

Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy

By Yuki Tatsumi*

Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy predates that of the U.S. In fact, Abe Shinzo gets credit for envisioning it as early as 2007 during his first brief tenure as prime minister. When he returned to office in December 2012, he revitalized the effort to actualize his vision as the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy and began to institutionalize it, securing support from the United States, Australia, and most critically, India. After he left office in 2020, his Indo-Pacific strategy had the full support of his successors Suga Yoshihide and Kishida Fumio, each of whom added their own touches to Abe's vision.

President Donald Trump endorsed Abe's "FOIP," but he showed limited interest in its multilateral implications. President Joe Biden has gone much further in adding substance to it since his inauguration in January 2021. By 2023, the concept has become the centerpiece of U.S. and allied strategic rethinking of the architecture for the vast maritime area spanning Northeast Asia to South Asia. Japan stood firmly by the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, and when it revised its National Security Strategy in December 2022, the two countries' strategies showed a high level of alignment, which was celebrated as "unprecedented alignment of their vision, priorities, and goals" when U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin met their Japanese counterparts Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa and Defense Minister Hamada Yasukazu for the Security Consultative Committee on January 12, 2023.¹

There is no question that the two countries' Indo-Pacific strategies share many goals and priorities. However, that does not mean that the two strategies are in complete alignment. This article examines what drove Abe's approach to the Indo-Pacific and how it evolved first under Suga then Kishida. It then reflects on how Japanese view the Biden approach, followed by a preliminary comparison between the Biden and Kishida approaches as of early 2023 for the similarities and differences in their thinking.

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The Drivers behind Abe's Approach to the Indo-Pacific

Abe, who had been in office for almost a year after the departure of Koizumi Junichiro, revealed the basic framework of his Indo-Pacific strategy during his visit to India in August 2007. Standing in front of the Parliament, Abe articulated the strategic importance of the vast maritime area spanning from the Pacific to Indian oceans in his speech entitled “Confluence of the Two Seas.” Citing the title of a book written by a Mughal Prince in the 17th century, Abe argued that Japan and India stood together at an historic moment when these two oceans have joined in a broader maritime Asia, emerging as an important strategic region for both countries. He further argued that Japan and India could cooperate to convert this vast maritime area into “an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the United States of America and Australia. Open and transparent, this network will allow people, goods, capital, and knowledge to flow freely.”²

Abe articulated a clearer vision after he returned to office. In a commentary “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond,” he argued that “Peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Pacific Ocean are inseparable from peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean” and emphasized the importance of a deeper cooperation with India and Australia. He also explicitly encouraged European countries—namely England and France—to engage in the Indo-Pacific region more robustly, arguing “(T)he sea-faring democracies in Japan’s part of the world would be much better off with their renewed presence.”^{3,4} Furthermore, when he spoke at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) during his visit in Washington DC in February 2013 Abe presented his vision for Japan’s role in the Indo-Pacific region as a “rules-promoter, a commons’ guardian, and an effective ally and partner to the U.S. and other democracies.”⁵ Catching more attention was his August 2016 address in Kenya, where he used the language of “free and open oceans between two continents,”⁶ which stuck as the label for a regional initiative.

Two major factors drove Abe to raise this theme in 2007 and again in 2013 and 2016, and to continue to vigorously press for it until the end of his time in office in September 2020. The predominant driver was China. By 2005, Japan-China relations were already troubled by many issues. Some were related to Japan’s wartime past, such as large anti-Japanese demonstrations in Chinese cities that were triggered by Koizumi’s repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, a controversial Shinto shrine that enshrines not only the Japanese soldiers who died during World War II but also a handful of Class-A War Criminals. But others were driven by Japan’s strategic competition vis-à-vis China over their respective influence in the other parts of the world, demonstrated by a diplomatic showdown over membership in a newly established East Asian Summit (EAS). Japan was

unwilling to accept a strengthened body under ASEAN leadership without adding India, Australia, and New Zealand to counterbalance China's growing power and assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region. In addition to ASEAN countries, Japan, and China, these three and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) joined the EAS when it was first launched in 2005.⁷

