



Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy": Reality before the Rhetoric?

Shahana Thankachan

ABSTRACT

Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" was announced as recently as November 2016. However, it may be argued that Japan has been acting in accordance with this principle for over a decade in the Indo-Pacific region. While the Asia–Africa Growth Corridor and the "quadrilateral" initiative could be called the latest and more visible manifestations of this strategy, they are definitely not the first. This paper explores two core elements of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, namely, regional connectivity and proactive contribution to peace, and highlights Japan's initiatives in this regard in the Indo-Pacific.

KEYWORDS

Japan; Indo-Pacific; regional connectivity; AAGC; quadrilateral

Introduction

Japan's foreign policy principles are articulated primarily through the annually released Diplomatic Bluebook. Even a cursory reading of the 2017 edition of this document 2017 gives the impression that the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" is at the core of Japan's foreign policy for the region. This concept came into prominence during Prime Minister (PM) Modi's visit to Tokyo in November 2016, when it formed the centre-piece of the joint statement between the two countries.¹

In May 2017, a vision document for the Asia–Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) was released by India and Japan. The AAGC is primarily a connectivity and infrastructure project which has the stated goal of connecting the two continents of Asia and Africa. This project is viewed as India and Japan's answer to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was widely celebrated in an international summit in Beijing, just a few days before the AAGC was announced. In November 2017, Japan, India, the United States and Australia met in a "quadrilateral" meeting along the sidelines of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit. While the nature of this grouping remains undecided, the revival of this grouping after 10 years, together with the AAGC, is seen as the first manifestation of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy.²

This paper takes a stance contrary to this understanding and argues that the AAGC and the quadrilateral initiative are not the first developments that put into action Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy. The paper intends to show that Japan has been acting in accordance with two core principles of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, namely regional connectivity and proactive contribution to peace, for well over a decade, and that the latest developments are not mere geopolitical reactions to Chinese gameplays in the region.

Evolution of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy

The concept of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, in its current form, was articulated in November 2016, in a joint statement issued by India and Japan during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Tokyo. The statement referred to "improving connectivity between Asia and Africa through realizing a free and open Indo-Pacific as vital to the entire region".³ While the main thrust of this paper is in highlighting that Japan's actions have long conformed to this recently articulated strategy, it may be argued that together with the substance, much of the semantic form of this pronouncement also goes at least as far back as a decade.

In August 2007, during Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to India, he addressed the Indian Parliament. In his speech, titled "The Confluence of the Two Seas", the Prime Minister talked about "an arc of Freedom and Prosperity, which will be formed along the outer ring of the Eurasian continent".⁴ This was arguably the first, if somewhat oblique, reference to evolving a cohesive strategy for the entire Indo-Pacific maritime space, from a Japanese perspective.

During Prime Minister Abe's subsequent visit to New Delhi in December 2015, the two countries announced the "Japan and India Vision 2025". The joint statement accompanying the release said, "Under the new and renewed enhanced partnership Japan and India will be able to promote the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy".⁵ Following this, in August 2016, during his speech to Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) in Nairobi, Kenya, Prime Minister Abe said,

*What will give stability and prosperity to the world is none other than the enormous liveliness brought forth through the union of two free and open oceans and two continents. 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.*⁶

Essential Elements of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy

The essence of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy lies in the potential that Japan sees in connecting the two continents of Asia and Africa, as well as the Indian and Pacific oceans. Japan hopes to evolve a paradigm that views this geographical span as a single strategic space, upon which it may be able to apply its foreign policy strategies to good effect.

An official Japanese document released in 2017, entitled *Priority Policy for Development Cooperation FY 2017*, claims that under the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy,

*Japan will enhance "connectivity" between Asia and Africa to promote stability and prosperity across the regions. Japan will secure the safety of Japanese nationals playing active roles overseas, through cooperation with developing countries in improving their anti-terrorism measures and security situation, etc. Based on the concept of "sustaining peace", Japan will proactively contribute to realizing peace and stability in the international community through cooperation in areas such as peace building, assistance for refugees, and countermeasures against violent extremism, etc., while strengthening the nexus between humanitarian assistance and development cooperation. In addition, Japan will support the efforts of countries with which Japan shares universal values, including the rule of law, and cooperate in the fields of reinforcing the capacity of maritime law enforcement, establishing legal systems, etc.*⁷

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy therefore encompasses two broad themes, viz. connectivity and security. Whereas the former seeks to realise the true economic potential

of the two continents and the oceans between them, the latter is aimed at fostering an environment that could promote the economic well-being of people in this region. But as highlighted earlier, Japan's activities – in what is today described as the Indo-Pacific region – in domains of both connectivity and security have been an enduring feature of its foreign policy for some time now.

