

## JAPANESE PERSPECTIVE AND ITS ROLE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

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**Abstract.** The Indo-Pacific, which is home to about half of the world population, has experienced rapid economic development and been a major driver of the global economy. This region's recent increasingly important position and role has made large countries such as the United States, Russia, China, Japan, and India all have strategic adjustments to increase their regional influence and interests. At the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum on November 10, 2017, US President Donald Trump has mentioned the idea about a free and open Indo-Pacific. Shortly thereafter, both the US National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy (NDS) have formally affirmed the Indo-Pacific as US strategy's new geospatial space and fulcrum in Asia. This paper explores the background and content of the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Strategy; Japanese perspective and its role in this strategy.

**Keywords:** Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy; maritime security cooperation; United States; Japan; India; Australia.

### 1. Introduction

Entering the 21st century, especially from the second half of the second decade up to now, the world has experienced many complicated changes and fluctuations with the trend of shifting power from the West to the East, leading to a change in power correlation between major countries. In the Asia-Pacific region, the strategic competition appears, and the gathering of forces in different trends is increasing, making competition and cooperation between major countries increasingly fierce. The trend of gathering forces on the basis of geographic, historical, cultural, religious and ethnic intimacy in the Asia-Pacific space has been expanded through the strategy of "Indian Ocean - Pacific" is free and open". This new force gathering trend has led to the mobilization and adjustment of force correlations among major international actors in the region. The paper explores Japan's position and role in the "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy as a big country in region.

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## **2. Content**

### **2.1. The US Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy's background and content Background**

According to some scholars, US President Donald Trump is not the one who coins the Indo-Pacific concept. In fact, leaders from many countries in the region such as Japan, Australia and even the previous US administrations have also mentioned this idea earlier.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe first mentioned the Indo-Pacific concept during his visit to India in 2007. Later in 2013, Australia also used this term in its Defense White Paper [2].

In its new National Security Strategy (published in December 2017) and National Defense Strategy (published in January 2018), the US government has daftly described this "vision". It was until March 2018 that the US officially named this "vision" the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy". Later on June 2, 2018, US Secretary of Defense James Mattis officially announced key contents of this strategy [3].

According to some researchers [4], there are two main factors affecting the introduction of the FOIP strategy that should be considered.

*The first one* is the internal factor. Being the area adjacent to many oceans, gateways linking the United States with the world, the Indian Ocean - Pacific Ocean have always been considered as a key geostrategic area, directly affecting the US national security and its world leadership. Therefore, the implementation of the FOIP strategy is the way for the US to protect its citizens' interests and market, ensure the freedom and security of maritime traffic, maintain the power balance, and promote democracy and human rights following American norms in the region.

*The second one* is the external factor. The US argues that China's strong rise, especially Beijing's efforts to build and militarize outposts in the South China Sea, is threatening the free flow of trade, reducing nations' sovereignty, dampening regional stability; and China's actions through advancing its "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) are challenging the US leadership in the region. Meanwhile, the Indo-Pacific region hasn't had a multilateral mechanism of collective security but still mainly base on bilateral agreements such as the Japan-US Security Treaty, the US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty, etc. Because of both these internal and external factors, the US recognizes the necessity to strengthen its regional alliance, especially encouraging the role of India, in order to protect its interests, maintain its influence and position as a superpower in the region.

#### **The FOIP Strategy's content**

Although the FOIP Strategy is on the shaping process, its framework is said to have been relatively formed.

First is the geographical scope. According to the US National Security Strategy 2017, the Indo-Pacific region starts "from the West Coast of India to the West Coast of the United States" [5].

In other words, this region includes the Indian Ocean region on the east coast of Africa and the Pacific Ocean on the west coast of the United States. Essentially, this is an emphasis on the India's importance in the US's Asia strategy. At the Shangri-La

Dialogue in early June 2018, US Secretary of Defense James Mattis affirmed that the United States will implement this strategy in Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Pacific and South Asia.

