

THE INDO-PACIFIC LEGACY OF ABE SHINZO

Tunchinmang Langel

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Over the week that has elapsed since the tragic loss of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who was assassinated in his home country on the 8th of July 2022, the world has witnessed a deluge of eulogies for this charismatic world leader who charmed and inspired the world over the past two decades. For all those of us who remain committed to “maritimity” and the strengthening of maritime linkages between Japan and India that Prime Minister Abe forged, the loss is a particularly keen one.¹ Indeed, the life and times of this charismatic leader has, in many ways, defined and shaped the predominantly-maritime region that is now well-established in political, economic and strategic circles as the Indo-Pacific. For institutions such as the National Maritime Foundation, which spearhead India’s own transition from an obsessive-continentalism of geopolitical thinking to one in which India can more sensibly balance her land-centric and her maritime geopolitical imperatives, it is more than a time for lamentation. Alone. It is, rather, a time to honour Shinzo Abe, the global statesman, by considering the manner in which his visionary articulations were able to grip the imagination of his peers right across what he accurately described as an arc of freedom and prosperity that spanned the Indian and the Pacific Oceans.

Shinzo Abe was the first Prime Minister of Japan who had been born after the Second World War. He had a first short stint as Prime Minister in 2006-2007 and then, over the period from 2012 to 2020, he became the longest serving Prime Minister in the history of his country. He was a visionary who espoused the pivotal nature of the maritime domain and foresaw the growing centrality of maritime issues in stitching together a new security architecture across a region spanning an enormous maritime and continental expanse encompassing East Asia, the western and the southern Pacific Ocean, South East Asia, and South Asia, extending right across the Indian Ocean to the African continent. Indeed, without his personal evangelical advocacy, it may be argued that there would have been neither a Quad nor an Indo-Pacific.

It is, of course, a fact that the *Tsunami* Core Group (TCG) of 2004, constituted in the aftermath of the deadly *tsunami* of December 2004, was the first meaningful collective deliberation between Japan, the US, India, and Australia — all of whom shared a common faith in democratic values and were, in addition, recognised as dominant maritime powers of the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions. However, these deliberations were halted by Beijing’s bellicose diplomacy. Indeed, right up to 2006-2007, the world, as viewed through the lens of geopolitics, was still at an embryonic stage of understanding the full ramifications and implications of the coercive economic and

¹ Saul Bernard Cohen, 2015, “Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations”, Third Edition. Rowman and Littlefield: London

military diplomacy being practised by a rising and revisionist China. Shinzo Abe, on the other hand, was able to cut through the multiple layers of Chinese duplicity and doublespeak with impressive ease. This was evidenced in July of 2006 itself, when he released his political manifesto “*Utsukushii Kuni E (Towards a Beautiful Country)*”, which was later reproduced as a book.² In this document, he had gone so far as to state that within a decade, the Japan -India relationship would surpass the US-Japan and the Japan-China ones.³ On 30 November 2006, Japan’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Taro Aso, who was an influential member of Shinzo Abe’s cabinet, had shared the government’s new approach to foreign policy under the rubric of “*value-oriented diplomacy*” and the “*Arc of Freedom and Prosperity*”.⁴ The new approach acknowledged the growing significance of strategic geography that interlinked the Eurasian continent — one that was teeming with budding democracies. Supplementing the “*Utsukushii Kuni E*” manifesto, Shinzo Abe delivered a policy speech to the 166th session of the Diet, on 26 January, 2007, wherein he underscored the significance of Japan developing, promoting, and strengthening exchanges with ASEAN, India, and Australia, with all of whom Tokyo shared fundamental values.⁵

