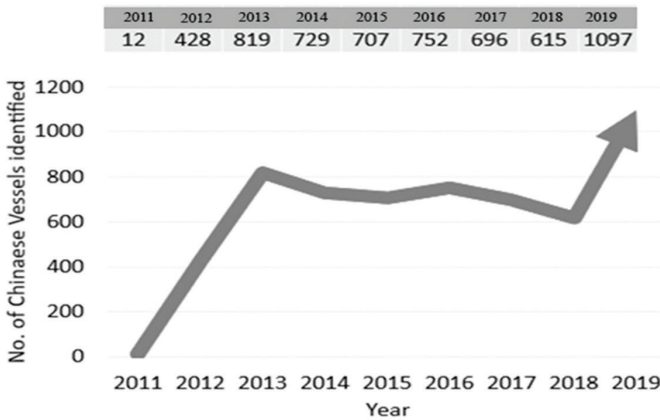


Figure 2: Number of Chinese Vessels Identified within the Contiguous Zone in the Waters Surrounding Japan’s Senkaku Islands

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page23e_000021.html

Taiwan

Around the Taiwan Strait, China’s rapid military modernisation is changing the military balance with Taiwan, even as China provokes Taiwan militarily. Chinese fighter jets have repeatedly entered Taiwan’s air space. On June 15, 2021,

4 Mari Yamaguchi, “Japan’s military, among world’s strongest, looks to build”, *ABC News*, December 6, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/japans-military-worlds-strongest-build-81576818>.

28 Chinese military planes entered Taiwan's Air Identification Zone.⁵ Additionally, its activities on the Pacific side of Taiwan, where a Chinese aircraft carrier battle group made repeated visits, are of particular concern. If Chinese armed forces were permanently deployed there, this would essentially cut Taiwan off from the United States and Japan. Chinese submarine activities are also cause for concern, and the then US Indo-Pacific Commander Admiral Philip Davidson warned that China could invade Taiwan within the next six years.⁶

In addition, Taiwan is facing diplomatic isolation. Since June 2017, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Burkina Faso, El Salvador, the Solomon Islands, and Kiribati have abandoned formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, including economic assistance and infrastructure projects, as a result of Chinese efforts. This leaves only fifteen countries maintaining formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan – and the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the fact that Taiwan cannot join many international organizations, including the World Health Organization, due to Chinese opposition.

The South China Sea

The situation in the South China Sea is a serious matter. While the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague rejected China's claim to 90 per cent of the South China Sea in 2016, Beijing is ignoring the verdict and building three new airports on seven artificial islands in the region. This has drawn concern from Japan, and then Prime Minister Abe noted,

5 Brad Lendon, "China sends 25 warplanes into Taiwan's air defense zone, Taipei says", *CNN*, April 13, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/12/china/china-taiwan-jets-defense-zone-incursion-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>.

6 "China could invade Taiwan in next six years, top US admiral warns", *The Guardian*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/10/china-could-invade-taiwan-in-next-six-years-top-us-admiral-warns>.

increasingly, the South China Sea seems set to become a ‘Lake Beijing,’ which analysts say will be to China what the Sea of Okhotsk was to Soviet Russia: a sea deep enough for the People’s Liberation Army’s navy to base their nuclear-powered attack submarines, capable of launching missiles with nuclear warheads.⁷

His statement points to the possibility of China deploying ballistic missile submarines under the protection of fighter jets launched from these artificial islands – and excluding all foreign ships and airplanes that might identify their submarines.⁸ Abe stated, further, “if Japan were to yield, the South China Sea would become even more fortified.”⁹

The India-China Border Area

Since 2000, China has been developing infrastructure projects in the Indo-China border area, increasing the number of strategic roads, trains, tunnels, bridges, and airports. The military balance at the Indo-China border is changing because of China’s rapid military infrastructure modernization. Along with these infrastructure projects, Beijing has started to deploy more armed forces in the area. In 2011, India recorded 213 incursions in the Indo-China border area, but in the following years, the numbers grew: 426 in 2012, 411 in 2013, 460 in 2014, 428 in 2015, 296 in 2016, 473 in 2017, 404 in 2018, and 663

