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The “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” Strategy and Japan’s Emerging Security Posture

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Abstract

This article explicates the aims and objectives of the Abe administration’s central policy initiative towards the Indo-Pacific region: its “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) strategy, which was officially unveiled in 2016. It argues that whilst the FOIP is talked of as one of the most important organizing ideas in Japan’s contemporary foreign policy, there is actually little consensus as to what the FOIP really entails and what it may mean for the country’s emerging national security posture. Using a novel analytical framework to test for potential points of contact between the FOIP and three critical strands of Japan’s national security (key alliances, the role of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces outside of territorial defense, and security cooperation with ASEAN nations) the article shows why extant constitutional constraints on the use of the force combined with limited resources given over to defense make it unlikely that Japan will play a more robust role in pursuit of the FOIP’s main goal: the maintenance of open seas.

Keywords

Free and Open Indo-Pacific, Japan, Strategy, The Quad, Self-Defense Forces

An Amorphous Concept?

Japan’s turn towards a more robust defense posture and proactive approach to regional and global security affairs has received considerable scholarly attention (Green, 2013; Smith 2014; Oros 2017; and Liff 2018). From a significant loosening of a decades-old ban on arms exports to a landmark Cabinet decision allowing for the limited exercise of collective self-defense, the change in Japan’s strategic posture, especially under the current administration of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, has captured international attention and has been a source of intense debate within the country. Whilst considerable ink has been spilt on this major – though some say evolutionary (Liff 2015) – reorientation, less attention has been given over to a more recent policy initiative launched by Abe in August 2016: the so-

called “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP). Arguably, the FOIP has emerged as one of the most important organizing ideas in Japan’s contemporary foreign policy. Yet, as it stands, there is little consensus as to what the FOIP actually entails – let alone the ways by which it may influence future Japanese policy. As one well-connected Japanese journalist has recently commented, “even people working in the government cannot clearly explain its objectives and content” (Okada 2018).

As its name implies, the FOIP is married to the geographical concept of the “Indo-Pacific,” a nomenclature increasingly used by diplomats, policy-makers and scholars across many parts of the world to denote a spatially coherent zone that combines the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Publicly, the government led by Prime Minister Abe has presented the FOIP primarily as a set of initiatives designed to promote Japan’s economic prosperity through maintaining a rules-based order and improving connectivity across this vast expanse of water, islands and rim countries. Whilst the government has detailed some elements of the FOIP’s agenda – including, in the overseas development realm, specific initiatives for large-scale infrastructure projects in various locations stretching from the Pacific to East Africa – for many commentators it remains a rather amorphous concept. Beyond the broad ideas that underpin the FOIP, very little has been elucidated about its potential practical implications for Japanese policy in this strategically important maritime area.

The term *senryaku* (strategy in English) typically accompanies the FOIP in official pronouncements as well as in unofficial commentary. But it is not self-evident that this term’s use is justifiable. Notwithstanding the dilution of the meaning of the word, a consequence of its overuse and misuse (Freedman 2013, pp. x-xi), a strategy is nothing if it is not a plan with concomitant policy actions. National strategy – and this speaks to the core meaning of *senryaku* – is ultimately about the choices states make to secure their future in an uncertain world where war is possible. The extent to which the FOIP can be viewed in this way, as guiding Japan’s strategic approach to the Indo-Pacific, remains hidden for most analysts. As one Japanese academic has recently noted: “The reality remains that many people have only a vague idea about what the [FOIP] strategy actually means” (Tsuruoka 2018). In one recent in-depth study of Japan’s emerging national security policy, for example, the FOIP strategy is mentioned but once, and only to say that it was formulated in response to China’s growing assertiveness (Liff 2018, p. 18). If the FOIP is in fact a move to counter Beijing, then it is surely a crucial facet of Japanese national security policy. Such an aim behind the FOIP would make it analogous to Washington’s own Indo-Pacific strategy, which is more overtly a containment policy towards China (Matsuda 2018).

