



Japan's approach towards India in the changing Geopolitical Scenario in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

Japan and India have always maintained a cordial relation, excepts a few ups and down during the cold war era. The turn of 21st century saw a positive growth as the bilateral relations were already gaining momentum partly due to India's liberalization policies in the early 1990s. By 2006, the two countries became the 'global strategic partnership', after the former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Japan. The changed circumstances in the Indo-Pacific region demand a deeper convergence between two countries. This was no surprise that the concept of Indo-Pacific was firstly highlighted by Abe thereby asserting the idea of the "confluence of two seas" in the Indian Parliament in 2007. Since then, the importance of Indo-Pacific has been gaining popularity in the international relations. Similarly, Japan approach towards India has changed a lot with India's growing international posture with the increasing responsibility in the Indian Ocean region and beyond. Thus, this paper tries to highlight the changed perspectives of Japan on India and their growing bilateral relationship in the region.

Key words: Japan, India, Indo-Pacific, Rule-Based Order.

Introduction

Japan and India share numerous common values, encompassing religious, cultural, and economic interests, as well as shared political ideologies. This closeness, however, was significantly realized with the advent of the 21st century, marked by a strong political commitment from both nations. Concurrently, the global political landscape has undergone substantial transformations. A notable aspect of these change is the unilateral redefinition of existing rules of engagement by certain countries, driven by strong nationalist perspectives. This shift has challenged the status quo of the established international order. This development has encouraged both Japan and India as the status quo-est power in Asia to play responsibly,



particularly in the maritime domain. Another significant factor in contemporary times is the rise of China as the most powerful country in Asia. China's economic engagement has profoundly altered the existing regional order in Asia. Thus, it is felt by both the countries that they should play a more active role in the peaceful growth of Asia. Similarly, they share a common view of the US "pivot to Asia" that could be a stabilizing force in the Asia-Pacific region¹.

The notion of a 'rising Asia' is increasingly evident within the expanding 'Indo-Pacific' region, which is acknowledged as a pivotal geo-strategic and geo-economic domain in Asia. According to a report by the *National Maritime Foundation* in New Delhi, the combined economies of 36 nations in 'Maritime Asia' represented 48% of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2017, measured in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) (Khurana, 2019a). Moreover, encompassing a broader scope, the entire 'Indo-Pacific' region, spanning 74 nations including those in the Americas, is projected to constitute approximately 72% of the world's total GDP (Khurana, 2019b). Thus, the regional countries need to note that the evolving Indo-Pacific concept has evident to become more of a geopolitical reality.

The genesis of the Indo-Pacific concept primarily stems from the increasing strategic alignment between Japan and India, particularly in response to the escalating influence of China characterized by its assertive politico-military maneuvers within the region. This alignment is driven by shared concerns over China's burgeoning dominance and its potential implications. Notably, Japan's advocacy for the Indo-Pacific concept is underpinned by its imperative to safeguard the uninterrupted passage of sea lanes of communication (SLOC) to uphold its economic interests. Concurrently, India's endorsement of the Indo-Pacific framework is motivated by its apprehensions regarding China's expanding presence and activities within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This sentiment is underscored by analyses such as the Booz Allen Hamilton report, which draws attention to China's strategic initiatives, including the "string of pearls" strategy, wherein port facilities along key maritime routes could serve as potential military footholds in the foreseeable future (Ibid, 17).

¹VIF-JINF,(2013) "Joint Study on Framework for Indo-Japanese Strategic Partnership and Cooperation", *Vivekananda International Foundation*, New Delhi, 1-2.



The evolving geopolitical landscape of 21st century Asia has witnessed a dynamic interplay among regional powers vying for leadership in both geo-economic and geo-political spheres. This shift has been catalyzed, in part, by the United States' partial retraction of its interests from Asia, with its pivot to Asia policy reflecting a strategic rebalancing amidst China's expanding regional influence within the broader Asia-Pacific context. Concurrently, China has advanced its comprehensive "One Belt One Road" (OBOR) initiative as a cornerstone of its peripheral diplomacy, introducing a new Asian security paradigm aimed at fostering a Sino-centric Asia, particularly through its pivot towards Eurasia.

In response to China's ascent, Abe had formulated a proactive strategy, often termed the "Abe Doctrine²," grounded in fostering mutual partnerships and proactive engagement. This doctrine emphasizes strategic partnerships with key allies such as India, Australia, and the USA, underlining a collective commitment to advancing a free, open, and rule-based order. Abe's Indo-Pacific strategy aligns closely with India's 'Act East Policy,' further strengthening the Japan-India Strategic Partnership and contributing to the shared vision outlined in the Indo-Pacific 2025 framework (Ishida, 2020).

The transition from 'Asia-Pacific' to 'Indo-Pacific' terminology in the early 21st century reflects a strategic reorientation driven by shifting geographical and geopolitical dynamics. Key regional actors such as the US, Japan, India, and Australia have spearheaded this transition to address evolving maritime security challenges and adapt to changing power dynamics, particularly amidst assertive Chinese actions and waning US influence (Brown, 2018). Thus, the emergence of the Indo-Pacific concept thus reflects a broader transformation in the regional security architecture.

