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**Japan-Gulf Relations:
Discussing the Major Analytical Tendencies
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Abstract

This study aims to shed light on the emerging body of literature on Japan-GCC relations, elucidate its traditional and more recent analytical tendencies, and discuss which aspects of their relations have been left largely unexplored. It identifies the existence of two major analytical trends favouring “inter-regional” and “sector-specific” approaches to the study of the contemporary Japan-GCC linkage. It also finds that these analytical trends have led to a relative paucity of studies with state-based and multi-sectoral analytical approaches that deserve more scholarly attention.

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Introduction

Given the emergence in the twenty-first century of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states’ “Look East” policy, also known as the “pivot to Asia,” a strategic move to strengthen economic and political ties with Asian countries, several scholars have emphasised the salience of looking at this new reality, including the development of their relations with Japan (e.g., Davidson, 2010; Ehteshami & Miyagi, 2015a; Janardhan, 2021, 2020, 2015; Ulrichsen, 2016).¹ While the emerging body of literature has thus far added a significant amount of scholarly knowledge about this new reality, there has been little discussion about the analytical trends underlying the study of Japan-GCC relations.²

In light of this, a research question arises: what analytical tendencies can be identified in the study of contemporary Japan-GCC relations? With this question in mind, this paper aims to shed light on the emerging body of literature on Japan-GCC relations, elucidate its traditional and more recent analytical tendencies, and discuss which facets of their relations have been left largely unexplored.³

The rest of the paper is divided into four sections to attain the above objectives. The first section sets the stage with a brief overview of the history of Japan-GCC relations and the status of scholarship on their ties. The second and third sections reveal the existence of two major analytical trends favouring “inter-regional” and “sector-specific” approaches, respectively, among the existing literature on Japan-GCC relations. Lastly, the concluding section articulates the review’s findings and discusses research gaps deriving from the aforementioned analytical trends.

Setting the Stage

Japan has enjoyed amicable ties with the GCC states for almost a century, with hydrocarbon trade being largely, albeit not solely, at the heart of their relations. The commencement of hydrocarbon trade relations between these partners can be traced back to 1934 when the oil-carrying tanker *El Segundo* left Bahrain for Japan, carrying Bahraini crude oil.⁴ This event was economically significant for both sides as the shipment marked the first crude oil export of any Arab country and Japan’s first oil import from the GCC states in history, thus connecting the two sides of the world more closely (Hosaka, 2014; Ito, 2020; Nakajima, 2015).^{5,6} In the words of the former Japanese Ambassador to Bahrain, Hideki Ito, the 1934

¹ The six member states of the GCC are Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain.

² In this paper, the term “Japan-GCC relations” refers to Japan’s relations with the six member states of the GCC, not with the GCC as a multinational organization.

³ However, it should be acknowledged that the extent of the review this paper offers is far from complete due to its limited scope.

⁴ This historic trade took place following the Imperial Japanese Navy’s decision to shift its fuel from coal to oil in 1921. After this shift, imports of crude oil became a matter of national security for Japan as the country could not produce enough oil to meet its domestic demand (Nakajima, 2015). By 1934, Japan had already been engaged in the oil trade with other countries such as Iran and the United States. Hence, Bahrain was not the first oil exporter to Japan.

⁵ It should be noted, however, that before the 1934 oil shipment from Bahrain to Japan, the two sides already had non-hydrocarbon trade relations. Hosaka (2014) pointed out that Japan was exporting goods to Bahrain as early as the 1920s.

⁶ It is not well-known, but Japan itself is an oil-producing country. In 1869, its first geological survey for crude oil was conducted, followed by the first successful machinery oil excavation in the Amase oil field in Niigata prefecture in 1891 (Nakajima, 2015). Today, the country has several domestic oil fields in Niigata and Akita prefectures as well as the islands of Hokkaido, among other places. However, oil production volume has never been sufficient to meet domestic demand. Japanese government statistics show that the country’s crude oil self-sufficiency rate has been less than 0.5% since the 1970s. As a result, today, Japan relies on oil imports, nearly 90% of which come from the GCC states (Agency for Natural Resources and Energy of Japan, 2021).

