



Japan’s New Plan for A “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”: What Does It Mean for Southeast Asia?

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“With an expected upgrade to a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” this year, Japan and ASEAN need to communicate well with Japan’s new Indo-Pacific Vision under Kishida’s Administration. While Southeast Asia remains at the heart of Indo-Pacific, meaningful and substantive cooperation with ASEAN is a win for Tokyo in the context of great power rivalry. Most importantly, the two should find more synergies between FOIP and AOIP.”

The Evolution of Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision (FOIP)

FOIP is not a new term in Japan’s foreign and security policy. The historical evolution and amelioration of Japan’s FOIP are important factors to understand the flexibility and accommodation that Japan has to offer to its partners, especially its desire to gain endorsement from ASEAN. The initial development of Japan’s FOIP concept dates back to the first administration of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007, when he delivered a speech in the Indian Parliament and mentioned “broader Asia” to create a network of entirety of the Pacific Ocean, including the US, India, and Australia. These big four powers were later formed into the first “Quadrilateral Security Dialogue” known as the Quad, which was not quite successful as its strategic intents encountered much Chinese criticism and doubts from ASEAN member states. Together with his long-term strategy of “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity”, Abe’s core values at that time were to promote “democracy, rule of law, freedom and human rights” with only a group of like-minded countries of the Quad members.¹ This strategy was pretty much driven by a rapidly rising China, while the Chinese threat perception became sharper among Japanese policy elites. Overall, the first FOIP vision was regarded as a “competitive strategy” more than “cooperative strategy” towards China, although it was not explicitly or directly pointed out.²

Until Shinzo Abe’s second administration (2012-2020), Japan officially launched its “Free and Open Indo Pacific” Strategy in 2016, with a clear concept of shaping a rule-based regional order through fostering regional stability and prosperity.³ This strategy opens a new and broader chapter in Japanese

¹ Yuichi Hosoya, “FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *Asia-Pacific Review* 26, 3 (2019): 18-28.

² Ibid.

³ Ministry of Defense of Japan. “Advancing the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Vision.” Accessed May 20 2023. https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/exc/india_pacific/india_pacific-en.html

diplomacy. Abe stressed the importance of the confluence of the two oceans (Indian and the Pacific Oceans), and the two continents (Asia and Africa). Japan's Foreign Ministry put it in this way: "Asia that is rapidly growing and Africa that possess huge potential of growth, and free and open Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean".⁴ But interestingly, within that period, Japan was committed to improving Tokyo and Beijing relations under Abe's new foreign policy vision. At that time, Tokyo-Beijing diplomatic improvement became more apparent. In the High-Level Summits between Prime Minister Abe and President Xi Jinping in November 2014, the two agreed to have a "Mutually Beneficial Relationship based on Common Strategic Interests"⁵. Once again in July 2017, Abe pledged to incorporate his new FOIP with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This is one of the key divergence between FOIP in the first and the second Abe's administrations. The second version seems not to be a containment strategy towards any state in particular and tends to be more "inclusive and open" to all interested countries, without antagonizing the largest elephant in the room like China.

After all, many Asian states, especially Southeast Asian states, were more comfortable with the second version, in which China was not regarded as the main target yet a welcoming partner. This is Abe's legacy in improving China-Japan diplomatic relations at that time as Japan had shown its willingness to mutually respect different diplomatic initiatives and find the synergies to cooperate with China for common prosperity of Indo-Pacific.

What Does Kishida's New Plan of FOIP entail?

The New Plan for A Free and Open Indo-Pacific was announced on March 20, 2023, during Prime Minister Kishida's visit to India. Kishida emphasized a few times in his speech that "international community is at a history's turning point", thus, there is a strong need to collectively defend "freedom" and "rule of law".⁶ In this New Plan, there are some key points worth examining.

First and foremost, the current Kishida's "New Plan for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific" is not a newly reformulated foreign policy of Japan, it is rather a policy enhancement of the existing FOIP from Shinzo Abe's Administration. The New Plan entails four pillars of cooperation, namely Principles for Peace and Rules for Prosperity, Addressing Challenges in an Indo-Pacific Way, Multi-layered Connectivity, and Extending Efforts for Security and Safe Use of the "Sea" to the "Air". These four pillars are quite comprehensive as it does not only prioritize security issues but also digital connectivity, free and fair trade, infrastructure, climate change, food security, public health, and people-to-people exchange. With this new notion, Tokyo expects to put forth Japan's leading role in shaping a rule-based economic and security architecture in the wider Indo-Pacific region, which is often perceived by Japan as at greatest risk if left unchecked.