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

8 Satoru Nagao, “Nightmare Scenario in the South China Sea: Japan’s Perspective”, *Maritime Issues*, September 12, 2019, <http://www.maritimeissues.com/security/nightmare-scenario-in-the-south-china-sea-japans-perspective.html>; Reiji Yoshida, “Beijing’s Senkaku Goal: Sub ‘Safe Haven’ in South China Sea”, *The Japan Times*, November 7, 2012, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2012/11/07/national/beijings-senkaku-goal-sub-safe-haven-in-south-china-sea/#.WDQ774VOKUk>.

9 Shinzo Abe, op. cit.

Patterns of China's Provocation: What Should We Do?

in 2019 (see Figure 3). These incursions are similar to China's activities around Japan's Senkaku Islands, and China increased activities in both areas in 2012 and 2019 (see Figure 4).

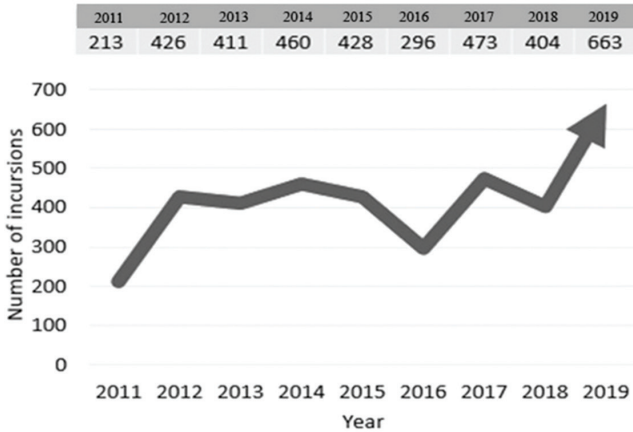


Figure 3: Chinese Incursions in the Indo-China Border Area
Source: Compiled by the author using major media reports

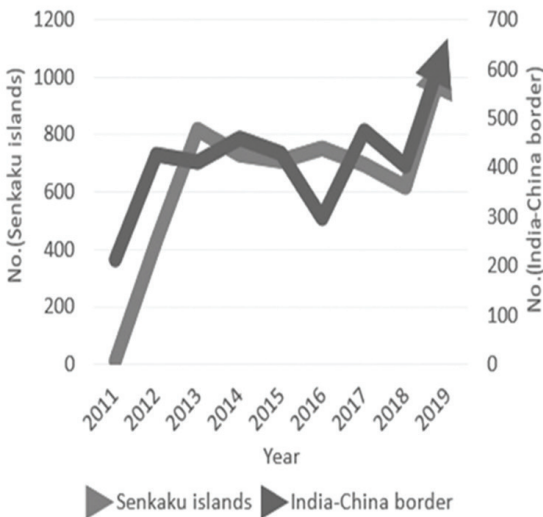


Figure 4: Comparison of Figure 2 and 3

China is deploying troops in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Pakistan, along a portion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – a core project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹⁰ Beijing is also developing infrastructure projects to connect to Nepal. It has entered the Doklam plateau, claimed by both China and Bhutan, insisting on building a new road to deploy more forces. This led to a standoff between Indian and Chinese armed forces along the 4,000-kilometer Indo-China border (including the Line of Actual Control, a line separating India-controlled territory from China-controlled territory).