shipment of crude oil marked “the beginning of the relations through oil not only between Japan and Bahrain but also between Japan and GCC countries” (Ito, 2020, p. 3). This historic moment was followed by a series of Japanese acquisitions of oil concessions from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in the 1960s. Japan also became the first importer of other hydrocarbon resources from the GCC states, such as Bahrain’s liquified petroleum gas (first exported in 1980) and Qatar’s liquified natural gas (first shipped in 1996) (Ito, 2020; Nakamura, 2016). Following the development of the Japan-GCC hydrocarbon trade linkage in the twentieth century, the twenty-first century has witnessed a shift in Japan-GCC relations. Both sides began to enjoy fruitful ties based on not only the hydrocarbon trade but also on political, economic and strategic calculus, exemplified by the GCC states’ Look East policy and Japan’s continuous efforts to diversify its relations with the GCC states beyond the hydrocarbon and trade sectors (Ehteshami & Miyagi, 2015a; Janardhan, 2021, 2020, 2015; Kobayashi & Miyagi, 2015; Ulrichsen, 2016; Yamada, 2015).

In spite of the long-lasting and increasingly multifaceted nature of their ties, however, Japan-GCC relations have often been overlooked by studies of Japan and the GCC states. A statement by Tsujigami and Horinuki (2015, p. 86) illustrates the paucity of literature on this topic:

In spite of the importance of the GCC for Japan, existing diplomatic studies of the GCC focus on Saudi-US relations, whilst studies of Japan pay most attention to Japan’s relations with the USA and its East Asian neighbours. Although there are a few memoirs of Japanese diplomats and businessmen who spent time in the Gulf, and some work on Japan-Middle East relations, relations between Japan and the Gulf have, with few exceptions, been neglected.

Similarly, Christopher Davidson (2010, p. 333) argued that “the rapidly tightening economic interdependence between [East Asia and the GCC states] is a recent phenomenon that deserves considerable attention.” However, this is not to state that the literature on Japan-GCC relations is non-existent; the body of literature on this topic has been gradually emerging in recent years, including at least two major analytical tendencies.

The First Analytical Tendency: Inter-regional Approach

One of the recent phenomena in the existing scholarship on contemporary Japan-GCC relations is the preponderance of the “inter-regional” analytical approach that brings together all six of the GCC states (or sometimes the whole Middle East region) on the one hand and (East) Asia on the other and treats them as two collective units of analysis.⁷ This type of literature often frames the relations between the two sides with such terms as “Asia-Gulf relations” (e.g., Niblock & Malik, 2013a), “The Middle East-East Asia nexus” (e.g., Ehteshami & Miyagi, 2015a) or “Persian Gulf-Pacific Asia linkages” (e.g., Davidson, 2010). While the inter-regional analytical approach certainly captures part of the complex dynamics of their relations (e.g., Ehteshami & Miyagi, 2015b), this analytical approach sometimes overlooks the importance of the “state-based” analytical approach that examines individual, bilateral relations (e.g., Japan-Saudi relations). For example, Niblock and Malik (2013b, p. 3) stated:

Although there has been considerable work done on the relationships between individual Gulf and Asian countries, there has previously been no attempt to cover the

⁷ In this regard, Al-Subaey (2017, p. 19) aptly points out that the existing studies “generally focus on the Gulf states and Asian countries” as two collective units of analysis.

overall relationship – bringing in all of the 8 Gulf countries and all the Asian countries which have substantial economic relations with the Gulf region. Information and analysis of how relations are developing between one Asian country and one Gulf country (most commonly China and Saudi Arabia), however, are of limited value in explaining how the global economic balance is changing. The strengthening of one Gulf-Asia relationship may be accompanied by the weakening of another such relationship. An overall perspective is what is needed in order to comprehend how Gulf-Asia developments are transforming the balance of global economic relations.