Apparently, India has always been the main venue to introduce Japan's new foreign policy vision of the Indo-Pacific. The first was by Shinzo Abe in 2007, followed by Fumio Kishida this year. It therefore clearly attests to the claim that India and probably the wider Global South is an important and

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," Accessed 19 May 2023, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000430632.pdf>

⁵ Kawashima Shin, "Beyond Abe Diplomacy: Charting a China Policy for a New Era." *Nippon.com*. 18 September 2020. <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00626/>

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Policy Speech by Prime Minister KISHIDA Fumio (New Plan for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific"), 20 March 2023, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/pc/page1e_000586.html

indispensable partner to Japan in this new age of global order, especially when implementing this FOIP vision. However, the “Global South” is still very vague in Kishida’s speech, and without a detailed explanation, the question raised on which specific area or region Japan expects to cooperate with those countries, given their different strategic environments and diversities.⁷

Alongside this New Plan, in December 2022, Japan released three security documents “National Security Strategy”, “National Defense Strategy”, and “Defense Buildup Program”, which explicitly put the country in a more proactive defense posture by stepping up defense capability including counterstrike capabilities.⁸ The rationale behind such posture is more likely shaped by the changing strategic environment in Northeast Asia, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The so-called international liberal order is becoming more vulnerable. After the Russian aggression towards Ukraine, China’s assertiveness in the maritime domain, as well as North Korean nuclear threats, Japan finds its strategic environment more threatening, and therefore, needs an urgent response.

As Kishida is taking a new step in Japan’s foreign policy, he stressed the importance of maintaining a rule-based order—without leaving it unchecked—as well as the collective attempts to oppose any unilateral intent to change the status quo. The unilateral intents Japan refers to probably are those of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China’s military assertiveness, and the North Korean nuclear program, which are the big three concerns of Japan in the current context. In the face of such geopolitical challenges, Kishida’s extended version of FOIP expects to reinvigorate Japan’s leadership in the region and remain even more relevant in shaping regional economic and security architecture.

What Does It Mean for Japan-ASEAN Partnership?

Japan reiterates the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans to define the core geographical proximity of its FOIP Vision. Southeast Asia is geographically important to this vision, as it is at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region. However, in the context of Southeast Asia, Kishida’s New Plan remains unclear about which region should be the focus. Southeast Asia seems not at the top of the priority list, but India and the undefined “Global South”. Up until now, there is no clear hint of what specific actions should Japan and ASEAN can work on together under this “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” framework. While Southeast Asia is not on Japan’s priority list, it remains to be seen the new development of partnership between Japan and ASEAN under such vision.

Indeed, Southeast Asian states had mixed reactions towards Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific back in the first Abe’s administration. The key sensitivity for ASEAN is to be forced to endorse any policy that implicitly or explicitly targets the rising China, given the fact that China has been the largest trading partner to regional bloc and became indispensable in regional economic development. This is not to mention yet the close bilateral ties between China and ASEAN states, such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. Abe’s FOIP had evolved from a “competitive” to a “cooperative” strategy towards China, yet the current policy framework under Kishida probably demonstrates a significant return to that “competitive” one. Notwithstanding the emphasis on “excluding no one, openness”, it remains to be seen

⁷ Kei Koga, “Japan-Southeast Asia Relations: Great Power Politics: The Indo-Pacific, Southeast Asia, and the Global South,” *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 25, No.1, pp 171-182. <https://cc.pacforum.org/2023/05/great-power-politics-the-indo-pacific-southeast-asia-and-the-global-south/>

⁸ Yoichiro Sato, “Japan’s Counter-Strike Capabilities: Southeast Asians Should Be Circumspect,” *Fulcrum*, 07 March 2023. <https://fulcrum.sg/japans-counter-strike-capabilities-southeast-asians-should-be-circumspect/>

on the new development of Japan's posture towards China as Japan's new step was very much inspired by the increasing Japan's threat perception towards neighboring states. If this is really the case, ASEAN should be informed of Japan's strategic intents behind the new national security strategy and a new plan for Indo-Pacific, in a timely fashion if it is meant to uphold the ASEAN centrality. This is also to sheer off ASEAN's wariness or probably a misunderstanding of the target of Japanese policy as well as its sudden proactive defense posture.

