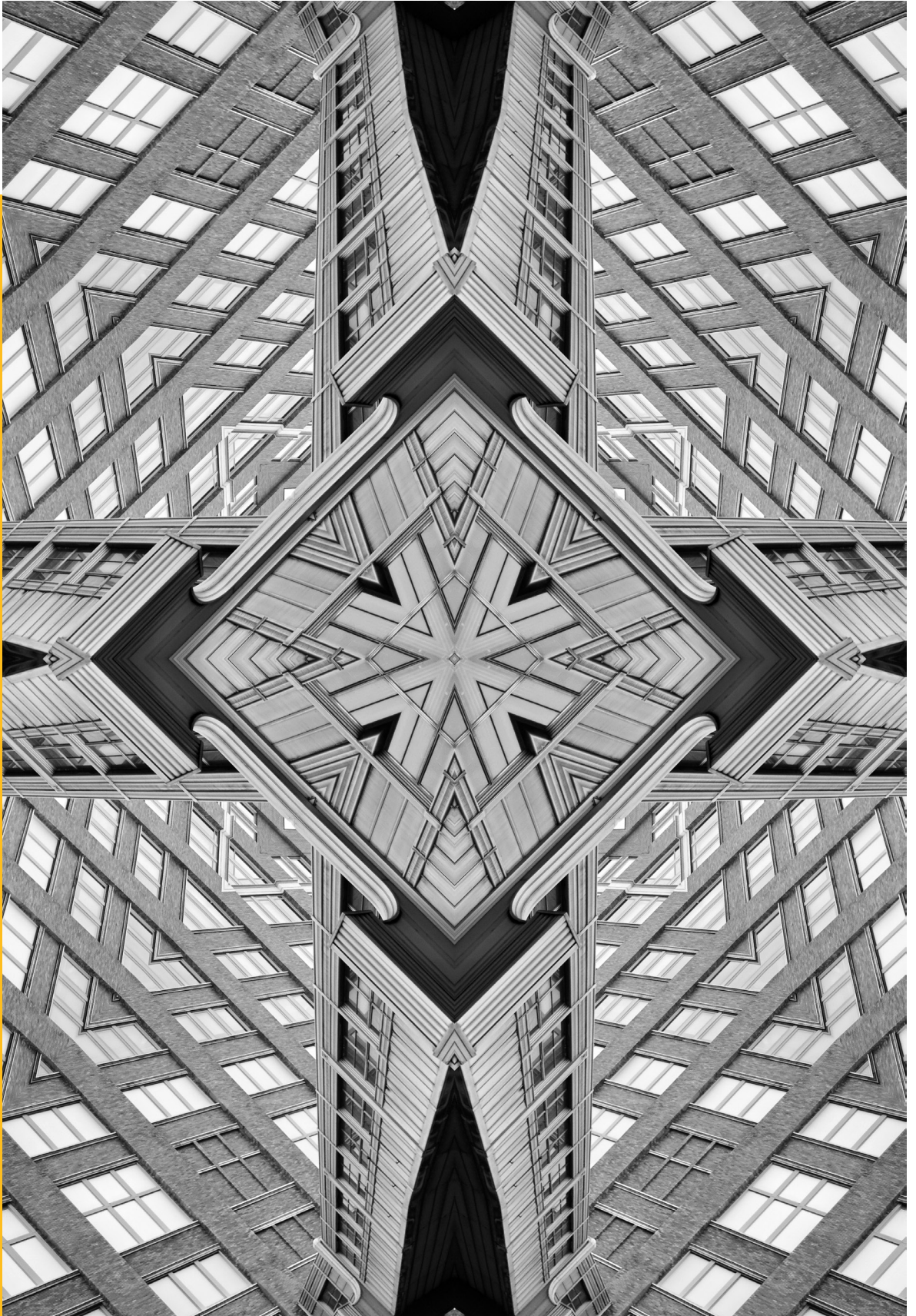


# Occasional Paper



**ISSUE NO. 444 AUGUST 2024**

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# Order Through Practice: Assessing Tokyo's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision

**Pratnashree Basu**

## **Abstract**

Since being initiated by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe formally in 2016, Tokyo's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision has become the preferred framework for diplomatic engagement among like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific. This paper undertakes an assessment of FOIP. The motivation is threefold: first, it creates an understanding of Tokyo's vision of maintaining a stable global order; second, because FOIP has become inclusive—it is subscribed to by many countries and it has been adjusted variously based on regional aspirations and sensitivities; and third, with Japan on the path to reform its pacifist ethos and assume a greater global role, it is vital to evaluate the philosophy behind FOIP.



# Mapping the FOIP Framework

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative, launched officially in 2016, marked an important development in postwar Japanese diplomacy and integrated economic and security policies into a cohesive external strategy for the first time. This development was partly the result of geopolitical changes in the region as well as the enhanced powers of the Prime Minister's office—a trend that began in the 1990s through a series of political reforms that enabled Japan to play a more assertive role in regional and global affairs.<sup>1</sup>

The core objective of FOIP is to promote peace, stability, security, and economic prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>a</sup> In the process, navigating the challenges posed by the growing influence of China—whose actions are often in contravention of international legal principles—becomes imperative. In order to provide alternatives to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while aiming to incorporate China and other powers into an inclusive economic system,<sup>2</sup> Japan has adopted comprehensive initiatives to enhance regional connectivity, provide capacity-building assistance to developing countries, and support infrastructure development projects that adhere to international standards of transparency and sustainability, including non-military cooperation focused on infrastructure building, supply chain resilience, and technological innovation.<sup>3</sup>

Japan's strategy is three-pronged: strengthening its defence capabilities and security ties with the United States (US); deepening its security partnerships with like-minded countries<sup>4</sup> such as Australia, India, South Korea, and other Southeast Asian nations; and enhancing strategic coordination to support a US-led rules-based international order.<sup>5</sup>

While the FOIP appeared intermittently in the geopolitical lexicon of the early 2000s and became more prominent after 2015, its roots grew much earlier. Following Japan's recovery after the Second World War, the country reintegrated into the global community with the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty and its 1956 membership to the United Nations. During the Cold War, Japan positioned itself as a crucial ally within the

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a As the term 'Indo-Pacific' gained prominence, the use of 'Asia Pacific' lessened. While the latter referred largely to a geographic expanse, the former is a geopolitical term with connotations of alignment and balancing. The concept of 'Indo-Pacific' integrates the Indian and Pacific Oceans as well as South and East Asia into a single, interconnected geostrategic zone rather than viewing them as distinct entities. See: <https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/unpacking-the-free-and-open-indo-pacific/>

# Mapping the FOIP Framework

US-led “free world” against the Soviet bloc and benefited from the security and economic opportunities provided by the US-centred San Francisco System.<sup>b</sup> Adopting the Yoshida Doctrine,<sup>c</sup> Japan prioritised economic growth under US protection, which allowed it to shape regional economic policies in the 1970s through initiatives like the Fukuda Doctrine.<sup>d</sup> Despite being perceived as a “reactive state”,<sup>e</sup> Japan actively participated in global platforms like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), G7, Asian Development Bank (ADB), and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). After the Cold War, under a US-led “liberal international order”, Japan re-evaluated its global role, particularly after receiving criticism for its minimal financial contributions during the 1991 Gulf War. This led to its “adaptive” phase in the 1990s, guided by the Koizumi doctrine,<sup>e</sup> which aimed to achieve a more pronounced international presence supporting the liberal order and to move beyond being merely an economic powerhouse.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Japan increased its involvement with regional organisations like ASEAN+3, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the East Asian Summit (EAS) and participated in peacekeeping operations, including in Cambodia and East Timor. Following 9/11, Japan supported the US-led ‘War on Terror’ with military and reconstruction efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, marking a shift from its previous non-military foreign engagements.

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- b The US-centred San Francisco System is a post-Second World War network of bilateral security alliances and agreements in the Asia-Pacific, initiated by the 1951 Treaty of San Francisco. Key components include treaties with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines, and the ANZUS Pact with Australia and New Zealand. These alliances ensure mutual defence, allow for US military presence in the region, and promote economic and political ties.
  - c The Yoshida Doctrine, named after Shigeru Yoshida, Japan’s prime minister in the postwar era, shaped Japan’s foreign policy during the early Cold War. The doctrine emphasised pacifism and economic rebuilding over military strength and fostered Japan’s post-war economic miracle by prioritising economic recovery and stability over defence spending, leveraging its alliance with the US for national security.
  - d The Fukuda Doctrine, introduced by Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda in 1977, represents a pivotal shift in Japan’s postwar foreign policy towards Southeast Asia, fostering Southeast Asian integration and robust Official Development Assistance (ODA) contributions. This diplomatic policy helped transform Japan’s image from that of a former imperial aggressor to a committed partner in regional development and stability.
  - e The Koizumi Doctrine aimed to position Japan as a proactive global player. It marked a shift from Japan’s postwar pacifism to a more assertive stance, characterised by Japan’s support for US initiatives like the Iraq War and its involvement in peacekeeping and anti-terrorism efforts.



