



## JAPAN'S FOREIGN POLICY IN INDO-PACIFIC

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**Abstract** - This article focuses of the ASEAN-Japan relations in the context of Indo-Pacific, recently introduced as a concept along with the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) strategy purported by the Quad, including Japan. This had been in response to the changing structure of the Indo-Pacific region, which has been characterised with developments such as rising China, Sino-Japan rivalry, and declining US commitment in the region. This research seeks to study the factors that affect ASEAN-Japan cooperation in the region. This research employing the use of thematic analysis and process-tracing. This research found three factors that affects ASEAN-Japan cooperation in the region. Firstly, China is the primary factor, as the rise of China and its growing influence in the region prompted Japan to counter-balance against China through its FOIP, while ASEAN feared China's reaction, making ASEAN hesitant to accept Japan's FOIP. Secondly is the Quad, which has been perceived negatively by China, and anymore strengthening of the Quad would further provoke China, reinforcing the antagonistic relationship between China and the Quad, which may give pause to ASEAN to accept FOIP. This research has updated the developments and analysis involving ASEAN and Japan in the Indo-Pacific. Thirdly, there is a need to deconstruct the hostile perceptions and deescalate tensions between China and the Quad members. Japan will need to continue framing the FOIP to be more inclusive and accommodative to China, while convincing the US to shift its hostile perceptions towards China.

**Keywords:** ASEAN-Japan Relations; Japan's Foreign Policy; Indo-Pacific; Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)

### INTRODUCTION

This article will focus on the historical background and evolution of Japan's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia states, and eventually ASEAN from the Cold War period to Abe second administration (2012). Of particular note is the Fukuda Doctrine which signals Japan recognizing ASEAN as its focal point in its foreign policy. Then, this article will examine the Japan's FOIP strategy, along with its implementation and its effects in Indo-Pacific.

Japan has been one of the world's largest economic power in the world for a long time, providing various foreign aid, capital, and technologies to countries in Asia. In wake of a post-cold war world, Japan's position in Asia has been evolving, especially in relative to a rising power, China. For a time, Japan has had slow economic growth, seeing its once dominant position slowly losing to China. Yet Japan still plays a very important role in Asia, as the state can still provide benefit to Asia region in terms of public goods. Recently, Japan was seen to make a comeback, especially after the formation of Abe Shinzo administration in late 2012 after Japanese domestic politics had been in a state of instability (Yoshimatsu 2021). The administration, who had a long reign of more than 7 years, provides a stable political foundation for the country to focus on Japan's foreign policy towards Asia.



The intensifying of Sino-US rivalry had caused Japan to re-evaluate its strategic position in the region, as US is Japan's principal strategic ally, so any relationship changes between US and China would affect Japan's relationship with China as well. During Abe's second administration, Japan had spearheaded the concept of Indo-Pacific, made manifest with the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) strategy. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or known as 'The Quad' had also been revived, as the four Quad member states had increased their cooperation and interaction to 'contain' China, seen as a strategic threat to the Quad members. Under the FOIP, Japan and its allies seek to create a favourable regional distribution of power and status in an increasingly multipolar region, especially in light of China's rise and its military assertiveness in the region. The FOIP and its implementation in Indo-Pacific region will be discussed in three aspects: connectivity and infrastructure, maritime and, perceptions.

### **JAPAN'S FOREIGN POLICY**

Delving into the nature of Japanese foreign policy, early into 1970s, the Japanese were said to romanticize their neighbours, aspiring for Asianism and laden with idealism (Rozman 2017). Post-cold war period saw Japan's peak, being viewed as a rival to US and aspiring leader of an emergent East Asian region. Into 2000s however, Japan had faded into background in the face of rising China. 2010s saw Japan's regional situation much worse, China now considered as the great threat, along with nuclear threat of North Korea and a distrusting South Korea. Japan now doubled down with its alliance with the US.

Japan's foreign policy post-World War 2 was mainly buttressed with its subordinate relationship to the US, which began with defeat and occupation, enshrined with the San Francisco Treaty of 1951 (Kingston 2017). The San Francisco System left legacies that would later be left in cold conflict with Japan's neighbouring states, as seen in the maritime disputes such as Senkaku/Diaoyu, Kuril/Northern Territories and Dokdo/Takeshima, all which would remain unresolved till this day. Under the security umbrella of the US-Japan security alliance, Japan enacted the Yoshida Doctrine, meant to focus on economic recovery while delaying rearmament as wished by the US, which then became a point of tension between the US and Japan. In 1967, Japan had announced its Three Non-Nuclear Principles, which ban the production, possession or introduction of nuclear into Japanese territory. This was done not only due to domestic pacificism within Japanese society, but also to present Japan to the world as a peaceful, pacifist state that abhors war and the use of force.