Although placing the FOIP in the context of Japan’s evolving national security posture is largely absent in scholarly discussions, commentary in Japanese elite

media, routinely frames the strategy in terms of two issues that are central to nearly all debates about Japan’s security: China’s rising power and the U.S. security commitment.¹ Yet the FOIP is never presented officially in this way, and certainly not as an attempt to counter China’s growing influence and power in the region. When it comes to the FOIP and China, the opposite message is given. Recent pronouncements, including a speech delivered by Prime Minister Abe on 22 January 2018 to the Japanese parliament, describe the FOIP as complimentary to Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Indeed, Abe spoke of the necessity of cooperating with China in the implementation of the FOIP’s initiatives (Abe 2018).

Blurriness about the FOIP, and as a corollary a poor appreciation of the potential implications resulting from its implementation, is a major weak spot in attempts to anticipate the future strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific. Possessing the world’s third largest economy and one of the region’s most capable militaries, the policies Japan adopts have a major bearing on the most populous and economically dynamic part of the world. Furthermore, Japan’s emerging strategic posture considerably influences how the U.S. thinks about its own role in the Indo-Pacific. Domestically, a more activist security role in region brought about by the FOIP could also have significant implications for Japanese political scene, where critics vehemently oppose any departure from Japan’s post-war “pacifism”.

So how then can we move beyond opacity towards a firmer appreciation of how the FOIP fits into Japan’s evolving foreign and defense policies? This article uses a novel analytical framework to test for potential points of contact between the FOIP and three critical strands of Japan’s overseas national security posture: key alliances; the role of the Japan Self-Defense Forces or *Jietai* (hereafter the SDF) outside of territorial defense; and security cooperation with ASEAN nations. By approaching the FOIP in this way, the article starts from the premise that for trading nations like Japan, the economic agenda of a maritime strategy cannot be decoupled from security concerns. It is on such matters as free movement across international seas where the economic health and national security interests for a country like Japan intersect. Seen from Japan, the Indo-Pacific region is essentially a maritime domain where economic and security interests collide. In making this argument, the article adds to previous work on Tokyo’s changing defense posture and foreign policy since the end of the Cold War (Green 2001; Lind 2004; Samuels 2007; and Oros 2008). Before detailing the national security-related aspects of the FOIP, the article begins by charting the evolution of the concept.

¹ Initial findings from author’s forthcoming research paper that employs text-mining methods to establish co-occurrence networks in Japanese-language elite media commentary between the term FOIP and other key security-related terms.

The FOIP's Genesis and Evolution

From its conceptual origins to the place it holds today in Japanese policy, the FOIP has followed a non-linear trajectory. Its genesis can be traced primarily to one individual – Shinzo Abe; its progression from idea to government policy has been indelibly linked to the up-and-down fortunes of his political career. Though it was not until the sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) held in Nairobi in August 2016 that Abe delivered his first major speech on the FOIP, the origins of the strategy can be traced much further back, as can the conceptualization in Japanese thinking of the Indo-Pacific as a geographically coherent area.

Following on from the Japan-India strategic dialogue initiated in 2006, Abe, in his first, short-lived tenure as prime minister, unveiled the term Indo-Pacific in a speech delivered at the Indian Parliament in August 2007. Entitled “Confluence of the Two Seas,” the speech introduced Japan’s vision for the Indo-Pacific as a region built on common values, such as democracy, freedom, and respect for human rights. Links can be made between this value-orientated proclamation about the region and the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” concept, which was first laid out in a speech by Abe’s foreign minister, Taro Aso, in 2006 and was subsequently clarified by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) as centered on “expanding the ring of freedom along the Eurasian continent to form a rich and stable region based on universal values” (Aso 2006; MOFA n.d.). Elaborating on these ideas further, Abe spoke in the New Delhi speech of an “immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the US and Australia. Open and transparent, this network will allow people, goods, capital, and knowledge to flow freely” (Abe 2007). Evoking the term “broader Asia (*kakudai Asia*),” Abe’s speech reflected a perception that economic and strategic linkages between Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean had increased to such a level that Japan’s security and prosperity were now influenced by events in both places (Matsuda 2018). Though Abe’s vision for Japan’s role in promoting and maintaining this vision of a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific was not, at this stage, clearly articulated, the conceptual foundations of what was to come later were visible. When Abe’s short stint as prime minister came to an end in September 2007, the drive for Japan to develop a holistic policy agenda towards the Indo-Pacific fizzled out. The idea of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic zone, however, continued to gather momentum among Japanese policymakers.²