# Mapping the FOIP Framework

In the 2010s, recognising the challenges to the liberal order, Japan adopted a more proactive<sup>8</sup> role in international politics, which led to the adoption of the “Abe doctrine”.<sup>9</sup> The Shinzo Abe administration emphasised cooperation among democracies as central to the Indo-Pacific regional order, promoting the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” as part of its “value-oriented diplomacy”.<sup>10</sup> It also emphasised “cooperative development and cooperative multilateral security” with the US and Australia, India, and the EU and NATO countries,<sup>11</sup> focusing on values-oriented diplomacy to encourage the promotion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law across the Eurasian continent, in alignment with the FOIP initiative.<sup>12</sup>

In the early 2010s, the Indo-Pacific began to be highlighted as a significant region in terms of economic strength, military prowess, and political dynamism.<sup>f</sup> In 2012, the Japan Institute of International Affairs published a report that recognised key factors driving the wider adoption of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept.<sup>g,13</sup> In 2013, Abe became among the first political leaders to recognise and articulate the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific concept.<sup>14</sup> The resultant FOIP vision continued Japan’s tradition of an economics-led foreign policy to provide alternative economic development paths and promote free and fair trade rather than coercive economic practices.

Japan’s current FOIP vision is built on three pillars: (1) promoting rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free trade; (2) enhancing connectivity and strengthening economic partnerships through agreements like Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA), Free Trade Agreements (FTA), and investment treaties; and (3) ensuring commitment to peace and stability, which includes capacity building for maritime law enforcement and cooperation in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR).<sup>15</sup>

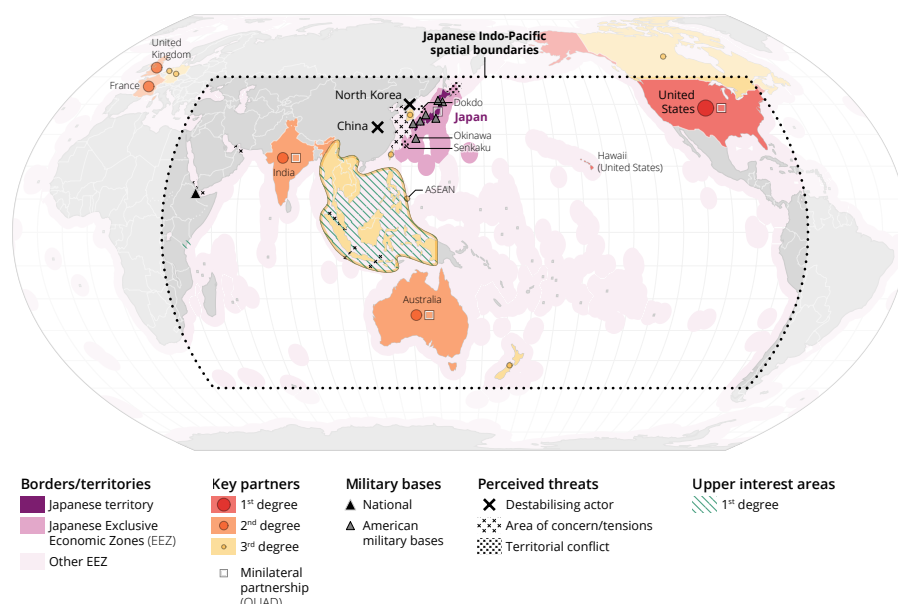
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f Analysts such as Michael Auslin, Rory Medcalf, Raoul Heinrichs, and David Scott have discussed the strategic importance of an integrated Indo-Pacific maritime region, advocating for a coherent regional strategy by the US and its allies. As Medcalf notes, the concept of the Indo-Pacific alters our perception of some of the most strategically significant areas of the world acknowledging that the growing economic and security links between the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean are merging into a unified strategic system. See: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13439006.2019.1622868>; <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2013/10/10/the-indo-pacific-whats-in-a-name/>

g These included the potential for extended conflicts in the Indian Ocean, the US expanding its Asia-Pacific focus to include the Indian Ocean, the rise of emerging powers like China and India, concerns over oceanic stability for economic activities, and the growing recognition of the need for the rule of law to maintain freedom of navigation.



**Figure 1: Japan’s Indo-Pacific Construct**



Source: *Japan Observatory*<sup>16</sup>

The FOIP vision, which includes economic and security policies across ministries, has benefited from the strengthened role of the Prime Minister.<sup>h</sup> The PM is leveraging new institutional structures like the Cabinet Secretariat, the Cabinet Office, the National Security Council, and the National Security Secretariat to shape and advance these policies.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>h</sup> This was the result of multiple reforms that led to power being centralised in the Prime Minister’s office. These reforms began with the 1994 reform of the electoral system, which increased the Prime Minister’s influence within the ruling party. In 2001, administrative reforms granted the Prime Minister formal authority to initiate policies, even in areas overseen by other ministers, and strengthened the role of the Cabinet Secretariat in policy design and legislation drafting. The introduction of the National Security Council in 2013 further enhanced the Prime Minister’s control over security policy and established a Four Ministers’ Council for faster policy coordination between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence. These reforms were instrumental in overcoming challenges associated with the previously decentralised political system, enabling swifter and more unified policy decisions. See: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/03/indo-pacific-strategies-perceptions-and-partnerships/07-japan-and-indo-pacific>



# Mapping the FOIP Framework

FOIP provided a framework for an evolving strategy, which helped establish it as a durable option that could withstand changes in administration, as indicated by shifts in leadership in both Japan and the US.<sup>18</sup> The FOIP strategy also highlights the evolution of Japan's regional engagement. Unlike earlier strategies, such as Prime Minister Ohira's Pan-Pacific initiative, which emphasised Pacific Rim cooperation, the FOIP strategy has an integrated economic and security focus.

“FOIP's core objective is to promote peace, stability, security, and economic prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.”



# Leadership and Legacy: Abe's Imprint on the Indo-Pacific

Shinzo Abe, now deceased, was the first political leader to acknowledge the significance of the Indo-Pacific<sup>19</sup> and implement frameworks for regional cohesion.<sup>20,21</sup> These frameworks underscored his vision of a more interconnected and secure Indo-Pacific driven by democratic alliances. In 2007, he introduced the notion, “Confluence of the Two Seas”, highlighting the strategic convergence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and emphasising the importance of strengthening ties between the democracies around these waters.<sup>22</sup> In 2012, he proposed the “Security Diamond”<sup>23</sup> to safeguard maritime regions from the Indian Ocean to the western Pacific against potential threats.<sup>24</sup> During Prime Minister Abe’s visit to New Delhi in December 2015, the two countries released the “Japan and India Vision 2025”, which declared a partnership to “promote the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy”.<sup>25</sup>

In August 2016, Abe introduced the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy and emphasised Japan’s role in promoting the integration of the Pacific and Indian Oceans into a unified region that champions the rule of law and market economics without coercion.<sup>26</sup> In his National Diet speech in January 2018, Abe highlighted the historical significance of the region stretching from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean and declared that the waters should remain a public good that ensures peace and prosperity for all.<sup>27</sup> This framework also coincided with a distinct maritime characteristic being ascribed to the Indo-Pacific because of the region’s geography.

Across Abe’s two terms as Prime Minister (2006–07 and 2012–20), there was a strategic shift in the Cabinet’s foreign policy narrative, as indicated by an analysis of references to regional terms in Japan’s foreign policy. References to “Asia” and “Asia-Pacific” in his first term shifted to increasing mentions of “India” and “Indian Ocean” in his second term, reflecting a deepening strategic interest in India and its maritime region.<sup>i</sup> Later, “Indo-Pacific” and “FOIP” would become the predominant phrases in his fourth term. These trends indicate that the Abe administration was framing its foreign policy within the context of the Indo-Pacific and actively promoting the FOIP as a key strategic initiative.

