



Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe speaks at the General Debate of the 73rd session of the General Assembly at the United Nations in New York City on Sept. 25, 2018. (Bryan R. Smith/AFP/Getty Images)

## Japan's Abe Highlights 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Strategy to Counter Beijing

BY FRANK FANG, EPOCH TIMES

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While at the United Nations General Assembly session in New York, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe updated his strategy on a maritime corridor that is designed to counter Beijing-centered trading routes.

Speaking to the General Assembly on Sept. 25, Abe devoted a section of his speech to the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy, which outlines Japan's role in preserving stability and peace in the waters and airspaces panning the Arctic Ocean to the Sea of Japan, through the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean, according to a report by Japan's oldest English-language newspaper The Japan Times.

Abe said the many ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and Pacific island nations, as well as the United States, Australia, and India, should work together "to preserve the blessing of open seas" to engage in economic cooperation based on the rule of law and rules-based order.

ASEAN is a regional intergovernmental organization consisting of 10 countries, including the Philippines, Burma (also known as Myanmar), Indonesia, and Malaysia. Meanwhile, many Pacific islands traverse the Pacific and Indian oceans to trade with countries in Eastern Africa. Abe first introduced FOIP in 2016. According to the website of Japan's Mission to ASEAN, FOIP involves setting up several corridors to promote free and open trade in the

Indo-Pacific region. The initiative includes upgrading the Yangon-Mandalay Railway in Burma, establishing the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor in India, as well as the Nacala Corridor, spanning three African countries: Malawi, Zambia, and Mozambique.

A huge pillar of the FOIP is a partnership with India under the framework of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), which was first proposed by Abe and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the India-Japan Annual Summit Meeting in Tokyo in 2016.



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi (L) and his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe shake hands after signing in Tokyo on Nov. 11, 2016. (Franck Robichon/AFP/Getty Images)

The AAGC promotes maritime economic activity between Japan, India, African nations, and countries throughout Southeast Asia and Oceania. The corridor includes development projects, mostly in the health, pharmaceutical, and agricultural sectors. The AAGC also includes plans to train local laborers involved in the projects to learn medical training and mining skills. The AAGC was formally rolled out in May 2017 at the 52nd Annual Summit Meeting of the African Development Bank in India.

While Abe didn't mention China by name while speaking about the Japan-led Indo-Pacific strategy at the UN, it's widely recognized that FOIP is an alternative to China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative (OBOR, also known as OBOR).

## **OBOR**

OBOR, first announced by Beijing in 2013, seeks to build Beijing-centered land and maritime trading networks by financing infrastructure projects throughout Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. However, Beijing's initiative has been criticized for burdening developing countries with massive loans to China that they can't pay off. This "debt trap" has already occurred in [South Africa](#), Kenya, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives.

[Sebastian Maslow](#), assistant professor at the Graduate School of International Cooperation Studies at the prestigious Kobe University in Japan, wrote in an August article published in the Policy Forum that FOIP was not simply an economic alternative to OBOR, but "a main pillar of Japan's strategy to contain China's military and economic power in the region."

China has increased its military presence in the South China Sea in order to stake its sovereignty claims over disputed islands in the area, such as the Spratlys, where Beijing has constructed artificial islands equipped with naval and air bases.

India, a main partner with Japan in the AAGC, has openly expressed reservations about China's OBOR. According to an April report by India's English-language daily The Statesman, India boycotted an OBOR Summit convened by China in May 2017. India protested that China's flagship OBOR project in Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), runs through disputed territory in the Kashmir region.

In July, Pakistan asked the International Monetary Fund for a bailout after the country's external debt soared to a record \$91.8 billion, \$19 billion of which is owed to China. Projects in the CPEC, meanwhile, is estimated to cost \$62 billion.

The chief differences between OBOR and AAGC are outlined in the book "China-India-Japan in the Indo-Pacific," published in July and written by two researchers at the East Asia Center of India's Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis.

"The AAGC transcends the scope and scale of the [OBOR] in terms of its universal approach of addressing human resource development in Asia and Africa," the book stated, adding that while AAGC values training local talent to contribute to local economies, OBOR prioritizes Beijing's national interests—such as gaining mining rights to precious minerals or using its investments to pressure countries into siding with the Chinese regime on diplomatic issues.

## **Indo-Pacific**

Before Abe made his remarks at the U.N., there were already signs that China's OBOR would face opposition, as Japan, Australia, and the United States have sought closer cooperation in the Indo-Pacific to counter Beijing's aggression.

The three countries inked a trilateral pact to invest in infrastructure projects in the region in July, according to The Japan Times. The partnership will focus on the energy, transportation, tourism, and technology infrastructure sectors.



Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the Indo-Pacific Business Forum at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Washington on July 30, 2018. (Samira Bouaou/The Epoch Times)

Also in July, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced a \$113 million investment to fund new technology, energy, and infrastructure projects in the region. The investment is part of President Donald Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy.

Meanwhile, the Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis argued in a September paper that Taiwan, a key U.S. ally, should be made a critical part of the AAGC.

The paper pointed to Taiwan's location—at the confluence of the South China Sea and East Asia—which makes the island country a strategic point for international shipping lanes in the region. Additionally, Taiwan is a full-fledged democracy, in line with the free and open values promulgated by AAGC.

Japan also is set to increase cooperation with the Mekong countries—Cambodia, Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam—as the five countries are set to sign a new cooperation strategy next month at the 10th Mekong-Japan Summit in Tokyo, according to a Sept. 29 article by Japanese newspaper Mainichi Shimbun. Japan has plans to develop infrastructure projects in the Mekong region as part of FOIP.

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