



**CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE**  
**INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES**

# **From the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific: Drivers and Hurdles**

by Akiko Fukushima  
March 2021

# POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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**T**he name of the region that encompasses Japan and the West Coast of Canada has evolved over the years. Initially, it started simply as Asia, with the Pacific Ocean between us as reflected in Nitobe Inazo's wish to be "Japan's Bridge across the Pacific". Transpacific co-operation was ushered in during the 1980s, when the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC) and the Pacific Basin Economic Council (PBEC) acknowledged the area known as the Pan-Pacific or the Pacific Rim. With the 1990s, came the term "Asia-Pacific". Japan and Canada have actively supported regional institutions such as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) or the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) at track 1 and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) at track 2. In the late 1990s, East Asia arrived, led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), ASEAN Plus Three, the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM Plus). The term "Indo-Pacific" emerged in the 2010s. During this evolution of names, none of the regional institutions were dissolved, thus creating multi-layered architectures for regional co-operation.

Japan was one of the first countries to use the term "Indo-Pacific". Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept has spread to countries in the region and beyond. Participants have sought to co-ordinate and co-operate in the broader region. As for Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga spoke on the phone on February 3, 2021 and exchanged views, including co-operation on FOIP, according to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>1</sup>

Given this background, this policy brief analyzes the Indo-Pacific concept in its aims, drivers and hurdles from a Tokyo perspective.

## **Evolving from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific**

Why has Japan broadened the name of the regional scope from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific? Akihiko Tanaka, president of the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, observed that an Indo-Pacific concept emerged "as the region had become a centre for global economic dynamism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."<sup>2</sup> Kurt Campbell, Indo-Pacific co-ordinator at the U.S. National Security Council (NSC), also observed that the Indo-Pacific is "a region home to roughly half of the global economy."<sup>3</sup> Without exception, this economic importance is cited by all who have launched their Indo-Pacific concept as the reason for their engagement. Included in this scope is the important sea lane for transportation that supports the global economy. Here again, the idea of connectivity is shared.

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<sup>1</sup> Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Telephone Summit between Japan and Canada," February 3, 2021. Accessed February 5, 2021. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/na/na1/ca/page3\\_003011.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/na/na1/ca/page3_003011.html).

<sup>2</sup> Akihiko Tanaka, Keynote Speech at the Foreign Press Centre Symposium: "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific – Ensuring Peace and Prosperity in the Region," March 7, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi, "How America Can Shore up Asian Order," *Foreign Affairs*, January 12, 2021: 15.



Furthermore, as Rory Medcalf, a professor at the Australian National University, argues: “The Indo-Pacific is more than a geographical concept but includes security, economics and diplomacy.”<sup>4</sup> The countries involved embrace various geographical footprints, ranging from the East Coast of Africa, the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia to the South Pacific and the United States. Moreover, the narrative of the Indo-Pacific has not been static but remains dynamic and is evolving. Elements included in the Indo-Pacific also vary by country.

Although there is debate over who initiated the concept of the Indo-Pacific,<sup>5</sup> Japan was one of the first to launch it in the form of FOIP. On August 22, 2007, former prime minister Shinzo Abe spoke to the Indian parliament and alluded to “the confluence of the two seas (the Indian and the Pacific oceans)” which marks FOIP’s origin. Abe explained his concept with key words such as openness, freedom and co-operation,<sup>6</sup> which remain major points in Japan’s FOIP. Subsequently, when he returned to the office of prime minister in December 2012, Abe contributed an article to *Project Syndicate*, entitled “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond.” Recalling his speech in 2007, he wrote that peace, stability and freedom of navigation in the Pacific Ocean are inseparable from those values in the Indian Ocean. He also expressed his concerns about maritime security in the South China Sea, which was becoming “Lake Beijing”.<sup>7</sup> This explains why Japan broadened its regional narrative from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific.

The confluence of the two seas and Asia’s security diamond subsequently developed into FOIP, which was officially launched in August 2016 at the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI), held in Kenya.

## **Evolution of the Indo-Pacific Concept**

Japan originally envisioned FOIP as a “strategy” with maritime security at its core. China criticized it as a containment strategy. However, from the beginning, Japan’s FOIP included connectivity, the rules-based order and capacity building as important elements, which lent it further weight. According to a document published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in August 2020, FOIP is a concept “to develop a free and open Indo-Pacific region as an ‘international public good,’ through ensuring the rule-based international order, in a comprehensive, inclusive and transparent manner.”<sup>8</sup> According to Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi, its three pillars are (1) promotion and consolidation of fundamental principles of the international community,

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<sup>4</sup> Rory Medcalf, *Indo-Pacific Empire*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020): 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> There is debate over who was the first to use the term “Indo-Pacific”. In 2012, “Indo-Pacific” appeared for the first time officially in the white paper, “Australia in the Asian Century.” In August 2016, Shinzo Abe launched FOIP at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD). In November 2017, at the APEC summit in Da Nang, Donald Trump described the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” as his policy on Asia. This was followed by the section on FOIP in the national security strategy announced the following month. In June 2018, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi presented his Indo-Pacific concept in his speech at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.