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i During Shinzo Abe’s second term, Japanese think tanks started to adopt more of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ terminology. See: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347797019842440>



# Leadership and Legacy: Abe's Imprint on the Indo-Pacific

Abe's international diplomacy efforts were particularly active with countries in the Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions.<sup>j</sup> Abe was the first Japanese prime minister to visit all Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries within a single year. In 2014, he visited Australia, Bangladesh, India, New Zealand, and Sri Lanka. These visits emphasised Japan's strategic focus on political alignment, security cooperation, and the development of regional rules and norms.<sup>28</sup> The Abe administration also prioritised security cooperation within the Indo-Pacific region,<sup>29</sup> with a focus on countries such as Australia, India, and ASEAN nations like Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

The Abe administration undertook a number of institutional reforms to enhance Japan's policy formulation capabilities, notably towards advancing the FOIP vision. The Cabinet Secretariat played a crucial role in guiding these reforms, with the Council on Strategy of Infrastructure Development through Economic Cooperation serving as a key platform for implementing infrastructure policies aligning with the FOIP. The centralisation of power also facilitated Japan's leadership in FTAs like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the National Security Secretariat was instrumental in drafting the National Defense Program Guideline of 2018, which emphasised security cooperation aligned with the FOIP and underscored US-Japan alliance. In parallel, the Ocean Policies Headquarters, under the Cabinet Office, coordinated maritime policies, emphasising capacity building in maritime law enforcement across friendly nations and directly supporting the FOIP's strategic maritime objectives.

Abe's Indo-Pacific policy was also impacted by China's expanding influence, with the FOIP vision countering China's regional ambitions. While Abe's policies on Southeast Asia, India, and the Indo-Pacific were largely well received, some Southeast Asian nations were wary of being caught in the strategic rivalry between Japan and China, preferring a more neutral stance. Additionally, delays and budget overruns impeded the execution of certain economic projects. For instance, in India, there were discrepancies between the vision and the state of implementation of certain infrastructure projects on the ground. The Quad also faced criticism regarding its long-term cohesion and effectiveness in countering China.

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<sup>j</sup> He did not, however, visit Japan's immediate neighbours, China and South Korea, until 2014 and 2015.

# Leadership and Legacy: Abe's Imprint on the Indo-Pacific

Alongside the cooperative partnerships enabled by the FOIP vision, Abe initiated networked regional security, which led to the formation of multilateral forums and countries strengthening their individual and collective defence capabilities and response mechanisms.

“Abe was the first political leader to acknowledge the significance of the Indo-Pacific.”



# Development Diplomacy and Networked Regional Security

**T**okyo's implementation of the FOIP initiative is two-tiered—through development cooperation efforts and the strengthening of the regional security architecture.

## Development Diplomacy

A pillar of Japan's FOIP strategy is boosting infrastructural development within the Indo-Pacific region. Tokyo has positioned itself as an alternative to China's BRI while avoiding the 'debt trap' concerns associated with Chinese projects. Japan's "quality infrastructure investment" (QII) principles emphasise openness, transparency, economic efficiency, and fiscal soundness, in collaboration with global partners such as the EU, India, and Africa. After the Second World War, Japan's engagement in Southeast Asia was driven by the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) and foreign direct investments (FDIs); and at the same time, constrained by Article 9 of its Constitution and a historical trust deficit. Japan's ODA focused on building foundational infrastructure to support regional development and economic modernisation while facilitating the entry of Japanese businesses for manufacturing and resource exploitation. This development aid also focused on comprehensive development, community investment, and transparency towards enhancing Japan's reputation as a vital regional partner.<sup>31</sup> This approach not only aligned with Japan's national interests but also underscored its commitment to development diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

Domestically, Japan's strategies for enhancing Indo-Pacific connectivity are integrated with its ODA initiatives and complement ASEAN's regional plans. These efforts are collectively aimed at stimulating economic activity and strengthening logistics in the region.<sup>32</sup> Japan supports ASEAN connectivity via land and sea corridors. The Japan-Mekong Connectivity Initiative<sup>k,33</sup> funds the trade-promoting East-West Economic Corridor that extends from the Danang port in Vietnam through Laos and Thailand to Myanmar. Furthermore, Japan supports the Southern Economic

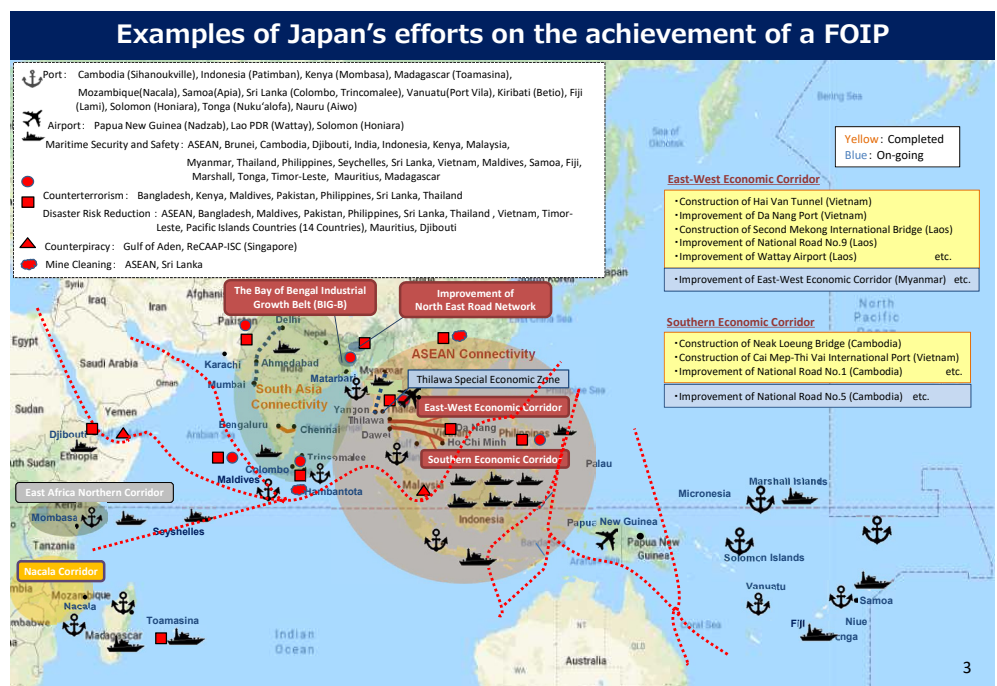
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<sup>k</sup> The Japan-Mekong Connectivity Initiative, launched in 2016, aims to enhance regional connectivity in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam through infrastructure development, improved customs procedures, and the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs). It also focuses on human resource development and cultural exchanges to foster cooperation and mutual understanding.

# Developed Diplomacy and Networked Regional Security

Corridor, which is envisioned to extend from Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam through Cambodia and southern Laos to Thailand and the Dawei port in southeastern Myanmar.<sup>34</sup> Japan also boosts maritime connectivity across Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines, focusing on port development and the establishment of an ASEAN Roll-on/Roll-off shipping network.

**Figure 2: Japan’s Connectivity Initiatives and Capacity-Building Efforts Under FOIP**



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan<sup>35</sup>

In 2018, the US and Australia officially endorsed Tokyo’s “quality infrastructure” concept and agreed to promote “quality infrastructure development” in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>36</sup> This collaboration involves joint financing from government agencies in the US, Japan, and Australia for



# Development Diplomacy and Networked Regional Security

infrastructure projects across Asia, such as liquefied natural gas terminals and undersea cables. Therefore, quality infrastructure directly contrasts Beijing's infrastructure projects under the BRI, which are opaque and often economically coercive.