In an effort to regionally reintegrate Japan economically into Asia, Japan had paid reparations to its formerly conquered countries during World War 2, totalling over US\$1 billion, which allowed Japan to expand economic ties in the region (Kingston 2017). Japan had even spearheaded the establishment of Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 1966, which promote regional development and good will among the states in the region. Following the aftermath of anti-Japanese riots in Bangkok and Jakarta in 1974, Japan had enacted the Fukuda Doctrine in 1977, which saw Japan increasing its influence primarily in Southeast Asia, with Official Development Aid (ODA) as its main foreign aid tool to facilitate the 'flying geese' model of development, with Japan as the leading goose of the pack.

Since the end of the Second World War, Japan since then have unique conditions that made Japan an 'abnormal' state. Japan is abnormal in two aspects: No right to wage war or maintain armed forces, and Japan to punch so below its weight in the provision of regional and global security. These two aspects serve as limitations for Japanese foreign policy, which can be seen manifested in Japanese relations with its neighboring states. Japan now has a self-defense force, of which is one of the strongest military force in Indo-Pacific region. However, the restrictions meant that Japan gives particular weight to using economic statecraft as its foreign policy (Seawright & Gerring 2008). Japan mainly employs foreign aid as one of its economic statecraft tools (Baldwin 1985; OECD 2021). This is reflected through the recent revision to ODA Charter in 2015, which designates ODA policy as "strategic diplomatic tool" where it allows the offer of development assistance to foreign armed forces for non-military purposes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2015;



Yoshimatsu 2021). This means that economic statecraft is Japan's main foreign policy tool in its interactions in both before and after the introduction of Indo-Pacific concept.

Up until 2006, Japan had a strong diplomatic presence, but under the DPJ government after 2009, Japan's diplomatic presence had weakened (Yoshimatsu 2021). The main reason can be attributed to: 1) Japan stuck in great power plays due to alliance with US; 2) Japan's 'lost decades' since 1990s; and 3) Domestic's lack of support. Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government, who assumed power from the previous Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) from 2009 - 2012 had released new National Defense Program Guidelines in December 2010, which slowly shifted Japan into assuming a more active security role, even in conditions when Japan is not under attack or in crisis (Oros 2014). It is in this 2010 guidelines that the important concepts of 'dynamic defence' which has Japan adopting a more flexible, action-based conception of the use of military force, and 'grey area' use of military force, which has Japan using military force in response to situations that are not a full-scale attack on the Japanese homeland.

### **ABE'S SECOND ADMINISTRATION (2012 - 2020)**

Japan was seen to make a comeback, especially after the formation of Abe Shinzo administration in late 2012 after Japanese domestic politics had been in a state of instability. The administration, who had a long reign of 8 years, providing a stable political foundation for the country to focus on Japan's foreign policy towards Asia.

China's rising influence had caused Japan to reconsider its foreign policies vis a vis China. Most of Japan's strategic aims is that of dominance-denial (Yoshimatsu 2021). Also central to the Japanese foreign policy is the Prime Minister's executive office, the Kantei, which had been the center in Japanese policymaking, as the Kanteiled policymaking is sustained by Abe's skillful employment of personnel, strategic reframing of existing policies and centralization of policymaking power, often through new supra-ministerial decision-making bodies in the Cabinet. This meant that Abe's long reign administration at the domestic level is an important factor when considering Japanese foreign policies.

In the aspect of Japan's maritime policy, there were developments particularly in three aspects: 1) influence of China's growing assertiveness in maritime affairs; 2) Japan's advocacy of a new idea to achieve strategic objectives; and 3) the development of ocean policy during Abe administration (Lam 2017; Yoshimatsu 2021). Japan was concerned about China's assertiveness in the region, and seek to maintain the rule of law in the region and keep China from further influencing and coercing Southeast Asian states. Abe had called for three principles adhering to the rule of law at sea at the 2014 Shangri-La Dialogue, advocating for restraint in using force and coercion in pushing maritime claims, use of international law in laying claims, and to settle disputes by peaceful means (Abe 2014). Japan had cultivated strong ties with not only the US, but also India as balancing acts towards China's growing influence in various seas. At the same time, Japan also set up a formal communication mechanism with China as a hotline to prevent occurrence of a maritime contingency. In the ideational aspect, Japan had advocated the Three Principles of the Rule of Law at Sea, which has been recognized as a common norm through Japan-US partnership and diffused in G7 statements, which invited backlash from China (Yoshimatsu 2021).

As for Japan's trade policy in the age of proliferating mega Free Trade Agreements (FTA), Japan, who had previously focused on bilateral FTAs had switched to mega-FTAs, particularly Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement (JEEPA) (Yoshimatsu 2021). Japan had sought to promote high standard trade rules which cover areas that are not even been covered by WTO, suggesting Japan's use of ideational promotion to sustain liberal trade order. This was also done due to uncertainty of Trump administration in sustaining the liberal trade order, exemplified by Trump's withdrawal of US from the TPP negotiations, so Japan stepped in to fill the role of upholding the liberal trade order (Wu 2020).