In 2020, the situation escalated further. China entered the Indian side of the Indo-China border in the spring, and the two sides clashed in June. At least 20 Indian soldiers sacrificed their lives and 76 Indian soldiers were injured. After that, China continued to redeploy fighter jets and missiles from other areas of China. For example, China moved H-6 bombers with the capability to employ cruise missiles from Wugong to Golmud and Kashgar. China also deployed DF-21 missiles, which use a new type of warhead that the US and Japan cannot intercept through missile defense systems, to Kailash Mansaravar. At the Hotan air base, China has been increasing its presence of heavy fighters and bombers, such as the J-11 and J-16. Other types of military aircrafts, such as the Y-8G electronic reconnaissance aircraft, the KJ-500 early warning aircraft, the CH-4 drone, and the latest J-20 stealth fighter jets are being held there. To

10 “Chinese Army troops spotted along Line of Control in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir”, *The Economic Times*, July 12, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/chinese-army-troops-spotted-along-line-of-control-in-pakistan-occupied-kashmir/articleshow/51380320.cms>; Manish Shukla, “China deploys troops in Sindh, Just 90 km away from Indo-Pak border”, *Zee News*, March 21, 2019, <https://zeenews.india.com/india/china-deploys-troops-in-sindh-just-90-km-away-from-indo-pak-border-2189314.html>.

Patterns of China's Provocation: What Should We Do?

protect these airfields and missiles, China is deploying S-400 and S-300 surface-to-air missiles. To deal with China's build-up, India has repeatedly conducted missile tests. During a six-week period from September to October 2020, India conducted more than 12 missile tests. In February 2021, China withdrew more than 200 tanks from the Indian side of Pangong Tso in Ladakh, and the tension has reduced drastically. However, it took China only two days to withdraw these 200 tanks, demonstrating that China has the power projection capability to rapidly redeploy force of a similar size in this area. Further, China is still present on the Indian side of the border in at least four areas and continues to maintain missiles and jets in the India-China border area.

The Indian Ocean

China has also expanded its activities in the Indian Ocean, which has caused worry for India. Beijing insisted on solving its 'Malacca Dilemma' — the insistence that it must avoid excessive dependence on the Malacca Strait, a strategic shipping lane for China's oil industry that is controlled by the US Navy. As a result, China is creating alternative routes, such as a Middle East-Pakistan-Xinjiang Uygur route and a Middle East-Myanmar-China route. These new routes are core pieces of China's Belt and Road Initiatives.

On one hand, Beijing is investing in developing ports in the Indian Ocean, including Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Chittagong in Bangladesh, and Kyaukpyu in Myanmar. Because of the sheer size of China's investments and the six to eight per cent interest rates it charges on loans, these countries now owe enormous debts to Beijing. For comparison, the World Bank and Asia Development Bank charge 0.25 to

three per cent interest rates.¹¹ Sri Lanka was unable to repay its loan for Hambantota, which made it a victim of China's 'debt diplomacy' policy, and in December 2017, it handed over the port to China as part of a 99-year lease agreement.

In the meantime, in order to secure sea routes, China has started to expand its military forces in the region. It has been increasing its military activities in the Indian Ocean since 2009, when it joined anti-piracy measures off the coast of Somalia. Chinese submarines have patrolled since 2012, and the Chinese surface fleet has called at ports in all the countries around India, including Pakistan, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. According to Admiral Sunil Lanba, former Chief of the Naval Staff of the Indian Navy, Beijing has deployed six to eight warships in the Indian Ocean,¹² while in Pakistan, it has started to deploy ground forces. Some raise concerns that if the Chinese navy begins to use civil-purpose ports as naval supply bases, as it has at the Hambantota port, it could overcome its lack of a naval port in the region, outside of Djibouti.

In addition, China also exports submarines to countries around India. Bangladesh received two in 2016, and Pakistan imported eight for its navy. In particular, Islamabad's willingness to acquire nuclear submarines must not be overlooked. Because it lacks the technology to support these nuclear submarines itself, there is a reasonable possibility that China will provide support to these 'indigenous' nuclear submarines to counter India.

11 Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "China may put South Asia on road to debt trap", *Economic Times*, May 2, 2017, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/china-may-put-south-asia-on-road-to-debt-trap/articleshow/58467309.cms>.