In spite of scholars' increasing preference for the inter-regional approach in recent years, a few researchers advocate the relevance and importance of shedding light on bilateral ties between Japan and each of the GCC states, given their varying natures and contexts. For example, after analysing the evolution of Japan's energy diplomacy vis-à-vis the GCC states and Iran since the 1973 oil crisis, Kobayashi and Miyagi (2015, p. 72) concluded that "Japan's policy toward specific energy producing countries [i.e., the GCC states and Iran] is not, therefore, uniform, and indeed has varied according to the specific contexts." Moreover, studies employing the state-based approach suggest that Japan's bilateral relations with GCC states are not necessarily homogeneous. For example, Nakamura (2016) analysed the evolution of Japan-Qatar bilateral relations and traced its origin to the late twentieth century, when Japan started to play a significant role in the development of Qatar's natural gas sector as both primary developer and importer. In other words, natural gas was substantially the centre of the commencement of their bilateral ties. When it comes to the Japan-Saudi link, however, Japan's contact with Saudi Arabia started with, arguably, the performance of the Hajj pilgrimage by some Japanese Muslims in the early twentieth century, which predates the start of their oil trade relations (Muto, 2018). Furthermore, Japan has a special royal relationship with Oman. In the 1930s, upon visiting Japan, Oman's former Sultan Taimur bin Faisal (1886-1965) met a Japanese woman, Kiyoko Oyama, and later married and lived with her, albeit briefly, in Kobe, Japan. Their only daughter, Sayyda Buthaina bint Taimur, who shares both Omani and Japanese lineages, is a member of Oman's royal family today (Morimoto, 2012). While the significance of the inter-regional analytical approach can hardly be denied as it has deepened scholarly understanding of the Japan-GCC nexus, these differences illustrate the relevance and salience of the often-overlooked state-based analytical approach to the topic.

Notably, there is a relatively minor strain within the limited body of literature that employs the state-based approach; while Japan's bilateral relations with resource-rich GCC states, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are often studied (e.g., Muto, 2018; Nakamura, 2016), its bilateral links with resource-poor Bahrain and Oman have been mostly overlooked. A quick search using major journal search engines, such as JSTOR, produced almost no results for scholarly literature that exclusively and rigorously studied Japan-Bahrain or Japan-Oman relations.⁸ This search result alone may not serve as adequate evidence of the relative scarcity of academic literature on Japan's relations with the resource-poor GCC states. In addition, given that hydrocarbon trade has historically constituted a significant, though not the whole, proportion of Japan-GCC relations (e.g., Abdullah & Al-Tamimi, 2015; AlShamsi & Kandil, 2001; Al-Tamimi, 2013; Calabrese, 2009; Nakajima, 2015; Niblock, 2013), the imbalance in the available literature is understandable to some extent. Nevertheless, it is imperative to take into consideration that the analytical preference for these resource-rich GCC states has left Japan's bilateral ties with Bahrain and Oman largely unexplored to this day.

⁸ There are, however, a few memoirs written by former Japanese ambassadors on Japan's relations with the GCC states (e.g., Morimoto, 2012).

The Second Analytical Tendency: Sector-specific Approach

Another more traditional analytical tendency is the dominance of the sector-specific approach that largely, if not exclusively, focuses on hydrocarbon and trade dimensions of the Japan-GCC relations. This tendency has resulted in the relative dearth of the multi-sectoral analytical approach that goes beyond the hydrocarbon and trade sectors.

A number of scholars have traditionally employed the sector-specific analytical approach. For example, Sharif's 1986 edited volume entitled *The Arab Gulf States and Japan* discussed their relations largely from the viewpoint of the hydrocarbon trade. In 2001, AlShamsi and Kandil (2001) employed a similar approach and examined Japan-GCC hydrocarbon and trade relations between 1975 and 1995. Niblock (2013) also analysed the economic relations between the Gulf region and Asia, providing an overall picture of their hydrocarbon and trade ties, yet overlooking other aspects of their relations. Nakajima (2015) explained Japan's historical oil relations with the GCC states began in the early twentieth century. However, his discussion is inevitably confined to the hydrocarbon and trade domains due to his volume's thematic perspective. Furthermore, Calabrese (2009, para. 7) argued that "trade in crude oil forms the backbone of Gulf-Asia energy relations." A similar argument was made by Abdullah and Al-Tamimi (2015, n.p.), who stated that "trade is at the heart of the growing links between GCC countries and Japan, which centres on the crude oil and gas." Al-Tamimi (2013, p. 12) went even further to argue that "in summary, the energy interests still largely define the GCC-Asia relations... The relationship between GCC and Asia suggests (at least for now) that this is an energy-economic partnership and not a strategic-political alliance," thereby stressing the importance of looking at hydrocarbon and economic facets of their relations. Quilliam and Kamel (2015, p. 325) took a similar stance by openly dismissing the potential of the growing Asia-GCC ties to transcend beyond "transactional relationships" based on mutual economic transactions largely centred on hydrocarbons, to "strategic relationships" that are "typically multidimensional and draw partners closer together through cultural, educational and historical ties." These are only a few examples of the popularity of the sector-specific analytical approach focusing on hydrocarbons and trade. If one includes discourses around media and policy circles, this tendency becomes even more overt.