In terms of infrastructure investment in Asia, Japan had strengthened commitments to infrastructure export and investments via reforming existing policies and establish new organizations to support the policy, especially in supporting Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and Asian Development Bank (ADB) (Yoshimatsu 2021). According to ADB's estimation in 2017, the total investment needs in ASEAN from 2016 to 2030 is between US\$2.8 trillion (baseline estimate) and US\$3 trillion (climate-adjusted estimate) (Asian Development Bank 2017). ASEAN needs these infrastructure to drive economic growth and support the increasing ASEAN trade, with total merchandise trade projected to increase as ASEAN grows to become the fourth largest economy in the world by 2050 (Jusoh 2018). China's BRI projects would be important contribution to ASEAN's infrastructure, as upon completion, ASEAN will be able to increase its investment in the logistic sector, which contributes to spillover effects in the economy through other investments, such as agriculture, manufacturing, oil and gas, mining, and quarrying. BRI projects' completion will plug investment gaps in infrastructure, and if these gaps are not addressed, there will be negative impact on the overall economic growth in ASEAN (Asian Development Bank 2017).

Japan sought to pursue inter-institutional balancing against China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). This was mainly seen through Japan's Quality Infrastructure projects, which provides the alternative to China's BRI, and Japanese companies have decades-long experience with infrastructure development and investments in Asia, which gives Japan edge over China in the infrastructure investment realm (Berkofsky 2019). Of particular note is Japan's focus on ideation elements with regards to its commitment towards infrastructure investment by advocating four standards for quality infrastructure investment openness, transparency, economic efficiency, financial soundness, which had been a success considering that the standards had been embedded in multilateral institutions like APEC and G20 (Yoshimatsu 2021). The four standards also had a strategic aspect to it as it undermines China's own infrastructure investment initiatives, particularly it's the shadow of its debt trap problems.

However, Japan also pursue economic pragmatism by engaging collaboration with China in infrastructure development in third countries in Asia (Berkofsky 2019; Yoshimatsu 2021). In July 2017, Japan had announced that it would consider being involved in BRI projects after initially refusing to consider joining the BRI. However, Japan listed four preconditions for Japan to join the BRI. The projects must be characterized by: 1) Openness; 2) transparency; 3) economic sustainability; and 4) the ability of developing countries involved in the projects to claim financial ownership over the projects. This was met with refusal from China, as these conditions can be arguably be the very opposite of how most of the BRI projects are being operated and managed. However, it made economic sense for Japan to cooperate with China on the BRI, as it gives Japan opportunity to hold China to higher levels of accountability and transparency. In October 2018, during Abe's state visit to China in 11 years since the last state visit to China by a Japanese leader, Japan and China had signed a memorandum of understanding that foresees cooperation on up to 50 infrastructure investment initiatives (Armstrong 2018). Japan and China also agreed to set up a joint committee to explore the possibility of a joint project of building a high-speed railway system in Thailand, which previously had been a symbol of competition between the two countries (Duchâtel 2018).

#### ASEAN-JAPAN RELATIONS

Southeast Asia is an important region for Japan, as it holds the crucial sea lines of communications (SLOC) and natural resources (Kingston 2017; Koga 2017). This was one of the reasons why Japan sought to expand southwards towards Southeast Asia during World War 2, which is to secure natural resources and ensure Japan's selfsufficiency. This however had caused Southeast Asians to harbour historical memories of Japanese imperialism. Thus, Japan endeavoured to rebuild trust of Southeast Asians, starting with providing economic aid to Southeast Asian states after the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty, paying war reparations and established the ADB in 1966, providing support for development in the region. Japan's relations with ASEAN began gaining more momentum from 1977, signified by the enactment of the Fukuda Doctrine and Japan becoming a dialogue partner of



ASEAN. Japan would then sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 2004, furthering the trustbuilding with ASEAN (Hook et al. 2011).

Japan's relations with ASEAN is mainly nurtured through ASEAN-led multilateral institutions, where formerly Japan used to nurture its relations with ASEAN states bilaterally, which proliferates in Indo-Pacific. Among these multilateral institutions that Japan is a part of includes ASEAN Plus Three (APT), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asian Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). These institutions serve multiple purposes, chief among them includes regularization of security exchanges among a wider group of states and promotion of regional economic integration and development (Ba 2014; Stubbs & Mustapha 2014).