Internally, according to Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Alex N. Wong, the FOIP strategy is based on the values of “freedom” and “openness”. Accordingly, “freedom” is described at two levels: at the international level, countries are not subject to coercion and at the national level, individuals are not suppressed and deserve good governance. The “openness” means that maritime routes are not controlled or blocked by any major powers and the fair and free trade system is maintained [6]. In his speech at the Shangri-La 2018 Dialogue, US Secretary of Defense James Mattis emphasized: Freedom means freedom for all nations, no matter its size, wishing to transit international waters and airspace. The United States also asserted that the cooperation mechanisms in this strategy are not intended to exclude any country, open for all the countries to participate in following the provided principles, as well as ensure freedom and prosperity for all countries [7].

At the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018, US Secretary of Defense James Mattis also highlighted four key acting directions for implementing the FOIP Strategy as follows:

*Firstly*, US will expand its attention on the maritime space, preserving common maritime space by helping its partners build up naval and law enforcement capabilities and capacities to improve monitoring and protection of maritime orders and interests.

*Secondly*, US will focus on strengthening its interoperability with allies and partners by promoting financing and sales of cutting-edge US defense equipment to security partners in the region, educating professional military to more Indo-Pacific military noncommissioned officers and officers.

*Thirdly*, US will strengthen the rule of law, civil society, and transparent governance. As Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Alex N. Wong opined, the FOIP Strategy is not merely a competition for power, but mainly a competition to “shape the regional governance system” [8]. US Secretary of Defense James Mattis said the FOIP Strategy is a reconfirmation about the rule-based order. Accordingly, the US will continue to deeply integrate in existing regional mechanisms, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), along with tripartite and multi-stakeholder mechanisms with other partners. Accordingly, Secretary of Defense James Mattis also affirmed the US’s support for the ASEAN’s central role in the regional structure [9].

*Fourthly*, in the economic aspect, US will promote the private sector-led economic development, trade and investment activities, including infrastructure development. Besides, US will also invigorate finance institutions to enable the common rule. Secretary of Defense James Mattis also emphasized: “Not empty promises and surrender of economic sovereignty.” [10].

In short, the US FOIP Strategy is based on a number of basic pillars, including the rule of law (implies preserving the current US-led order), alliance/partners system

(implies a broader forces with the US at the core), emphasizes the principles of freedom and openness (implies opposing to policies that coerce countries in the region and ignore the US's presence, especially in the South China Sea).

## **2.2. Japanese perspective on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy**

Japan shares many similarities with the US about the perspective, strategic concept on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy.

During his visit to India in 2007, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe raised his voice on “the arc of freedom and prosperity along the outer rim of the Eurasian landmass” and the dynamic combination of the Indo-Pacific regions [11]. This view essentially emphasizes the role of the four leading democracies in the world: the United States, Japan, Australia and India. In 2016, PM Shinzo Abe announced the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” at the International Conference on African Development in Nairobi (Kenya), according to which “Japan bears the responsibility of fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and of Asia and Africa into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and making it prosperous” [12]. Japan identifies the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” with three main pillars and measures including:

*The first pillar* is the promotion and establishment of fundamental values such as rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade, and cooperation with US, India, Australia, ASEAN, European and Middle Eastern countries. In order to implement this pillar, US and Japan will strengthen protection of common maritime rules and norms. The US and Japan will also strengthen coordination to deliver messages at bilateral and multilateral fora in the region; strengthen alliance network and countries which share similar viewpoints.

For *the second pillar*, Japan wants to improve connectivity through infrastructure developments such as sea ports, railways, roads; strengthening economic partnership and improving business environment. On this point, US and Japan will strengthen economic cohesion with the region, such as trade connectivity, investment promotion and promoting support for regional countries to develop high quality infrastructure, regional economic architecture with high standards and efficient, transparent governance; support capacity-building in many fields such as human resources, business environment and institutional reforms...

