Investigating Recent Changes in MJO Precipitation and Circulation in Two Reanalyses

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Key Points:

- Non-monotonic increases in MJO circulation and precipitation amplitude over the period of 1981-2018 are found in ERA5 and MERRA-2.
- Decrease in the ratio of MJO circulation to precipitation amplitudes is detected and is explained by the weak-temperature-gradient theory.

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Abstract

Recent work using CMIP5 models under RCP8.5 suggests that individual multimodel-mean changes in precipitation and wind variability associated with the Madden-Julian oscillation (MJO) are not detectable until the end of the 21st century. However, a decrease in the ratio of MJO circulation to precipitation anomaly amplitude is detectable as early as 2021-2040, consistent with an increase in dry static stability as predicted by weak-temperature-gradient balance. Here, we examine MJO activity in two reanalyses (ERA5 and MERRA-2) and find a detectable decrease in the ratio of MJO circulation to precipitation anomaly amplitude over the observational period, consistent with the change in dry static stability. MJO wind and precipitation anomalies individually increase in strength relative to the start of the record, but these changes are non-monotonic. These results suggest that weak-temperature-gradient theory may be able to help explain changes in MJO activity in recent decades.

Plain Language Summary

A recent study examined future projected changes in precipitation and wind strength associated with the Madden-Julian oscillation (MJO) in a set of anthropogenically-forced warming simulations. While they showed that changes in the amplitude of individual MJO-related variables are not detectable until the end of the 21st century, they also demonstrated that a decrease in the ratio of MJO wind to precipitation anomaly amplitude is detectable as early as 2021-2040. To examine whether these MJO changes found in climate models are realistic, changes to MJO variability are assessed in two observational products, and we find that a similar decrease in the ratio of MJO wind to precipitation strength is detectable over 1981-2018. In addition, the strength of MJO circulations and precipitation both increase relative to the start of the record, although these changes do not increase consistently from year to year. Our results suggest that the change in MJO activity in recent decades may be a detectable climate warming signal.

1 Introduction

The Madden-Julian oscillation (MJO; Madden & Julian, 1971, 1972) is the dominant mode of large-scale tropical precipitation variability on intraseasonal timescales. MJO activity impacts the occurrence of extreme weather events not only in tropics, but also at higher latitudes due to its remote teleconnections (Zhang, 2013). Because of its ability to modulate weather across the globe, with clear implications for lives and property, extensive research is being conducted about the MJO, with increasing attention given to the evolution of the MJO under anthropogenic warming (Maloney et al., 2019). As global temperatures rise, MJO activity is expected to be impacted by competing effects, making the projections of the MJO difficult. For example, an increased basic state vertical moisture gradient in the lower troposphere increases the efficiency with which vertical motion moistens the atmosphere, leading to a strengthening of MJO-associated convection (Arnold et al., 2013; Holloway & Neelin, 2009). In contrast, an increased dry static stability decreases the efficiency by which diabatic heating induces vertical motion (Knutson & Manabe, 1995; Sherwood & Nishant, 2015; Sobel & Bretherton, 2000), which would tend to weaken MJO-associated convection (e.g. Chikira, 2014). Future projections from most global climate models (GCMs) suggest an increase in the amplitude of MJO precipitation under anthropogenic warming, although MJO circulation anomalies weaken, or at least increase less than precipitation (Maloney et al., 2019). Analysis of the reconstructed historical record from instrumental observations and reanalysis shows positive trends of MJO amplitude over the 20th century in surface pressure and precipitation (Oliver & Thompson, 2012) and in the late 20th century in zonal winds (Jones & Carvalho, 2006; Slingo et al., 1999). However, other studies have found no trend in boreal-wintertime MJO amplitude from the 1980s to the 2000s when using an outgoing longwave radiation-related metric (Tao et al., 2015).