12 "China's Growing Presence in Indian Ocean Challenge for India: Navy Chief", *NDTV*, March 14, 2019, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/chinas-growing-presence-in-indian-ocean-challenge-for-india-navy-chief-2007615>.

Patterns of China's Provocation: What Should We Do?

The activities of Chinese submarines and exported Chinese submarines indicate that they could potentially be used to attack India's nuclear ballistic missile submarines, aircraft carriers, and sea lines of communication (SLOCs). Therefore, these submarines will, to a great extent, regulate India's activities (see Figure 5).

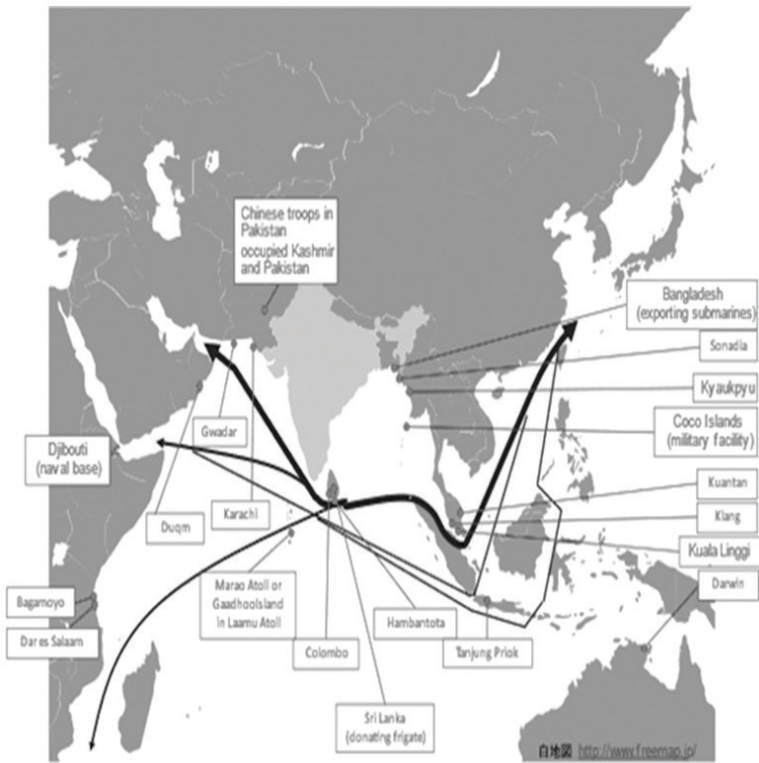


Figure 5: China's Activities in the Indian Ocean

Source: Author

WHAT ARE THE SIGNIFICANT FEATURES OF CHINA'S PROVOCATIONS?

There are three significant features of China's territorial expansion.

- (a) The first feature of note is China's repeated disregard for international law when laying claim to new territory. In the sea around Japan, China did not claim the Senkaku Islands before 1971. With the potential existence of oil reserves in the East China Sea, China's attitude has since changed. At the same time, the Senkaku Islands are in a strategic location to pressure Taiwan. In the South China Sea, China has expanded its territorial claim, ignoring the verdict of an international court, and has built artificial islands. Despite insisting that these islands have no military purpose, China has started to deploy missiles and military planes to them.

In the case of the India-China border, the Tibetan government in exile clarified that these areas historically belong to India.¹³ China has ignored current international law and expanded its territorial claim in each of these areas.

- (b) The second significant feature of China's territorial expansion is timing. It has exploited the situation whenever it finds a power vacuum. For example, China occupied half of the Paracel Islands immediately after France withdrew in the 1950s and occupied the other half one year after the US withdrew from South Vietnam in 1974. China occupied six features of the

13 Central Tibetan Administration, "'Ladakh belongs to India': Tibet sides with India, exposes China's expansionist tactics," June 5, 2020, <https://tibet.net/ladakh-belongs-to-india-tibet-sides-with-india-exposes-chinas-expansionist-tactics/>.

