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OPINION

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A key role for Japan in the Indo-Pacific

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The Indo-Pacific region serves as the transport corridor for energy, imports and exports for many of the world's leading trading nations, including Japan. Stretching from East Africa through the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean, the region is the central hub for global economic growth, innovation and potential security challenges today and the years ahead.

Middle powers such as Australia, Canada, France, India, the United Kingdom, South Korea and Japan need to chart out what their national and joint vision of the Indo-Pacific is, how they can work together to shape the region's evolution, and how they can negotiate the deepening Sino-U.S. rivalry which will grow in the region and complicate their respective bilateral relations with the United States and China.

Japan's place among the middle powers can be questioned. It is the third-largest economy in the world, its Self-Defense Forces are both powerful and work synergistically within the Japan-U.S. security alliance, and Japan is a technological and cultural superpower with global reach and influence.

Critics of Japan as a middle power would argue that the current efforts to revise Article 9 of the Constitution so that the SDF is legally recognized as a military is strong evidence that Japan's political leaders reject the ideal of the nation as a middle power.

Despite these traits and criticisms, Japan continues to behave and invest in its future as a middle power by advocating for the strengthening of international laws, through the maintenance of an SDF that constitutionally and arguably ideologically eschews the use of force to achieve foreign policy objectives. This inclination for nonmilitary solutions to foreign policy challenges in concert with a demonstrated track record of promoting development through overseas economic aid clearly places Japan in the family of middle powers based on behavior and power capabilities.

What is Japan's vision for the Indo-Pacific region, and does it resonate with other middle powers? Japan's advocacy of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) overlaps closely with the behavior that characterizes other middle powers. By stressing the protection and bolstering of a rules-based international order, Japan is highlighting the importance of international laws and norms to prevent instability, conflict or a disruption in the maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific region.

The FOIP initiative also focuses on development, such as maritime capacity-building and the funding of regional interconnectivity projects promoting more intra-ASEAN connectivity, such as the East-West Economic Corridor and the Maritime ASEAN Economic Corridor.

These development-based projects bolster local economic integration within ASEAN to help diversity economies and choices of infrastructure providers.

Furthermore, the focus on transparency and building a legacy of high-quality infrastructure and human capital matches other middle powers' broader development efforts regionally and globally.

Japan has an important role in coordinating middle powers within and outside the Indo-Pacific region.

Long-standing partners such as Australia, France and the U.K. have a deep interest in ensuring their Indo-Pacific territories and legacies remain protected by a rules-based international order in the region. Japan should continue to find roles for these Indo-Pacific middle powers to bolster rules but also cooperate in capacity-building, infrastructure and joint exercises for disaster relief.

All would be welcomed by states in the Indo-Pacific. By pooling resources, a coalition of middle powers could be a platform for additional states such as Canada, New Zealand and South Korea to support middle power diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific in a manner that is in line with the FOIP initiative.

While smaller in resources, Canadian, New Zealand and South Korean's participation in a middle power-based FOIP would expand the number of stakeholders in the region but also lend their experiences in supporting development, transparency and good governance to the region.

Japan's size, resources, geographic position and long track record of promoting and abiding by a rules-based international order give it a leading role in building a middle power coalition for the Indo-Pacific region. Its deepening relationship with India also makes it an ideal candidate to be the middle power connector for the region.

Without India in any middle power coalition in the Indo-Pacific region, there is little hope that other middle powers will be able to sustain an effective and influential coalition of states focused on rules-based behavior, development and connectivity.

India's role also revolves around its status as an emerging state that is actively involved in shaping the Indo-Pacific region. India can and should use its middle power and emerging state status to ensure that other middle powers are not only championing their respective national interests, but also the interests of emerging states through the region.

Japan's long track record of building infrastructure and human capital in Southeast Asia is reflected in its FOIP initiative. Importantly, they overlap significantly with India's national development strategies, its preference for maintaining its nonaligned status, and its Act East Policy and interest in the Asian Africa Growth Corridor.

The multitude of overlapping relationships Japan enjoys with other middle powers gives Tokyo an opportunity to build an institution that focuses on the interests of middle powers and emerging states. A coalition of middle powers in the Indo-Pacific region may be able to insulate each other through

cooperation, joint positions and bargaining that have and will continue to emanate out of friction between the U.S. and China, such as China's retaliatory detainment of Canadians Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor following the arrest of the Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou.

Orchestrating a coalition of middle powers in the Indo-Pacific based on the FOIP initiative would complement Japan's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue by expanding the quantity and nature of its multilateral relations in the Indo-Pacific to achieve its objectives of maintaining sea lanes of communication that are free, open and subject to international law.

Japan is up to the task as evidenced by its leadership in pushing forward the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership after the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the signing of the Japan-EU economic partnership agreement. Tokyo can and should continue this track record of multilateralism by forging a middle power coalition for the Indo-Pacific region to secure its national interests that are increasingly in line with other middle powers.

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