Regional Connectivity

The Indo-Pacific is a predominant maritime entity. Development of port facilities within littoral states, therefore, is vital to achieving regional connectivity goals. Japan has been actively involved in several port development projects, in both Asia and Africa. The African continent in particular has been the beneficiary of significant Japanese assistance. Most Japanese companies have significant presence in East and South Africa, especially in Kenya, Mozambique, Uganda, Ethiopia and Tanzania.⁸ These countries also are the top five recipients of Japanese official development assistance (ODA) in sub-Saharan Africa.⁹ These countries are among the more developed countries of Africa in terms of gross domestic product (GDP), and yet Japan focuses on them for aid and development assistance.¹⁰ This is somewhat contrary to the guiding principles of the ODA programme, which tends to focus on poorer and less-developed countries. These exceptions could possibly be due to the fact that all these countries lie on the Eastern side of the African continent, and are therefore critical to initiatives that seek to connect it to the Asian landmass.

Mozambique is possibly the most noteworthy example of Japanese efforts at port-infrastructure development. Japan has invested over USD 320 million in the development of Nacala Port. This investment was made in two tranches of USD 69 million and USD 258 million, in 2013 and 2015 respectively.¹¹ Nacala is the principal commercial port of Mozambique, and has the best natural harbour on the East African coast.¹² It is expected that the port will grow as the gateway to the Nacala Corridor, which has a population of approximately 45 million people. With the project to improve road connectivity from Nacala Port to Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, scheduled to be completed in 2018, the port is expected to become a regional trading hub. This will contribute in a major fashion to economic growth, and integration of countries in Southern Africa.¹³

Japan is also actively involved in the expansion of Mombasa Port in Kenya, specifically the Container Terminal. Part of this project also entails the development of trunk roads leading up to the Mombasa Port. In March 2017, Japan committed to provide Madagascar with an ODA loan of USD 400 million. This is primarily for the expansion of the Port of Taomasina, the largest commercial port of Madagascar.¹⁴ Three fourths of the nation's maritime trade passes through this port. Taomasina is also rated as one of the top five ports of sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁵ This investment is essentially aimed at expanding the port facilities to allow larger vessels access to the port.

Moving West, Japan's role in the development of the Chabahar port in Iran attracts much attention.¹⁶ In May 2016, India, Iran and Afghanistan signed a trilateral agreement to build trade and transit routes from the Iranian port to Afghanistan and Central Asia.¹⁷ Later in the same year, Japan agreed to cooperate with India in the development of this port.¹⁸ Japan also granted an untied loan of USD 660 million to the Sultanate of Oman in 2007 for the development of the Duqm port.¹⁹ This port gains strategic significance, as it would allow ships to embark oil and gas sourced from West Asian countries,

without passing through the Persian Gulf and the somewhat troubled chokepoint of the Strait of Hormuz.

The vision of larger regional connectivity between Africa and Asia, and between the Indian and Pacific oceans, is also visible in South Asia. Japan has provided India with a soft loan of USD 4.5 billion for the development of the Delhi–Mumbai Industrial Corridor. This will also involve development of the Dighi Port in Mumbai as a vital component of this corridor.²⁰ Myanmar is also the recipient of Japanese investment and aid, especially towards rehabilitation of the Yangon port area. This involves various power projects, customs modernisation projects, human resource development, etc.²¹ In Sri Lanka, Japan is involved in the development of the Galle Port in the southwestern part of the island. As it is situated a mere 118 km from the Chinese-funded port at Hambantota, it will be interesting to observe the manner in which these ports – developed with contrasting models – evolve as maritime trade hubs.

The Southeast Asian region is also a major beneficiary of Japan's investments in key port projects. Japan entered into a private–public partnership (PPP) agreement with Vietnam to develop the Lach Huyen port project in 2013, as an international deep-sea port.²² Since 1999, Japan has supported the infrastructure improvement and capacity-building of Sihanoukville Port, the only deep-sea port of Cambodia. Japan acquired equity stakes in the Port Authority in 2017, and went on to provide a loan of USD 23 billion for the development of a new deep-water terminal at Sihanoukville.²³ In 2016, Japan also agreed to grant a private loan amounting to USD 2.5 billion for the development of a deep-sea port project in Patimban, West Java, Indonesia. This was especially significant for Japan, which had lost out to China in a bid for a high-speed rail project worth USD 5.5 billion, in the same country.

Proactive Contribution to Peace

The second component which lies central to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy is the stated need to ensure peace and stability in the region. This is clearly reflected in the “Proactive Contribution to Peace” concept which Japan articulated in its first National Security Strategy in 2013, and which has since been incorporated into the larger Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy. While the promotion of peace and stability has many facets, the military element is particularly tricky for Japan. This is because of constraints imposed by a pacifist constitution which prevents Japan's military involvement in third-party conflicts and collective self-defence activities. However, for over a decade now, Japan has been seeking to alter its interpretation of the constitution to better meet its security objectives and in fulfillment of its larger national interests.