However, China is indeed a key player in the contemporary revival of the Indo-Pacific concept. Although, there are lot of transformation in the understanding of Indo-Pacific as a geo-economic and geostrategic concept. Japan views the Indo-Pacific concept as offering reassurance from India as a rising power within the broader maritime Asia, while India seeks Japan's assistance in formulating its strategic assessment of China. However, the US under President Trump has offered a distinct interpretation of the Indo-Pacific, where alliance with

² Envall, HDP (2020) "The 'Abe Doctrine': Japan's new regional realism", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* vol 20: 31-59,



India against China and participation in the Quad are perceived as counterproductive to long-term peace and stability in the wider maritime Asian region (Khurana, 2109b).

This paper consists of four sections that try to explain Japan's approach towards India in the changing geopolitical situation in the Indo-Pacific. The first section deals with the development of Indo-Pacific as a new geopolitical theatre that has gained momentum in international politics in recent times. The second section delves with the Japan's "free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategic vision as a grand strategy to defend their vital interest in the Indo-Pacific region. The third section highlights Japan's strategic cooperation with India in the Indo-Pacific region thereby considering the maritime security, wherein the 'rule-based order' or 'rule of law' remain key elements in dealing with the complex maritime issues in the region. The fourth and final section of this paper examines the current trends and challenges in developing the Indo-Pacific as a strategic vision in the Japan-India partnership. It also reviews the progress made in strengthening their bilateral engagement. The next section will explore the development of the Indo-Pacific region as an emerging geopolitical theatre.

Indo-Pacific: A New Geopolitical Theatre

The transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world following the end of Cold War has led to the emergence of new global powers, particularly in the East, altering the dynamics of international relations. This shift has presented challenges to the established international order, resulting in a more intricate global landscape. Economic power has notably shifted from the West to the East, reflecting the growing influence of the global South. In this multipolar environment, states align themselves into distinct groupings, each seeking to assert its autonomy within the international system³. While some nations advocate for the preservation of the existing global governance framework, others aim to reform it gradually, addressing perceived inequalities that favor established powers.

Various international relations theories offer differing perspectives on this nuanced issue at hand, highlighting the complexity of the matter. The notion of a rising power, exemplified by China's assertive actions in the Indo-Pacific region vis-à-vis Japan and the U.S. Indo-Pacific

³ Cannon, J. Brendon and Rossiter, Ash (2018) "The "Indo-Pacific": Regional Dynamics in the 21st Century New Geopolitical Center of Gravity", *Rising Power Quarterly*, (3)2, pp7-17.



strategy, underscores a widespread apprehension among states regarding potential challenges to the existing international order. This concern is particularly pronounced when perceived as a departure from rational behavior within the established international framework. Leaders' normative assertions regarding concepts such as the "rule of law" and "safe sea lanes" reflect a growing emphasis on leveraging both hard and soft power by major actors like India and pivotal players such as Australia. The strategic alignment of these four states across diverse geographical regions forms a central axis of power, as envisioned by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's call for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy in the region⁴.

The strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific region is underscored by notable geopolitical shifts observed in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in recent times. Positioned at the nexus of trade routes connecting the North Atlantic and Asia-Pacific regions, the IOR holds immense importance. India's role in this region is pivotal, given its extensive coastline spanning approximately 7,500 kilometers along the IOR (Subba, 2023). India's recent recalibration of its maritime strategy in response to evolving geopolitical dynamics in the region is a significant development. The adoption of a pragmatic approach aligns with the realities of the region and signals a positive step forward. The Indian Navy's Maritime Strategy, introduced in 2015 as "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy," offers a holistic approach to addressing India's maritime security needs in the Indian Ocean Region. In essence, India's strategic focus on maritime development not only reinforces its security posture but also complements its broader economic advancement efforts⁵.

Furthermore, the Prime Minister Modi has come up with a concept called "SAGAR initiative"—Security And Growth for All in the Region firstly introduced in 2016, during his visit to Mauritius. SAGAR initiative aims to promote cooperation among the littoral states and creates an environment of peace and stability in the IOR. It brings maritime cooperation, naval security, and importance of Coast Guard agencies of the littoral states to counter piracy and

⁴ Ibid, 8-9.

⁵ Kanodia, Harshita (2020) "India's SAGAR Policy in the Indian Ocean Region", *Diplomatist*, 25 Dec., 2020.



fight non-state actors (Bhatt, 2018). Thus, it complements Japan's FOIP strategic vision at the broader level.

The Indo-Pacific strategic landscape presents a scenario where multiple powers intersect. David Scott (2018) contends that the US Indo-Pacific policy strategically involves aligning with one rising power, India, to counterbalance another, China, amidst a backdrop of relative decline for the US and Japan vis-à-vis China in the region. Additionally, the Indo-Pacific dynamics deeply concern key US allies such as Japan and Australia, prompting successive US administrations to strengthen their presence in the region⁶. Consequently, concerted US efforts to restrain China's assertive behavior have yielded some measure of success.

President Trump reexamined the Indo-Pacific strategy during his inaugural visit to Asia in November 2017, subsequently revitalizing the concept of the Quadrilateral security dialogue, or 'Quad', comprising the United States, India, Japan, and Australia. This strategic shift reflects America's endeavor to contain China's geopolitical expansion in the region. Moreover, the United States anticipates India to play a pivotal role in fulfilling its strategic objectives, given New Delhi's growing assertiveness vis-à-vis other regional stakeholders. Similarly, Japan and Australia are anticipated to reinforce Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy. Initially, the military dimension is deemed paramount, given the multifaceted nature of the Indo-Pacific theatre, characterized by China's escalating military capabilities (Miracola, 2019).