The long-standing analytical focus on hydrocarbon and trade sectors has somewhat clouded other facets of the Japan-GCC relations that have flourished, especially over the past decade. In response, in recent years, several scholars have advocated the salience of widening analytical scopes beyond the hydrocarbon and trade sectors while acknowledging their continuing importance and relevance. For instance, Miyagi et al. (2013, p. 320) pointed out that:

As a result [of several energy crises for Japan between the 1970s and 2011], Japan started promoting diversification and deepening of relationships with the Gulf beyond the one-dimensional trade relation, towards policy consultation over issues of common concerns, promotion of other forms of economic relations such as investment and tourism, and intensifying exchanges at various levels ranging from high-ranking officials to business representatives to the youth of both countries.

This statement is echoed by Davidson (2010, p. 333), who studied Asia-Gulf relations:

what began as a simple, late twentieth-century marriage of convenience based on hydrocarbon imports and exports has now evolved into a comprehensive, long-term mutual commitment that will not only continue to capitalize on the Gulf's rich energy

resources and Pacific Asia's massive energy needs but will also seek to develop strong non-hydrocarbon bilateral trade.

The GCC states' Look East policy is often treated in this line of discussion (e.g., Ehteshami & Miyagi, 2015a; Janardhan, 2021, 2020, 2015; Ulrichsen, 2016; Yamada, 2015). In addition, Janardhan (2021, para. 16) argued in a more recent context that:

The priorities of Gulf-Japan relations are changing. There will continue to be oil interdependence for decades to come, however, engagement in non-oil sectors is increasing due to the emphasis on economic diversification as well as the turn to tech-based businesses during the coronavirus pandemic.

Jun Saito and Janardhan (2020) also stated in their book chapter entitled "Gulf-Japan Ties, Beyond the Energy Sectors" that friendly Japan-GCC economic ties have diversified into non-hydrocarbon sectors. Even Niblock and Malik (2013b, p. 4), who largely focused on the hydrocarbon and trade sectors in their 2013 edited volume, acknowledged that "the pattern which emerges from the different cases is that a many-layered relationship is developing between the Gulf region and Asia," thus pointing out the need to study their relations from a more multi-sectoral perspective beyond the traditional fields of hydrocarbons and trade. While the pivotal roles played by hydrocarbon and trade sectors for the advancement of Japan-GCC ties should not be negated, there seems to be an increasing agreement among experts that analysis of other facets of their relations is also relevant and important to the study of today's Japan-GCC relations.

Conclusion: What Is Left Largely Unexplored?

Notwithstanding the limited scope of the review, this paper has explained the existence of two major analytical trends favouring inter-regional and sector-specific approaches to the study of the contemporary Japan-GCC linkage. The presence of these analytical tendencies per se is not to be criticised, as the existing scholarly works that employed these analytical approaches have added a significant amount of scholarly knowledge to the understanding of Japan-GCC relations. However, it is imperative to point out that these analytical tendencies have left some facets of the topic largely unexamined. More precisely, the recent preponderance of the inter-regional approach has led to the relative scarcity of literature that employs a state-based approach in studying bilateral relations. This is particularly so in the case of Japan's ties with resource-poor Bahrain and Oman. Moreover, the dominance of the sector-specific analytical approach that focuses on the hydrocarbon and trade domains has resulted in the relative lack of the multi-sectoral approach that encompasses non-hydrocarbon and non-trade sectors in the analysis.

Given the above observations, one of the gaps left largely unexplored in the study of contemporary Japan-GCC relations is the lack of studies that employ state-based and multi-sectoral analytical approaches. Particularly, given the scarcity of literature on Japan's ties with Bahrain and Oman, state-based and multi-sectoral analyses of these pairs are of significant scholarly value to diversify the existing analytical preferences and complement scholarly knowledge on the Japan-GCC relations.

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