In March of 2007, the Japanese cabinet reintroduced Abe’s aspirational and inspirational concept of the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” to further emphasise the growing significance of the shared strategic geography of Eurasia.⁶ In May of that same year, during the ASEAN Regional Forum Summit in Manila the four countries, namely, Japan, the United States, Australia, and India, huddled together, whether by accident or design, and their parleys constituted the first exploratory meeting of what is now known as the Quad. The process of creating a new alignment or grouping had been initiated — a grouping that individually and collectively which recognised that there could no longer be an “I” that could counter Beijing’s increasingly-assertive attempts to change the status quo. It needed to be a “we”. In 2007, the four countries, along with Singapore, took part in that year’s edition of the MALABAR series of naval exercises. This edition was held in the Bay of Bengal and it sent out a strong strategic signal of solidarity. The signal that was received by Beijing, however, was one of an amalgamation of forces arrayed in phalanx to contain China’s own geopolitical aspirations. The Chinese reaction, as has already been stated, was sharp and ominous. In the event, it proved adequate to dissuade some of the participants of the MALABAR exercise to desist from further participation. In fact, the reaction from Beijing was sufficient to lead to the Quad slipping into a comatose state for the next decade-plus. This rapid decline notwithstanding, the significance of the four countries within the maritime domain of the region had been successfully registered. The 2007 Quad Dialogue had

² Gavan McCormack, “Fitting Okinawa into Japan the “Beautiful Country””, *The Asia Pacific Journal – Japan Focus*, 02 May 2007, <https://apjif.org/-Gavan-McCormack/2437/article.html>

³ Nayanima Basu, “Shinzo Abe was ‘passionate’ about ties with India, had special equation with both Modi & Manmohan”, *The Print*, 08 July 2022, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/shinzo-abe-was-passionate-about-ties-with-india-had-special-equation-with-both-modi-manmohan/1031100/>

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Speech by Mr Taro Aso, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Japan Institute of International Affairs Seminar “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity: Japan’s Expanding Diplomatic Horizons””, 30 November 2006, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/fm/aso/speech0611.html>

⁵ Government of Japan, “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 166th Session of the Diet”, 26 January 2007, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/abespeech/2007/01/26speech_e.html

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “On the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity”: Address by HE Mr Taro Aso, Minister for Foreign Affairs on the occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the Founding of the Japan Forum on International Relations, Inc”, 12 March 2007, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/pillar/address0703.html>

provided a platform to address regional concerns over collective safety and security from threats arising in or from the oceans. It had also underscored the relevance of the Quad navies as the only agencies that could deliver this requisite degree of collective maritime safety and security.

To restore the reader's focus to Shinzo Abe, it needs to be reiterated that it was the strength of conviction inherent in his 2006 articulation of the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" that eventually provided a more enduring and robust conceptual-underpinning to the Quad.⁷ The geopolitical prominence – predominance, in fact — of the oceans was unequivocally expressed by Abe when he delivered his monumental speech at the Indian Parliament on August 22, 2007, where he spoke at length about the "*Confluence of the Two Seas*".⁸ The speech, whose title had been borrowed from the writings, in 1655, of the Mughal prince, Dara Shikoh, laid the grounds for the dynamic coupling of the Indian and the Pacific oceans as "*Seas of Freedom and Prosperity*".⁹ As Abe dextrously coordinated the progression from the "*Arc of Freedom and Prosperity*" to the "*Seas of Freedom and Prosperity*", within a span of a year itself, it was clear that he and his cabinet had fully grasped the significance of the maritime domain in the strategic geography of not just Japan, but also that of the other three members of the Quad.¹⁰ Even the "*Eurasian continent*" formulated was evolved by Abe into one that addressed a "*Broader Asia*". In 2007, however, vicissitudes of domestic politics and personal medical complications cut short Shinzo Abe's first tenure as Prime Minister. Consequently, the grip of the new, exciting, and rapidly-evolving regional maritimity was loosened and a five-year hiatus ensued.