Japan and ASEAN signed the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (AJCEP), which has elements of a free trade agreement (Ramezani & Kamali 2021; Wu 2020). As for regional agreements, Japan and some members of ASEAN had been a part of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for TransPacific Partnership (CPTPP), which were evolved from Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) after the US pulled out from TPP. Japan and ASEAN are also in Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), of which Japan have collaborated with China to seek early conclusion of negotiations on the RCEP, while also at the same time using RCEP as Japan's ideational promotion of high standard trade rules to sustain liberal trade order (Yoshimatsu 2021).

### FUKUDA DOCTRINE

Fukuda Doctrine, introduced by Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda in 18 August 1977 has been the symbol of amity and cooperation between Japan and Southeast Asia (Koga 2017). This was initiated following massive anti-Japanese demonstrations erupted during Prime Minister Tanaka's visit to the Southeast Asia in 1974. The demonstrations signaled the fears of the Southeast Asians of Japan seeking to revive some sort of a new form of Japan's past imperial ambitions of "Greater East Asia CoProsperity Sphere". At the time, ASEAN member states had 'twin fears' in the changing strategic landscape in the 1970s, in which ASEAN member states had fears of the potential emergence of a power vacuum and about the future of Japan's role in Southeast Asia. The Shanghai Communique in 1972 had signaled the shift in the USSoviet composition, where China had aligned itself with the US against the Soviet. There had also been US retrenchment from Asia after the US had pulled away from the Vietnam War, causing the eventual defeat of South Vietnam. The region also saw the retrenchment by the United Kingdom and the weakening of regional institutions, which saw the collapse of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Asia-Pacific Council.

The Fukuda Doctrine was initiated in this context, as Japan seeks to reassure the Southeast Asians states that Japan does not seek to become a military power or dominance in the region. Formal relationship between ASEAN and Japan first established at the 1st ASEAN-Japan Forum in March 1977, which had been build on the ASEAN-Japan Rubber Forum to discuss economic issues (Koga 2017; Tay et al. 2019). Following that, in August 1977, Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda was invited to the ASEAN-Japan summit, which had been on the sidelines of the 2nd ASEAN Summit. It was from his speech in Manilla on the last day of his visit to ASEAN that he introduced the Fukuda Doctrine. In 1978, Japan became the dialogue partner of ASEAN.

Japan then sought to create an East Asian community through its the vision of "acting together, advancing together" in 2002 (Ramezani & Kamali 2021). Among these efforts included the AJCEP, Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area, and the Greater Mekong Subregion project. Japan and ASEAN signed the Tokyo Declaration for the Dynamic and Enduring Japan-ASEAN Partnership in the New Millennium and endorsed the Japan-ASEAN Plan of Action in 2003. This would cover various areas including economic, political, and security cooperation (Hook et al. 2011). In 2004, Japan took a step further towards trust building with ASEAN by signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC).





### TRADE AGREEMENTS

Since 1998, Japan had made a shift in its trade policy in order to diversify its options and give emphasis on bilateral and regional arrangements. This change in trade policy is driven by two factors: uncertain future of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and fear of abandonment. Japan had immediately endeavoured to establish trade agreements with ASEAN after China's own trade negotiations with ASEAN. Japan wanted to remain active in the regional arrangements and maintain its economic influence in the region. ASEAN had been attracted by Japan's technology and Japan's consumer market, and also wanted to diversify its trading partner.

ASEAN and Japan had signed some form of free trade agreement known as ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (AJCEP) in 2008, which is comprehensive in scope, covering trade in goods, trade in services, investment, and economic cooperation (ASEAN 2013). This had begun from 2003 when leaders of ASEAN and Japan had signed the Framework for Comprehensive Economic Partnership in Bali, providing the basis for negotiation of AJCEP. Since the AJCEP, ASEAN-Japan economic ties have been significant, and shows substantially high profits for both ASEAN and Japan in joint cooperation (Ramezani & Kamali 2021).

ASEAN-Japan economic ties can thus be likened to mutual dependency. Both Japan and seven of ASEAN member states were part of Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), which were first proposed in January 1989 by Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke, where the objective of APEC is to nurture close economic interdependence of the countries of the Pacific Rim (Wu 2020). Some of ASEAN's leaders may have perceived APEC as a threat, and as a response, in 1990, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir had proposed the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) to establish a free trade area consisting of ASEAN, China, Japan, and South Korea. However, this plan did not get through due to Japan declining to join EAEC due to exclusion of Western countries.

Japan, along with four of ASEAN member states: Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam and Brunei were part of CPTPP (or known as TPP-11), which had been evolved from TPP which had failed due to the US under Trump's administration pulling out of TPP negotiations in 2016. ASEAN member states had participated in the TPP as a form of a hedging strategy to avoid becoming overdependent on China by diversifying their economies and balance diplomatic relations between the US and China (Wu 2020). US withdrawal from TPP caused uncertainty in the negotiations, which Japan under Abe administration would then assume leadership in revitalizing the TPP, which had been an important element of Abenomics, where the main objective of this policy was to pull Japan out of its long-term recession.