In response to Trump's comments on the Indo-Pacific construct after his 2017 visit to Asia, China's Foreign Ministry, represented by Zhang Jun, expressed apprehension, noting the need for a deeper understanding of the concept of the "Indo-Pacific". Subsequently, Geng Shuang, another spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, voiced concerns during sideline discussions at the ASEAN Summit in Manila regarding the convergence of Japan, India, Australia, and the US. Hong Kong media interpreted this development as indicative of security concerns regarding China's military and economic ascendancy. The resurgence of the Quad alliance reflects mounting suspicions among Tokyo, Washington, New Delhi, and Canberra regarding China's assertive engagement in the Indo-Pacific region.

⁶Cannon, J. B. and Rossiter, Ash (2018) "The "Indo-Pacific", 11.



In contrast, Japanese media swiftly responded, emphasizing that Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy is not aimed at containing China. Former Prime Minister Abe's decision to prioritize fostering cooperation with China for Japan's security and economic interests was highlighted, as conveyed by official sources. Ishida (2018) argued that Prime Minister Abe's Indo-Pacific strategy seeks to engage with the OBOR initiative rather than oppose it, while also aiming to limit China's assertive maritime expansion. This strategy strengthens both the Japan-US alliance and the Japan-India partnership, assuming a hard balancing role that urges China to adopt a more responsible approach in the region. The Japan-India partnership focuses on bolstering the ASEAN-centric regional architecture to uphold a rule-based order, employing soft balancing tactics to navigate major power dynamics, particularly those between the US and China, in the region⁷.

Amidst the rapidly evolving Asian strategic landscape, Australia has become increasingly apprehensive due to the expanding Chinese presence in the small Pacific Island Countries (PICs), which has diminished Australia's diplomatic influence. Consequently, Australia has sought closer strategic cooperation with Japan, India, and the United States through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) to uphold a rules-based order in the region (Lee, 2020).

In response, China has expressed concerns regarding the development of the 'Quad'. From China's perspective, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is not merely a large-scale infrastructure project linking regions across Asia, Africa, and Europe; rather, it is viewed as a defensive mechanism aimed at safeguarding the country from perceived geopolitical and economic encirclement orchestrated by the US (Magri, 2109). Thus, it reflects the differing perception based on an individual national interest, albeit the region has gained a lot of geo-economic and geo-strategic competition among the major power across the world. To that end, Countries like Japan, India, Australia and other like-minded countries in the region need to be more cautious while choosing the policy framework in the Indo-Pacific.

⁷ Ishida Yasuyuki (2018) "China's OBOR Initiative and Japan's Response: The Abe Doctrine, Free and Open Indo Pacific Strategy and Japan-India Strategic Partnership".



Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy

The origin of the “Indo-Pacific” concept can be traced back to Prime Minister Abe’s address to the Indian parliament in 2007, although it remained in its nascent stage and underwent subsequent evolution⁸. Initially perceived as a strategy by Japan, recent perspectives from Tokyo’s statesmen characterize it more as a ‘vision’, with the overarching theme being the promotion of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP). Koga aptly asserts that the evolving “Indo-Pacific” construct embodies a vision rather than a strategy. Unlike a strategy, which may imply a directed policy aimed at a specific country such as China, a vision serves as a softer foreign policy tool, fostering a neutral approach towards all countries in the region.

According to Koga (2018), Japan’s Indo-Pacific strategy requires a more distinct delineation to effectively uphold regional order in a manner that ensures freedom and openness. The emergence of Japan’s Indo-Pacific strategic vision, particularly epitomized by the concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), has garnered significant international attention, particularly following President Trump’s articulation of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ in November 2017. Japan perceives FOIP not merely as a static policy but as an evolving concept, subject to continual adaptation over time.

The FOIP strategic vision is predicated on the alignment principle of “US in, China Down, ASEAN/India/Australia Up,” which reflects Japan’s policy orientation in the region. This strategic vision underscores the imperative of maintaining peace and stability while securing US strategic commitment, particularly in light of potential challenges emanating from China within the international order, particularly in the context of strategic outreach to Eurasia, Africa, and eastern Europe. Consequently, if challenges from China are perceived as threats, they necessitate constraint if not containment. However, given the vast expanse of the Indo-Pacific, effective engagement necessitates close collaboration with key regional actors, notably ASEAN, India, and Australia. ASEAN, in particular, assumes a pivotal role in shaping regional multilateral norms and fostering legitimacy within the Southeast Asian region⁹.

⁸ Abe, S. (2007) ‘Confluence of the Two Seas’ – Speech by H. E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India, 22 August.

⁹ Koga, Kei (2018) “Honing Japan’s regional strategy”, *Policy Forum*, Accessed on 08/08/2020, <https://www.policyforum.net/honing-japans-regional-strategy/>



Japan's apprehension regarding China's resurgence as a global superpower is poised to become a significant geopolitical challenge in the upcoming decades. This concern is evident in Japan's rhetoric and actions, particularly in its formulation of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. Recognizing the complexity of addressing such a regional security concern alone, Japan seeks active involvement from its partners and allies in the Asia-Pacific region to implement its strategy effectively¹⁰. In this context, Japan is committed to advancing its value-oriented diplomacy, known as "*kachikan gaiko*¹¹," which prioritizes principles of openness, soundness, and inclusiveness in the Indo-Pacific region. Through collaboration with like-minded nations, particularly India, Japan aims to address shared concerns and uphold regional stability and security.