Over the last decade, structural changes and rising labour costs in China, coupled with US-China trade conflicts, have redirected Japanese FDI from China to ASEAN countries. The "China Plus One" strategy<sup>l</sup> reflects this shift as ASEAN countries become the top investment destinations for Japanese firms. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this trend, with Japanese emergency economic measures revealing a demand for supply-chain diversification and restructuring.<sup>37</sup>

The Japan-ASEAN Comprehensive Connectivity Initiative under the FOIP strategy also aims to enhance regional integration through improvements in transport, digital, maritime, supply chain, electrical, human, and knowledge connectivity through projects such as Cambodia's National Road No. 5 Improvement.<sup>m</sup> In Africa, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) provided a US\$340-million loan in 2017 to Kenya for developing a second container terminal at Mombasa Port.<sup>38</sup> In India, Japan is funding 80 percent of the US\$8-billion Mumbai-Ahmedabad High-Speed Rail project with a low-interest soft loan.<sup>39</sup> Japan also actively partners in aid projects in Oceania, including building solar power systems, schools, ports, airports, and desalination plants, helping these countries wean themselves from

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l The "China Plus One" strategy is a business strategy adopted by companies to diversify their manufacturing and supply chain operations by establishing additional production bases outside of China. This approach emerged as a response to challenges associated with over-reliance on China, such as rising labour costs, trade tensions, regulatory uncertainties, and geopolitical risks. First popularised in the early 2000s, the strategy has gained renewed urgency in recent years due to the US-China trade war, the COVID-19 pandemic, and increasing political and economic uncertainties.

m The project is part of the Southern Economic Corridor, aimed at enhancing a 366-kilometre stretch from Prek Kdam to Poipet to boost economic development and logistics efficiency. This project has led to increased land values and local economic growth. The initiative also includes maritime cooperation, with enhancements of Cambodia's Sihanoukville Port and Indonesia's Patimban Port to address capacity constraints, improve logistics and trade, and stimulate economic benefits in surrounding areas, with six nearby villages experiencing increased trade and residential occupancy due to the influx of workers. See: <https://www.nbr.org/publication/japans-connectivity-initiatives-in-the-indo-pacific/>; <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/2023/12/16/special-supplements/initiatives-bearing-fruit-southeast-asia-economies/>

# Development Diplomacy and Networked Regional Security

dependence on Chinese loans. Tokyo has been a significant contributor to infrastructure development in Pacific Island countries, focusing on enhancing connectivity and boosting economic growth, and routinely participates in regional forums such as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF); it also hosts the Japan-Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM) that discusses mutual concerns that require cooperation. Notable projects include the installation of solar power systems, for instance, in the Marshall Islands and Samoa<sup>40</sup> and the construction of desalination plants to address water scarcity issues.<sup>41</sup> Japan also provides training and equipment in disaster risk reduction to help these countries better prepare for and respond to natural disasters.

The FOIP strategy has also promoted digital connectivity through investing in submarine cable networks and digital infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific towards ensuring secure and reliable connectivity for economic development, e-commerce, and information sharing, while addressing concerns over China's and Russia's potential manipulation of the digital economy.<sup>n,42</sup> The EU-Japan Digital Partnership, launched in May 2022, also seeks to strengthen cooperation in digital infrastructure, innovation, cybersecurity, and public services digitisation.<sup>43</sup>

Energy development and security are central to the US and Japanese FOIP strategies. The US aims to reduce reliance on energy from the Middle East by increasing exports of oil and Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), countering China's BRI. Japan endorses LNG as a cleaner alternative to coal and aims to become an LNG hub, substituting Chinese energy sources.<sup>44</sup> Japan's strategic energy partnerships, such as that with the US,<sup>o</sup> also focus on promoting LNG use and ensuring the security of sea lanes.

Japan's leadership in global climate change efforts, marked by its role in the Kyoto Protocol and support for subsequent climate agreements, have positioned Tokyo as a leader in global efforts to address climate

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n Especially in the areas of 5G and cyber warfare.

o The Japan-US Strategic Energy Partnership (JUSEP), launched in 2017, aims to bolster bilateral cooperation on energy security and sustainable development. Key goals include promoting energy diversification, advancing clean energy technologies, and enhancing infrastructure. JUSEP focuses on LNG as a cleaner alternative to coal, supporting Japan's regional LNG hub ambitions.



# Development Diplomacy and Networked Regional Security

change.<sup>45</sup> Japan's FOIP strategy leverages technological advancements in clean energy, waste management, and disaster risk reduction to support environmental projects in the Indo-Pacific. These include initiatives on marine plastic debris and sustainable ocean management.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has emphasised the importance of engaging with the Global South to address key policy issues and ensuring outreach to middle- and low-income countries.<sup>46</sup> The G7 summit in May 2023 underscored the need to scale up ODA and adopt innovative financing mechanisms, especially in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Japan leverages the ODA and investments to promote growth, build trust, and avoid forcing developing nations into an anti-Beijing stance—a strategy that has been successful in Southeast Asia and is now being expanded to South Asia, the Pacific Islands, Africa, and Latin America.<sup>47</sup>

## Networked Regional Security

Japan has increasingly funded non-traditional security efforts such as anti-terrorism and anti-piracy.<sup>48</sup> Japan also promotes the establishment of separate maritime police forces in countries to enable the transfer of equipment like patrol boats. For instance, in 2006, Japan provided three coast guard cutters to Indonesia to boost local capacity and encourage political coordination among maritime nations.<sup>49</sup> In 2013, the national security strategy of Japan sought to enhance Japan-US alliance across missile defence, maritime security, space security, cybersecurity, and disaster relief, signifying a new dimension of US-Japan engagement in Southeast Asia.<sup>p,50</sup>

Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam are central to Japan's strategic re-engagement in Southeast Asia due to their regional influence and shared concerns over territorial disputes with China. Japan has ramped up bilateral security cooperation in these countries through enhanced defence

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p The strategy was accompanied by new defence program guidelines that prioritised the buildup of defence postures in the southwest, focusing on maritime and air capabilities. Additionally, Japan introduced new principles for the transfer of defence equipment and technology in April 2014, revised the interpretation of Article 9 of its Constitution in October 2014, and enacted a set of national security laws in August 2015. Further solidifying this strategic direction, new defence cooperation guidelines were established with the US in April 2014. See: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/03/01/japan-s-indo-pacific-policy-pub-62929>

# Development Diplomacy and Networked Regional Security

diplomacy, increased security-focused ODA, and new military support programs.<sup>q</sup> These initiatives align with Japan's revised defence posture, which enables Japan to support allies under attack if it aligns with Japan's interests.<sup>r,51</sup> Japan has also established strategic partnerships and high-level dialogues with these nations, notably with Indonesia since 2006 and with the Philippines since 2012. Although the security relationship with Vietnam remains modest, it has grown since the high-level 2+2 dialogue in 2010.<sup>52</sup>

Abe's tenure was marked by "proactive pacifism" in regional diplomacy, particularly through enhanced coast guard diplomacy aimed at addressing China's paramilitary activities in maritime regions. Japan revised its ODA program in 2015 to support Southeast Asian countries by providing modern patrol vessels, dual-use domain awareness equipment, and technical training through support from the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) and the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF). This assistance aims to bolster the capacity of Southeast Asian coast guards and navies to enforce their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) rights under international law. The JCG is also conducting increasing joint exercises and patrols with regional partners to strengthen the rules-based order in Southeast Asia.<sup>53</sup>

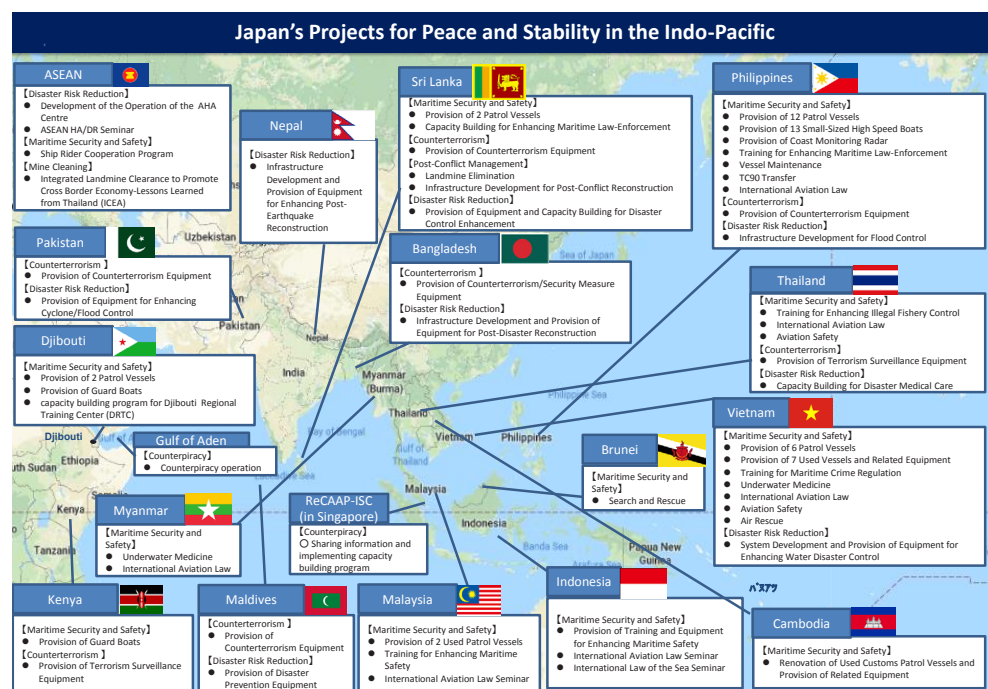
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q These initiatives include the establishment of the Japan-Indonesia Maritime Forum to enhance Indonesia's maritime infrastructure and patrol capabilities; providing support to the Philippines through patrol boats and an aid package for infrastructure and the rehabilitation of Marawi in exchange for a commitment to lawfully resolve South China Sea disputes; and pledging financing for new patrol vessels and enhancing naval cooperation to Vietnam.

r This shift was supported by a 2015 legislation that reinterpreted Japan's Peace Constitution to allow collective self-defence in limited scenarios, marking a significant shift in Japan's regional security engagements.