In 2012, Shinzo Abe returned to office for his second stint as Prime Minister of Japan, and, from then on, he wasted no time in bringing the Quad out of its coma. His 2012 article, espousing "*Asia's Democratic Security Diamond*" became an extension of his 2007 vision of the "*Confluence of the Two Seas*".¹¹ This landmark article identified "*peace, stability and freedom of navigation*" within the Pacific and the Indian oceans, as being prime responsibilities of the maritime democracies of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. His was a strident and unafraid open call, inviting the Quad countries to urgently and comprehensively focus upon "*safeguarding the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean to the western Pacific*".¹² The root of this urgency was the impressive pace at which China had advanced since 2007, in terms of its naval and territorial expansion. In 2013, Shinzo Abe proclaimed, "Japan is back"¹³ and, in August 2016, he unveiled the "*Free and Open Indo-Pacific*" (FOIP) concept at the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI), in Kenya.¹⁴ Via the FOIP concept, ABE Shinzo and his cabinet were

⁷ Patrick Gerard Buchan and Benjamin Rimland, "Defining the Diamond: The Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue", *CSIS Briefs*, 16 March 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/defining-diamond-past-present-and-future-quadrilateral-security-dialogue>

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. 2007. "Confluence of the Two Seas Speech by HE Mr Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India", 22 August 2007, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ Shinzo Abe, "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond", *Project Syndicate*, 27 December 2012, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe>

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan is Back", 22 February 2013, https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/us_20130222en.html

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Towards a Free and Open Indo-Pacific", <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000407643.pdf>

able to connect the geopolitical dots right across the vast expanse of the Indo-Pacific. The three pillars of the FOIP, namely, “*Promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade; Pursuit of economic prosperity (e.g., improving connectivity); [and] Commitment to peace and stability*” articulated Japan’s geoeconomic and non geoeconomic goals, and identified FOIP as the geostrategy by which these were to be achieved.¹⁵

It is obvious that in terms of geopolitics Abe was, indeed, able to bring Japan back to the centre and as the fulcrum for the Indo-Pacific security architecture during his second stint as Prime Minister of Japan, which lasted almost a decade. As a direct consequence of Shinzo Abe’s persistence and the strength of logic evident in his advocacy, the “*oldest seafaring democracies*” of the Indo-Pacific region are, today, going from strength to strength.¹⁶ Shinzo Abe’s philosophy that “*democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights*” must guide the Indo-Pacific’s prosperity is part of the legacy he leaves behind, of which the Quad is the guardian.¹⁷ However, insofar as India is concerned, perhaps an even more enduring facet of his legacy will be that he was able to bring the apex levels of India’s political class to clearly see that the age-old centrality that had been accorded to continental India had, in fact, become obsolete and that the rise of ‘maritime India’ was an idea whose time had come. New Delhi’s enthusiastic embrace of the Quad — ever since 12 November 2017, when official-level discussions were recommenced — is India’s regional manifestation of this recognition.¹⁸ The Quad and the Indo-Pacific will be remembered as Shinzo Abe’s unique contribution to “*maritimity*”.¹⁹ On a wider plane, he will be the leading global and regional advocate of the need to overcome “*sea blindness*” — an affliction often lamented by several luminaries, including Admiral Arun Prakash, former Chief of the Naval Staff of the Indian Navy.²⁰ How wisely we leverage this wonderful legacy will be a function of the clarity with which New Delhi’s politico-bureaucratic levels “*see the sea*” and will determine India’s place in the Indo-Pacific.

About the Author:

Tunchinmang Langel is an Associate Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi, India. His current research focusses on the maritime geostrategies of East Asian countries within the Indo-Pacific. He may be contacted at indopac5.nmf@gmail.com

¹⁵ Japan’s Ministry of Defense, “Development of the ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)’ Vision”, https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/exc/india_pacific/india_pacific-en.html

¹⁶ Shinzo Abe, “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond”, *Project Syndicate*, 27 December 2012, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe>

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ Kallol Bhattacharjee, “India, Japan, US, Australia Hold First ‘Quad’ Talks at Manila ahead of ASEAN Summit”, *The Hindu*, 12 November 2017, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-highlights-indo-pacific-cooperation-at-the-first-quad-talks/article61856670.ece>

¹⁹ Saul Bernard Cohen, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations*. Third Edition. Rowman and Littlefield: London

²⁰ Admiral Arun Prakash, “Rise of the East: The Maritime Dimension”, *Maritime Affairs* 7(2), 1-13, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2011.648727>