ASEAN centrality has become an often-used diplomatic term when it comes to deal with great power rivalry. As much as ASEAN's central role is concerned, that self-proclaimed centrality will always remain one of the pre-conditions for the grouping's engagement with its external partners. Due to significantly emerging Indo-Pacific versions by many of its partners including the US, Japan, India, and even South Korea, ASEAN made a smart move in 2019 by putting out its own version of "ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific –AOIP". Moving beyond a concept, ASEAN made another clear move in mainstreaming its own version of Indo-Pacific during the 42nd ASEAN Summit in Labuan Bajo, Indonesia. The leaders adopted "ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Mainstreaming Four Priority Areas of The ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific within ASEAN-Led Mechanisms". Making use of its existing mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus One, ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), this regional bloc aims to ensure and maintain its centrality and unity when engaging with major powers and tackling the global challenges.⁹

Admittedly, ASEAN has always been a crucial partner to Japan throughout its fifty years of cooperation. Regarding Japan's new national security strategy and the New Plan for FOIP, ASEAN states have no reaction yet. But to any partner or policy, ASEAN will always maintain that its centrality needs to be beyond lip-services and respected by all. That case also applies to Japan's new foreign policy direction. No matter which region Japan will prioritize, ASEAN will remain important to Japan when implementing its FOIP. But the pre-condition of that should be the two need to uphold the ASEAN centrality and ASEAN-led mechanisms, and more importantly to communicate what should be synergies between AOIP and Japan's FOIP.

Towards A Meaningful Japan-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

2023 is an important year as Japan and ASEAN celebrate the 50th commemorative year of their partnership. Such partnership is now expected an upgrade to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP)" at the upcoming ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit in Tokyo in December. If so, Japan will become the fifth country to hold such status followed by China (2021), Australia (2021), the United States (2022), and India (2022). CSP has become more popular now to the ASEAN's dialogue partners after the regional bloc granted this to China and Australia simultaneously in 2021. As a customary practices when it comes to CSPs, ASEAN expects that its upcoming CSP with Japan will be substantive, meaningful, and mutually beneficial to both the people of Japan and ASEAN.¹⁰

⁹ ASEAN, "ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Mainstreaming Four Priority Areas of The ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific within ASEAN-Led Mechanisms," 11 November 2022. <https://asean.org/asean-leaders-declaration-on-mainstreaming-four-priority-areas-of-the-asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific-within-asean-led-mechanisms/>

¹⁰ Joanne Lin, "Is ASEAN's Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Becoming A Farce?", *Fulcrum*, 22 February 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/aseanfocus/is-aseans-comprehensive-strategic-partnership-becoming-a-farce/>

In its engagement with ASEAN, Japan has always maintained more leverage given the trust and positive image it possesses in Southeast Asia, witnessed by the enormous support Japan offers to ASEAN's regional integration. However, in the last two years, such confidence has decreased significantly. The opinion polls of ISEAS-Singapore in 2023 reveal that Japan does not rank first as being a country that can provide leadership to maintain "rule-based order" and uphold international law, with a score as low as 8.6% from ASEAN respondents. The United States and the European Union gain 27.1% and 23%, respectively, the highest among all.¹¹ Japan's influence in the region is under-appreciated. This is understandable. Compared to other major powers like China, and the US, Japan's total trade with ASEAN is only at USD 240.4 billion in 2021, half of China's and around one-third of the US's one.¹²

Taking this "golden year and golden opportunity", Japan can further discuss with its ASEAN counterparts in priority areas and mutual expectations the two may have under the new plan for FOIP and ASEAN's four priority areas of AOIP. In the context of great power rivalry, cooperation between Japan and ASEAN can be meaningful if they find the synergies to achieve a "rule-based" order that can be acceptable to all, even engaging with China.

For trade, Japan will need to further step up its efforts through existing frameworks such as Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the largest mega-FTA in the region. Indeed, RCEP will have a significant impact on Japan's economic standing in East Asia.¹³ For security cooperation, the maritime domain will remain the focus as both ASEAN and Japan put more focus on maritime security. This can be promoted through the upgrade of capacity-building programs, disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, etc. For connectivity, Japan's "Quality Infrastructure Investment" has the utility to be a competitive option to reduce the domination of China's BRI in Southeast Asia. For the people pillar, Japan should promote a more "quality and meaningful people-to-people exchange" and create a frequent youth dialogue to sufficiently nurture the future of Japan and ASEAN. There should be an emphasis on "quality" over "quantity" so that the exchange and dialogue can be meaningful as it promotes more mutual understanding and closer connection among future leaders of Japan and Southeast Asia.

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¹¹ ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, "State of Southeast Asia: 2023 Survey Report," Accessed 20 May, 2023. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/category/articles-commentaries/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/>

¹² ASEAN, "ASEAN Statistical Year Book 2021," Accessed 20 May, 2023. <https://www.aseanstats.org/publication/asyb-2021/>

¹³ Kazushi Shimizu, "RCEP's Great Impact on Japan and East Asian Economies," *The Japan Institute of International Affairs*, 08 February 2022, https://www.jiia.or.jp/en/ajiss_commentary/rceps-great-impact-on-japan-and-east-asian-economies.html

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