# Development Diplomacy and Networked Regional Security

**Figure 3: Japan's Networked Security Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific**



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan<sup>54</sup>

In 2022, Japan updated its National Security Strategy (NSS) for the first time in nearly a decade to enable it to respond to increased security threats from Chinese economic and military expansions. The strategy introduced Official Security Assistance (OSA) as a new diplomatic tool alongside the existing ODA towards fostering international cooperation and regional stability. These changes signify a shift in Japan's foreign assistance policies towards issues of security and defence.<sup>55</sup> The NSS operates under the "Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology",<sup>5</sup> which ensures controlled military exports.

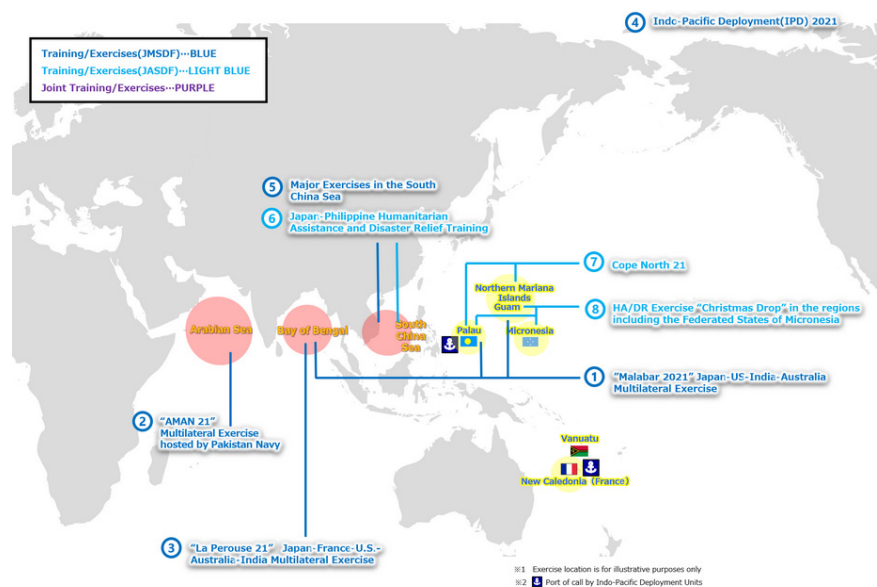
<sup>5</sup> Japan's Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology, established in 2014, guide the controlled export of defence items, prohibiting transfers that violate international treaties, UNSC resolutions, or involve conflict zones. Exports are permitted only if they promote peace, international cooperation, or Japan's security, with strict examination and transparency measures. Additionally, recipient countries must obtain prior consent for re-export or changes in use to prevent misuse.



# Developed Diplomacy and Networked Regional Security

The OSA program was initiated in April 2023, with Japan sending patrol ships to Bangladesh and coastal surveillance systems to the Philippines, with initial OSA grants, aimed at Bangladesh, Fiji, Malaysia, and the Philippines<sup>t</sup> totalling approximately US\$15 million for FY 2023-24. Japan also plans to extend the OSA to include other countries like Djibouti, Indonesia, Mongolia, and Papua New Guinea in FY 2024-25.<sup>u,56</sup>

**Figure 4: Japan’s Maritime Exercises in the Indo-Pacific**



Source: Ministry of Defence, Japan<sup>57</sup>

- t These countries, particularly the Philippines and Malaysia, are strategically important due to their territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. Fiji’s location near critical sea lanes between Japan and Australia also makes it a vital area.
- u Mongolia and Djibouti are notable for their strategic positions and diplomatic significance, with Djibouti hosting Japan’s only overseas military base, which is crucial for securing sea-lane security amidst regional shipping crises.

# Development Diplomacy and Networked Regional Security

In June 2023, Japan revised its Development Cooperation Charter to incorporate economic security in its foreign assistance. ODA is to be used<sup>58</sup> to launch the “co-creation for common agenda initiative” (Co-Creation Initiative)<sup>59</sup> which marks a significant step towards Japan becoming an equal partner in its development engagements.<sup>v</sup>

“Japan’s strategies for enhancing Indo-Pacific connectivity are integrated with its ODA initiatives and complement ASEAN’s regional plans.”

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v The initiative marks a shift from a traditional donor-recipient framework to mutual cooperation, particularly in rapidly growing Southeast Asian countries. It enables Japan to propose projects directly rather than solely responding to requests from recipient countries, thus allowing it to concentrate its efforts on areas like digitalisation, economic resilience, and green technologies. In its inaugural project under the initiative, Japan began constructing a national data centre in Cambodia in December 2023, reflecting deeper bilateral ties and a proactive stance against cyber threats, notably from Beijing.

## ASEAN

Japan's diplomatic policies recognise the centrality of ASEAN in East Asian multilateralism. The 1977 Fukuda Doctrine was instrumental in transforming Japan's perception among Southeast Asian countries by assuring them of Japan's commitment to equal partnership and promising that the country would not pursue military power. Consequently, between 2019 and 2022, based on perceptions among ASEAN countries, Japan was ranked as the most trusted among the regional powers, surpassing the US and the EU.<sup>60</sup>

Japan's bilateral engagements with Southeast Asian countries are based on its FOIP vision and its approach modified on the basis of feedback from these countries to ensure that no ASEAN member state opposes it—which is crucial since ASEAN operates by consensus. While most ASEAN countries have previously supported Japan's FOIP, there has been reluctance to endorse it multilaterally due to concerns about China's reaction. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) serves as a diplomatic tool for ASEAN to back the principles advocated by FOIP without explicitly aligning against China.<sup>61</sup> Efforts to align FOIP with ASEAN's outlook on the Indo-Pacific indicate a recognition of the need for a collaborative approach that includes all regional stakeholders, thereby potentially reinforcing ASEAN's centrality in regional governance.

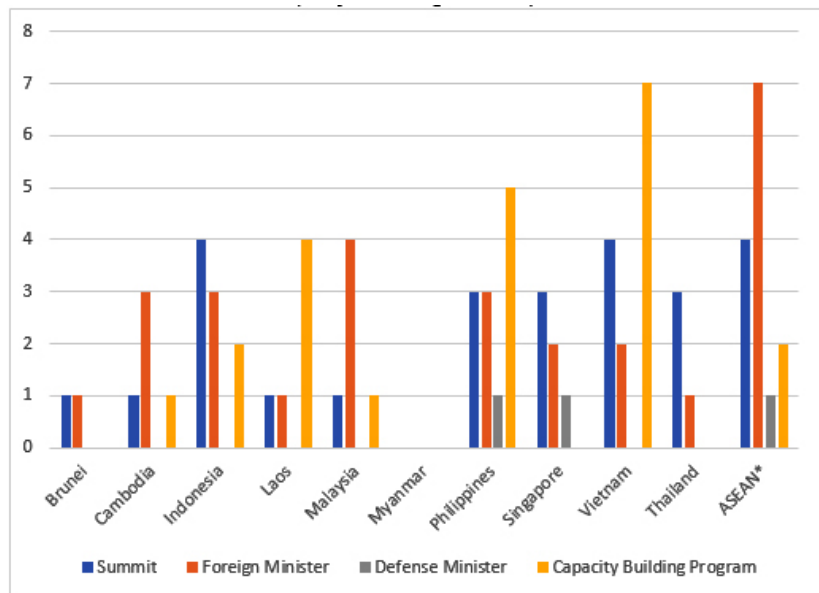
The FOIP is therefore not just strategic or economic but also fundamentally values-based. It extends beyond security and trade to incorporate the identities and values of Asian countries and principles like democracy and rule of law.

Tokyo perceives Beijing's approach to ASEAN as seeking to undermine the bloc's unity on issues that are crucial to China's interests, notably in negotiations over the South China Sea. Japan also considers the BRI as a strategy to shift regional economic structures from an ASEAN-centric to a more China-centric hierarchy. Against this backdrop, infrastructure projects like the East-West, North-South, and Southern Economic Corridors bolster ASEAN's intra-regional trade, thus providing nations within the bloc greater economic independence and resilience against external pressures,



particularly from China. This economic strengthening is also intended to provide ASEAN countries with greater strategic autonomy in making decisions on issues such as the disputes in the South China Sea.