On returning to power in 2012, and after the successful passage of landmark security legislation in 2015, Abe revived his nascent Indo-Pacific concept. Providing an opportunity to explain to a number of potential African recipient countries

² Author interview with former MSDF senior officer who had worked on FOIP in MOFA, Tokyo, July 2018.

how they could benefit from Tokyo's plans, TICAD seemed the perfect venue to unveil a new regional strategy for Japan that was seemingly built around the promotion of free trade, infrastructure investment and economic development. Though the FOIP continued earlier talk of spreading values in the Indo-Pacific, many of the normative elements present in Abe's early statements about Japan's priorities towards the region, such as in his speech to the Indian Parliament in 2007, were either relegated in importance or eradicated altogether (Brown 2018). The FOIP strategy was launched at a time when Japanese government policy was shifting towards protecting the country's material and security interests and away from propagating norms and values. Much of the substance of the FOIP, as expressed in the TICAD speech and other statements since, retains a focus on Japan's role in promoting economic connectivity between Asia, the Middle East and Africa through the expansion of trade ties and by investing in major infrastructure projects, but it is now accompanied by a growing emphasis on the need for an open and secure maritime environment and regional stability more generally. This is natural; Japan, as a trading nation, relies on open sea lanes. But recent events, not least Chinese attempts to dominate the South China Sea, have led decision-makers in Tokyo to reach the conclusion that these necessary conditions for economic prosperity are being corroded.

Given this trend, there is little surprise that Japan's foreign policy is orientated towards maritime issues, including upholding fundamental principles such as freedom of navigation as well as countering specific threats to Japanese shipping. (Japan's counter-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia can be understood in this context.) Security of the sea-lines-of-communications have been critical to the success of Japan's export-led model of development and there is nothing to suggest that this will change in the future. That Japanese policy-makers view the intertwining of economic and security interests as being at the heart of any approach to the Indo-Pacific was made clear at the Japan-U.S. Summit in November 2017. The Japanese delegation explained to their American counterparts that the FOIP's goals were (and remain so): the establishment and maintenance of the rule of law and the freedom of navigation; the promotion of economic prosperity; and a commitment to promoting peace and stability in the region, especially through capacity-building and security assistance (MOFA 2017b). Because the FOIP calls so strongly for the maintenance of open seas, it cannot thus be disentangled from security challenges that threaten Japan's economic prosperity.

Since 2016, the FOIP has transitioned from a largely personal initiative of Prime Minister Abe to becoming integrated into actual foreign policy. Indeed, the FOIP now features in the agenda and budget of the MOFA for the coming financial year. Moreover, the new MOFA strategy, for example, includes a new chapter

specifically for the FOIP. As the FOIP moves from concept to a more substantive policy, with specific objectives and deliverables, it will become increasingly important to understand its relationship with Japan's emerging security posture.

Points of Contact

Under Abe, Japan's national security posture has gone through its most significant transformation since the end of the Second World War. At the center of this change is the passage of ambitious "peace and security legislation" that included revisions to ten existing laws as well as a new International Peace Support bill (Ministry of Defense, 2016). Among other things, it provides the legal foundation for the controversial 2014 Cabinet decision to reinterpret the Article 9 "peace clause," allowing Japan to exercise the right of collective self-defense under specific conditions.

In pursuing ambitious and controversial reforms, Abe claimed to be responding to Japan's deteriorating security landscape, including an increasingly powerful and assertive China and the growing North Korean nuclear threat (Smith 2015). In January 2018, Abe summarized his view of regional affairs by stating that "the security environment surrounding Japan is its most severe since World War II" (Shusho Kantei 2018). Given this pessimistic outlook, it stands to reason that the FOIP would become increasingly linked to national security priorities. This is not to make the claim, however, that the FOIP has developed wholesale into a national security initiative dressed up as something else; it remains primarily driven by an economic agenda. In order to unpack the growing connection between the FOIP and Japan's emerging strategic posture, the following sections explore three critical dimensions of Japan's defense and security policy.