Patterns of China's Provocation: What Should We Do?

Spratly Islands after the Soviet Union decreased its military presence in Vietnam in the 1980s and, in 1995, it occupied Mischief Reef three years after US troops withdrew from the Philippines.¹⁴ According to the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, from 2010–19, China increased its military expenditure by 85 per cent. China's military expenditure, the second highest in the world, is estimated to have totalled USD 252 billion in 2020. This represents an increase of 1.9 per cent over 2019 and 76 per cent over the decade 2011–20. China's defence spending has risen for 26 consecutive years.¹⁵ During the same period (2010–19), India increased its military expenditure by 37 per cent and Japan by only two percent.¹⁶ In the year 2020, India's expenditure was USD 72.9 billion and Japan's USD 49.1 billion.¹⁷ China has tried to expand its territorial claims not only in the South China Sea, but also in the sea around Japan, Taiwan, and the India-China border, because it sees a power vacuum in these areas. Additionally, China has identified a power vacuum in the Indian Ocean and has worked to expand her influence there.

- (c) The third key feature of China's territorial expansion is an attempt at economic control. China has used foreign infrastructure projects — including those aligned with

14 Japan Ministry of Defense, "China's Activities in the South China Sea (China's development activities on the features and trends in related countries)", March, 2021, https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/sec_env/pdf/ch_d-act_b_e_210421.pdf.

15 SIPRI, "World military spending rises to almost \$2 trillion in 2020", April 26, 2021, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2021/world-military-spending-rises-almost-2-trillion-2020>.

16 SIPRI, "Military Expenditure Database", <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

17 SIPRI, *op.*, cit.

its BRI — to expand its sphere of influence. Through one of these projects, Sri Lanka leased its Hambantota port to China for 99 years. Because the port project was financed at a high interest rate and created huge debt, Sri Lanka was essentially forced to accept China's terms. In addition, countries with significant Chinese investment and debt are hesitant to criticize the country, even when it flouts international rules. These situations demonstrate the deep connection between China's territorial ambitions and its economic power.

WHAT SHOULD CHINA'S NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES DO?

China's lack of respect for international law, expansion of territorial claims where there are power vacuums, and attempts at economic dominance abroad are all common themes relating to China's exploits in the sea around Japan, Taiwan, the South China Sea, the India-China border, and the Indian Ocean. To deal with China's bad behaviour, the US has been seriously stepping up its efforts. The question, however, remains: What should China's neighbours, like India and Japan, do? Understanding China's behaviour patterns points toward the answer: They should do the opposite of what China wants.

First and most importantly, Japan and India should demonstrate their support of the US efforts to maintain a rule-based order. In March 2021, for the first time after the US-Japan 2+2 foreign and defense minister-level meeting, the US-Japan Joint Statement mentioned China by name multiple times and expressed concern over China's activities in the East China Sea, South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang.¹⁸ This clear stance shows Japan's support of

18 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee (Japan-U.S. "2+2")", March 16, 2021, https://www.mofa.go.jp/na/st/page3e_001112.html.

Patterns of China's Provocation: What Should We Do?

the current rule-based order and democratic norms. After the G7 Foreign and Development Ministers' Meeting between ministers of India, Australia, South Africa, and South Korea in May 2021, this Joint Statement also mentioned Tibet.¹⁹

Second, to enhance their defense capabilities, India and Japan need to focus on an offensive-defensive balance. Along with the US, Japan, India, and Australia are each planning to acquire 1,000 to 2,000-kilometer long-range strike capabilities, such as cruise missiles and F-35 jets with glide bombs. Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and South Korea are also increasing their strike arsenal with surface-to-surface missiles. These moves could be key. For example, if both Japan and India possess long-range strike capabilities, they could force China to defend on multiple fronts. Even if China decides to expand its territories along the India-China border, it still needs to expend a certain amount of its budget and military force to defend itself against Japan. In addition, long-range strike capability is useful in dealing with the route China is using to expand its territories. If the straits or other choke points are under the range of the strike capabilities of countries siding with the US, China will lose confidence in these routes. In the case of the mountainous India-China border area, India can attack strategic bridges, tunnels, or airports anytime by using missiles. This reduces China's confidence in this strategic infrastructure.