**Figure 5: Diplomatic Interactions, Japan and Southeast Asian Countries (May 2022-April 2023)**



Source: *Great Power Politics: The Indo-Pacific, Southeast Asia, and the Global South*<sup>62</sup>

Today, the rules-based order faces its greatest challenges in Southeast Asia.<sup>63</sup> Tokyo advocates for diplomatic and legal resolutions to these territorial disputes, countering the “rule of might”,<sup>64</sup> anticipating that a more unified and economically independent Southeast Asia will yield geopolitical decisions that align with Japan’s regional interests and contribute to a balanced power dynamic in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>65</sup> Abe’s more cooperative stance towards China has been well received—both by China as well as more broadly—and has the potential to strengthen Japan’s role in the Asia-Pacific. This approach also makes Japan’s FOIP more acceptable to

ASEAN countries and to nations like India and Australia, which are typically less confrontational towards China compared to the US.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, in recent years, ASEAN member countries have become less cautious about Beijing and more willing to deepen strategic ties with the US and Japan.

Overall, Japan's policy in Southeast Asia focuses on promoting ASEAN unity and integration, enhancing ASEAN's role as a strategic lever for its members, and supporting ASEAN Plus processes in regional architecture development.<sup>67</sup>

Japan's diplomacy in Southeast Asia, however, especially amid the Myanmar crisis and the Ukraine conflict, highlights the challenges that it is facing in maintaining ASEAN unity while aligning more closely with Western principles of human rights and democracy. The FOIP framework emphasises this alignment, which could potentially strain Japan's position within ASEAN. Japan needs to facilitate dialogue and policy coordination between ASEAN states to preserve regional autonomy and prevent the area from becoming a battleground for great-power conflicts.<sup>68</sup>

The NSS of 2022 had little mention of ASEAN, which may be reflective of Japan's prioritisation of immediate security challenges from neighbouring countries like China and North Korea and the impacts of the Russia-Ukraine war. Nonetheless, recent US-Japan summits have reiterated support for ASEAN centrality, indicating a continuity of Japan's approach. Japan's evolving strategy towards ASEAN highlights a balancing act between adapting to immediate geopolitical challenges while managing its commitment to the grouping and the broader Indo-Pacific framework.<sup>69</sup>

## **The United States**

Since the 1960s, Japanese diplomacy has focused on preserving the US-led postwar international order in the Asia Pacific amid shifting power balances. In the last decade, Japan has advocated for increased political investment in the Indo-Pacific and urged the US to strengthen its presence in the region.<sup>70</sup> Japan's FOIP strategy aligns closely with the US strategy for the Indo-Pacific, with both countries emphasising rule of law and freedom of navigation. This alignment has provided operational strength to the Japan-

# Key FOIP Partnerships

US alliance, enhancing their security ties and cooperation. The strategy also recognises Japan as a US ally in maintaining regional stability and countering challenges to the rules-based order, especially from China.<sup>71</sup>

Japan's FOIP strategy addresses concerns about China's assertive regional behaviour, despite claims from the Japanese government that the FOIP does not aim to counter China's influence. Japan's FOIP narrative has evolved from being described as a "strategy" to a "vision" or "concept", partly to aid diplomatic relations with China.<sup>w</sup>

The US response has been more direct. The FOIP was championed by the Trump administration, which framed China's practices as threatening global norms, in contrast with Japan's more cautious approach.

The FOIP framework serves as a mechanism for aligning US-Japan strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific, with ongoing dialogue needed to refine the initiative and define its role in managing China's rise and supporting the international order.<sup>72</sup> A significant task for the US was building trust in its commitment to these goals and the broader region; in this context, the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018 served as a legislative endorsement of US support for FOIP.<sup>73</sup>

To maintain regional stability and coherence in their foreign policy, the US and Japan need to harmonise their strategies and ensure consistency in their joint approach to FOIP.<sup>74</sup> Viewing FOIP as a coordination tool rather than a strict framework could increase its flexibility in ensuring a balanced strategic competition with China.<sup>75</sup>

The US-Japan alliance can enhance the FOIP strategy by engaging in existing trilateral frameworks like the US-Japan-Australia and US-Japan-India dialogues as well as potentially revitalising strategic dialogue with South Korea. Additionally, the reinvigorated Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which includes Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, provides a platform to promote the FOIP vision. Regarding

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w There is hesitation in Japan about adopting a confrontational stance toward China, especially regarding economic and non-traditional security issues, due to potential disruptions in Japanese-Chinese supply chains in the high-tech sector. The US is largely sceptical of this stance.

infrastructure development, Tokyo has shown a conditional willingness to cooperate with the BRI while insisting on the need for transparency and sustainable debt practices. Concurrently, Japan and the US have engaged in trilateral infrastructure initiatives with Australia, which marks a step towards offering Indo-Pacific countries with alternatives to BRI funding.

## India

Tokyo's FOIP strategy positions India as a key strategic ally. India's importance in Tokyo's geopolitical strategy emerged in the early 2000s, when Washington identified Delhi as a crucial security partner. By the mid-2000s, discussions between Japan and the US at the Security Consultative Committee further enhanced India's role in regional security.<sup>76</sup> India's strategic role in Japan's foreign policy gained prominence under Abe, notably through 2+2 ministerial dialogues.<sup>77</sup> The FOIP strategy also enabled deepening ties between the two countries, positioning New Delhi as a key player in realising a free and open Indo-Pacific. Japan-India cooperation on security, economic, and infrastructure projects has also increased due to a convergence of strategic interests, especially in countering China's assertiveness.<sup>78</sup> This partnership has proved to be a stabilising force in regional geopolitics and adapted to new challenges, such as those posed by the pandemic. The India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership of 2013 was another step aimed at fostering action-oriented collaboration by leveraging the collective capacities of both countries to shape an Indo-Pacific agenda.

India and Japan have also collaborated with other nations to develop innovative responses like the India-Japan-Australia Resilient Supply Chain Initiative (RSCI) and the Quad's Vaccine Partnership. Although there are differences in their approaches to the Indo-Pacific economic framework, particularly in terms of mega free trade agreements and data governance, the relationship between the two countries has grown to evolve and address both regional and global challenges.<sup>79</sup>

There are strong alignments between the FOIP visions of New Delhi and Tokyo. First, both countries emphasise a rules-based order, freedom of navigation, and respect for international law in the Indo-Pacific region, in



# Key FOIP Partnerships

alignment with Japan's FOIP and India's Act East policy and broader foreign policy objectives. Both countries advocate for maintaining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states, opposing unilateral changes to the status quo, especially in contentious areas such as the South China Sea. Second, economic development and infrastructure connectivity are pillars of both Japan's FOIP and India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific. Third, both Japan's FOIP and India's regional outreach prioritise development assistance and capacity building; Japan's development aid, particularly in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands, complements India's capacity-building initiatives and technical cooperation programs in these regions. Both countries aim to enhance the resilience and self-sufficiency of smaller states, thereby reducing their vulnerability to coercive economic practices. Fourth, both Japan and India recognise the importance of environmental sustainability and disaster resilience in the Indo-Pacific. Japan's emphasis on sustainable development and clean energy initiatives under FOIP aligns with India's efforts to promote solar energy through programs such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA).

Kishida's "New Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'" positions India as an indispensable partner, in line with US National Security assessments.<sup>x</sup> India plays a crucial role across all four pillars of Kishida's FOIP strategy: establishing principles for peace; addressing regional challenges through partnership; enhancing connectivity; and ensuring security in maritime and airspaces. Complementing this strategy, Japan plans to invest US\$75 billion by 2030 in Indo-Pacific infrastructure, prioritising connectivity in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific Islands, with a focus on developing an industrial value chain linking the Bay of Bengal and Northeast India towards de-risking supply chains and promoting economic growth in the region.<sup>80</sup>

Japan-India relations have seen significant growth and strategic alignment in recent years. Since 2018, the two countries have also collaborated in developmental efforts in third countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar in the context of their shared outlook towards the Indo-Pacific.<sup>81</sup>

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x This strategic stance was demonstrated when Kishida chose Delhi—the same location chosen by former Prime Minister Abe for his "Confluence of the Two Seas" speech—to launch his FOIP Plan. See: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/india-japan-relations-out-of-the-shadow-of-ukraine/>

## Australia

Japan and Australia have been at the forefront of regional collaboration since 1978, with then Japanese Prime Minister Ohira Masayoshi's proposal for economic cooperation in the Pacific Rim, followed by a meeting in Canberra in 1980.<sup>82</sup> The Japan-Australia security partnership has since become vital to both countries' strategic positions in the Asia-Pacific. This partnership is driven by shared concerns over regional stability, the rise of China, and the need to ensure freedom of navigation and overflight in the Indo-Pacific. The relationship took a step forward in 2007 with the signing of the Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, which laid the groundwork for enhanced cooperation in areas such as counterterrorism, peacekeeping, and disaster relief. Over time, the scope of collaboration has expanded to include more complex dimensions such as cybersecurity, defence technology, and intelligence sharing. Military exercises between Japan and Australia have also increased in frequency and complexity. These exercises, which often include the US, are aimed at enhancing the readiness of the countries and demonstrating their joint capabilities.