Japan also seek to expand foreign markets, create pressure for domestic reform, and counterbalance against China through the TPP. Despite Trump administration's refusal to join TPP, the US may come back into the TPP in the future, so TPP-11 will need have to be in force to receive the US (Tay et al. 2019). In March 2018, final deal of the TPP-11 which would be known as CPTPP was signed by 11 countries in Chile, though participating ASEAN countries like Malaysia had demanded the review of its commitments on state-owned enterprises while Vietnam asked for delay in the implementation of trade sanctions arising from violations of labour standards (Wu 2020).

Unlike APEC and CPTPP, RCEP was fully participated by all of ASEAN member states, which also included Japan and China. RCEP had broken the deadlock between two competing economic frameworks in the region: East Asia Free Trade Area (EAFTA) and Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia (CEPEA), which were championed by China and Japan respectively (Wu 2020). ASEAN and the 'plus six' partner countries had begun RCEP negotiations in 2012 during ASEAN Summit held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia (ASEAN 2012). It was imperative for Japan to conclude the RCEP negotiations as soon as possible, while maintain trade liberalisation as high as possible to secure Indo-Pacific region against trade protectionism (Tay et al. 2019).

### OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE (ODA)

Since 1977, Japan's foreign aid policy had been geared towards playing a role in the international community as befitting its economic status as one of the top economic powerhouses in the world (Sudo 2015). Asian Financial Crisis 1997 had allowed Japan to strengthen relations and increase further presence in the region, as Japan had allocated US\$17.3 billion in aid for ASEAN member states (Ramezani & Kamali 2021). Japan also uses ODA to strengthen bilateral relations with its partners, as close relations allows for facilitated environment for Japan to achieve its national interests through economics and politics (Khoiriaty 2021).

Japan has adapted its use of ODA, which is Japan's most prominent economic statecraft, to reflect its security concerns, particularly since the increasing hostilities between the US and China (Govella 2021; Kato 2016). This is reflected through the recent revision to ODA Charter, which designates ODA policy as "strategic diplomatic tool" where it allows for strengthening capacities to ensure maritime security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2015). Official Development Assistance (ODA) can be defined as government aid that aims to promote and especially prioritizes on economic development and welfare of developing countries (OECD 2021). ODA has since been the main source of financing for development aid and has been adopted as the 'gold standard' of foreign aid by OECD Developmental Committee (DAC) since 1969.

Economic statecraft is described as a state using economic means to achieve geopolitical objectives in the international arena (Baldwin 1985; Weiss & Thurbon 2021). States make use of policy tools that provide either rewards or sanctions to influence foreign government and shape their behaviours. Usually, the purpose of such statecraft is to "fend off, outflank, or move in step with clearly defined rival powers whether such rivalry is primarily economic or military" (Weiss & Thurbon 2021 p. 5). Japan presents an interesting case to observe the use of economic statecraft due to its unique constraints (Govella 2021). The constraint refers to Article 9 of its constitution, whereby Japan formally renounced its right to wage war and use of military force. While Japan now has a self-defense force, this restriction means that Japan give particular weight to using economic statecraft as its foreign policy (Seawright & Gerring 2008). One of the economic statecraft tools that Japan mainly employs is ODA, which is a form of foreign aid (Baldwin 1985; OECD 2021).

In undertaking the "aid-doubling" plan, ASEAN has been at the core of Japan's economic assistance policy, with approximately 30 per cent of net disbursements of bilateral ODA going to ASEAN states (Sudo 2015). Japan's economic aid policy had expanded, in large due to external pressure by the United States, who had been the most vocal in asking the Japanese government to share the burden of supporting pro-Western developing countries near major conflict areas. This had been the reason why Thailand and the Philippines since 1980 had received special consideration under the slogan known as "strategic assistance", resulting in high level of Japanese aid to ASEAN as a whole. During those times, these two countries had been on the frontline states facing the opposing bloc led by the Soviets.

Japanese factories in ASEAN states are indispensable part of Japan's supply chain and production network (Lam 2017). Japan and ASEAN economies are interdependent. Further supporting the importance of Asia as the most strategically important region for Japan is that almost two-thirds of Japanese ODA was distributed to Asia rather than to the poorest regions like Africa (Govella 2021; Lam 2017). In 2015 - 2019, Japanese ODA in Asia accounted for 68.4 percent of total aid, while Southeast Asia had received the most ODA in most of Japan's ODA from 1979 (Govella 2021). It is only by 2017 that South Asia receives the most ODA allocation, with Southeast Asia just behind South Asia. This reflects on Southeast Asia's importance to Japan's strategic objectives, especially when contrasted with other regions such as Africa who only receive 8.4 percent of total ODA.

### FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC

Before the introduction of the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) strategy, Japan has been facing acute security, political and economic pressures from China since 2010, who had now surpassed Japan's GDP (Koga 2020). China also began challenging Japan's sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands, which had been under de facto Japan's administration. The US, who had been Japan's key



strategic ally was strategically distracted by the 2007-2008 global financial crisis, and has been in a 'relative decline' (Layne 2018).

Under this context, the FOIP strategy was launched by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development in 2016, which was to be Japan's new strategic vision. The FOIP is to address several issues: 1) maintaining the Indian and Pacific oceans as two 'free and open oceans'; 2) facilitating connectivity between the Asian and African continents; and 3) promoting "freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and making [the region] prosperous" (Abe 2016). According to Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, the concept of FOIP does not intend to create a new institution nor compete with existing institutions and will cooperate with any partners who share the vision of FOIP (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022). The Indo-Pacific is to be the 'engine of the economic growth of the entire world', where the establishment of the regional order based on the rule of law, rather than force or coercion will benefit the international community as a whole.

Under the FOIP concept are three pillars to realize its strategy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2021). The first pillar is the promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation and free trade. In this pillar, Japan will seek cooperation with those who share fundamental vision and principles for a free and open Indo-Pacific, and will promote FOIP through media and strategic communication at the international arena. The second pillar is the pursuit of economic prosperity, where Japan will work on improving "physical connectivity" (which include quality infrastructure development such as ports and railways), "people to people connectivity" (through human resource developments), and "institutional connectivity" (through facilitating customs). Japan also aims to strengthen economic partnership and enhance business environment. The third pillar is the commitment for peace and stability. Under this pillar, Japan will give assistance for capacity-building to countries in the Indo-Pacific region such as strengthening capacity of maritime law enforcement and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), while also fostering cooperation in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, anti-piracy, counterterrorism, and non-proliferation.

Japan's primary objective in its 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)' strategy is to shape and consolidate regional order in the region based on existing rules-based international order, while increasingly separated from FOIP is the pursuing national security strategy through strengthening US-Japan alliance and cultivating partnerships with India and Australia (Koga 2020). This suggests Japan's grand strategy towards Indo-Pacific region, and from this strategy, Japanese national interest in Southeast Asia can be identified by observing how Japan operationalises FOIP in Southeast Asia. Due to doubts of US security commitments in Asia-Pacific, Japan had made its FOIP strategy more flexible, one of its approaches is by using FOIP as a way to gauge other state's responses, understanding their perspectives and changing its strategic emphasis accordingly, which is dubbed as 'tactical hedging'.

### CONNECTIVITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Connectivity and infrastructure have been a core pillar of Japan's FOIP strategy. For a long time, Japan has a history of building connectivity and infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia, South Asia and, Africa. Japan has backed projects in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines, which are six of ASEAN's biggest economies with a total of US\$367 billion, against China's US\$255 billion (Choong 2020). Besides that, important to Southeast Asia is Japan's Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (EPQI), which addresses issues such as job creation, effective governance, and environmental impacts. This had been at a time when China's Belt Road Initiative (BRI) had bad perceptions, attached with "debt trap diplomacy". Japan's effort to build connectivity and infrastructure between the Indian and Pacific Oceans had gained ASEAN's support, with possibility of cooperation into ASEAN's various plans and initiatives such as 2025 ASEAN Masterplan for Connectivity, Indian Ocean Regional Association, and the ASEAN Smart Cities Framework.





Japan had promoted the idea of quality growth for development cooperation, which accentuates China's weakness in their own development cooperation. This idea is known as 'Quality Infrastructure Investment', which is cost-effective in the long run for resilient, inclusive, and sustainable growth (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022). Under Japan's leadership, G20 countries including emerging donors endorsed the 'G20 Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment' at the G20 Osaka Summit in 2019. The principles would include elements of Japan's priority such as: 1) openness; 2) transparency; 3) economic efficiency; and 4) debt sustainability (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2019b).

In the implementation of Japan's Quality Infrastructure Investment, Japan has taken measures to address global infrastructure financing gap. This attempt began with the introduction of Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI) in 2015, which focuses on 'quality' in infrastructure investment (Aizawa 2019). This would then expand with Japan's initiative of Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (EPQI) in 2016, Japan had provided approximately US\$200 billion in public and private capital from 2017 until 2021 for five years for infrastructure projects across the world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022). Among these projects in Southeast Asia includes US\$200 million for a container terminal in Yangon, Myanmar and US\$800 million for a special economic zone and a port in Dawei, Myanmar (Berkofsky 2019).