Despite his concerns about the trajectory of China's rise, Abe had not given up on the effort to pursue a constructive relationship with Beijing during his first tenure in office. In fact, he chose to visit China and South Korea before his visit to the U.S.—a very unusual move by a Japanese prime minister⁸—to demonstrate his commitment to restore relations with its two East Asian neighbors, both of which had considerably cooled during Koizumi's six years in office. During his visit to Beijing in October 2006, the two governments agreed to work toward a “mutually-beneficial relationship based on common strategic interest,” and to make the East China Sea a “Sea of Peace, Cooperation, and Friendship.”⁹

By 2012, however, Japan-China relations had sunk further with China's increasing aggressiveness around the Senkaku Islands, most notably manifested in China's response to Japanese government's decision to arrest the captain of the Chinese fishing boat that rammed into a Japanese Coast Guard cruiser. Japan also questioned China's intentions for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an attempt to flex its economic muscle by offering an alternative development aid framework for developing countries with troubling geopolitical implications.

Secondly and more importantly, Abe was concerned that China's rise was not countered by the U.S. as robustly as required. In particular, Abe was concerned that the prolonged U.S. preoccupation in the Middle East not only took U.S. attention away from China's growing assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region. He also suspected that Washington was wary of sustaining its leadership role in the Asia-Pacific despite the Obama administration's initial commitment to the “pivot to Asia.”¹⁰ Hoping to secure U.S. continued engagement in the region, Abe gave his full support when the Obama administration launched the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as one of the two key pillars of its Asia-Pacific strategy. Under his watch, Japan also joined the U.S. decision not to join China's BRI, even as the positions of major U.S. allies in Europe continued to evolve on this.¹¹

Abe's concern about U.S. disengagement from the region continued to grow during the Trump administration. His government was shocked by Trump's announcement of U.S. withdrawal from some of the major multinational initiatives that the U.S. had led during the Obama administration, including TPP and the Paris Climate Accord. While Abe appreciated the Trump

administration pursuing “a new approach” that is “grounded in fairness, reciprocity, and respect for sovereignty,” and welcomed its redefinition of the relationship with China as one of strategic competition, he was still concerned that its abrasive approach to U.S. allies could alienate the other democracies in the Asia-Pacific region.

Hence, consistent with the vision he articulated in his “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond,” Abe made diplomatic moves to invest in further deepening Japan’s relationship with India (encouraged by his personal rapport with Prime Minister Narendra Modi), Australia, and even with the Philippines. Under Abe’s watch, Japan also began to institutionalize its security cooperation with major European countries including England, France, and Germany.

From Suga to Kishida—evolution of Abe’s vision

After Abe left the office in September 2020, his vision of “FOIP” for Japan’s Indo-Pacific strategy was picked up by his successors. The fact that both Suga and Kishida were intimately familiar with Abe’s vision contributed to continuity in Japan’s policy.¹² Each added his own touch to the “FOIP” strategy.

Suga’s biggest contribution to the Indo-Pacific strategy was his effort in revitalizing and institutionalizing the Quad, the framework that included the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India. First articulated in 2007 by Abe, the Quad strategic dialogue was put on hold when Australia withdrew out of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s concern about antagonizing China. However, in light of China’s aggressive behavior, such as coercive economic policy toward Australia’s neighbors in the Pacific Islands, Australia’s outlook on China began to harden. Also, India’s stance toward China came to be more aligned with that of the U.S., Japan, and Australia as it also began to grow wary of China’s aggressive activities in Indian Ocean. Finally, as the entire world struggled to navigate the impact of COVID-19, issues such as increased transparency in global public health, pandemic preparedness, ensuring timely vaccine development and safeguarding medical supplies emerged as a new set of global challenges that needed to be addressed.