Australia was an early supporter of the FOIP strategy because the strategy aligns with two of Australia's primary foreign policy approaches: being a dependent ally and exercising middle-power diplomacy. Key aspects of Australia's FOIP include enhancing its military capabilities to deter regional threats and extend its influence and strengthening bilateral ties with key democracies like Japan and India.

Australia also supports the Quad to counteract the challenges posed by China to the liberal order.<sup>83</sup> Japan and Australia have deepened their security partnership due to shared concerns over Chinese activities in the East and South China Seas through frameworks like FOIP and Australia's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper.<sup>84</sup>

The Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), Japan's first with a non-US country, enables reciprocal military visits and enhances joint exercises. The 2022 Joint Declaration further solidified this quasi-alliance, despite Japan's constitutional constraints on collective self-defence. The partnership also

extends to strategic sectors such as hydrogen and ammonia.<sup>85</sup> Deployments of Japan's F-35A jets to Australia and reciprocal Australian deployments to Japan signify the RAA's activation. The participation of Australian forces in joint exercises with US and Japanese troops also highlights Japan's openness to broader collaboration. Future cooperation may include Japan supplying multi-mission frigates to Australia and joining the AUKUS alliance's second pillar.<sup>86</sup>

## Quad

The Quad, which was strongly advocated by Shinzo Abe,<sup>y</sup> has been pivotal to promoting the FOIP vision. Abe viewed the Quad as a critical instrument to uphold maritime security across the Indo-Pacific against perceived Chinese coercion. The grouping has now become central to the strategies of all four member countries, providing a framework for functional cooperation on various fronts, including maritime security, counterterrorism, cybersecurity, and disaster relief.<sup>87</sup> This cooperative framework allows Japan to support its Southeast Asian neighbours in enhancing their maritime capabilities, thereby fostering a stable and secure maritime domain. Japan's redefined defence policies, including the reinterpretation of its Peace Constitution to allow collective self-defence, enable it to engage more substantively with Quad partners.

The Quad has played an increasing role in advancing the FOIP, especially in strengthening defence cooperation and endorsing the FOIP as a common strategic vision. The collaboration has expanded beyond security measures to include various development and humanitarian initiatives, aligning with broader regional needs and earning support even from ASEAN nations wary of overt anti-China alliances.<sup>88</sup>

At the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in 2022, the significance of the Quad in fostering a "free and open Indo-Pacific" was a focus of discussions between Japanese Prime Minister Kishida and US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. They highlighted the need for collaboration with

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y A popular monicker for Abe is "QuadFather".

# Key FOIP Partnerships

ASEAN to support this vision, acknowledging that the Quad must align with regional needs to achieve broader acceptance. The Quad Leaders' Summit in Tokyo the same year yielded a clearer, more unified approach towards maintaining a rules-based order, explicitly addressing concerns about China's regional behaviour without directly naming Beijing. The Quad is being increasingly viewed as necessary in light of China's belligerence, seen, for instance, in its rejection of the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling on the South China Sea and its aggressive military posturing along the Line of Actual Control with India.<sup>89</sup> The Quad also offers external encouragement and backing to address shortcomings in Japan's military capabilities.<sup>90</sup>

Since its establishment, the Quad has evolved into a more robust platform, integrating military exercises such as the Malabar naval drills as well as fostering cooperation on non-military fronts such as public health, disaster relief, and infrastructure.<sup>91</sup> In order for the Quad to support a regional order, it needs to adopt an open and flexible approach that allows countries to engage with Quad initiatives that align with their national interests. Providing public goods such as climate cooperation and COVID-19 vaccines has already improved the Quad's standing in Southeast Asia. Moreover, enhancing the maritime security capabilities of regional states through non-threatening means like coast guard ships could further consolidate support for the Quad's objectives.<sup>92</sup> The Quad's focus extends beyond traditional security measures to incorporate inclusive cooperation by providing regional public goods and engaging with other organisations and countries in the Global South. This approach helps mitigate the potential divisiveness of great-power rivalry and underscores the Quad's role as a stabilising factor in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>93</sup>

The Quad's success hinges on gaining ASEAN endorsement and cooperation to achieve broader regional engagement based on shared principles and mutual benefits, rather than imposing a structured alliance against China. This approach focuses on what the Quad can offer the region rather than expecting regional countries to conform to its strategic framework.<sup>94</sup>



# Continuity Under Kishida

The Kishida Cabinet's policies and rhetoric have furthered the FOIP vision. During his visit to New Delhi in March 2023, Kishida introduced the "New Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'", which emphasised the collaborative responsibility of Japan and India to bolster a rules-based order and reaffirmed the initiative as a fundamental component of Japan's security strategy. The new plan builds on the foundational work of Abe and follows the Kishida Cabinet's revision of the NSS and the adoption of the National Defense Strategy in December 2022, which positioned FOIP as a cornerstone of Japan's security. Kishida also stressed on the responsibility for maintaining and strengthening "a free and open international order (FOIO) based on the rule of law."<sup>95</sup> Kishida also referenced the FOIO at the 212<sup>th</sup> session of the Diet<sup>96</sup> in October 2023. Japan under Kishida's leadership acknowledges its role in a complex global framework and strives to be a flexible and proactive participant. This involves responding to immediate challenges as well as anticipating future developments and adjusting strategies accordingly. Enhancing Japan's defence capabilities is a critical component of this approach, including through investing in advanced technology and expanding the country's defensive capacity to protect its territory and maintain regional stability. Kishida's vision, however, extends beyond military strength to encompass the ability to operate effectively in various scenarios, which necessitates a well-equipped and versatile Self-Defense Force.

The scope of Japan's security policies has expanded under the "four pillars of cooperation", which include 51 policies designed to operationalise the FOIP vision. The four pillars are: (1) Peace Principles and Prosperity Rules; (2) the Indo-Pacific Problem-Solving Approach; (3) Enhanced Connectivity; and (4) Expanding Security Measures from Sea to Air. Despite the expanded scope of security policies, the Kishida Cabinet emphasises the diplomatic nature of the initiative, which seeks to balance strategic concerns with broader objectives of economic development, connectivity, and regional stability. Yet, the underlying commitment remains unchanged: Tokyo's steadfast backing for a rules-based international order.<sup>97</sup>

There are three key elements of Kishida's New Plan. First, the defence of freedom and the rule of law continue to constitute the core of the

# Continuity Under Kishida

FOIP concept, with Japan's Indo-Pacific initiatives aiming to uphold the rules-based international order amid systemic challenges. Second, the new plan advocates inclusivity and normativity, urging all states to agree on fundamental principles of international law. Third, Kishida's plan encourages cooperation among middle powers to safeguard established norms without necessitating alignment with either China or the US. Finally, the plan underscores Japan's rejection of coercion.<sup>98</sup>

The FOIO is not distinct from the FOIP nor is it an evolved version of the FOIP. As Kishida has noted, the FOIP remains unchanged and has primacy in the Indo-Pacific, whereas the FOIO acts as a guiding principle in the global context.<sup>99</sup> This differentiation could be due to the fact that Tokyo has begun considering itself to be ready for a more global leadership role.

