

PERSPECTIVE

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Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy in Southeast Asia: Floundering, not Foundering

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Japan has taken the lead in propagating a vision of regional order for more than a decade, where much of the benefit of such an order accrues to Southeast Asia.
- The sophistication of Japan's FOIP concept is that it seeks to constrain China at a time when Southeast Asian countries fret about China's military buildup, its expansion in the South China Sea and its controversial Belt and Road Initiative. It needs support from these countries for it to work in that direction.
- ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific shows that the grouping supports some FOIP principles, but not all of them. Given ASEAN's pivotal role in the Indo-Pacific, this development counteracts Japan's FOIP ambitions.
- Japan can nevertheless still contend for regional leadership by banking on regional connectivity projects, and on its positive perception in the eyes of many ASEAN member states.

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INTRODUCTION

Japan has been a consistent friend and partner to Southeast Asia ever since Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda declared in 1977 that Japan would forswear military power and pursue an equal relationship with countries of Southeast Asia. Today, Japan is Southeast Asia's fourth largest trading partner, the second source of the region's foreign direct investment and a firm defender of what Tokyo terms the "rules-based" regional order.

Since 2017, Japan has propagated its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, which seeks to establish core principles for regional order – adherence to the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight as well as no recourse to the use of force. Southeast Asia, being at the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, is geographically at the heart of this strategy. The FOIP strategy enjoyed a period of ascendance in 2017 and 2018, particularly with support from Australia, India and the United States. Beginning in late 2018, however, the strategy started to lose some of its potency. ASEAN's own interpretation of the Indo-Pacific concept and Japan's growing cooperation with China means that Japan cannot meaningfully use its Indo-Pacific strategy as a subtle and sophisticated instrument to constrain China. What it can do is to leverage on its traditional strengths vis-à-vis Southeast Asia – as a leading investor and respected strategic partner.

JAPAN'S ASSERTIVE REGIONALISM

Japan has taken the lead in propagating a vision of regional order for more than a decade, and much of the benefits of this order can accrue to ASEAN. Speaking to the Indian parliament in 2007, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (in his first term in office) espoused a "dynamic coupling" of the Indian and Pacific Ocean based on "freedom and prosperity." India and Japan, he stressed, had the ability and responsibility to enable "broader Asia" to become "seas of greatest transparency".¹ Abe's Indo-Pacific concept dissipated when he left office in September 2007 due to health problems. With the rise of a more assertive China and concerns about Beijing's buildup in the South China Sea in the early 2010s, however, Abe (in his second term as premier), sought to shape a regional order amid perceived challenges from China. Speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2014, he laid down three principles for adhering to the rule of law at sea: pursuing and clarifying claims based on international law; restraint in using force or coercion in pushing countries' respective claims; and settling disputes by peaceful means.² In August 2016, Abe stated further that there should be an emphasis on "freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, freedom from force and coercion" in the Indo-Pacific.³

To support the rules-based order and contribute further to its alliance with the United States, Japan sought to beef up its military posture, under the aegis of becoming a "proactive contributor to peace." In 2015, it lifted a long-standing ban on collective self-defence and drew up new guidelines for alliance cooperation with the United States. A practical outcome for Southeast Asian countries of these changes was Japan's efforts to support peace and stability in the South China Sea. In February 2017, defence minister Tomomi Inada said that Japan would not deploy the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) for the so-

called freedom of navigation operations that the United States was conducting in the South China Sea. Instead, she reiterated that Japan would play a role in the disputed maritime area through training exercises with the US Navy, bilateral and multilateral exercises with other regional navies and the provision of capacity building assistance to coastal nations.⁴

Japan's assertive regionalism extends to Southeast Asia. Since 2012, Tokyo has extended defence capacity building assistance to at least ten countries (of which eight are Southeast Asian countries) in areas such as civil engineering, aviation safety and military medicine.⁵ Nearly all of Japan's trade is transported by sea and the mandate of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces is to defend Japan's sea-lanes out to 1,000 nautical miles from Tokyo.⁶ But strengthening the defence capacities of regional states would enable Tokyo to secure its sea-lanes of communications. In 2016, Tokyo declared its Vientiane Vision, which sought to expand defence cooperation with Southeast Asian states to augment the rule of law and maritime security. In recent years, Japan has sought to enhance the maritime domain awareness of littoral states and their defence capacity, through the transfer of coast guard ships and maritime aircraft to Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. In Tokyo's view, this was to ameliorate the threat of "grey zone" challenges in the disputed maritime areas. Coast guards are deemed to project a less militaristic face for state power in disputed areas, and the use of such civilian ships meant that such disputes fell under civilian jurisdiction and domestic state laws.⁷ As Jain notes, what is truly remarkable with Japan's dispensing of Official Development Assistance and the provision of coast guard ships to Southeast Asian countries is that they are "broadly military in nature, even though not directly for military purposes."⁸