Suga was quick to capitalize on these developments. Following the first Quad summit virtually held in March 2021, Suga visited Washington for a bilateral summit meeting with Biden in April 2021 where one of the major topics of discussion was coordination under the Quad. In September 2021, the four leaders met for the first-ever in-person Quad summit in Washington DC during which they agreed to regularize Quad meetings at the cabinet ministerial level. They also agreed to establish focused working groups on issues including

COVID-19 vaccine production and worldwide distribution, coordination on overseas infrastructure projects, and coordination on the rule-setting for emerging technologies.¹³

After succeeding Suga in October 2021, Kishida Fumio continued to place the utmost emphasis on realizing the “FOIP” as one of the pillars of his cabinet’s national security and foreign policy.¹⁴ In particular, Kishida led Japan’s effort to situate itself as a “connective node,” so to speak, between the U.S. and Europe on the one hand and the countries in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond on the other. In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, he was concerned that many countries in the region shied away from clearly articulating their support for Ukraine. At the 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue, he declared unambiguously his “strong sense of urgency that “Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow,” stressing that “(n)o country or region in the world can shrug this off as ‘someone else’s problem.’ It is a situation that shakes the very foundations of the international order, which every country and individual gathered here today should regard as their own affair.”¹⁵

Kishida’s effort to articulate this point preceded his Shangri-La speech. In fact, he was already making the case for his “Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow” argument as he revitalized in-person summit diplomacy earlier in 2022. During his visit to India and Cambodia—his first trip as prime minister—for instance, the need for the Indo-Pacific region to commit to upholding a rule-based international order was highlighted in the joint statements at each stop. In India, Kishida and Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the joint declaration following a summit meeting that repeatedly discussed “the need for all countries to seek peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law without resorting to threat or use of force or any attempt to unilaterally change status quo” and the two countries “shared vision for Free and Open Indo-Pacific.”¹⁶ In Cambodia, while the primary focus was to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Japan-Cambodia diplomatic relationship, the importance of cooperation toward the “FOIP” and the two countries’ shared recognition that “this aggression (by Russia against Ukraine) jeopardizes the foundation of international order which does not accept any unilateral change of the internationally recognized borders by force” were articulated.¹⁷ He stayed on this message during his visit to Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand in May 2022, pushing them to step up support for Ukraine.¹⁸

As Kishida continued to make the case for his “Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow” argument in his engagement with Japan’s partners in the Indo-Pacific region, he simultaneously accelerated Japan’s engagement with Europe both on a bilateral basis and within the context of the EU and NATO. Throughout

2022, Kishida aggressively engaged Japan's European partners including Germany, England, the EU, and NATO. Finally, Kishida continued to champion the Quad and further institutionalization of Japan's security partnership with Australia, which culminated in the two countries signing the Japan Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement in January 2022.¹⁹

Kishida's sense of urgency over Japan's worsening security environment, which was further aggravated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and propelled him to invest time in his role as "diplomat-in-chief" to articulate the case for why the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war should be taken seriously as one of the most serious challenge against the post-World War II international order, drove Japan to considerably update its key three strategic documents—National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and Defense Build-up Plan (DBP). Referred to as a package, the "Three National Security Documents" (Anpo San Bunsho)—represent a considerable reorientation of Japan's national security policy and address the critical question of how to protect important national security interests by considerably changing policy approaches.

First and foremost, the 2022 NSS clearly identified China as "an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge in ensuring the peace and security of Japan and the peace and stability of the international community, as well as in strengthening the international order based on the rule of law," which is a notable departure from Tokyo's past approach to China. Secondly, the three documents collectively focus on the areas that have long been considered "taboo" in domestic discourse on national security policy, creating a political environment in which the decision to introduce counterstrike capabilities met with very little opposition. Thirdly, the documents collectively embrace a broader definition of national security, such as economic security, and a more robust civil society-defense synergy in domains such as cyber and space and other emerging technological areas.