<sup>6</sup> Shinzo Abe, Speech to the Indian Parliament. Accessed January 27, 2021. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Shinzo Abe, “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond,” *Project Syndicate*, December 27, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Accessed January 19, 2021. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000430632.pdf>.



(2) pursuit of economic prosperity through ensuring connectivity and (3) commitment to peace and stability, including maritime security.<sup>9</sup>

In 2018, the Japanese government dropped the term “strategy” and substituted “initiative”. This change initially silenced the Chinese who had harshly criticized the FOIP strategy as a containment policy, although their criticisms re-emerged, not on FOIP per se but in relation to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue on October 6, 2020. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in his meeting with Malaysian Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein in Kuala Lumpur on October 13, 2020 that a group underpins “a so-called Indo-Pacific NATO”, although two years earlier, he had compared the Quad to sea foam.<sup>10</sup>

The evolution from “strategy” to “initiative” also reflected Japan’s transition from an exclusive regional narrative reflected in Asia’s security diamond to a more inclusive one. In fact, Japan has shown its inclusivity by agreeing to let FOIP coexist alongside the Belt and Road Initiative. At the Japan-China summit on July 8, 2017, Abe and President Xi Jinping reportedly agreed that “Japan and China will discuss how to contribute to the stability and prosperity of the region and the world, including the Belt and Road Initiative.”<sup>11</sup> Japan has actually explored co-operating on infrastructure investment on a project-by-project basis. The *Diplomatic Bluebook 2020* clearly states that “the concept of FOIP does not intend to create new institutions or compete with existing institutions” and “no country is excluded from partnership.”<sup>12</sup>

Other key words in the narrative’s evolution have been competition vis-à-vis co-operation. As Mataka Kamiya, a professor of international relations at the National Defense Academy of Japan has argued, Japan’s FOIP consists of two facets; namely, a “competitive strategy” and a “co-operative strategy.” Kamiya observed that Japan emphasized a competitive strategy in the beginning but has started to focus on co-operation.<sup>13</sup>

Japan has long sought a balance between competition and co-operation with China. While Japan relies heavily on China economically, it suffers from the intrusion of official Chinese vessels into its contiguous waters and even in its territorial waters in the East China Sea. Such intrusions have increased lately, threatening Japan’s territorial integrity and security.<sup>14</sup> The new Chinese coast guard law is a source of concern as well.

Competition and co-operation are no longer unique to Japan’s relations with China but are shared by others, including great powers. While China and the U.S. are perceived as engaging in a fierce rivalry, China’s former vice-foreign minister, Fu Ying, wrote in the *New York Times* on November 24, 2020 that the U.S. and China must develop a relationship of “co-opetition”, which is

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<sup>9</sup> Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Minister Motegi’s Attendance at the EU Foreign Affairs Council,” January 25, 2021. Accessed February 10, 2021. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press1e\\_000168.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press1e_000168.html).

<sup>10</sup> Abhijnan Rej, “China and the Quad: From Sea Foam to Indo-Pacific NATO,” *The Diplomat*, October 15, 2020. Accessed February 20, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/china-and-the-quad-from-sea-foam-to-asian-nato/>.

<sup>11</sup> Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Japan-China Summit Meeting,” July.

<sup>12</sup> *Diplomatic Bluebook 2020*. Accessed February 8, 2021. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2020/html/feature/f0104.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Mataka Kamiya, “Kyoso senryaku” notameno “kyoryoku senryaku,” *Society of Security and Diplomatic Policy Studies*, February 2019: 1.

<sup>14</sup> The data on Chinese vessels’ intrusion into Japanese territorial waters and contiguous waters are available on the website of Japan’s coast guard. Accessed February 21, 2021. <https://www.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/mission/senkaku/senkaku.html>.



competition plus co-operation.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the NSC's Kurt Campbell wrote in *Foreign Affairs* on January 12, 2021, of the need to restore balance and legitimacy and noted that it is neither practical nor profitable to exclude Beijing from a promising future. The Atlantic Council issued a paper recommending to the Biden administration that the U.S. “strengthen and defend (itself) vis-à-vis China but also engage China”.<sup>16</sup>