Key Alliances

Although statements about the FOIP do not explicitly make mention of Japan's military partnerships, it is possible, given the focus of the concept on open seas, especially the freedom of navigation, to draw discernable links between the strategy and Japan's efforts to promote a maritime-based security network. Strengthening naval ties with India, Australia and the U.S. – members of the Quadrilateral Dialogue (the so-called "Quad") set up in 2007 but disbanded soon thereafter – is a central plank in this agenda (Okada 2018). To be sure, Abe's desire for this quartet to safeguard existing rules and norms of behavior in the maritime commons was embedded in Abe's thinking before the FOIP was launched in Kenya at TICAD in 2016. It is clearly expressed, for example, in his essay titled "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond," which was uploaded to the international NPO Project Syndicate website the day after the launch of his second administration on 27 December 2012 (Abe 2012). And before this, a grand maritime alliance of this quartet of democracies was the core of Abe's thinking in his first term. Be-

cause of divergent national interests and the geographical distance between each member, attempts to get the Quad off the ground failed in 2007 (Madan 2017). Though the grouping has been reconstituted with official meetings in November 2017 and April 2018, it is unlikely that will progress beyond military exercises and coordination into a fully fledged maritime security alliance any time soon. The Quad is far from moving towards a kind of Indo-Pacific NATO (Burgess & Beilstein 2018). Japan, Australia, and India, for example, are unwilling to join the U.S. in conducting freedom of navigation (FoN) operations through the South China Sea (NIDS 2018). It is thus difficult to see how a critical part of the FOIP – to maintain open seas – can be fully realized without greater willingness of all the Quad members, including Japan, to commit to a more robust position on freedom of navigation.

In parallel with the evolution of its strategy towards the Indo-Pacific, Japan has sought to fortify and expand its bilateral partnership with India for some time. The relationship with New Delhi has been further elevated in importance under Abe. Arguably the prime minister sees a tightening of the strategic partnership with New Delhi as the essential pillar of the Indo-Pacific strategy (as opposed to Japan’s overall national security strategy, which is still underpinned by the alliance with the U.S.). The seminal address to the Indian parliament in August 2007 and his December 2012 “democratic security diamond” article make Abe’s commitment to the idea of an alliance with India abundantly clear. Japan and India – for reasons related to Chinese territorial and maritime policies in the region – both emphasize issues such as freedom of navigation, respect for and compliance with international law and maritime security. These are critical aspects of the FOIP. It is hard to imagine how the strategy can be implemented without India as a partner.

There has been a significant uptick in Japan-India strategic ties, including Japan’s participation in the annual naval exercise “Malabar”, which used to be an India-US bilateral framework. According to Japanese government sources, the first military exercise involving Indian and Japanese ground forces could even take place before the end of this year (Gady 2018). India, however, appears to be more hesitant since 2017 in deepening its alliance with Japan and has become lukewarm about the idea of the Quad. This is probably linked to a more general improvement in relations between New Delhi and Beijing in 2018 after bilateral relations reached their nadir in 2017 over the Doklam dispute. To be sure India will remain wary of China into the future but it is unlikely that it will fully side with Japan or become intricately involved in the execution of Japan’s FOIP vision (Okada 2018).

In terms of its allies, Japan is most anxious about the U.S. Indeed, Washington’s future willingness and capability to command the maritime global commons is

especially pertinent to the aims of the FOIP. Abe has gone out of his way to convince the U.S. how the FOIP contributes to American strategic priorities in the region. Japan's increasing propensity to take greater initiative in the security sphere is in part a response to deep concern over the U.S.'s long-term commitment to Japan's defense and the role it plays in freedom of navigation of the seas. Although in 2017 the first major Abe-Trump alliance joint statement included a U.S. "commitment to the security of Japan through the full range of capabilities, including U.S. nuclear forces" (MOFA 2017a), Tokyo is nonetheless concerned about American willingness to defend the very maritime system that underpins Japan's national prosperity. Japan has recently expending considerable diplomatic capital in attempting to buttress U.S.-Japan ties. In the past, Japan has resisted U.S. calls for it to perform a more proactive role in regional security. It is telling that soon after his election victory at the end of 2012, Abe declared his administration's intention to make Japan a "first-tier" power again (Liff 2015). This was in great part motivated by the need to demonstrate to its chief strategic ally, as he told a Washington DC think tank audience, that "Japan is back" (Abe 2013).