# Domestic Political Dynamics and Public Support vis-à-vis FOIP

China-US rivalry has played a key role in domestic political dynamics. While Japan is often viewed as a staunch supporter of the US-led liberal international order, its actions reveal a more ambivalent stance toward a Sino-centric order. This is largely due to the presence of pro-China individuals and groups within the Japanese government and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). For instance, key figures like Takaya Imai, former executive secretary to the prime minister, have promoted collaboration with China. Imai's close relationship with Prime Minister Abe allowed him to influence the decision to cooperate with China on the BRI in 2017. Toshihiro Nikai, a senior LDP politician known for his pro-China stance, also played a central role in shaping a more cooperative approach towards China.<sup>100</sup> The Komeito, the junior coalition partner of the LDP, is also known for its pro-China position, which has often resulted in compromises within the coalition government, such as the decision to not pursue strong condemnations of China's human rights practices in Hong Kong and the Uyghur region. The Komeito's influence highlights the prevalent internal criticism and the balancing acts that are required within the coalition. Simultaneously, opposition parties such as the Constitutional Democratic Party, Social Democratic Party, and Japan Communist Party, along with liberal leftist forces including citizen groups and liberal media, have often been sceptical of the SDF and the US-Japan alliance.

However, there are factions within the LDP and the broader government that support strong ties with the US and alignment with the FOIP framework. There is also a broader bipartisan consensus on the importance of economic initiatives guided by FOIP. The Komeito, too, while generally more cautious about military expansion, has approved key security policy documents and facilitated Japan's participation in multilateral forums like the Quad. Opposition parties like the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) and other centrists have largely supported trade agreements, recognising their importance for Japan's economic security and integration into the Indo-Pacific economic order. The Japanese Diet, which includes members from various parties, has shown a consensus on the need to ensure regional stability and security. This is reflected in the approval of defence budgets and security policies that enhance Japan's role in the Indo-Pacific in alignment with FOIP objectives.<sup>101</sup>

# Domestic Political Dynamics and Public Support vis-à-vis FOIP

In the context of FOIP, both Kasumigaseki (the Japanese government bureaucracy) and the Diet play significant roles, but their influences differ in nature and scope. The Kasumigaseki provides the technical expertise, continuity, and institutional knowledge to develop and sustain policies like FOIP. The bureaucratic influence ensures that Japan's foreign policy remains consistent and aligned with broader strategic goals even as political leadership changes. On the other hand, the Diet, as the principal democratic institution, reflects public opinion and political will. It debates and approves the defence budgets and foreign aid allocations crucial for implementing FOIP-related initiatives. Additionally, the Diet provides a platform for political leaders to articulate and advocate for Japan's strategic visions, including FOIP.

Public opinion in Japan is largely in support of the FOIP for its potential to enhance economic ties and secure trade routes crucial for Japan's maritime-dependent economy and concerns regarding China's assertions.<sup>102</sup> The emphasis on maritime security aligns with Japan's strategic interests in maintaining open and secure sea lanes. This support is also driven by Japan's need to protect its shipping routes from regional threats, particularly in the contested waters of the South China Sea, where tensions have been rising due to China's assertive actions.<sup>103</sup> The strategic partnerships and alliances fostered under FOIP also support Japan's economic and security interests.

Public opinion is also simultaneously cautious of the FOIP, especially regarding the implications of Japan's security policies and their potential to escalate regional tensions. This perspective is influenced by the complex geopolitical dynamics involving China, Russia, and the US and the delicate balance that Japan needs to maintain in its foreign policy.<sup>104</sup> This concern is pronounced among those wary of Japan becoming too closely aligned with US military policies and being drawn into unwanted conflicts. For instance, in Okinawa, which has a significant US military presence, there is considerable apprehension about the risks associated with heightened US-China tensions.<sup>105</sup> Residents are concerned that the presence of US military bases would result in their region becoming a target in the event of a conflict. Some are also concerned about the financial and resource implications of supporting FOIP initiatives.

Public support varies based on geopolitical events and economic conditions. Older generations are more supportive of strong security alliances, while the younger demographics have more diverse views on foreign policy. The governmental push for FOIP has also influenced public opinion.<sup>106</sup>



# Strengths, Limitations, and the Road Ahead

Despite its popularity, the FOIP vision is constrained in achieving full efficacy. First, Japan’s FOIP strategy employs tactical hedging to cope with strategic uncertainty, especially regarding China’s rise and fluctuating US foreign policy. While this approach allows Japan to bide its time and coordinate with allies and partners to strengthen partnerships and internal capacities, it could also result in strategic ambiguity.<sup>107</sup>

Second, divergent responses to the impact of global events such as the war in Ukraine and the crisis in Myanmar could either strengthen or weaken the role of FOIP in promoting a rules-based international order by affecting its implementation and its ability to uphold its core principles.<sup>108</sup> The FOIP strategy’s viability hinges on successful multilateralism. This raises questions about the necessary adjustments or validations of the strategy’s current trajectory to enhance its effectiveness and policy significance.<sup>109</sup>

Third, domestic security discussions in the country, including boosting its deterrence capabilities, acquiring counterstrike abilities, doubling defence spending, and potential nuclear sharing, have evolved, with Kishida warning that “Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow.”<sup>110</sup> However, the increase in defence procurement has been incremental, reflected in both the budget and capabilities, because of constitutional constraints. If FOIP was a containment strategy, there would be a significant enhancement in deterrence capabilities, such as the procurement of submarines, lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWs), and mid-to-long-range missile systems capable of targeting regional threats. Instead, Tokyo’s FOIP vision remains diverse, consistently emphasising trade promotion, development, infrastructure expansion, connectivity, and investment in resilient supply chains.<sup>111</sup> This operational diversity also serves as a strength by allowing the strategy to readjust to required responses. Japanese diplomacy has historically lacked explicit guiding principles.<sup>112</sup> However, the country adopting the Indo-Pacific framework provides clearer insight into its strategic direction. While the term “Indo-Pacific” aims to establish a new geographical and geopolitical framework, FOIP embodies a set of values, principles, and norms that Japan, the US, and other countries believe would support the region’s informal order.<sup>113</sup>

# Strengths, Limitations, and the Road Ahead

Fourth, while most ASEAN members endorse the FOIP vision, ASEAN's role in the Indo-Pacific needs to be clearly defined to ensure its sustained support.<sup>114</sup>

Expectedly, the FOIP vision has faced criticism from China for potentially exacerbating regional tensions rather than enhancing stability, with critics suggesting that, although FOIP intends to protect against China's perceived threats to the international order, it might instead provoke Beijing and unsettle other Asian countries towards intense competition.<sup>115,116</sup> Recently, Japan's FOIP strategy has shifted towards a less confrontational and more cooperative approach towards China; 'FOIP 2.0' marks a significant departure from Abe's earlier "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond" proposal.<sup>117</sup>

FOIP is often misunderstood as merely an extension of the "Indo-Pacific" concept or as an anti-China containment strategy. Nevertheless, China's increasingly assertive territorial claims and worsening relations with the Quad members are prompting a united and strategic response from the democracies of the Indo-Pacific. Thus, while FOIP is not solely a containment strategy, it does represent deepening fault lines between China, the democratic Quad of the Indo-Pacific,<sup>118</sup> certain ASEAN members, and some counties of the Pacific Islands that are increasingly more vocal about Beijing's aggressive practices.

Among FOIP's strengths are its flexibility and continuity. Tokyo has also implemented provisions in its domestic institutional mechanisms to allow the latter to support changes and address requirements in its FOIP vision. Concurrently, the country has remained alert and responsive to regional sensitivities. Japanese diplomacy has evolved from relying solely on its bilateral relationship with the US to actively developing a robust critical security and strategic partnerships with countries across the Indo-Pacific concerned about China. Finally, Japan's strategic direction has consistently advanced the realisation of FOIP through the successive administrations of Shinzo Abe (2012-2020), Yoshihide Suga (2020-2021), and Fumio Kishida (2021-present).<sup>119</sup>

# Strengths, Limitations, and the Road Ahead

An evolving Indo-Pacific, shaped by changing geostrategic imperatives, regional responses to China, and efforts to de-risk from China, makes the future of FOIP uncertain. The region has multiple formats of security-driven partnerships, with the potential for more in the future. The nature and scope of these partnerships may also change based on prevailing geopolitical realities. In this context, whether or not the FOIP will continue to be relevant will depend on a number of factors, including the evolving balance of power in the region, the strategic interests and policies of stakeholders such as the US, China, India, and Japan, and the ability of countries and partnerships to adapt to new security challenges. The relevance of FOIP will also hinge on its capacity to address emerging issues such as cybersecurity, maritime security, and economic stability while fostering cooperation among nations.

With globalisation and economic ties making traditional Cold War-style containment strategies impractical, democracies in the Indo-Pacific are focusing on a vision<sup>120</sup> that promotes a regional order based on prosperity and adherence to the rule of law. The greatest strength of FOIP is that it is a responsive and adaptive diplomatic framework. Even as the nomenclatures of collaborative arrangements and their functional directions may change, the core tenets of FOIP are likely to endure. [ORF](#)

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