Countries have used different adjectives and nouns to describe the Indo-Pacific. Japan has used the adjectives “free and open” from the beginning and has not varied them, even when Yoshihide Suga took over from Abe. This was reflected in Suga’s policy speech to the Diet in January 2021. He stated that “establishing a free and open order based on the rule of law is extremely important in the Indo-Pacific region, which is the hub of the world’s dynamism. While deepening co-operation with the United States, ASEAN, Australia, India and Europe, we will work together with more countries and regions to achieve a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific.’”<sup>17</sup> Yuichi Hosoya, a political science professor at Keio University, argues for the importance of “free and open”, emphasizing that “free” includes freedom of navigation and “open” includes freedom and democracy in the region.<sup>18</sup>

The U.S. under Donald Trump also used the adjectives “free and open”<sup>19</sup> although the emphasis was on maritime security. Although President Joe Biden reportedly used “peace and stability” in referring to the Indo-Pacific immediately after his election,<sup>20</sup> he used “free and open Indo-Pacific” with Suga after his inauguration during their January 28, 2021 conversation.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, in his foreign policy speech in June 2019, cited “a free, open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific” and promoted “Pacific Step-up#” in the Pacific island region.

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke at the Shangri-La Dialogue: Asia Security Summit in June 2018, he elaborated upon India’s relations with regional players including ASEAN, Japan, Australia and the U.S. Modi said India shares the vision of an open, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific, balancing its need for strategic autonomy with its need for partnership in the region.

As for nouns, Japan used “strategy” in the beginning but has since shifted to “initiative”. The U.S. has consistently used “strategy”. ASEAN has used “outlook” as in “the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)”. This acknowledges ASEAN’s own vision of the broader region, without sacrificing its centrality in regional co-operation and the need to survive under U.S.-China rivalry.

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<sup>15</sup> Fu Ying, “Cooperative Competition is Possible between China and the U.S.,” *New York Times*, November 24, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> The Atlantic Council, *Global Strategy 2021*, December 2020. Accessed February 20, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/global-strategy-2021-an-allied-strategy-for-china/>.

<sup>17</sup> Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, Policy Speech to the 204<sup>th</sup> Session of the Diet on January 18, 2021. Accessed February 10, 2021. [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/99\\_suga/statement/202101/00013.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/99_suga/statement/202101/00013.html).

<sup>18</sup> Yuichi Hosoya, “Indo Taiheiyō Chiiki niokeru jiyū to kaihousei no owarika,” Mpve.net 16, 2020. Accessed February 8, 2021. <http://blog.livedoor.jp/hosoyayuichi/archives/2003137.html>.

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, Washington, D.C., June 1, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Phone conversation between Prime Minister Suga and President-elect Biden on November 12, 2020. Accessed February 8, 2021. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/na/na1/us/page3\\_002922.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/na/na1/us/page3_002922.html).

<sup>21</sup> Telephone conversation between Prime Minister Suga and President Biden in January 2021. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/na/na1/us/page1\\_000925.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/na/na1/us/page1_000925.html).



AOIP stresses “dialogue and co-operation instead of rivalry” and “development and prosperity for all”.<sup>22</sup>

French President Emanuel Macron referred to an “Indo-Pacific axis” when he visited Australia in May 2018. France later presented its vision of the region in *France and Security in the Indo-Pacific* in 2018, updated in 2019. The French government identified the Indo-Pacific as “the world’s economic powerhouse” where France’s major trading partners are located. It also explained that France has its own territories in the region. Céline Pajon, head of Japan research at the Centre for Asian Studies at the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), observes that France can promote “its very own vision for a balanced, inclusive Indo-Pacific regional order, upheld by key liberal principles and multilateral schemes”.<sup>23</sup>

Germany, which formerly hesitated to join the narrative for fear of antagonizing China, published *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific* region in September 2020. Germany used “guidelines” rather than “strategy” or “initiative”. The guidelines expressed Germany’s “great interest in participating in Asia’s dynamic growth”. The guidelines also noted Germany’s wish to develop a future EU strategy on the Indo-Pacific.<sup>24</sup> Germany’s interests went beyond trade, and included order, peace and security, digital transformation and connectivity, along with a wish to develop relations with ASEAN.<sup>25</sup> The Netherlands published its own guidelines soon after Germany and has proposed that the EU consider drafting an Indo-Pacific policy.

## **Motives and Obstacles**

FOIP is the first foreign policy strategy for which Japan took the initiative rather than leading from behind and it successfully brought other liberal democracies within and beyond the region on board. Countries that are on board have their own motives and aims, some of which converge while others diverge. However, the common motivating factor is a wish to be part of the region’s economic potential.

These countries also share a concern about the fraying regional and international order which, for example, may affect sea lines of communication (SLOC). The U.S. led the liberal international order in the post-Second World War period, but doesn’t seem keen now to carry the burden alone. Former president Barack Obama, in his speech to Congress on Syria, said that “our ideals and principles, as well as our national security, are at stake in Syria, along with our leadership of a world where we seek to ensure that the worst weapons will never be used. America is not the

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<sup>22</sup> ASEAN, *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, Bangkok, June 23, 2019: 2.