The origin of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategic vision can be traced back to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's address at the sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) in August 2016. In his speech, Abe emphasized the need to establish robust quality infrastructure connecting Asia and Africa, particularly focusing on the sea lanes of communication (SLOC) spanning from "the Seas of Asia to the Indian Ocean." The core tenets of the FOIP vision include safeguarding freedom of navigation, upholding the rule of law in both air and water domains, and promoting infrastructure development and economic growth in the Indo-Pacific region in accordance with international standards (Koga, 2018).

Taro Kono, Japan's former foreign minister, serves as a prominent advocate for Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) diplomacy within the context of the region's dynamic geopolitical landscape. Kono's approach extends beyond economic collaboration to encompass a robust emphasis on enhancing political engagement rooted in the principles of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and a free-market economy. Central to Kono's vision is the identification of ASEAN countries as the geographical nucleus of Japan's FOIP strategy. Additionally, he recognizes other regional partners such as the United States (to the East), India

¹⁰ Yennie-Lindgren, W. (2019) "Old Sake, New Barrel? Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy", in Sharon Stirling, *Mind the Gap: National Views of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, Asian Program, GMF, Washington.

¹¹ Literally meaning "Value-based diplomacy".



(to the West), and Australia (to the South) as pivotal contributors to realizing a vibrant and peaceful Indo-Pacific region.

In 2016, Japan introduced the *Vientiane Vision*¹², which underscores a heightened focus on integrated defense cooperation with ASEAN countries. This initiative resonates with the core tenets of the FOIP strategy, emphasizing Japan's commitment to promoting adherence to international law, particularly concerning maritime security and sea laws. Moreover, the Vientiane Vision underscores Japan's dedication to enhancing capacity-building cooperation through the sharing of expertise in defense planning and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. This entails deploying human resources and facilitating technology transfer to enable effective utilization in addressing regional challenges (Yennie-Lindgren, 2019).

Japan and India's ties in the Indo-Pacific

Japan and India, as the oldest and largest democracies in Asia, have maintained a longstanding and amicable relationship, extending mutual support to each other. In recent years, the two nations have intensified their engagement across various bilateral and multilateral platforms. In the Indo-Pacific region, Japan and India are committed to upholding the status quo while adhering to international law, actively working to ensure a rule-based order. Recent incidents have highlighted China's unilateral actions in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, reinforcing the importance of their collaborative efforts. Addressing issues such as human trafficking, drug trafficking, sea piracy, terrorism, and environmental concerns are also significant aspects of their bilateral engagement (Singh, 2017). In this context, Japan seeks India to assume a more responsible role in the region, given their shared vision of the Indo-Pacific construct and India's strategic significance in the region.

Since 2006, the Indo-Pacific strategy was very much prevalent in Japanese official document. Thereafter, there has been a series of bilateral and trilateral agreement among the four important countries. They proposed formalizing the Quad that constitutes of Japan, India, Australia and the US, which is yet to materialize in a proper agenda setting mechanism in the region. Additionally, the India-US annual Malabar naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal now includes

¹² Specially developing a defense cooperation with the ASEAN countries in a single platform to address the various maritime issues in the region.



Japan, Australia, and Singapore. These strategic and military developments can be viewed as a nascent ad hoc security alliance that can be directly attributed at balancing China rise (Lee-Brown, 2018).

The bilateral relationship between Japan and India has witnessed significant enhancement over the past few decades, marked by a growing emphasis on strategic cooperation. Central to this cooperation is the adherence to a ‘rule-based order’ or ‘rule of law,’ which is deemed critical amidst various bilateral issues (MOFA, 2015). Given the complexities inherent in the Indo-Pacific region, which is fraught with a myriad of issues necessitating international attention, the interpretation of international law assumes paramount importance. Notably, the maritime domain emerges as a focal point, with both Japanese and Indian leaders consistently addressing pertinent issues in this sphere during their annual diplomatic meetings.

In this context, both Japan and India are constantly cooperating to maintain a robust international and regional order and engaging in different bilateral and multilateral institution to address the issue. One can observe that both the countries are engaging in several platforms in international level such as the Shangri-La dialogue, G4, G20, ARF, and Malabar Exercise against the pirates in the Indian Ocean¹³. In 2014, the former Japanese Prime Ministers, Shinzo Abe had urged the international community to adhere to the international law, while making their claims and resolving their disputes during his speech at Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore (Khan, 2016). This speech remains remarkable in the era when the rule-based international order was deteriorating across the world.