While bolstering the defense relationship with the U.S. predates Abe, it has become an even greater priority since 2012. In practical terms, the U.S.-Japan military alliance was upgraded with the issuance of the 2015 U.S.-Japan Guidelines, last promulgated in 1997 (Department of Defense 2015; Jimbo 2015). The Abe government has since doubled-down, deepening bilateral defense cooperation even further. Japan's latest defense white paper, published in 2017, devotes more than 50 pages to the topic of "strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance." Yet these documents say little about how the allies will actually cooperate in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, the strict, self-imposed prohibitions on the conditions under which the "use of force" (*buryoku koshi*) is permitted, as well as restrictions on the acquisition of offensive platforms that exceed the "minimum necessary" threshold for territorial defense (e.g. aircraft carriers and strategic bombers), limits the extent to which Japan can be a reciprocal partner to the U.S. beyond Japan's immediate environs. It is unlikely these constraints will loosen on account of the FOIP strategy.

The perceived weakening of Washington's interest in Asia-Pacific security has encouraged Tokyo to show its ally that it is willing to do more itself (Brown 2018). This in some respects is analogous to efforts by Australia after 1951 to play the reliable, burden-sharing ally.³ In this context, there are signs that the FOIP is being used as an alliance-enhancing mechanism. By taking a more active role in the region, in part by pushing out the FOIP strategy, the Abe administration hopes to keep Washington engaged. As one analyst observes: "Abe has been selling the

³ I am very grateful to Professor Tsutomu Kikuchi of Aoyama Gakuin University for sharing this analogy.

strategic idea [the FOIP] to Washington since the early days of the Trump administration. To Abe’s pleasure, Trump called Vietnam the “heart of the Indo-Pacific” when he arrived in Danang last November for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, seeming to embrace an Asia strategy that Abe conceptualized” (Akimoto, 2018). The Prime Minister’s office has dispatched envoys with close ties to the U.S. military establishment to America to explain Japan’s FOIP concept in the context of U.S.-Japan strategic partnership.⁴ At a time when the U.S. is berating allies for not shouldering enough of the security responsibility, Japan may see an opportunity to show, through the FOIP, that it is shouldering more of the regional security burden. In this way, the FOIP strategy is as much about keeping the U.S. engaged in Japan’s security environment as it is a plan of action for Japan to work more closely militarily with the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific.

Role of the SDF

Decisions taken by previous governments from both Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) expanded the SDF’s regional and global tasks (Samuels 2007). In the early 1990s, Japan dispatched minesweepers to the Persian Gulf – albeit after hostilities ended – and passed legislation in 1992 allowing for involvement in UN peacekeeping operations (PKO). The roles performed by the SDF broadened further after 9/11: Japan deployed a small contingent to conduct post-conflict reconstruction in Iraq and contributed the Maritime Self-Defense Forces (MSDF) to refueling operations for coalition forces in the Indian Ocean. In 2009, the SDF joined a multinational anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden, constructing a naval facility in Djibouti, stationing frigates, and flying surveillance aircraft from an installation at Djibouti airport (Japan reportedly still provides approximately two-thirds of the maritime domain awareness for the multinational anti-piracy forces).

The ongoing transformation of the role and activities of the SDF, however, gained momentum during Abe’s second term (Liff 2015, pp. 81-83). In the past few years, the Abe administration has made modest increases to the defense budget and undertaken significant adjustments to SDF force structure and posture (Heginbotham & Samuels 2018, p. 136). As previously mentioned, the major push to transform Japan’s security policy and the roles and missions of its defense forces culminated in the passage of the ambitious “peace and security legislation” in 2015 that formally took effect in March 2016 (Liff, 2018, p. 13). These legislative reforms removed some, though far from all, of the historic, self-imposed limits on how Japan’s military forces could be used (Hughes 2015).