There is also the Thilawa Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Myanmar, where JICA signed a loan agreement with the Myanmar Japan Thilawa Development Ltd. in August 2017. Japan has been funding highways and roads in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and assisted in the development of Sihanoukville port in Cambodia and the construction of railway lines in Thailand. To fund the trade-promoting East-West Economic Corridor, Japan had launched the 'Japan-Mekong Connectivity Initiative' in 2016, which runs from Danang Port in Vietnam through Laos, Thailand and on to Myanmar. Japan also had funded the Southern Economic Corridor which runs from Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam through Cambodia, southern Laos, Thailand and on to the south-eastern Myanmar port city of Dawei.

The US and Australia had even officially endorsed Japan's 'Quality Infrastructure Investment' concept in 2018. An agreement between government agencies from the US, Australia and Japan was made to provide joint financing for infrastructure in Asia, which included America's Overseas Private Investment Corp., Australia's Export Finance and Insurance Corp., and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, which will cooperate to provide support for infrastructure such as undersea cables and energy projects such as liquefied natural gas (Berkofsky 2019). Even though China has been increasing its investment and infrastructure projects in ASEAN member states over the years, Japan is still leading in investment in Southeast Asia (Ramezani & Kamali 2021; Yadi 2020).

In the region's six largest economies, which are Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and, Vietnam, there were Japanese-backed projects which as of 2019, amounted at US\$367 billion, compared to China's US\$ 255 billion (Stromseth 2019). Japanese companies also have decades-long experience with infrastructure development and investments in Asia, which gives Japan edge over China in the infrastructure investment realm (Berkofsky 2019).

### MARITIME

Southeast Asia has been the main region for Sino-Japanese rivalry due to the importance of Southeast Asia to both China and Japan. Japanese factories in ASEAN states are indispensable part of Japan's supply chain and production network. Within the region also lies the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea which are the maritime lifelines of the resource-poor Japan (Lam 2017). With at least 80 percent of its oil tankers moving through the sea waters, it is no wonder that Japan would seek to maintain good relations with the maritime states in Southeast Asia for its own energy security.

To show just how far the two sea waters are important to Japan, in the light of China's excessive territorial claims in the disputed South China Sea had caused Tokyo to dispatch its new helicopter carrier, the Izumo, to South China Sea, which would continue to make port visits to Singapore, the



Philippines and Indonesia in 2017 before proceeding to have a joint naval exercise with Indian and US naval vessels in the Indian Ocean (Reuters 2017). As we can observe here, Japan was willing to go so far as to even dispatch its own military vessel to those sea waters. Some ASEAN states had actually welcomed a Japanese maritime presence to maintain the regional balance of power (Lam 2017).

In terms of maritime security, Japan has been concerned about China's recent assertive actions in the Indo-Pacific region. As stated above, the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea are important maritime lifelines for Japan's survival, and as such, Japan wishes to maintain the current status quo of 'rule of the law' in the region (Lam 2017). As such, Japan cannot afford to let China to have a sway on Southeast Asian states, who may be coerced by China's aggressive behaviour. At the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2014, Shinzo Abe had stated three principles for adhering to the rule of law at sea: 1) laying claims based on international law; 2) restraint in using force or coercion in pushing countries' respective claims; and 3) settling disputes by peaceful means (Abe 2014).

Under the FOIP strategy, Japan has been promoting the establishment of the rule of the law, freedom of navigation and free trade (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2021). As part of FOIP goal which is to enhance commitment for peace and stability, Japan has been strengthening the maritime security capabilities of various Southeast Asian states. Under the Vientiane Vision which Japan had launched in 2016, Japan sought to extend defence cooperation with Southeast Asian states to enhance the maritime domain awareness of littoral states and their defence capacity (Choong 2020). Countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam had received provision of coast guard ships and maritime aircraft to enhance the maritime security capabilities of these states. Japan aims to ameliorate the threat of "grey zone" challenges in the disputed areas, and the coast guards are perceived to project a less militaristic front for state power in disputed areas. While these measures are aimed to combat maritime security threats such as crime and piracy, it can be argued that these can also be a form of deterrence for China as well.

Besides that, Japan also have supported the US military's freedom of navigation operation in the sea. Although Japan will not send its Self-Defense Force, but Japan will play its role through defense cooperation and training, which includes training exercises with the US Navy, bilateral and multilateral exercises with other regional navies (Panda 2017). In Japan's attempts to support freedom of navigation in Indo-Pacific, Japan has even dispatched the 'JS Kaga', an Izumo-class helicopter destroyer to the region in 2018, with aims to promote cooperation and interoperability with partner navies (Minister of Defense of Japan 2018). This helicopter destroyer was escorted by two destroyers and conducted exercises with the navies of India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

Japan also had deployed the 'JS Izumo', a sister ship of the Kaga, to the region, and conducted naval exercises with Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, the Philippines and Vietnam in 2019 (South China Morning Post 2019). The deployment also includes a naval exercise with four countries, which is Japan, India, the Philippines and the US in the South China Sea. The exercises were perceived to send a signal to China, emphasizing that at a time when China continued its military build-up in the area, Japan, the US and other likeminded countries could deploy their naval power to South China Sea.