*The third pillar* is Japan's desire to secure peace and stability through capacity-building assistance to coastal countries of the Indo-Pacific, cooperation on the field of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, anti-piracy, counter-terrorism, non-proliferation. So as to implement this pillar, US and Japan will strengthen defense-exchange cooperation, with a focus on maritime security cooperation. In particular, both countries will accelerate capacity building assistance to coastal states in Asia, mainly around the South China Sea. This is especially beneficial for regional countries. Both US and Japan will simultaneously strengthen cooperation to share information, including intelligence, counter-terrorism and anti-piracy, and help strengthening regional countries' capacity in disaster relief, humanitarian assistance...

### **2.3. Japan's role in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy**

Japan plays a central role in the Indo-Pacific region. Being the country that has a strategic alliance relationship with US and also signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship with China; facing the challenges from the current comprehensive US-China strategic competition, Japan is seeking to address these challenges and enhance its position regionally and globally to create a pole that plays the role of preserving stability, cooperation and development in the Indo-Pacific region.

After being re-elected as the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party in 2017, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe continues his tenure until 2021 and become the longest-running Prime Minister in the history of the land of the rising sun since WWII. This political stability allows PM Shinzo Abe to demonstrate Japan's role as a central pillar and the protector of liberal democracy in an emerging world order of protectionism and anti-globalization.

In this context, Japan has been unable to passively observe rapid changes, but has to be more proactive and active to protect its core interests when US President Donald Trump places national interests at top priority with the slogan "America first" and China's ambitious rise are upsetting the world order. First of all, Tokyo is trying to implement the FOIP Strategy and diversify partnerships to assert its international position.

During his visit to Asia shortly after taking office in 2017, US President Donald Trump announced that the United States would promote the FOIP Strategy as well as carry out a coordinated plan between the US and Japan investing in infrastructure. In July 2018, Tokyo, Washington and Canberra signed a trilateral partnership agreement on infrastructure with the first electrification project in Papua New Guinea.

In November 2017, Japan initiated the Japan-US-Australia-India Quadrilateral Dialogue on an Asia-Africa growth corridor project to counter with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Japan also cooperated with India and Australia to secure the Indo-Pacific sea lanes. At the same time, through the International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Japan financially supported a series of countries in the region to improve maritime infrastructure such as Mozambique, Kenya, Madagascar, Oman, India, and Myanmar.

In Southeast Asia, Japan contributes to strengthening the maritime capabilities of countries in the region, especially the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia by training coast guard and transferring patrol boats. Multilateral military cooperation activities have been promoted particularly between Japan and India, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam. In 2016, the Philippines received ten patrol boats. In January 2017, at a press conference during his visit to Vietnam, PM Shinzo Abe opined that the principles of security, safety and freedom of navigation are extremely important. To implement these principles, it is necessary to fully implement the rule of law. As a regional member, Japan is ready to carry out its role and responsibility as figured in FOIP strategy, and he has also committed to providing six marine patrol boats for Vietnam [13]. Japan is also deepening its security cooperation with UK and France to maintain rule of law and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific, including the South China Sea.

Besides, Japan also actively promotes its indispensable role in the Indo-Pacific region in terms of economy. The 2017 White Paper on Official Development Assistance (ODA) of Japan stated the plan to continue to support countries in the Indo-Pacific region in many fields. In the context of the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, Japan became the largest economy, decided to take the leading role in the negotiations, promoting 11 participating countries to sign a new agreement, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP or TPP-11) which came into force from December 2018.

Obviously, Japan has an important role in the Indo-Pacific region as well as in the world. The success of the G-20 conference which was first held in Japan in June 2019 with the attendance and side meetings of US President Donald Trump, Russian President V. Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, has affirmed Japan's crucial and indispensable role and position in the Indo-Pacific region as well as in the world in the context of strategic competitions of US-China and the US-Russia which are considered as kind of complex world war in a new era.

### **3. Conclusions**

In short, Japan is playing an active role and strongly voices over security issues in the Indo-Pacific region. With its FOIP Strategy, Japan is attempting to provide another military-economic cooperation option for regional countries to reduce dependence on China. At the same time, as a close ally of the US, Japan will assist the US to promote its leading role and implement its FOIP Strategy, countering the BRI of China.

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