On the surface, the FOIP’s broad agenda seems to imply an even more active

⁴ Author interview with retired MSDF admiral and former professor of national security strategy, Tokyo, July 2018.

role for the SDF, especially naval forces (including the Japan Coast Guard), outside of Japanese territory. However, it is hard to see how the FOIP strategy will lead to an expansion of the Maritime Self-Defense Force's (MSDF) role in the maintenance of open seas and a rules-based order, as called for by the strategy. Although the MSDF has been deployed in recent years near the Korean Peninsula to forestall attempts by North Korea to bypass international sanctions ('In new role' 2018), it is highly unlikely Japan will allow its naval forces to participate in provocative FoN operations. For one thing, FoN operations hold out the potential for breaching constitutional constraints on the use of kinetic force by the SDF against threats not directly risking Japan's survival (*kuni no sonritsu*). The SDF is still prohibited from using military force outside very narrow conditions of self-defense and cannot, strictly speaking, possess or project offensive power. There remain strong domestic headwinds against the SDF performing more tasks outside of the defense of Japan. Despite a shift to more a realist orientation, Japan is still bounded by highly normative ideas about the use of military force (Katzenstein & Okawara 1993). A 2015 poll revealed that less than a quarter of Japanese feel the SDF should be more active "helping to maintain peace and stability in the Asia Pacific region" ('Poll' 2015). Conditions for using the military have been loosened somewhat under Abe but remain constitutional very rigid compared to other nations.

Although the 2015 security legislation did not lift many of the limits placed on what the SDF can do outside of territorial defense, it did allow the SDF to play a greater role in peace support operations and peacetime activities. The recent contribution to the U.N. mission in South Sudan being a good example of the expansion in tasks and activities the SDF can perform (Gady 2016).⁵ Djibouti has also been viewed as a successful precedent for the SDF's new role, especially in terms of facilitating non-hostile measures in Eastern Africa where it hopes to have an expanded economic and diplomatic footprint.⁶ However, it is unlikely that Japan will increase the overseas presence of the SDF in the Indo-Pacific on account of the FOIP. If SDF units are deployed on rotational basis as part of some FOIP-related initiative – in say Vietnam, perhaps – their activities would, as a matter of course, need to be shown to have a non-military function. One area of participation where the SDF could play a more significant role in the region as a result of the FOIP is in humanitarian assistance / disaster relief (HA/DR). For one thing, HA/DR missions are short, visible, and safe (politically and in terms of safety of personnel).

⁵ Here Japanese peacekeepers were allowed to come to the rescue and support fellow UN troops of other peacekeeping contingents and could henceforth engage in military security operations including patrolling and vehicle inspections at checkpoints.

⁶ During the Ebola outbreak in 2014, Japan used Djibouti to get 20,000 protective suits quickly into Ghana (Kameda 2014). Djibouti also gives Japan a freedom of action for non-combatant evacuation in the Western Indian Ocean, and the SDF was on standby after violence erupted in Juba, South Sudan in 2016.

Also, there is a large question mark against what Tokyo can possibly commit to the Indo-Pacific in terms of security assets and resources. It is not clear whether the MSDF has sufficient vessels in the coming years to increase its presence in Indian Ocean joint naval exercises or contribute to more maritime security operations. Indicative of these constraints, Japanese participation in the Malabar and other exercises has to date been very modest. An expanded contribution to maritime security brought about by the FOIP would require a greater share of the defense budget going to the MSDF. Senior Japanese naval officers have already pressed home the point that, in light of the FOIP strategy, they need greater funds to meet new requirements.⁷

On the face of it, recent procurement decisions point to Japan acquiring a greater range of military capabilities allowing it make a larger contribution to regional security. These include the acquisition of 52 amphibious assault vehicles, the launching in August 2015 of the country’s second helicopter carrier (*JS Kaga*), the building of two advanced destroyers, and the creation of an amphibious rapid deployment brigade (Aibara 2017).⁸ There are reasons to be cautious about concluding from this that the SDF will play a significantly more robust role in the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, many analysts in Japan, particularly those working on security and defense, are skeptical about the prospect of the SDF expanding its activities beyond territorial defense as a consequence of the FOIP strategy. Driven by the 2010 National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), published under the left-of-center DPJ government, the SDF is focused on the defense of Japan’s southwest island chain (Ministry of Defense 2010). Revised guidelines released in December 2013 under Abe place even greater emphasis on the ability to deter and, if deterrence failed, repel and islands invasion (Ministry of Defense 2013). Due to the fact that the security situation in the immediate vicinity of Japan is deteriorating – on account of the twin issues of China’s increasing revanchist behavior and the North Korean ballistic missile threat – it is almost certain that the SDF will concentrate more, not less, on territorial defense in the future.

