



## The Evolution of the Indo-Pacific in Japanese Strategy

By Komei Isozaki

The relative importance of the Indo-Pacific region to the United States has increased over the centuries. But the rise of China and India as real global powers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a tectonic shift in the international order. Additionally, post-WWII and Cold War issues remain at play in the region. The division of the Korean Peninsula and the tensions across the Taiwan Strait are clear examples. North Korea has continued its brinkmanship for over a half-century and is still accelerating its development of nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles. Meanwhile, gray zone challenges by China are accelerating in the East and South China Seas. China's determination to unify Taiwan with the Mainland, supported by its acceleration in military capabilities, including a robust nuclear force and intermediate-range ballistic missiles, is a strong challenge to peace in the Indo-Pacific region.

**Komei Isozaki**, Japan Chair Fellow at the Hudson Institute, explains that Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe "should be remembered not just for the length of his tenure but also for his visionary efforts [regarding the Indo-Pacific], which were farsighted and strategic."

### The Origins of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific

Japan's Asia Policy has evolved over the centuries. In recent years, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan's longest-serving head of state, boldly and tenaciously presented his new idea of how Japan should navigate the Indo-Pacific, despite heavy domestic criticism. India played a key role in many of his speeches and documents. Abe should be remembered not just for the length of his tenure but also for his visionary efforts, which were farsighted and strategic.

### The Arc of Freedom and Prosperity (2006)

In the first Abe administration, Foreign Minister Aso proposed the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity," a policy that advanced diplomacy based on shared values. The Arc policy sought to create a coalition of states that respected fundamental values, such as freedom, democracy, basic human rights, the rule of law, and the market economy. This area included Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East, the Indian Subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and Northeast Asia. However, the policy did not survive after Abe's premature retirement as Prime Minister, as his successor, Yasuo Fukuda, discarded the policy as a hawkish ideology aimed at containing China.

### Confluence of the Two Seas (2007)

In an August 2007 speech entitled "Confluence of the Two Seas" to the Indian Parliament, Abe noted that the Japan-India Strategic Global Partnership was a testament to the Arc policy. He claimed that a "Broader Asia" would grow into a vast network extending across the Pacific, including the United States and Australia if Japan and India came together. It was intended to be an open and transparent network where people, goods, capital, and wisdom could come and go as they pleased.

### Asia's Democratic Security Diamond (2012)

Abe proposed the Security Diamond in a 2012 *Project Syndicate* article. He argued that Japan, as one of the oldest seafaring democratic nations, should play a role in preserving the common good in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. He also designated the diamond-shaped area surrounded by Japan, India, Australia, and Hawaii as key to maintaining peace, stability, and freedom of navigation. This concept may be viewed as the precursor of the Quad, which was formally established in 2019.

### Free and Open Indo-Pacific (2016)

Abe announced the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Strategy in August 2016 in his speech at the Africa Development Meeting (TICAD). He believed Japan was responsible for nurturing and enriching the intersection of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, Asia, and Africa as a place free from intimidation through force and where freedom, the rule of law, and market economies are respected. The FOIP strategy rested on three pillars:

1. Spread and entrench the rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade, etc.
2. Pursue economic prosperity through commercial links with Southeast Asia, Southwest Asia, the Middle East, and Southeast Africa, including economic partnerships, trade agreements, and investment treaties.
3. Secure peace and stability by building maritime law enforcement capacity, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, etc.

This concept was later embedded in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy of the Trump Administration and in the November 2022 Japanese National Security Strategy. FOIP is likely to continue as a critical concept for Japan in the next decade.

### **The “Discovery” of India as a Strategic Partner**

India is a rising global power with a population exceeding 1.5 billion, innovative companies, and a vibrant tapestry of cultures. As such, India is central to any Indo-Pacific strategy. However, long before the rise of India in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the nation has been emphasized in Japan’s official development assistance (ODA) and economic development efforts. India was the first recipient of Japanese ODA in 1958. This history is reflected in the fact that the relationship between Abe and India’s Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, was indispensable in the creation of the Quad. That said, the strategic interests of each Quad member state gradually transformed the 2004 Indian Oceana earthquake and tsunami disaster relief efforts into a comprehensive public goods and cooperation mechanism.

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### **Importance of ASEAN**

The US Indo-Pacific strategy talked about the importance of ASEAN. Southeast Asia was the focus of Japanese development assistance and foreign aid after WWII. Many Japanese companies operate in Southeast Asia, and many Japanese people, including retirees, live there. Recognizing the looming challenge in the region, Japanese assistance was later expanded to security cooperation. The first deployment of Japanese peacekeepers was to Cambodia under the United Nations mission. Japan maintains robust security engagement with the region, including law enforcement cooperation with Indonesia and the provision of Coast Guard Cutters to the Philippines. Japan also accelerated its defense assistance to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the last decade.

Dean Acheson famously declared that the US defense perimeter lay from the Aleutians, Japan, and the Ryukyus to the Philippines in 1950. As the northern and Southern portions of the First Island Chain, Japan and the Philippines play a pivotal role in responding to emerging challenges in the South and East China Seas and the Taiwan Strait. Thus, it is very appropriate that the first instance of Japan exporting defensive weapons was the transfer of TC-90 training planes and air-defense radars to the Philippines in 2016 and 2020 respectively.

### **Transformation of Japanese Defense Policy in 2022**

In 2022, Japan fundamentally transformed its long-standing post-WWII defense policy. Despite Japan’s focus on the Indo-Pacific region for many years, events in Europe significantly affected Japanese security deliberations in 2022. Prime Minister Kishida asserted that “Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow” in a speech at the 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue. Similarly, Japan’s national security strategy stressed that Japan faces its severest international environment since the end of WWII.

In December 2022, the Japanese cabinet released three documents, the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, and the Defense Buildup Plan. Acquiring counterstrike capabilities and doubling the defense budget are fundamental departures from Japan’s post-WWII defense policies. The new strategy also called for strengthening defense industrial and technological bases, building resilient social bases, civil protection infrastructure, development and upgrade of port and airport facilities, use of commercial transportation capabilities for emergencies, and building of social and intellectual bases. All these decisions are long overdue. Cooperation with the United States is imperative in Japan’s effort to realize its new security goals. This cooperative effort is a central component of the Indo-Pacific strategy of both nations

*Komei Isozaki*, Japan Chair Fellow at the Hudson Institute, can be contacted at [kisozaki@hudson.org](mailto:kisozaki@hudson.org).