Recent evidence suggests that the MJO may undergo structural changes with warming and differences in intensification rate in its associated precipitation and circulation components. Such changes would be important because teleconnections generated by upper-level divergence associated with MJO convection have a large impact on extratropical weather and its predictability (Ferranti et al., 1990; Zhang, 2013). Instead of examining the amplitude of the MJO with a single variable, Maloney and Xie (2013) and Wolding and Maloney (2015) suggest that in the deep tropics where the weak-temperature-gradient (WTG) approximation holds (Sobel & Bretherton, 2000), the amplitude ratio of vertical velocity to precipitation associated with the MJO is constrained by dry static stability. Since the temperature profile in the free tropical troposphere roughly follows a moist adiabat determined by convective adjustment in tropical convecting regions (Knutson & Manabe, 1995), the dry static stability profile may be constrained by future SST warming, thus providing a constraint on future MJO behavior.

A recent study found that the ratio of MJO-associated circulation to precipitation amplitude follows WTG balance in anthropogenic warming simulations (Bui & Maloney, 2019). The WTG approximation can be applied to the thermodynamic equation to produce the following approximate balance in the tropical free troposphere, where horizontal temperature gradients are small (Sobel & Bretherton, 2000),

$$\omega \frac{\partial s}{\partial p} \approx Q_1 \tag{1}$$

where ω is the vertical pressure velocity, s the dry static energy (DSE), and Q_1 the apparent heat source (Yanai et al., 1973). Note that all variables represent the large-scale area average. If it is further assumed that precipitation is proportional to Q_1 in MJO convective regions, and that the vertical structure of Q_1 is not changed (Maloney & Xie, 2013), it follows that at a given level:

$$\Delta \left(\frac{\omega}{P} \right) \propto \Delta \left(\frac{\partial s}{\partial p}^{-1} \right) \tag{2}$$

where P is the surface precipitation rate, and Δ denotes the relative change from a reference state to a new state. Bui and Maloney (2019) examined GCM simulations forced by Representative Concentration Pathway 8.5 (RCP8.5) in a subset of models participating in the Coupled Model Intercomparison Project 5 (CMIP5) that simulated realistic MJOs. While the amplitude changes of MJO precipitation and vertical velocity were individually not detectable until 2080, the *ratio* of MJO vertical velocity to precipitation amplitude showed detectable decreases as early as 2021-2040. Consistent with WTG balance and the proportionality of precipitation to Q_1, the ratio of MJO vertical velocity to precipitation amplitude matches the change in dry static stability in the simulations, implying that this theory could explain and predict the evolution of the MJO, even in the observational record that has exhibited warming.

Following this work, we investigate the temporal evolution of MJO-related precipitation and circulation amplitude and their ratio in two reanalyses (ERA5 and MERRA-2) to assess whether changes to the MJO can be detected in recent decades. Our purpose is to determine whether WTG balance can explain changes in MJO activity in the real world, which could help support projections of MJO under continued anthropogenic warming.

2 Data and Methodology

Two reanalysis datasets spanning 1981-2018 are employed to assess changes in MJO amplitude and the background environment in recent decades: the Modern-Era Retrospective analysis for Research and Applications version 2 (MERRA-2; Gelaro et al., 2017) and the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts re-analysis (ERA5; Hersbach et al., 2020). The MERRA-2 and ERA5 datasets have spatial (temporal) resolutions of $0.5° \times 0.625°$ (three hours) and $0.25° \times 0.25°$ (one hour), respectively. For the purpose of investigating large-scale dynamics, all variables are re-gridded to have a common horizontal spatial resolution of $2.5° \times 2.5°$. Vertical pressure velocity and precipitation are averaged into daily means, and temperature and DSE are originally obtained as monthly means. Wolding and Maloney (2015) imply that to good approximation the slowly varying background DSE gradient is appropriate to use in (1) for determining the dominant WTG MJO balance. While the precipitation data in both reanalyses is model-generated and comes with substantial caveats, inhomogeneities in satellite-observed precipitation over the tropics make it difficult to use to detect climate trends (e.g. Yin et al., 2004). Furthermore, the moisture budget in the reanalyses products is more internally consistent, and thus, we focus on reanalysis precipitation for this work.