Kishida's vision for Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy, unveiled during his trip to India on March 20, 2023, was built upon these 2022 developments. Entitled "The Future of the Indo-Pacific: Japan's New Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)," the speech contextualized his Indo-Pacific strategy as an evolution of Abe's 2007 speech as well as Kishida's own speech "Era of the Indo-Pacific" made in 2015.²⁰ Kishida also argued that, as the existing international order comes under attack, the "FOIP" is gaining relevance as an organizing principle because of its ability to evolve by incorporating the perspectives from the stakeholders in the region. Referring to the FOIP as "Our FOIP," he suggested that his baseline vision of it is "simple" and identified the underlying elements—enhancing regional connectivity; working toward the

goal of a region that values freedom; the rule of law; freedom from coercion; and diversity, inclusiveness, and openness as well as prosperity.²¹ Informed by the above frame of reference, Kishida laid out four key principles for his Indo-Pacific strategy.

The first principle Kishida put forward is what he calls “principles for peace and rules for prosperity.” Defining it as “the backbone of FOIP,” he insisted that international values and norms such as respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, no unilateral changes to the status quo by force, a free, fair and just economic order, and promotion of greater transparency in development finance are the core values that should underpin FOIP.

Secondly, Kishida advocated “addressing challenges in an Indo-Pacific way” as the new focus of cooperation for the “FOIP.” Countries in the Indo-Pacific region should seek to find realistic and practical solutions based on an “equal partnership” to global challenges—such as climate change, food security, public health, natural disasters, and cybersecurity—with Kishida arguing that such an approach is essential for the resilience and sustainability of the region.

Thirdly, Kishida called for an “FOIP” that is based on “multi-layered connectivity.” Specifically referring to Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific Islands, Kishida mentioned that connectivity among different parts of the Indo-Pacific region was essential for regional stability. He also discussed the importance of facilitating people-to-people exchanges as well as developing a reliable digital technology to support such connections.

Finally, Kishida discussed the security and safety of international maritime space and airspace. Pointing out that the region has historically focused on maritime security, he argued that ensuring the safe use of international airspace is equally important. Citing “three principles of the rule of law at sea”—international law-based territorial claims, no use of force or coercion to unilaterally change the status quo, and peaceful settlement of disputes—that Japan supports, Kishida discussed extensively the importance of empowering maritime law enforcement organizations and aviation authorities in the region.²²

A comparison of the updated Indo-Pacific strategy offered by Kishida and the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy announced in February 2022 reveals that the two have many shared elements (Chart 1).

Elements	Parallels	United States	Japan
Conception of FOIP	Both Highlight Rule of law Connectivity Freedom/sovereignty	“Free and open Indo-Pacific that is more connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient.” “[F]ree and open Indo-Pacific, where governments can make their own sovereign choices, consistent with their obligations under international law; and where seas, skies, and other shared domains are lawfully governed.”	“Enhance the connectivity of the Indo-Pacific region, foster the region into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, free from force or coercion, and make it prosperous.” “[T]he root of the concept of FOIP is defending “freedom” and the “rule of law.”
Pillars of FOIP Strategy/ Objectives	Both Highlight Respecting rule of law advancing connectivity addressing non-traditional security threats bolstering regional security enhancing regional prosperity	1) Advance a Free and Open Indo-Pacific 2) Build Connections Within and Beyond the Region 3) Drive Regional Prosperity 4) Bolster Indo-Pacific Security 5) Build Regional Resilience to Transnational Threats	1) Principles for Peace and Rules for Prosperity 2) Addressing Challenges in an Indo-Pacific Way 3) Multi-layered Connectivity 4) Extending Efforts for Security and Safe Use of the “Sea” to the “Air”
Scope of Indo-Pacific	Both Include Indian Ocean Pacific Ocean Northeast Asia Southeast Asia South Asia Oceania	Middle East: not included Africa: not included	Middle East: included Africa: included
Role in the Region		“The United States is an Indo-Pacific power”	“Japan and India should jointly lead the region and the world in the ‘Era of the Indo-Pacific.’”