Japan's standing as a progenitor of the FOIP concept was buttressed when US President Donald Trump adopted the term "free and open Indo-Pacific" at the APEC summit in Vietnam in November 2017. Around that time, officials from four countries were expressing support for the FOIP concept – Australia, Japan, India and the US. As one Australian official put it, there was talk about "getting the band back together." (the same four countries are part of the Quadrilateral Security Grouping, or "Quad," formed in 2007, which subsequently imploded after Australia withdrew on fears of antagonising China).⁹ In June 2018, Japan's FOIP concept got another high-level endorsement. Speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue, US Secretary of Defense James Mattis stressed that the "common character" behind the so-called "Quad" was that they are democracies. Mattis used the phrase "free and open" seven times.¹⁰ This mirrored Abe's argument, made earlier in 2012, that the four countries formed a "democratic security diamond" that guarded the maritime commons from the Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific.¹¹

SUBTLE COUNTER TO CHINA

The sophistication of Japan's FOIP concept is that it seeks to constrain China, at a time when Southeast Asian countries fret about China's military buildup, its expansion in the South China Sea and Beijing's controversial Belt and Road Initiative, which has been tagged "debt trap diplomacy" by countries outside Southeast Asia, in particular the US and Japan. In 2016, Japan rehashed the FOIP principles laid down by Abe in 2014 (rule of law, freedom

of navigation and economic prosperity). The new formulation projected a wider perspective to connect the two continents of Asia and Africa, via the Indian and Pacific oceans. It also added another objective – connectivity through quality physical infrastructure.¹² By promoting such principles, the FOIP concept adopted a more “nuanced and sophisticated” approach; vis-à-vis China, the Indo-Pacific strategy seeks not to carry out “deterrence by punishment, but deterrence by diplomatic dissuasion.” The aspiration is that “China could be dissuaded from carrying out activities that undermine the regional order mapped out by FOIP strategy.”¹³ Built on the FOIP strategy, the Quad – an informal strategic dialogue involving Australia, Japan, India and the US – is able to exert more influence, primarily by asserting freedom of navigation on the high seas at a time when China appears to be challenging the sanctity of FON.¹⁴

Japan and the US have sought to get Southeast Asia support for FOIP principles, and, by extension, for the aforementioned subtle pushback against China. While many regional countries, including Southeast Asian states, support the principles of rule of law and freedom of navigation, they have been leery of conducting maritime exercises to assert freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, for fear of antagonising China. But Japan – like other external powers such as France and the United Kingdom – have sought to assert such high sea freedoms. In August to October 2018, the *JS Kaga* – the JMSDF’s Izumo-class helicopter destroyer – was deployed to the Indo-Pacific region, ostensibly to promote cooperation and interoperability with partner navies and provide an “active contribution to peace and stability” in the region. The *JS Kaga* was escorted by two destroyers, and conducted exercises and interactions with the navies of India, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines and Sri Lanka.¹⁵ In April to June 2019, the *JS Izumo*, the Kaga’s sister ship, participated in another Indo-Pacific deployment, and conducted exercises and interaction with Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Vietnam. The highlight of the *JS Izumo*’s 2019 deployment in the Indo-Pacific involved a four-nation naval exercise, involving six ships from Japan, India, the Philippines and the United States in the South China Sea. The exercise was seen as an overt signal to China. It emphasised that Japan, the US and other like-minded countries could bring naval power to bear in the South China Sea, at a time when China continued its military buildup in the area.¹⁶

Japan has also sought to continue playing a leading role in the region on the trade and connectivity front. Following US withdrawal from the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership, Japan deftly steered the remaining 11 economies to push through and formalise the Comprehensive and Progressive Partnership for Trans-Pacific Partnership in March 2019. CPTPP involves four Southeast Asian countries, namely Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam. Japan has also sought to play a leading role in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which involves the 10 ASEAN countries, China, South Korea, Japan, New Zealand, Australia and India (following India’s shock withdrawal from the deal in November 2019, Tokyo said it would not push ahead with the deal without New Delhi). And at a time when there are concerns about China’s BRI and “debt trap diplomacy,” Japan introduced its US\$200 billion Enhanced Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, which seeks to build infrastructure in ASEAN (and other regions) which met globally-accepted standards in areas such as openness, transparency and financial viability of recipient countries.¹⁷