In 2014, the launch of the ‘Act East Policy’ by Prime Minister Modi coincided with the increased prominence of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’. This shift in focus towards the east and Southeast Asia was aimed at reinforcing ‘strategic deterrence’ against China. However, in 2018, at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Prime Minister Modi clarified several key points regarding the Indo-Pacific construct from the Indian perspective. He emphasized the principles of “inclusiveness”, “openness,” and “ASEAN Centrality,” stressing that the ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept was not directed at any specific country. This underscores India’s approach of employing ‘gentle’ persuasive and dissuasive pressures on China (Khurana, 2019). However,

¹³ Subba, N. (2023) ‘Evolving Japan-India cooperation: a case of ‘rule-based order’ in Indo-Pacific’, 3.



from the US and Japanese counterpart this could be taken into different as they aspect India to be more responsible and assertive power in the Indo-Pacific.

The increasing assertiveness of Chinese foreign and security policies in the Indo-Pacific region has contributed to the rising popularity of the Indo-Pacific concept. This has prompted both Japan and India to express concerns regarding the nature of China's policies, particularly those associated with countries collaborating on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Asia, Africa, and Europe, from which Japan and India have abstained. Notably, the United States has aligned itself with Tokyo and New Delhi in advocating for alternative infrastructure projects, either through bilateral or multilateral avenues. Consequently, a fledgling initiative known as the "Partnership for Quality Infrastructure," spearheaded by Japan and later joined by India and the US, has emerged. The primary objective of this partnership is to prioritize infrastructure projects characterized by sustainability and balance, in contrast to the large-scale infrastructure endeavors led by China (Magri, 2019).

Over recent decades, India's engagement with Japan has shifted from economic to strategic collaboration. Japan spearheaded the institutionalization of high-level meetings through the '2+2' dialogue, integrating defense and foreign affairs ministries. Collaboratively, Japan and India are advancing the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) project since its launch in 2017, reflecting their joint strategic interests in regional economic growth. In military cooperation, Japan's inclusion as a permanent member in the India-US Malabar Exercises since 2015 underscores their deepening partnership, with potential for Australia's involvement as a partner in the future (Miracola, 2019).

By November 2017, the US National Security Strategy pledged to increase Quad cooperation with Japan, Australia, and India and had an informal discussion during East Asia Summit in Manila on the issue of achieving common goal and overcoming challenges for making "Indo-Pacific" a viable reality. However, New Delhi did not mention explicitly in upholding a rule-based order and international law, freedom of navigation and over-flight maritime security in



the region has put some doubts regarding their commitment in the Quad frame, unlike the others members¹⁴.

In 2018, following a bilateral summit in Tokyo, the prime ministers of India and Japan, Modi and Abe respectively, issued a joint statement. Within this statement, the leaders agreed to initiate formal negotiations regarding the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA). This agreement aims to permit reciprocal utilization of military bases by the Indian military and Japan's Self-Defense Force (J-SDF) for logistical support purposes. Both governments are urged to deliberate on the ACSA negotiations to facilitate logistics for numerous joint Indo-Japanese military exercises slated for the foreseeable future¹⁵. This was finally brought into official agreement on 10 September 2020 that the two countries can now use the cross servicing network between the Navies and Coast Guard of two nations. Similarly, Japan's revised FOIP under the Prime Minister Kishida talks about the inclusivity, which is complimentary to India's Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiatives (IPOI). Together, Japan and India also strongly support the ASEAN centrality and consider ASEAN role in the center to their vision to the Indo-Pacific strategies. Kishida stated that "The future of the Indo-Pacific in Japan's new plan for "Free and Open Indo-Pacific"- "Together with India, as an Indispensable Partner". He stressed new four pillars of cooperation for FOIP- these pillars are, the first pillar is "principle for peace and rules for prosperity". The second pillar is "addressing challenges in an Indo-Pacific way", which is based on the practical and realistic way to address the various challenges related to the region. The third pillar is a "multi-layered connectivity", which remain at the core of cooperation in FOIP framework. The fourth or the last pillar highlights the importance by "extending efforts for security and safe use of the sea to the air"¹⁶. These are some of the key highlights made by Kishida in response to the changing geopolitical situation across the world.

India's Role as a Security Provider in the IOR and beyond

¹⁴ Amdad, Mansure (2018) "From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific or Change in Strategy?", BIPSS-Commentry, July 2018.

¹⁵ Gady, Franz-Stefan (2018), "India, US, and Japan to Hold 'Malabar' Naval War Games This Week", *The Diplomat*, Archived from the original on 13 June 2018, Retrieved on 5 June 2018.

¹⁶ Policy speech by Prime Minister KISHIDA Fumio at the India Council of World Affairs (ICWA), March 20, 2023



India with its geopolitical advantage and being a largest regional country in the Indo-Pacific remains an important stakeholder in the region. Initially, India's approach towards the Indo-Pacific was primarily driven by economic interest. However, in recent times, due to the growing importance of sea-borne trade vis-a-vis maritime security has slowly gaining momentum in India's foreign policy initiatives. This is more evident with the evolution of India's security posture regarding the policy transformation of its Look-East policy¹⁷ (LEP) in the Indo-Pacific. The gradual shift of LEP from economic and commercial strategies towards the security-oriented need in the Asia-Pacific was also driven by its growing security architecture in the region. Thus, by 2010 India began to engage itself in the security dimension of the LEP, especially after joining the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting plus Eight, where India has politically acknowledged its security interest in Southeast Asian region (Singh, 2015).