Security Cooperation with ASEAN Nations

Perhaps the area where there is greatest prospect for the FOIP’s agenda translating into actual security-related measures is Japanese capacity-building with, and military assistance to, ASEAN states, especially those fearful of China’s assertiveness but also those pursuing a hedging strategy of maintaining close relations with both Beijing and Tokyo. Security assistance and defense diplomacy measures among ASEAN nations dovetail with a major focus of the FOIP and Japan’s national security strategy more broadly under Abe, which has been to build on

⁷ Comments made by retired high-ranking MSDF officer and current think tank expert on Japan’s naval policy. Author Interview, Tokyo, July 2018.

⁸ This is in addition to 42 F-35s, 17 Osprey tiltrotor aircraft, 20 maritime surveillance aircraft and 22 diesel submarines.

the outreach of previous administrations and significantly expand Japan's security ties with these countries.

This activity fits neatly with changes to Japan's defense posture and foreign policy. For instance, one of the main aims of the security legislation passed under Abe was to allow Japan to better contribute to peace and stability. As Liff notes (2015, p. 84), the first-ever National Security Strategy issued by the newly established National Security Council (NSC) set out Japan's intention to make "Proactive Contributions to Peace" (*sekkyokuteki heiwashugi*). Maritime engagement in Southeast Asia in particular is emblematic of a key objective of the FOIP strategy which calls for Japan to play a role in promoting peace and stability in the region (MOFA 2017b). Efforts in security assistance linked to the FOIP would clearly chime with these broader changes in Japan's approach to its role in regional security affairs.

Given their geopolitical and economic centrality in the Indo-Pacific, the FOIP is unworkable without the participation of ASEAN states. For this reason, many of the planned Japanese economic and security initiatives in Southeast Asia are coordinated efforts to connect ASEAN nations with the wider concepts that underpin the FOIP. As an indication of the importance the current government places in relations with ASEAN nations, Abe visited all ten member countries in his first year in office in his second term (Lee 2016, p. 31). Moreover, in 2015, Tokyo signed strategic partnerships with Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam.

Before the launch of the FOIP strategy, Japan's ability to assist ASEAN nations had been strengthened by the 2014 National Defense Program Guidelines which tasked the SDF with providing human capacity development and technical assistance to the defense sector of friendly nations. The November 2016 Japan-ASEAN Vientiane Vision represented a further declaration of intent to intensify defense relations with Southeast Asian states as well as ASEAN as a whole. Following on from these changes, Japan has recently sold six maritime patrol vessels to Vietnam, three to Indonesia and loaned Manila the money to purchase ten. Military-to-military assistance, however, is still firmly anchored to established institutional patterns that tilt towards non-military approaches to security (Nankivell 2018). The issuance of the Development Cooperation Charter (DCC) in February 2015, an important revision of the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) Charter, provided the framework for Japan to provide assistance to foreign militaries, but only for nontraditional security missions, such as disaster relief and anti-piracy measures (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015).

It is important to remember that these defense diplomacy measures and security assistance to ASEAN nations are nothing new for Japan (Jimbo 2016; Kikuchi

2014). For decades ASEAN military personnel have attended extensive training and career courses at Japanese military schools. Yet there is evidence that Japan has stepped up its defense diplomacy efforts among the ASEAN states and has reportedly been looking at how other countries have been orchestrating defense diplomacy activities.⁹

Though security assistance efforts in Southeast Asia have not been without some fallout (China was reportedly furious with Japan for selling maritime vessels to some ASEAN partners), these activities also have the potential to produce diplomatic dividends. For example, the training by Japanese instructors of Vietnamese submarine crews in emergency recovery has been particularly welcomed by Hanoi. Japan has also provided satellite coverage of the disputed islands to those ASEAN states involved. These measures are perhaps ideal for Japan as they are on the whole uncontroversial – at least in principle. On the home front, capacity-building and technical assistance can be packaged as “development”. It can even be de-securitized in the budget by placing it under development and not defense. Furthermore, assisting ASEAN allies to better police and surveil their own territorial waters and exclusive economic zones (EEZ) is politically easier than say conducting FoN operations, but it still advances the fundamental goals of the FOIP.