<sup>23</sup> Céline Pajon, “France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Quad Plus,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Special Issue 2020: 166.

<sup>24</sup> Government of Germany, “The Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific Region,” September 2020. Accessed February 20, 2021. <https://rangun.diplo.de/blob/2380824/a27b62057f2d2675ce2bbfc5be01099a/policy-guidelines-summary-data.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.





world's policeman.”<sup>26</sup> This means great powers should co-ordinate their policies with the U.S. if they aspire to upgrade the regional and global order.

Next, many nations are concerned with the assertive and sometimes coercive actions on the part of rising powers, which have inhibited the narrative's launch. Potential participants hesitate to join the Indo-Pacific narrative because they fear being seen as antagonistic to these rising powers. At the same time, they are concerned with the rising powers' assertive activities and coercive diplomacy.

The Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada in its *Canada and the Indo-Pacific* report concluded that “alignment with Japan on the FOIP concept is unnecessary” for Canada as it co-ordinates its security policies through the G7. On trade and economic development, there are other Asia-Pacific institutions, including the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).<sup>27</sup>

However, the Indo-Pacific narrative is not meant to kill off other existing structures but rather to build on them. Whether one sees merit in a broader regional scope or not depends on one's motives and goals as well as upon an assessment of inhibiting reasons. To achieve their goals, these countries need to weigh the risks of acting alone or together.

### **Japan's Practice of FOIP**

Japan has taken initiatives on connectivity by promoting quality infrastructure development in numerous corridors from Eastern Africa all the way to the South Pacific, including the East-West Economic Corridor, the Southern Economic Corridor in Southeast Asia, the North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement project in India and the Bengal Bay Industrial Growth Belt in Southwest Asia. Japan is not acting alone on connectivity development but together with the U.S. and EU. On September 27, 2019, Japan signed the Partnership in Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure with the EU. This pact encompasses not only physical infrastructure but also digital, transport, energy and human resource exchange.

On the rule of law, Japan promotes maritime order in the region and shares its insights and experience in maritime law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and other international laws with countries in need through capacity building. Japan provides equipment and human resource development for maritime law enforcement in Southeast Asia. Japan has provided patrol vessels, high-speed boats and coastal monitoring radar equipment to littoral countries. Japan also provides capacity-building assistance on maritime domain awareness to countries in the Indo-Pacific region. Also, Japan supports ASEAN in the

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<sup>26</sup> Barack Obama, “America is Not the World's Policeman: Text of Barack Obama's Speech on Syria,” NDTV, September 11, 2013. Accessed February 21, 2021. <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/america-is-not-the-worlds-policeman-text-of-barack-obamas-speech-on-syria-534239>.

<sup>27</sup> Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, *Canada and the Indo-Pacific: Diverse and Inclusive, Not Free and Open*, September 2020: 97-99.





area of disaster management, including through providing funds to the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management.<sup>28</sup>

## **Conclusion**

How will Indo-Pacific policies evolve? The Indo-Pacific is facing intensifying great-power politics, from the strain on the rule-of-law order and competition over vaccines to disputes about territorial waters, domestic problems, widening inequality and nuclear proliferation. The region is filled with potential as well as with uncertainties and anxieties which the author believes could be drivers for co-operation in broader Asia.

There certainly are obstacles to co-operation, ranging from strategic autonomy and competition to possible coercive actions, etc. Another obstacle is how we frame our co-operation, managing the balance of competition and co-operation. The oceans are linked, but so are geopolitical and geo-economic agendas. We have to address them as a whole. In order to promote peace, stability and prosperity in the region and beyond, great and middle powers need to co-ordinate and co-operate for our regional and global public good. The Biden administration has offered the world hope. In his speech to the 2021 virtual Munich Security Conference, Biden stated that “America is back” and announced that the U.S. would make a \$2 billion pledge to COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX). The U.S. has also rejoined the Paris Agreement on climate change. There is new momentum.

Japan plans to further advance its FOIP. In his foreign policy speech to the Diet on January 18, 2021, Motegi emphasized FOIP and expressed his intention to co-operate with countries that share this vision.<sup>29</sup> Canada is one of those countries. The author recalls working together with Canadian colleagues on the Asia-Pacific at track 2 and believes that Japan and Canada have mutual interests in co-operating in the Indo-Pacific for the sake of the peace, stability and prosperity of the broader region.

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<sup>28</sup> Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” Accessed February 8, 2021. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000430632.pdf>;  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Japan’s Efforts for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” Accessed February 8, 2021.  
<https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100056243.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi, foreign policy speech to the 201<sup>st</sup> Session of the Diet, January 18, 2021.

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