MJO activity is assessed by its associated precipitation and vertical pressure velocity amplitudes, with vertical pressure velocity at 400 hPa (ω_{400}) used given the top-heavy nature of convection in the MJO (Kiladis et al., 2005). Specifically, the occurrence of an MJO event is defined as when the magnitude of the outgoing-longwave-radiation-based MJO index (OMI; downloaded from https://www.psl.noaa.gov/mjo/mjoindex/omi.1x.txt; see Kiladis et al., 2014, for definition) exceeds 1.0. Note that we split our analysis into 19-year periods, and so OMI is normalized within each time period (as in Bui & Maloney, 2019) to reflect possible changes in variance of outgoing longwave radiation fields. Boreal winter (November to April) MJO composites for each of its eight phases are then generated for 30-90 day bandpass filtered variables as is commonly done in the MJO literature (e.g. Kiladis et al., 2014). Amplitudes of MJO precipitation and ω_{400} for each location are calculated as the root-mean-square values across the composites of the eight MJO phases.

Boreal winter averages derived from monthly means of temperature and DSE are used to assess the background environment changes that could impact MJO activity. Dry static stability at 400 hPa is computed as the vertical gradient of DSE between 350 hPa and 450hPa.

Our focus is on the time evolution of the amplitudes of MJO precipitation and ω_{400} in the Indo-Pacific warm pool region (the IPWP region; 15°S-15°N, 60°E-180°) where the MJO is most active, as shown in the boxed region in Figure 1. Area-averaged MJO precipitation and ω_{400} amplitudes over the IPWP region are used as metrics to quantify overall MJO activity.

Composites obtained from 19-year running windows are extensively used in this study, similar to the averaging window length of 20 years used in Bui and Maloney (2019). This window length is chosen to reduce noise from decadal variations, but also to retain enough data points to show the time evolution of MJO activity. Since the entire time period analyzed is 38 years, the first and the last 19 years of the record are the only two periods that are truly independent, and we refer to these as the *early period* (1981-1999) and the *late period* (2000-2018). The conclusions in this study are not sensitive to the choice of window length used between 15 years and 25 years (Figure S1).

3 Results

First, we explore the spatial structure of MJO activity in the two reanalyses. The amplitude of MJO precipitation and ω_{400} maximize in the IPWP region (Figures 1a-d) in both reanalyses during the early period. The changes in MJO precipitation and ω_{400} amplitude between the late period and the early period have rich spatial structures, which are similar between the reanalyses (Figures 1e-h). Increases in both amplitudes occur to the south of India, at the southern edge of the Pacific warm pool, and near the Philip-