Elements	Parallels	United States	Japan
Traditional Security Challenges	Both Highlight Russia maritime security safe use of air/skies	DPRK: mentioned Critical and emerging technologies: mentioned Integrated deterrence: mentioned Extended deterrence: mentioned	DPRK: no mention Critical and emerging technologies: no mention Integrated deterrence: no mention Extended deterrence: no mention
Non-traditional Security Challenges	Both Highlight Climate change and environment COVID-19 and global public health terrorism cyberspace natural disasters	Biological threats: mentioned Food security: no mention	Biological threats: no mention Food security: mentioned
Reference to China		Frequent (5 times)	No explicit reference
Regional Allies	Both Mention India The Pacific Islands The Republic of Korea (ROK) Australia	New Zealand: seeks to strengthen relations Philippines: seeks to deepen/modernize relations Thailand: seeks to deepen/modernize relations Indonesia: seeks to deepen/modernize relations Malaysia: seeks to strengthen relations Mongolia: seeks to strengthen relations Singapore: seeks to strengthen relations Taiwan: seeks to strengthen relations Vietnam: seeks to strengthen relations Japan-ROK: emphasizes cooperation	New Zealand: no mention Philippines: only cites previous support Thailand: not explicitly mentioned Indonesia: not explicitly mentioned Malaysia: only cites existing exchange program Mongolia: not explicitly mentioned Singapore: not explicitly mentioned Taiwan: not explicitly mentioned Vietnam: not explicitly mentioned Japan-ROK: does not mention relations

Elements	Parallels	United States	Japan
Non-Regional Allies	Both Mention Europe/EU	United Kingdom: mentions Canada: no mention	United Kingdom: no mention Canada: mentions
Role of Multilateral Fora	Both Promote G7 and G20	ASEAN: highlights “ASEAN Centrality” ASEAN+3: no mention Quad: emphasizes role in non-traditional security threats NATO: seeks align goals AUKUS: integrate Indo-Pacific and European allies, and increase security deterrence WHO: strengthen preparedness and response to infectious diseases UN: coordinate with to advance “common vision” Pacific Islands Forum: advance our resilience efforts for infectious diseases Asia Zero Emission Community: no mention	ASEAN: endorses the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” ASEAN+3: food security Quad: no mention NATO: no mention AUKUS: no mention WHO: no mention UN: principles of the UN Charter should be adhered to in every corner of the world. Pacific Island Forum: no mention Asia Zero Emission Community: achieving both decarbonization and economic growth
Role of Economic Frameworks		IPEF: promoted CPTPP: no mention APEC: promoted WTO: no mention	IPEF: no mention CPTPP: promoted APEC: no mention WTO: promoted
Diplomacy	Both Promote Youth-leadership education exchange professional exchange	Entrepreneur exchange: no mention Embassies: will open new embassies in the region	Entrepreneur exchange: mentioned Embassies: no mention
Human Rights		Human trafficking: mentioned Gender: emphasizes “Gender Equity”	Human trafficking: not mentioned Gender: emphasizes “Women’s Empowerment”

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As Chart 1 shows, Japanese and U.S. Indo-Pacific strategies have considerable overlap. For instance, both strategies are anchored in concepts such as the rule of law, connectivity, and respect for freedom and sovereignty. The objectives for the “FOIP” articulated in both strategies include addressing non-traditional security challenges; bolstering regional security; and enhancing regional prosperity. In more specific elements, ranging from the definition of “Indo-Pacific,” both traditional and untraditional security identified in the respective strategies, non-regional partners, the role of multinational fora, and diplomacy, the two strategies’ are extremely closely aligned with each other. There are a few areas in which the Japanese and U.S. approaches show differences, however. First is the overall tone of each strategy. On the one hand, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, even though it addresses non-traditional security issues and economic and trade issues, has a stronger focus on political-military strategy. Consistent with the Biden administration’s National Security Strategy, which discussed the global security environment in the context of the strategic competition between democracy and autocracy, it emphasizes the importance of democratic norms and institutions and promoting cooperation with U.S. allies and partners that share democratic values. It discusses issues such as integrated deterrence, extended deterrence, North Korea’s security threat, and cooperation within such frameworks as the Quad, NATO, and AUKUS. Furthermore, in the context of the broader U.S.-China strategic competition, U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy frequently mentions China throughout its documents.