ALL DOWNHILL FROM HERE

Beginning in the second half of 2018, Japan's attempt to cast the region in a FOIP frame started to run into headwinds. It is an open secret that both the US and Japan versions of FOIP strategy target China. While Japan has been more restrained about containing the threat of China, the US has become more strident. The Trump Administration's 2018 National Defense Strategy labelled China as a "strategic competitor" that seeks to "undermine the international order from within the system".¹⁸ Such a stark formulation is anathema to ASEAN and its member states, which have traditionally preferred not to "choose a side" in the interstices of Sino-US competition. Unsurprisingly, when ASEAN published its Outlook on the Indo-Pacific document (AOIP) in June 2019, it stressed "dialogue and cooperation over rivalry", and "development and prosperity" for all.¹⁹ China was not mentioned in the document. This has been interpreted as the grouping's intention to maintain ASEAN centrality and distance itself from any initiative that targets China, whether directly or implicitly.²⁰ Even within the so-called Indo-Pacific Four countries that are behind the FOIP and the Quad, differences abound in the granular, ranging from the geographical definitions of the Indo-Pacific, defence cooperation and maritime security, the approach to China as a rising power, and connectivity.²¹ Given the wariness among Southeast Asian countries about the perception that any FOIP "strategy" could be used to contain Beijing, Tokyo opted to replace the word "strategy" with "vision", in a bid to make its "FOIP vision" sound more "euphemistic and practical" and to get buy-in from regional countries.²² ASEAN's refusal to endorse Japan's FOIP strategy in its entirety was further compounded by Japan's "explicit support" for the AOIP.²³ This means that Japan has effectively endorsed the principles enshrined in the AOIP – centrality of ASEAN, inclusive architecture (and not mini-lateral initiatives such as the US and Japan versions of FOIP), and an explicit reluctance to cast any Indo-Pacific strategy in a geopolitical frame (i.e. subtle constraining of China).

In the second half of 2018, Tokyo also began to take a more accommodating position towards China. While it had long opposed China's Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank and criticised the BRI, Tokyo finally agreed to cooperate with China on infrastructure projects. During his visit to China in October 2018, Abe pledged to cooperate with China on infrastructure projects in third countries, and find points of convergence between the AIIB and the Asian Development Bank.²⁴ A visit by Chinese president Xi Jinping to Japan was planned for early 2020 (but subsequently postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic). Both countries built up a reservoir of goodwill during the pandemic when Japan sent aid and assistance to China. Arguably, such an uptick in relations could be short-lived. Tokyo has sought to get China-based Japanese firms to leave China as a post-pandemic response. Deep-seated issues – such as the disputed Diaoyu/ Senkaku islands, and the problem of history – will continue to plague bilateral relations.

The Covid-19 pandemic that peaked in China in January 2020 also exposed deficiencies in Japan's regional leadership. The central government carried out relatively limited testing, there was squabbling between central and regional governments, and the Abe government did not seek to make social distancing legally enforceable. With Japan fighting the pandemic at home, China and South Korea stole a march on Japan in the regional leadership stakes.

Chinese premier Li Keqiang, in a 14 April 2020 video-link meeting with ASEAN leaders and the leaders of the Plus Three (China, South Korea and Japan), called for a concerted response. He promised protective gear for ASEAN countries and supported calls for a Covid-19 ASEAN Response Fund.²⁵ South Korea was behind efforts to set up the meeting.²⁶ Comparatively, Japan was not seen to be leading ASEAN efforts, apart from entreaties for more cooperation and the development of Avigan, a drug that could potentially treat the coronavirus.²⁷

Not all is lost in Japan's FOIP strategy, however. A core pillar of Japan's FOIP strategy encompasses connectivity and infrastructure. Japan has a long history of building infrastructure and connectivity projects in Southeast Asia, South Asia and Africa. In fact, Japan-backed projects in six of ASEAN's biggest economies – Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam – total a staggering sum of US\$367 billion, against China's US\$255 billion.²⁸ Secondly, Japan's Enhanced Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, which focuses on issues such as effective governance, job creation and addressing social and environmental impacts, is pertinent to Southeast Asia at a time when there are perceptions about China's BRI and "debt trap diplomacy".²⁹ Finally, ASEAN has expressed support for Japan's efforts to build connectivity and infrastructure between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. ASEAN has mapped out possible areas of cooperation with Japan, including the 2025 ASEAN Masterplan for Connectivity, sub-regional frameworks such as the Indian Ocean Regional Association and the ASEAN Smart Cities Framework.³⁰

CONCLUSION

Japan's conceptualisation of the FOIP as an ordering mechanism for the region, and in particular, Southeast Asia, is floundering. Among the Indo-Pacific Four, there are many differences between their FOIP strategies. Second, Japan's conceptualisation of the FOIP depends on ASEAN's assent and support. Given that ASEAN has adopted its own ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, there is little likelihood of it supporting Japan's FOIP strategy in its entirety. Furthermore, Japan's standing as a regional leader has been diminished by its low-profile approach to working with ASEAN on the Covid-19 pandemic.

While Japan's FOIP strategy – and its regional leadership – has floundered, it has not foundered. While ASEAN does not accept or assent to any power configuration or strategy that seeks to contain China, it has expressed support for some of Japan's FOIP principles, such as the resolving of disputes without recourse to the use of force and in accordance with international law. Given ASEAN's drive for regional connectivity, Japan has much to contribute, particularly via its Enhanced Partnership for Quality Infrastructure. And at a time when there are concerns in Southeast Asia about China's rise – and potential American retrenchment from the region – Japan can play an important role in maintaining regional peace and stability. In the 2020 State of Southeast Asia Survey, 61.3 per cent of 1,308 respondents rated Japan as the most trusted leader (the US scored 30.3 per cent, China's 16.1 per cent).³¹ If Tokyo taps on this reservoir of goodwill in Southeast Asia and works with ASEAN on aspects such as connectivity and infrastructure, its bid for regional leadership still has legs.

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