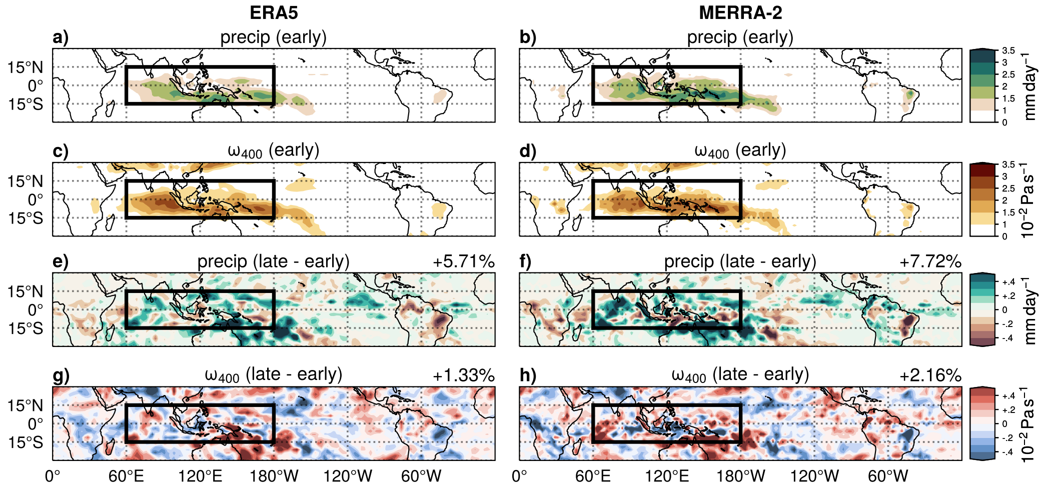

Figure 1. The boreal winter composite amplitudes of (a, b) MJO precipitation and (c, d) MJO ω_{400} during the early period (1981-1999), and (e-h) their difference from the late period (2000-2018), from (left column) ERA5 and (right column) MERRA-2. The black rectangle encloses the Indo-Pacific warm pool region, and the percentage values shown in the upper right corners of (e-h) are the area-averaged relative changes over the region.

pines. Decreases in both amplitudes occur near 5°S over the Maritime Continent. The regions of large amplitude of the MJO do not change substantially between the early and late period, allowing us to assess the temporal change in MJO activity within the IPWP region. The area-averaged amplitude of MJO precipitation and ω_{400} in the IPWP region both show increases in the late period relative to the early period with precipitation intensifying by 5.6% in ERA5 and 7.6% in MERRA-2, and ω_{400} intensifying by 1.2% in ERA5 and 2.1% in MERRA-2. Most important for this study, MJO precipitation amplitude intensifies more than MJO ω_{400} amplitude in both reanalyses, although MJO activity in MERRA-2 is strengthened slightly more than in ERA5.

The 19-year running area-averaged MJO precipitation and ω_{400} amplitude in the IPWP region increase between the early and the late periods of the record, while the amplitude in MERRA-2 exhibit larger changes than those in ERA5. However, both reanalyses demonstrate qualitatively similar fluctuations in between: in the early 90s, both of the amplitudes rise quickly, followed by a plateau and then a slight decrease afterward (Figures 2a-b). The strengthening of the boreal-wintertime MJO activity during the late 20th century is consistent with previous studies examining observed zonal wind changes at 200 hPa and 850 hPa (Jones & Carvalho, 2006)). Moreover, both reanalyses agree that throughout the record, MJO precipitation amplitude shows larger positive changes than MJO ω_{400} amplitude.

While we attempted to explain the fluctuating pattern in MJO precipitation and ω_{400} amplitude, we could find no obvious connections between them and interannual to decadal variability in surface air temperature. The evolution of surface air temperature in the IPWP region (Figure S2b) and its evolution relative to the whole tropics (Figure S2c) do not resemble the variability in the MJO amplitude time series, which have different trends from the early 90s onward (Figures 2a-b). Commonly used Pacific SST indices that capture interannual to decadal variability also do not show similar variability to the MJO amplitude time series (compare Figures 2a-b with Figure S3 SST-indices).