On the other hand, Japan’s strategy is more nuanced. It does not push the elements of democratic values, norms and institutions—or cooperation among the allies and partners that share these values—to the forefront of the strategy. Rather, Japan’s strategy places much greater emphasis on the rule of law and other international norms—such as no use of coercion, no unilateral change of the status quo, and safety of international maritime and air spaces—which countries can agree on regardless of their political and societal norms. For instance, Kishida’s references to “addressing the challenges in an Indo-Pacific Way” and “three principles of the rule of law at sea” demonstrate Japan’s focus on leveraging the country’s willingness to look for practical cooperation.

Likewise, the two strategies show a big difference in the multinational economic frameworks that each country promotes. While the U.S. understandably promotes cooperation through the Indo-Pacific Economic Forum (IPEF) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)—in both of which the U.S. participates and which are not treaty-based partnerships—Japan focuses more on cooperation through the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement

for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), both of which are treaty-based international agreements.

Finally, the two strategies have a very different outlook when it comes to engaging the regions outside the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. looks across the Atlantic Ocean as its primary focus for external partners to promote the “FOIP.” Its strategy discusses NATO as a partner with which Washington seeks to align visions of the “FOIP” and gives a nod to the European Union (EU) as a partner. It also refers to AUKUS as a potential springboard to integrate Indo-Pacific and European allies to enhance deterrence. Partners stop at North America and Europe, but the other parts of the world, including the so-called “Global South,” are by and large left out of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.

In contrast, Japan’s views engagement with the “Global South” as essential to promote its “FOIP” vision. Its Indo-Pacific strategy identifies Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and Africa as “important partners in achieving the FOIP.” Kishida, in his Indo-Pacific strategy speech, even discussed the specific initiatives to support sustainable economic development in these regions.²³ Kishida’s emphasis on engaging the “Global South” in Japan’s Indo-Pacific strategy is consistent with his argument for Japan to expand its engagement with “the Global South” in the speech he delivered in Washington DC during his visit in January 2023. He identified ASEAN and India as the most critical partners in “the Global South,” but also pledged Japan’s commitment to deepen diplomatic engagement with the rest of South Asia, the Pacific Islands, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean.²⁴ Kishida also called for greater transparency in development aid to provide equal opportunity for all the development aid recipients to pursue economic independence and sustainable development, insisting that “‘no country will be excluded’ from the spirit of the FOIP.”²⁵

Tokyo’s emphasis is built upon the history of its engagement with Southeast Asia and other parts of the “Global South.” For instance, Japan’s approach to Southeast Asia has long been anchored in the Fukuda Doctrine, the vision that Fukuda Takeo laid out during his visit to the Philippines in 1977, where he unveiled an ASEAN policy anchored in his belief that the foundation of the Japan-ASEAN relationship should be “heart-to-heart” connections among the people. Guided by this belief, Fukuda proposed three principles for Japan’s engagement with ASEAN: Japan would support Southeast Asia’s prosperity as a peace-loving country; Japan would develop relationships with Southeast Asia in areas ranging from politics, economy, and culture that are anchored in heart-to-heart relations among our peoples and based on mutual confidence as true friends; and Japan

would be an equal and “good partner” that would work with ASEAN toward not only a more robust economy but also toward a better, sustainable quality of life.²⁶ Similarly, Abe argued that Japan would stand with Africa as the region tries to rebuild itself from the decades of civil wars and strives to tap into its potential.

Conclusion

This article traces the evolution of Japan’s “FOIP” vision, which originated in Abe’s speech on “the confluence of the two seas” in India in 2007 and continued to evolve into the Kishida administration. It also compared Japan’s Indo-Pacific strategy, as articulated by Kishida in March 2023, with the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy announced by the Biden Administration in February 2022.