This was further strengthened when India's Look East policy took a shift in its nomenclature in 2014 to an 'Act East' policy under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi. The maritime component of Look East policy has also realizes the importance of the security and strategic dimension of maritime-related trade. This was transcended from the earlier land-based conception of the Asia-Pacific, where India's extended neighborhood now encompasses the broader maritime-based conception of the Indo-Pacific¹⁸. Thus, the region holds significant strategic connectivity between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean where more than 61 percent of the world's petroleum and other petroleum-related goods passes through the maritime route by 2015 (Bhatt, 2015). It symbolizes the importance of maritime connectivity and security for a sea borne trade in the region.

Another important role that India has been playing is to connect with the Pacific Islands Countries¹⁹ (PICs) in the Indo-Pacific. The key feature of India's engagement with the PICs was to hold the defence and naval officers' meeting for personnel training from PICs and building security outreach capacities in the South China Sea are key benchmarks of contemporary India's growing security outreach. Following the different Indian naval ships to

¹⁷ It entails that India's focus towards its eastern countries will be given more priority to develop a more robust economic and commercial engagement.

¹⁸ That is mostly dealt in the recent India's approach to IPOI. This also cover a wide range of maritime domain across the small Pacific Islands countries as well.

¹⁹ For India, the PIC holds significant place in its Indo-Pacific strategy as these small countries are the key stakeholder in the region.



the PICs has been another appealing feature of growing India's maritime security outreach in the region. Meanwhile, India has sent many naval ships for naval exercises in the region, e.g. the *INS Sumitra* to Fiji in October 2016, and the *INS Satpura* visits to the Republic Marshall Islands in August 2016 are a few examples of India's active naval presence in the region. To that end, India's ambition to attain the status of security provider, an increasing engagement is noticeable on India's part to enhance its maritime and security presence in the PICs as well²⁰.

Meanwhile, India's recent engagement with the island countries in the IOR is an apt illustration of its aspiration to maintain maritime security in the region. India is actively engaging with countries like Mauritius, Maldives, and Seychelles by assuring them by providing naval ships, patrol boats, and maritime surveillance aircraft in the region. In addition, Indian Ocean institutions like the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IORA-RC) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) reinforce its relationship with the Islands countries in IOR.

Contrary to popular perception, India's maritime role on the Indian Ocean is not limited to the security of the smaller island countries. Over the period, Indian Navy (IN) has played a significant role in the security of sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean. Similarly, the IN's role in Counter-Piracy operations off-Somalia has been significant. Since 2008, the Indian Navy had played an active role in escorting more than 2000 ships in the North-Western Indian Ocean and has also escorted the Japanese and Chinese navies in the IOR (Singh, 2015). Thus, it reflects the role played by Indian Navy in IOR and its adjacent water bodies and can play a bigger role in ensuring the SLOC in the Indo-Pacific in the future.

Thus, a peaceful and stable maritime environment is important. In this context, Prime Minister Modi has explicated his vision of SAGAR²¹ to ensure the Indian Ocean as his foremost priority. This policy is primarily based on India's interest to actively pursue and promote its geopolitical, strategic, and economic interests and the peaceful growth of the IOR. In addition, India is already engaging various other regional organizations such as IORA and IONS. These

²⁰ Panda, R. (2010). *Changing Dynamics of India-Japan Relations: Future Trends*. http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/rp/publications/no06/01_Panda.pdf

²¹ It itself highlight that the security and inclusive growth of the IOR is the paramount preference of the Indian policy makers that was reiterated by the PM Modi.



organizations mainly focus on maritime safety and security in the Indian Ocean region. India is also cooperating in bilateral naval exercises and tactical operations with many regional vis-à-vis global players.

India and the US have come up with an operationalized agreement on technology transfer and greater bilateral interoperability, including the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Association (LEMOA). Likewise, there are other naval exercises to increase interoperability in the maritime domain with many countries such as Singapore (SIMBEX), Japan (JIMEX), France (VARUNA), Australia (AUSINDEX), Oman (Sea Breeze) and Myanmar (MILAN and CORPAT). However, the scope of these naval exercises is limited to the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea²². But, considering the changing dynamic in the in larger Indo-Pacific region, there is high chance of more countries involving in the naval exercise to secure the maritime space of the region.

Considering, India's active engagement with various countries in the Indo-Pacific region and her aspiration to provide a regional architecture to the IOR has complimented the Japanese counterpart. Their bilateral, trilateral (Japan-Australia-India and Japan-US-India) and minilateral (Quad) and multilateral engagement has confirmed that Japan's approach towards India has changed tremendously. Their special strategic partnership through the vision 2025 set a long-term cooperation and their efforts to maintain a regional architecture to uphold 'rule-based order' in the Indo-Pacific hold major agenda in their bilateral strategic partnership.

Issues and Potential threats in the Indo-Pacific

Over the last decade, the term "Indo-Pacific" has gained prominence in global politics due to various factors. The region's geopolitical significance has markedly increased, drawing attention from statesmen worldwide who emphasize its importance in contemporary writings. Facing challenges from both state and non-state actors, the Indo-Pacific relies heavily on vital sea lanes connecting the Seas of Asia and the Indian Ocean for economic engagement. With Japan heavily dependent on these sea lanes for 90% of its crude oil imports, ensuring their security is crucial. India stands poised to play a pivotal role in safeguarding these sea lanes, facilitating smooth merchandise trade in the Indian Ocean region²³.

²² See: Bhatt (2018) *Evolving Dynamics in the Indo-Pacific*., 53-60.