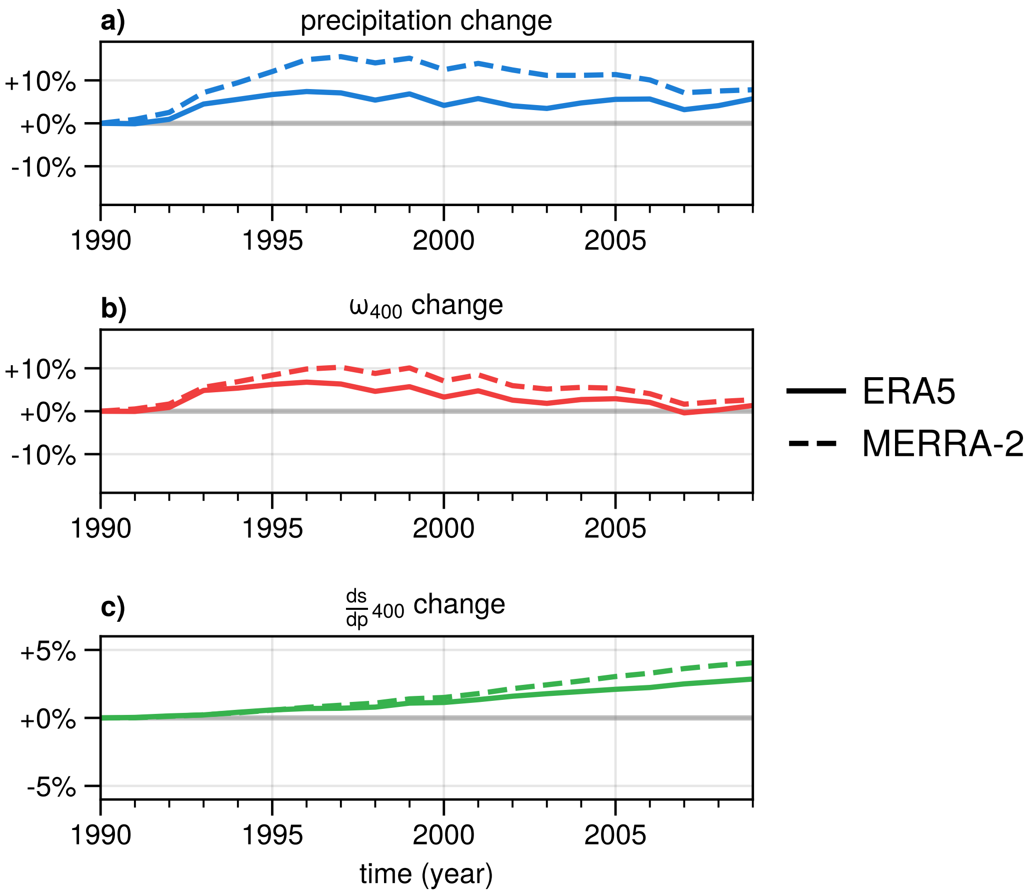

Figure 2. Relative change in 19-year wintertime running composites of (a) MJO precipitation amplitude, (b) MJO ω_{400} amplitude, and (c) dry static stability at 400 hPa with respect to the early period. The x-axis denotes the central years of the associated time window, for example, 2000 denotes the period of 1991-2009. The y-axis denotes the relative change to the early period.

To sum up, both MJO precipitation and ω_{400} amplitude increase from the early period to the late period in the IPWP region in both reanalyses, although the time evolution is non-monotonic and the amplitude of the change varies between the reanalyses. The timeseries of the amplitudes are not easily explained by tropical SST variability. However, a robust result common among different time periods and reanalyses is that the increase in MJO precipitation amplitude is always stronger than in MJO ω_{400} amplitude, consistent with what WTG balance would predict based on the increasing tropical static stability with SST warming observed in recent decades (Figure 2c; see also e.g. Sherwood & Nishant, 2015). We explore this contention more below.

Given a change in dry static stability, the theoretical change in the ratio of MJO ω_{400} to precipitation amplitude can be computed if one assumes that WTG balance holds (equation 1, 2). Previous modeling studies have shown good agreement between static stability changes and this ratio when applied to MJO-associated wind and precipitation variance (Maloney & Xie, 2013; Wolding & Maloney, 2015; Wolding et al., 2016; Bui & Maloney, 2018). As the climate system warms, tropical dry static stability increases in the troposphere because the atmospheric profile in the deep tropics roughly follows a moist adiabat set by the surface temperature in convecting regions (Knutson & Manabe, 1995). Because surface temperature has increased since 1981 (Figure S2a), equation (2) would argue for a greater change in MJO precipitation amplitude compared to MJO ω_{400} amplitude.