Among this intensified security engagement with ASEAN nations, it appears that Vietnam is acquiring a special place in Tokyo’s thinking. In May 2018, the ageing Japanese Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko unusually attended a Tokyo reception for the Vietnamese president, Tran Dai Quang (‘Emperor Akihito welcomes’ 2018). This focus on Vietnam is partly driven by other dimensions of Japan’s relationship with Hanoi. A number of Japanese companies have already relocated their operations from China to Vietnam. Although the Vietnamese are deeply suspicious of China, they are unlikely to adopt an openly hostile stance towards Beijing. Hanoi is unlikely to jump into bed with the U.S., Japan’s key partner in the Indo-Pacific. Nonetheless, its inclusion, for the first time, in the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise over the month of July, the world’s largest international maritime exercise, is not trivial (Parameswaran 2018). It is difficult to see at this stage how Vietnam and the ASEAN states will play a more active role in upholding a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific given the overwhelming power differential between them and Beijing. Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia will try to walk a fine line between retaining an uncompromising stance on protecting core interests when it comes to China but also not adopting a position of direct confrontation.

⁹ Author interview with Japanese think tank expert on Japan’s defense diplomacy measures, Tokyo, July 2018.

Conclusion

The National Security Council (NSC) was stood up early in Abe's second term to coordinate strategic, defense and foreign affairs under the prime minister's office's direction (Shusho Kantei 2013a). As the centralizing national security decision-making body, it has emerged as an important mechanism for advancing the prime minister's national security agenda across different parts of government.¹⁰ Given that the NSC "control tower" is "centered on the prime minister" (Shusho Kantei 2013b), the expectation would be to see security-related elements of the FOIP influencing the policy agenda for defense and foreign affairs. However, as this paper shows, there are few observable substantive details about the instruments of national power and statecraft that will be employed in pursuit of the strategy. As Aizawa (2018) points out: "We cannot see what the Japanese cabinet (or MOFA) is actually doing for the "Indo-Pacific strategy ... the "overall picture" of Indo-pacific is still under veil." Echoing this sentiment, Tsuruoka (2018) states that, "there does not seem to be a consensus on the extent to which Japan needs to allocate additional security assets and resources to the Indian Ocean." Statements about the FOIP related to maintaining "freedom of navigation" or of "promoting peace and stability" do not reveal specific initiatives or measures Japan will undertake. In short, although the FOIP is attracting more and more attention from analysts, the practical implications remain lost in all the noise.

At the conceptual level, the FOIP strategy cannot be decoupled from Japan's wider national security posture, which has been evolving for some years. Yet the Japanese government has sought to play down any suggestions that the FOIP is a strategic gambit to counter China's growing influence and power in the region. This is understandable given the rifts in the domestic political scene over the country's policy towards Beijing. Instead the strategy is most often depicted publically as a set of initiatives designed to improve economic prosperity in the Indo-Pacific. But this has not stopped many analysts from viewing the FOIP as Tokyo's attempt to play a more active foreign policy role in the region, especially in terms of securing the maritime environment on which and through which Japan's prosperity rests. The debate about what the FOIP is and what its potential consequences might be is inescapably caught up in these much larger issues.

The analysis above indicates that there are few signs that the FOIP will result in a major change in Japan's overall strategic posture. For one thing, many of the strategy's key elements already reflect policies that Japan has been pursuing for some time, such as security assistance to select ASEAN countries and an increasing proclivity towards using the SDF for non-military tasks. Secondly, the

¹⁰ At the NSC's heart is a bi-weekly "Four Minister Meeting" bringing together the prime minister, foreign minister, defense minister, and chief cabinet secretary for regular consultations on security affairs.

constitutional constraints on what the military can and cannot do, combined with limited resources given over to defense, place severe restrictions on the ability of the SDF (as well as the coastguard) to play a more extensive role in maintaining a rules-based maritime order in the region. What is more, divergent interests among Japan's key allies make it unlikely that they will collectively undergird the FOIP strategy.

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Bio

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