### PERCEPTIONS

In the 18th Shangri-La Dialogue that held in Singapore in 2019, the US and China had both exchanged sharp criticisms against each other (Jung, Lee & Lee 2021). France and the UK reaffirmed their commitment to the Indo-Pacific region while Japan had stressed the necessity of facilitating the FOIP strategy. Just a day before the Dialogue, the US Department of Defense had released its 'Indo-Pacific Strategy Report', which had described China as 'a revisionist power' that threatens the regional order, along with warnings of a more assertive China being willing to accept friction to pursuit a more expansive set of political, economic, and security interests (US Department of Defense 2019). This marks the foundations of a Sino-US rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region, as the concept of Indo-Pacific emerged to challenge China's strategic ambitions under the



guise of 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), which has been seen as the extension of China's assertive foreign policy (Jung, Lee & Lee 2021).

This hostile stance by the US in its Indo-Pacific strategy, as displayed during the 18th Shangri La Dialogue, had clearly displayed the US's perception towards China, and China too, perceives the US as hostile. As the US is the main pillar in the discourse of Indo-Pacific, the Quad as a whole would also be seen as hostile by China, as shown in China's criticism on the formation of the Quad as an effort to contain China. Even the Southeast Asian states are sceptical of the Indo-Pacific and the FOIP discourse, which they too perceive it as a thinly-veiled strategy against China by the US and the Quad member states (Heydarian 2020).

This had made a majority of ASEAN member states to perceive that the US and China are on a collision course, of which China share little blame for getting onto that collision course, while instead more of the blame lies in Trump's unconventional approach to foreign policy (Le Thu 2020). By contrast, in the perception of ASEAN member states, China is not perceived as a monolithic revisionist state, but instead a key element of the emerging regional security architecture, and also an indispensable stakeholder that should be engaged on a conciliatory basis (Heydarian 2020). ASEAN rejects the narrow definition of China as a hegemonic threat that should be countered by a coalition of powers, as per the realist norms of balance of power.

Fortunately, ASEAN member states has been consistently steadfast in their trust and confidence towards Japan, which had a different version of FOIP that ASEAN member states are more comfortable with (Le Thu 2020). Japan's FOIP had actually been the oldest and the most developed vision as it was first introduced by Prime Minister Abe in 2007, which now had a strong focus on development and connectivity. Japan had even opted to replace the word "strategy" with "vision", in order to present its "FOIP vision" as more "euphemistic and practical", and to get buy-in from countries in the region (Miller 2019). The change is meant as a message to China that FOIP should not be seen in adversarial terms. Japan also began to accommodate China, as Japan had finally agreed to cooperate with China on infrastructure projects despite having opposed China's Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and criticized BRI. In October 2018, Abe had pledged to cooperate with China on infrastructure projects in third world countries, and search for points of convergence between the AIIB and the ADB (Koga 2020). Japan and China had built up goodwill during the Covid-19 pandemic when Japan sent assistance and aid to China.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Japan now seeks to overcome the challenges of Japan's structural conditions in the region through the discourse of the Indo-Pacific and the FOIP strategy. Japan and China had been engaging in a sort of rivalry, especially in Southeast Asia. In the realm of infrastructure and connectivity, Japan, endorsed by the US and Australia, had been advancing its 'Quality Infrastructure Investment', which China would later mirror Japan's own idea. Japan has contributed a lot in various infrastructure projects under FOIP, among which is the East-West Economic Corridor and Southern Economic Corridor.

In the realm of maritime, where Japan has been cooperating with not only the Quad states, but also Southeast Asian states to extend defense cooperation through maritime security capacity-building and maritime exercises. Japan has also supported the US military freedom of navigation operations as well, going so far as to send its naval ships in multilateral training exercises. From the aspect of perceptions towards FOIP, the discourse of the Indo-Pacific and the FOIP strategy are perceived by both China and Southeast Asian states as a 'thinly veiled' strategy to contain China.

Such perception is not unfounded, as China has been perceived as a 'revisionist power' by the US, as shown in its 'Indo-Pacific Strategy Report'. In response to such perceptions, Japan had been working to improve the image of FOIP to deconstruct perceptions of FOIP being an 'anti-China' strategy and seek to rebrand FOIP as a more inclusive and not adversary to China. Despite the long ongoing rivalry, Japan has even been trying to socialize China to adopt Japan's own ideas and rules, as seen from Japan adopting a more accommodating position towards China by initiating joint cooperation on infrastructure projects.

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