Figure 3 displays the temporal evolution of the inverse of dry static stability and the ratio of MJO ω_{400} to precipitation amplitude (MJO ω_{400}/P; see equation 2) in the two reanalyses. The grey diagonal line denotes the predicted theoretical relationship between MJO ω_{400}/P and inverse static stability assuming WTG theory holds and the vertical structure of the MJO remains unchanged. Between the late period and the early period (the two outlined endpoints), the decrease of the inverse of dry static stability is 2.8% in ERA5 and 4.0% in MERRA-2, and the decrease of MJO ω_{400}/P is 4.2% in ERA5 and 4.9% in MERRA-2. Consistent with WTG theory, MJO ω_{400}/P and the inverse of dry static stability show comparable decreases between the early period (1981-1999) and the late period (2000-2018). Agreement is also good in ERA5 for interim periods, especially until about 2000 (Figure 3a). Considering the complicated temporal evolution of MJO precipitation and ω_{400} amplitude (Figure 2), WTG balance provides a reasonable explanation for the evolution of MJO ω_{400}/P over the past 38 years, especially when considering the start and end of the record (Figure 3).

As many MJO studies use zonal wind amplitude as a metric of MJO activity (e.g. Slingo et al., 1999; Jones & Carvalho, 2006), we also examine the amplitude of MJO 850 hPa zonal wind (u_{850}) for reference. The evolution of the ratio of MJO circulation to precipitation amplitude is defined here using u_{850} (MJO u_{850}/P). Although using u_{850} is not a direct application of WTG balance in equation (2), the amplitude of horizontal velocity should scale with vertical velocity through divergence if the vertical structure doesn't change (Maloney & Xie, 2013). Under such conditions, we would expect a qualitatively similar decrease in the ratio of MJO u_{850} to precipitation amplitude. Figure S4 shows that u_{850} amplitude relative to precipitation does decrease in a qualitatively similar way, although with stronger decreases relative to P than for ω_{400}.

Differences between the two reanalyses are notable in Figure 3. In ERA5, equation (2) explains the change in MJO ω_{400}/P very well until 2000 and then starts to modestly underestimate the change after 2000; in MERRA-2, equation (2) overestimates the decrease in MJO ω_{400}/P in the intervening periods but works well for the two endpoints. MJO ω_{400}/P in MERRA2 shows stronger decreases than ERA5 during the interim period largely because it has a larger P amplitude change than ERA5. The exact reasons for differences between the two analyses are unclear, although they may depend on the different behavior of tropical convection simulated by the two reanalysis models. The differing dry static energy profiles changes between ERA5 and MERRA-2 for the IPWP