The comparison of U.S. and Japanese Indo-Pacific strategies suggests that Japan envisions the “FOIP” as an organizing principle of the regional order that focuses on internationally agreed norms, such as the rule of law, and is open to any country and entity as long as it abides by these norms. In contrast, the U.S. strategy, while it addresses the importance of international rules and norms, heavily focuses on how the U.S. facilitates cooperation with its allies and partners in the region, which share democratic values, to develop a regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific region that allows Washington to compete with China from the position of strength. In other words, Japan’s Indo-Pacific strategy sees a region that is inclusive and open for any country and entity that is willing to respect the international norms Japan regards as critical rather than a region that is divided between those who have subscribed to the principles represented by democratic values and norms and those who hold alternative views.

Japan’s approach to its Indo-Pacific strategy offers a good complement to U.S. strategy, which has a much stronger element of countering China’s influence in the region. Japan’s heavier focus on international norms softens the ideological edge of the “FOIP” vision, making it more palatable for the countries in the Indo-Pacific region, many of which are hesitant to alienate China. In addition, reaching out to the “Global South” as part of its Indo-Pacific strategy places Japan in a place where Tokyo functions as a connective node between the U.S. and these regions.

As Japan continues to promote its Indo-Pacific strategy, a few challenges lie ahead. One is the further worsening of the U.S.-China relations. Despite the Biden administration repeatedly expressing its commitment that Washington will manage its relationship with Beijing responsibly, the U.S.-China relationship continues to worsen. For instance, despite the Biden administration’s effort to

resume diplomatic dialogue following unsafe encounters between the U.S. and Chinese militaries in the South and East China seas, the June 2023 trip by Secretary of State Antony Blinken seemed to have accomplished little and did not lead to a much-needed resumption of military-to-military dialogue. Further downward spiral of U.S.-China relations could make it difficult for Tokyo to maintain the current ambiguity in its Indo-Pacific strategy.

Kishida's waning domestic support may also impact his ability to pursue his FOIP vision. The Mainichi Shimbun opinion poll taken in mid-June showed that Kishida's approval rating went down to 33%, a 12-point dip from May.²⁷ Although Kishida's low popularity is based on domestic issues, his declining support could impact his staying power as the prime minister as he eyes his own reelection as the president of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in September 2024.

Endnotes

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- ¹⁷ “Joint Statement by Japan and the Kingdom of Cambodia,” Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, March 20, 2022, <https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/content/000100719.pdf>.
- ¹⁸ During Kishida’s visit to the three countries, Vietnam announced humanitarian aid to Ukraine, while Thailand explicitly expressed its support the March 2022 United Nations General Assembly resolution that demanded Russia’s immediate withdrawal from Ukraine.
- ¹⁹ “Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Japan, January 6, 2022, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100283786.pdf>.
- ²⁰ Fumio Kishida, “Policy Speech by Foreign Minister ‘Special Partnership in the Era of the Indo-Pacific,’” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, January 18 2015, https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sw/in/page3e_000291.html.
- ²¹ Kishida Fumio, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA),” Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, March 20, 2023, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202303/_00013.html.
- ²² Kishida Fumio, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA),” Prime Minister’s Office of Japan.
- ²³ For example, Kishida discussed Japan’s intention to leverage the Japan-ASEAN Women Empowerment Fund to support startups in Africa. “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA),” Prime Minister’s Office of Japan.
- ²⁴ Kishida Fumio, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS),” Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, January 13, 2023, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202301/_00005.html.
- ²⁵ Kishida Fumio, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA),” Prime Minister’s Office of Japan.
- ²⁶ *Detabase Sekai to Nihon “Fukuda Sori-Daijin no Manila ni okeru Supiichi (Fukuda Dokutorin Enzetsu)*, August 18, 1977, <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/docs/19770818.S1J.html>.
- ²⁷ « *Kishida Naikaku Shijiritsu 33% 1kagetu de 12 pointo geraku* » *Mainichi Shimbun*, June 18, 2023, <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20230618/k00/00m/010/040000c>.