The first major Japanese military initiative in the Indo-Pacific was in 1991, when the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Forces (JMSDF) were deployed in the Persian Gulf to conduct minesweeping operations at the end of the First Gulf War.²⁴ Subsequently, Japan participated in a peacekeeping operation in Golan Heights, by sending a contingent of ground self-defence forces, and other non-military personnel, to the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF).²⁵ Japan's SDF also participated in one of its longest peacekeeping missions in South Sudan from 2012 to May 2017.²⁶

In 2009, for the first time, Japan sent the JMSDF to participate in the larger international effort to fight piracy in the Gulf of Aden. This was a major departure from

Japanese policy in the post-war period, as military elements (the JMSDF) were allowed to be part of operations far from the Japanese coast. A new domestic law also gave the JMSDF the mandate to protect non-Japanese ships in the region, and allowed the JMSDF to participate in anti-piracy operations anywhere in the world, without a Diet approval every time.²⁷ These operations allowed Japanese naval vessels and aircraft to undertake surveillance and intelligence gathering activities in the entire geographical span from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. Following this, in July 2013, Japan joined the Combined Task Force (CTF) 151, a coalition maritime force that had been assembled to conduct anti-piracy operations in the region.²⁸ Japan led an international coalition force for the first time ever, when it commanded the CTF 151 in 2015. Japan's participation in these operations, which do not strictly fall under the ambit of "self-defence", was facilitated by several changes in domestic legislation. This included the Peace and Security Legislation of 2015, which entailed a significant reinterpretation of the collective self-defence provisions in the Japanese Constitution – so much so, that in 2011, Japan established a military base in Djibouti with the stated purpose of assisting in anti-piracy operations by JSDF elements.²⁹ This was a major shift for a nation that was reluctant to send its military abroad even for disaster relief operations, prior to 1991.³⁰

Another example of Japan's "proactive" contribution to peace came about in January 2015 during PM Shinzo Abe's visit to Egypt, when he committed to a sum of USD 200 million as aid for countries that were combating terrorist groups in West Asia.³¹ Following this, two Japanese citizens were kidnapped, and later killed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the same month. Japan pledged another USD 15 million for the same purpose later in the year.³² This was a significant departure for Japan, as its constitution places several restrictions on activities that could get the country involved in third-party conflicts.

Japan has been a permanent participant in the annual India–US MALABAR series of naval exercises since 2015.³³ While Japan had participated in previous editions of this exercise, its establishment as a permanent participant was viewed as a major signal to China of possible great-power collaboration in the region.³⁴ Japan was also the torchbearer of the first "quadrilateral" initiative when it was articulated by PM Abe in 2007.³⁵ While that initiative was not sustained, its recent revival in 2017 has also been largely driven by Japan's efforts.³⁶

Japan has, thus far, trod with particular caution in Southeast Asia, due primarily to the historical baggage of its actions during the Second World War. While regional suspicions of its intentions may still linger, Japan has taken certain relatively bold measures towards promoting peace and stability in this region. After the removal of the ban on arms export in 2014, Japan has gradually moved towards augmenting capacities of regional navies and coast guards, through a series of bilateral agreements. These may be viewed as Japan's efforts to bolster the ability of regional countries, and render them self-sufficient to resist China's aggressive stance over the South China Sea dispute.

Conclusion

The core components of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" as articulated by Japan have been visible in the Indo-Pacific region for over a decade. In terms of regional connectivity and military presence, Japan has made several inroads into the region and there is a

clear sense of Japan trying to see the Indian and Pacific Oceans as one strategic littoral space. While Japan has been actively pursuing a policy that establishes its presence in this region for over a decade, new initiatives such as the AAGC and the revival of the quadrilateral dialogue promise to reinvigorate its efforts in the region. It is, however, evident that these recent initiatives are not revolutionary or new in concept and execution, but evolved from previous such efforts that have dotted the Afro-Asian landscape for many years now. The AAGC in fact is in many ways similar to China's Belt and Road Initiative, which, although announced in 2013, actually builds upon prior efforts in the region.

Japan is often called a reactive power which treads carefully in the international arena. Most of its actions, including the AAGC and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, are seen as a response to the Chinese BRI. However, with Japan having articulated the "confluence of the seas" concept in 2007, it has since then been pursuing a policy premised on an interconnected Indo-Pacific region, well before its articulation of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy. Therefore, while Japan has been a pioneer in viewing the Indian and Pacific Oceans as a single entity, the initiatives that seek to operationalise this concept have serious competition from those of the Chinese. How this competition will play out, and what it will entail for regional countries, is something that only time can tell.

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Note on contributor

Shahana Thankachan is a research associate at the National Maritime Foundation, and is also pursuing her PhD from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She can be reached at shahana629@gmail.com.