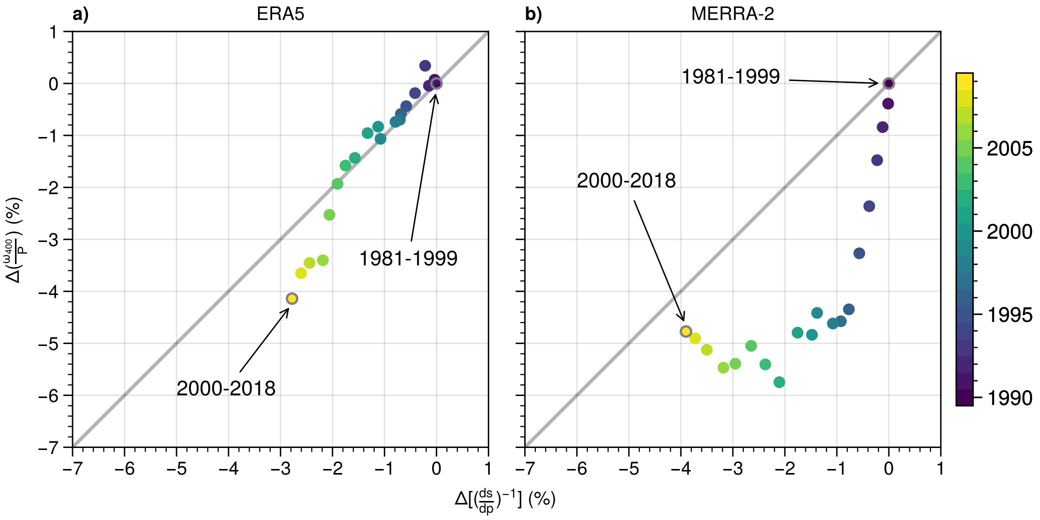

Figure 3. Relative change in (x-axis) the reciprocal of dry static stability at 400 hPa and (y-axis) the ratio of MJO ω_{400} to precipitation amplitude over the IPWP region between 19-year running windows and the early period. Colors indicate the central year of the running window. The grey diagonal line denotes the change in the ratio predicted by WTG balance assuming vertical heating structure is unchanged (equation 2). The first and the last points, which are independent, are emphasized by grey outlines.

region (Figures S5a-b) not only indicate differing static stability changes, but also circumstantially suggest different changes to the convective heating structure between datasets given the regulation of tropical tropospheric temperature by convective heating. Such structure changes would affect how well the balance in equation (2) reflects equation (1), considering the assumption about the proportionality of P to Q_1 at 400 hPa. MERRA-2 exhibits more warming in the lower troposphere than ERA5, presumably associated with increased condensational heating and precipitation generation there, which would produce greater decreases in MJO ω_{400}/P than that expected by looking at the 400 hPa level in isolation. The rate of increase in low-level warming in MERRA-2 is particularly strong until the 19-year period centered on 1997, possibly consistent with the greater MJO precipitation amplitude increase in MERRA during that time than ERA5 (Figure 2), although translating mean state convective structure changes to those on subseasonal timescales should be done with care. While these arguments are suggestive, we leave a detailed investigation into the evolution of tropical convective structure through examination of Q_1 to a future study.

4 Summary

The changes to MJO precipitation and ω_{400} amplitude from 1981 to 2018 are examined in two reanalysis datasets, ERA5 and MERRA-2. Both amplitudes individually increase from the early period (1981-1999) to the late period (2000-2018) (Figure 1). However, their temporal behavior is non-monotonic in that both amplitudes intensify from 1981 to 1997 and slowly weaken or remain constant thereafter (Figure 2). Interannual-to-decadal surface temperature variability (Figure S2; Figure S3) shows no simple relationship with this non-monotonic behavior in MJO activity changes.

When viewed together, amplitude changes of MJO precipitation are larger than MJO ω_{400} throughout the past four decades relative to the early period (1981-1999). A preferential strengthening of MJO precipitation amplitude relative to MJO ω_{400} amplitude is predicted by WTG balance with a warming climate, in that increasing dry static stability in response to SST warming in recent decades makes vertical motion more efficient at compensating latent heat release in deep convective regions. The fractional amplitude changes in the ratio of MJO ω_{400} to precipitation between 1981-1999 and 2000-2018 approximately match inverse dry static stability changes with climate warming, consistent with WTG balance (Figure 3).

While trends in both reanalyses appear to generally follow WTG balance, differences exist in the behaviour of the two reanalyses. MJO precipitation and ω_{400} amplitude increases are larger in MERRA-2 than in ERA5, especially in intermediate periods between the beginning and end of the record, although they show qualitatively similar time series variability. Decreases in MJO ω_{400}/P also fit the theoretical prediction based on the inverse of dry static stability better in ERA5 than in MERRA-2 across all 19-year periods examined, and these differences may be associated with differences in the simulated structure of tropical deep convection, which remains a topic for further investigation.

The present paper provides a preliminary assessment of MJO activity changes over the past four decades that include both anthropogenic forcing and natural variability. Our results based on observations support those previously derived from climate models (e.g. Bui & Maloney, 2019) suggesting that decreases in MJO ω_{400}/P occur as surface temperatures warm due to anthropogenic forcing. Nevertheless, discrepancies between results from ERA5 and MERRA-2 leave lingering questions about the degree to which changes to the MJO can be explained by WTG theory alone in response to climate warming. Further work using a broader set of observational data including tropical sounding and other in situ records are needed to affirm the validity of WTG theory for explaining MJO behavior.

Acknowledgments

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