²³ VIF-JINF (2013), 2-3.



The changing power dynamics in international relations was characterized by unstable and uncertain regional security. Japan, China and India are actively pursuing their policy initiative based on their national interest. Beijing has its own version of geo-economic strategy through OBOR in the Asia-Pacific region. Whereas, Tokyo and New Delhi seeks to pursue its Indo-Pacific Vision 2025 thereby focusing on geo-strategic and geo-economic Indo-Pacific strategy and Act East Policy. However, one can observe that the confluence and contrast of geo-economic and geo-strategic vision based on China's Asia-Pacific vision and Japan-India Indo-Pacific vision²⁴.

The post-war international order was shaped by the US liberal order and after Cold War, the US played further in shaping and managing international regimes and institutions. The post-1990s, the US enjoy 'uni-polar moment' as the only global superpower backed by military and economic might. However, this US-led order has been challenged by various elements across the globe. Firstly, there is a shift in balance of power. Secondly, with the rise of states capitalism in different part of the world, most notably the Chinese economic model. Thirdly, the unending competition for resources and energy and at last the return of geo-politics and geo-economics in times of globalisation.

In the early 21st century, Asian nations grappled with a crucial choice between aligning with either the United States-led security framework, which excluded China, or China's economic integration efforts. Initially, China primarily focused on economic engagement, leading to regional stability. However, from around 2010 onwards, China adopted a more assertive stance, particularly in the East and South China Seas, triggered by Japan's formal assertion of sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. Consequently, Asia found itself confronted with a dual scenario: an economic order championed by China and a security arrangement predominantly anchored in the US network of alliances, which tended to sideline China²⁵.

Similarly, Japan encountered a strategic crossroads, pondering whether to adapt to the shifting global power dynamics catalyzed by China's ascendance and actively contribute to shaping a new international order, or to prioritize national security imperatives while constraining its

²⁴ Ishida (2018), 175.

²⁵ Ibid, 161-163.



strategic purview. Policy adjustments began around 2010 when China became the world's second-largest economy, surpassing Japan. China then initiated provocations challenging Japan's sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands. Concurrently, the United States, following the 2007-2008 global financial crisis, saw a strategic shift and a decrease in its influence in Asia²⁶.

Meanwhile, Thomas Wilkins (2018) contends that countries like Australia and Japan must adopt cautious policies to address regional disruptions. These disruptions stem from both non-state actors and states, including disruptive leaders and technologies. Despite the rise of non-state actors, states remain the primary actors in international affairs, posing significant challenges to the rule-based order. Key state actors contributing to regional disruption include North Korea's provocations, Chinese assertiveness, and Russian revisionism in the Indo-Pacific region²⁷.

China's strategic initiatives under Xi Jinping pose a significant challenge to the Japan-India strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific. Both the countries face policy challenges from China, whether bilaterally or through regional engagements in the Asia-Pacific. It is crucial to grasp China's key policy measures in the broader Asia-Pacific region, where it seeks to exert control through economic engagement. Singh (2017) aptly notes that the emerging challenge in the Indo-Pacific stems from Beijing's unilateral actions and its unsettling stance towards regional players, posing a threat to the existing rule-based order in practice.

Recent Development

The year 2024 witnessed the election of Japan's new Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru²⁸ and the re-election of Modi as the Prime Minister of India for the third term. In November 2024, India and Japan initiated their first joint defence equipment development project by agreeing to co-develop the UNICORN (Unified Complex Radio Antenna) mast for Indian naval vessels. The two countries also enhanced defence cooperation through the 2+2 Foreign and Defence

²⁶ Kei, Koga (2020) "Japan's 'Indo-Pacific' question: countering China or shaping new regional order?", *International Affairs*, 91(1), January 2020, pp49-74, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz241>

²⁷ Wilkins, T.S. (2018), "Australia and Japan facing "disruptive" challenges to the rules-based order in Indo-Pacific", *JIIA Policy Brief*, 26 SEPT 2018, https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/policybrief/pdf/PolicyBrief_Wilkins_180926.pdf

²⁸ She is the first female Prime Minister in Japan's political history.



Ministers' Dialogue, regular joint military exercises, and maritime security initiatives in the Indo-Pacific (Walia, 2025). On 27 October, 2025 during the sideline of 47th ASEAN Summit, Mr. Motegi Toshimitsu, Foreign Affairs Minister of Japan held Japan-India Foreign Minister meeting with Dr. S Jaishankar in Malaysia. They discuss crucial areas of cooperation covering their commitment to Free and Open Indo-Pacific by strengthening through the Quad and enhancing coordination on regional security. They further agreed to deepen their strategic partnership by expanding collaboration in security, economic development, technology, investment, innovation, and P2P exchanges, building on the outcome of Prime Minister Modi's earlier visit to Japan (MOFA, 2025a).

In November 2025, right after assuming her office on 21 October 2025, Sanae Takachi met Prime Minister Modi for Japan-India Summit Meeting, during the sideline visit of the G20 summit held in South Africa. The two prime minister reiterated their commitment to cooperate in realizing a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific²⁹", which has been one of the major commitment between two countries for the past decades. The two countries were working newer avenues, e.g. under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan a new Japan-India Economic Affairs division was established to promote economic cooperation. Japan has planned to further push their public-private efforts to promote companies expansion of business and investment in India (MOFA, 2026a).

