

Japan's 'Pivot to Asia'

By [Sebastian Maslow](#) | 2nd August 2018



Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc (R) and his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe (L) bow their heads to national flags during a welcoming ceremony in the state guesthouse in Tokyo, Japan June 6, 2017. Sources: Reuters/Toru Yamanaka

IN response to the rise of China and India and declining US influence, Japan has prescribed the need for new security partnerships and the expansion of Tokyo's role in shaping the Asia-Pacific. As a result, Japan has shifted its geo-strategic focus from the 'Asia-Pacific' to the 'Indo-Pacific.'

As [Rory Medcalf](#) has pointed out, the 'Indo-Pacific' has evolved as a geostrategic construct to accommodate the challenges associated with regional power shifts. Here, Japan has embraced the concept in its own bid for regional leadership.

To promote an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Abe has for years pushed his vision of a [Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#) (FOIP). Clearly outlined in 2016 to promote connectivity, free trade and infrastructure across Asia, Africa and the Middle East, as Abe's '[pivot to Asia](#)', the FOIP evolved as a main pillar of Japan's strategy to contain China's military and economic power in the region.

Amidst competition over the reshaping of the Asian geopolitical order, Abe has embraced the Obama administration's 'Pivot to Asia'. Pledging a 'strong' Japan, Abe has since 2013 strengthened the US-Japan alliance and established new security partnerships. In applying a

dual-track approach of US alliance consolidation and alliance diversification, Japan has ‘decentred’ and ‘decoupled’ its security interests from the US while ensuring sustained US commitment to the region.

While the Indo-Pacific has only recently captured the imagination of military planners and academics, Japan has long advocated this concept.



US President Donald Trump and Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe shake hands before a working lunch at Akasaka Palace in Tokyo, Japan November 6, 2017. Source: Reuters/Jonathan Ernst

In his speech to the Indian Parliament in 2007, Abe spoke of a “confluence of the two seas”, arguing for a regional order based on values of democracy, human rights, and uninterrupted access to the region’s maritime commons. Calling for a ‘value-orientated’ foreign policy, this speech built on the [Arc of Freedom and Prosperity](#) initiative introduced by the Abe administration in 2006.

Abe revived the Indo-Pacific upon his comeback as prime minister in 2012. In promoting ‘[Asia's Democratic Security Diamond](#)’, he criticised China’s assertive behaviour in the South China Sea as an attempt to turn this maritime commons into a ‘Lake Beijing’.

To prevent this from happening, Abe called for a robust strategic partnership between the US, Australia, India and Japan. Japan has since worked hard to reinitiate the [quadrilateral security dialogue](#) (also known as ‘the Quad’) to consolidate Japan’s military links with those three countries. This group held its first work-level meeting in November 2017 and has since worked towards improving military-to-military cooperation.

At the core of Japan’s FOIP is its links with India and Australia, which Tokyo has cultivated in the form of a “[special strategic and global partnership](#)” and “[special strategic partnership](#)” respectively.

These partnerships have both a geostrategic and geo-economic dimension. Prior to the revival of the Quad in 2017, Japan had signed agreements on defence technology transfer with Australia in 2014 and with India in 2015. At the same time, it provided defence technology and training to the Philippines and Vietnam, lifting its long-standing ban on arms exports in 2014.

In addition, Abe has legalised Japan's participation in collective self-defence operations and swiftly moved to [entangle](#) his country in securing the maritime order in the South China Sea. To this end, Japan now not only supports the US Navy's freedom of navigation operations, but also conducts joint military exercises (such as with Indonesia). It also organises port calls for Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Forces, and supplies patrol vessels and surveillance planes to ASEAN member states to counter China's assertive behaviour in these waters.



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe prepares to participate in a media conference with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull after their bilateral meeting at Kirribilli House in Sydney, Australia, January 14, 2017. Source: Reuters/Chris Pavlich

To expand its scope, Abe's 'Pivot to Asia' initially embraced the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) free trade agreement. The TPP was long seen in Tokyo as a vital strategic instrument to counter the 2012 Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) promoted by China.

However, the Trump administration's immediate withdrawal from the TPP has forced policymakers in Japan to de-couple their trade strategy from the US. The Japan-India relationship constitutes the [cornerstone](#) of what some observers have termed Japan's FOIP '[grand strategy](#)'.

In competition with China's BRI, Japan has pledged support for large-scale infrastructure projects, including the construction of high-speed railway tracks and various other [projects](#). Abe has relied on [India's long-established connections](#) on the African continent to effectively expand the geographical scope of his FOIP.

Together with Modi, Abe announced the establishment of an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) as a platform to provide 'quality infrastructure' and capacity building. It is thus no coincidence that Abe chose the 2016 Tokyo International Conference on African Development in August 2016 in Nairobi to announce Japan's FOIP vision.

To position itself in the competition with China's BRI, Japan has put the emphasis on '[quality infrastructure projects](#)'.

Though far behind China's US\$4 trillion BRI budget, Japan has pledged US\$110 billion through the Asian Development Bank to develop 'quality' projects. As such, Abe has included the FOIP as a key element in Japan's official development strategy.



US President Donald Trump hosts a bilateral meeting with Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Florida US, April 17, 2018. Source: Reuters/Kevin Lamarque

It remains unclear **how Trump will balance** his 'America first' doctrine with the need to keep the US economically and militarily committed to the region and counter China's BRI. Given this uncertainty, Japan's strategic choice to focus on the 'Indo-Pacific' while diversifying its strategic partnerships is plausible, as Tokyo seeks to determine the trajectory of Asia's shifting geostrategic space.

If Tokyo wants its own geopolitical vision to succeed, it must demonstrate commitment to its **proclaimed values** of 'free' and 'open', particularly when it comes to addressing its own territorial disputes in the East China Sea.

Moreover, Tokyo will also need to work harder to substantiate the **Pacific** in its FOIP strategy. In the latest Pacific Islands Leaders meeting in May, sponsored by Tokyo, Abe did not miss the opportunity to emphasise Japan's own strategic concerns about North Korea and China, yet failed to sufficiently address issues such as ocean governance and climate change.

To succeed, Abe must be clear that the Indo-Pacific is more than an instrument of regional hegemonic competition with China. If he fails to do so, **Chris Wirth** may well be right in cautioning that Japan's 'value-oriented' diplomacy will likely reinforce civilisational geopolitics and create more cause for conflict than peace and stability.

*This piece was first published at **Policy Forum**, Asia and the Pacific's platform for public policy analysis and opinion.*

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