India and Japan, along with the US and Australia, need to integrate their economic efforts and reduce their reliance on China. Although China is the leading trading partner for India and Japan, if these countries depend too heavily on

19 G7 Research Group, "G7 Foreign and Development Ministers' Meeting, May 2021: Communiqué", May 5, 2021, <http://www.g7.utoronto.ca/foreign/210505-foreign-and-development-communication.html>.

this relationship, their economies will be like passengers on a sinking ship. Decoupling and risk-diversifying these supply chains and markets is necessary, and Japan has already begun this process. Because Japan has relocated its factories from China to Southeast Asia and South Asia, the number of Japanese citizens living in China has decreased from 150,399 in 2012 to 111,768 in 2020. At the same time, the number of Japanese living in the US has increased from 410,973 in 2012 to 426,354 in 2020.²⁰ In addition, Japan earmarked USD 2.2 billion of its 2020 economic stimulus package to help local manufacturers shift production out of China.²¹

Furthermore, India and Japan, along with the US and Australia, should cooperate in infrastructure development, COVID-19 vaccine supplies, and other socially beneficial initiatives. When Sri Lanka accepted China's high interest rate investment, it had no other investor options. Japan and India should collaborate on alternative infrastructure projects in developing countries, including Sri Lanka. The situation around the COVID-19 pandemic offers similar opportunities. Without an alternative source for these countries, for instance, China can expand its influence by supplying COVID-19 vaccines.²² The G-7 and four leaders from India, Australia, South Africa, and South Korea, agreed at the G-7 summit that providing vaccine support to these developing nations would be a critical

20 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Annual Report of Statistics on Japanese Nationals Overseas", 2021, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/toko/tokei/hojin/index.html>.

21 Isabel Reynolds and Emi Urabe, "Japan to Fund Firms to Shift Production Out of China", *Bloomberg*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-08/japan-to-fund-firms-to-shift-production-out-of-china>.

22 US White House, "Fact Sheet: Quad Summit", March 12, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/fact-sheet-quad-summit/>.

Patterns of China's Provocation: What Should We Do?

step in ensuring China could not further its influence in these countries.

China's aggressive territorial expansion has spurred neighbouring countries like India and Japan to take a tough stance alongside the US and Australia. The more China escalates the situation, the more the defense capabilities of the QUAD (India-Japan-US-Australia) will be institutionalized in the Indo-Pacific. Now is the time to do so.

SOUTH ASIA TERRORISM PORTAL

SOUTH ASIA TERRORISM PORTAL (SATP) is a major platform for the projection of data, research, analysis and news on terrorism in South Asia, and provides critical new inputs for the counter-terrorism effort. SATP is the largest and most comprehensive Portal of its kind, and already contains over 85,000 pages of information.

Unique features include assessments and background reviews of all major internal conflicts in the South Asian region, an extensive coverage of major terrorist outfits through individual profile pages, and timelines for each conflict. **TERRORISMUPDATE**, a news briefs page, is updated on a daily basis. Researched articles published in **FAULTLINES: THE K.P.S. GILL JOURNAL OF CONFLICT & RESOLUTION** and the South Asia Intelligence Review are available for free download. The database, information, research material and various other features on SATP are continuously expanded.

SATP is a project executed under the aegis of the Institute for Conflict Management (ICM), a registered non-profit society which seeks to focus on various problems and issues related to terrorism, insurgency, low intensity warfare and other sources of internal strife in South Asia. **FAULTLINES** is a sister project that is also promoted by the ICM.

Visit us at: www.satp.org