Likewise, the two countries held its first "Japan-India AI Strategic Dialogue" on 21 and 22 April 2026 in Mumbai and Bengaluru, India. This dialogue is the byproduct of earlier "Japan-India Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue" in January 2026. One of the crucial part of this dialogue is that it opens up their respective foreign policy on AI in the light of ongoing geopolitical situation, where they can freely exchange their views (MOFA, 2026b). This symbolizes that the two countries has been serious about the future technological innovation that transcend the whole region in the near future.

Furthermore, during the recent "Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting" on 26 May 2026, Foreign Affairs Minister Motegi highlight the updated Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) announced by Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi. The four ministers reaffirmed their joint statement on their shared strategic outlook on the Indo-Pacific and expressed strong opposition to any

²⁹ MOFA, Japan (2025b) Japan-India Summit Meeting, Nov 23, 2025.



unilateral attempts to alter the status quo through force or coercion, particularly in the East and South China Seas (MOFA, 2026c). The coming July from 1 to 3 Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi is coming India for the 16th Japan-India Annual Summit. In this visit she is accompanied by a large number of business delegation. It was also informed that the Japanese Ambassador had called upon the Assam CM Himanta B. Sharma, reaffirming the two sides will further push in key sectors like electronic, semiconductor, and entrepreneurship³⁰.

Conclusion

It is evident that the 21st century has witnessed lot of changes in the international relations. One of the key features of such changes is the geopolitical shift of power from West to East with complex interdependent variable and actors. Likewise, China rise remain one of crucial feature of such changes in the regional dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region. The term “Indo-Pacific” has become a buzzword for the policy makers, academia, leaders and think tanks to delve the issues in the region more rigorously.

The development of Indo-Pacific construct is crucial for the strategic community irrespective of its subjective understanding from different actors. Japan play a crucial role in pushing the idea of Free and Open Indo-Pacific construct thereby highlighting the importance of rule of law, freedom of navigation (both air and water) in the Indo-Pacific region. Japan perceives India’s critical role in the Indo-Pacific strategy as part of its FIOP strategic vision due to its geographical proximity. Both, Japan and India have common interest across the two seas, where Japan’s FOIP strategy is complimentary to India’s “Act East Policy”. Since, China’s decision and its unilateral military assertiveness have directly impacted on regional players in the region and Japan is not an exception.

Further, both the countries has been engaging in the trilateral and the quadrilateral dialogue or “Quad” along with Australia and the US. The Quad is still in its nascent phase where the future prospects might change with the course of time. However, it is true that the Quad has one way or the other aims to constrain, if not contain Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region. Some states believe that the Indo-Pacific is the balance of power in Asia in 21st century. But,

³⁰ A, Divya (2026 June 26) Japan PM Takaichi in Delhi from July 1-3 for annual summit: MEA, Explained, *Indian Express*, See: <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/japan-pm-takaichi-in-delhi-from-july-1-3-for-annual-summit-mea-10759588/>



for others the cooperation between Japan, India, Australia and the US is just a unilateralism that supplements the American bilateral and trilateral dialogue or “security triangle”.

Some Japanese media believes that Japan’s FOIP strategy is not to counter the China’s Asia-Pacific policy, rather Abe seems to decide to foster a good Japan-China cooperation for Japan’s security and economic interest in the region. This was evident in “Abe Doctrine” that the Japan’s Indo-Pacific further strengthens with its partners countries such as India, Australia, and the US as a hard balancing role that encourage China to act more responsible role in the region. Japan-India partnership aims to strengthen the ASEAN-centric regional architecture to maintain rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. Japan’s FOIP and India’s IPOI are complimentary to the ASEAN centrality and ASEAN led-mechanism in upholding the regional order.

Meanwhile, Japan’s approach towards India has changed tremendously over the period of time when India has acted responsible role in the region. It was more evident, when Indian coast guard rescued the Japanese cargo ship *MV Alondra Rainbow* in 2000 from the Indonesian pirates. Since then, Japan had huge respect for India and see as the stabilizing power in the IOR and beyond. This might be one reason that India posture in the region has slowly gained as a stabilizing role in other countries approach. For instance, the former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton had also acknowledge India as an important player in the Indo-Pacific and IOR during her visit to Australia in 2012 (IANS, 2013). It is true that the region has gained lots of significance in both geo-economic and geostrategic means. However, the future of Indo-Pacific region lies in the major power interaction whether to remain a place of convergence or divergence with the given policy option by the powerful actors in the region. The recent push made under the Kishida term with renewed four pillar of Japan’s FOIP with Indian counterpart sounds promising and now with new Prime Minister Takaichi seem to continue the same legacy further. All this symbolizes a positive growth for a long term bilateral strategic partnership.

Nevertheless, China will remain a key player to shape the future prospects of Indo-Pacific region with its economic and military might. Japan’s interaction with India vis-à-vis China remain crucial in maintaining a cordial longstanding relationship between the three countries in the region. Thus, Japan and India should remain cautious in dealing with various issues and challenges that is direly or indirectly aligned with Chinese assertiveness in the region. The



future prospects will be in the hands of these key players, where the ASEAN countries will have equal stakes in determining the future prospects of the Indo-Pacific region.

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