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Next Priorities for Japan's FOIP Vision

The Quad, ASEAN, and Institutional Linkages in the Indo-Pacific

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One of Japan's most important diplomatic agendas has become the realization of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), which was launched by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2016 to maintain and facilitate the existing rules-based order in the region.¹ And yet, it

was not clear to what extent new Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga would emphasize this strategic vision. In fact, the question of Japan's commitment to the FOIP has drawn much international attention from practitioners and foreign policy experts because of Japan's potential preoccupation with a number of domestic issues, ranging from COVID-19, economic recovery, and the 2021 Tokyo Olympics.² Indeed, Suga's political priorities appear to focus on domestic affairs, such as unemployment and revising the small and medium-sized enterprise basic law. The Prime Minister is also said to lack diplomatic experience, which was well illustrated by his statement during the campaign for President of the Liberal Democratic Party in September 2020, when Suga stated that he cannot emulate Shinzo Abe's summit diplomacy and that he would consult with the Minister and Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as former Prime Minister Abe about Japan's diplomacy.³

As a result of this apparent inertia, diplomatic continuity has ensued. Since Suga was inaugurated on September 16, 2020, he emphasized the importance of Abe's foreign-policy agendas. The FOIP remains Japan's core strategic vision, with the US-Japan alliance playing a pivotal role.⁴ Japan hosted the second Japan-Australia-India-US Foreign Ministers'

meeting (the so-called “Quad”) on October 6 to further coordinate their policies to realize the FOIP region.⁵ Suga regards Southeast Asia as the geographical center of the Indo-Pacific, and he made his very first diplomatic trips to Vietnam (2020 ASEAN chair) and Indonesia (the largest Southeast Asian country) in October. Based on these early moves, there appears to be no diplomatic upset: Suga seems likely to follow through on what Abe has envisioned for the FOIP.

However, this diplomatic posture is not sustainable in the long-term. Eventually, Japan needs to provide a clear strategy to realize the FOIP in the context of the rapidly evolving US-China great power rivalry. There are three reasons for this.

The Need for Flexible Adaptation

First, Japan’s FOIP vision is essentially evolutionary, which requires conceptual updates over time. As many have already pointed out, the concept of Japan’s FOIP has been changing since its inception in 2016. Initially, Japan aimed to maintain and strengthen the rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific region, which has been largely shaped by the United States in the post-Cold War era.⁶ Japan’s interest has been to blunt

China’s increasing political influence in the region, which is thought to be detrimental to existing international rules and norms. Most notably, China’s rejection of the 2016 South China Sea Tribunal Award disrespected international laws, while China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” has been responsible for setting new international standards for development.⁷ However, Japan’s strategy to protect the FOIP principles was unclear to begin with. Japan initially emphasized the importance of “fundamental rights” such as the rule of law, human rights, and democracy.⁸ Yet, because there are many non-democratic states in the region, such an emphasis soon disappeared. Moreover, the FOIP vision was initially called the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” but Japan eliminated “strategy” from the phraseology because some ASEAN member states were concerned about its diplomatic implications—that FOIP aimed to counterbalance or contain China, for example.⁹ As such, Japan flexibly changed the FOIP concept in accordance with reactions from other states.

Currently, Japan’s FOIP vision consists of “three pillars”: (1) “promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade, etc.”; (2) “Pursuit of

economic prosperity (improving connectivity and strengthening economic partnership including EPA/FTAs and investment treaties)”; and (3) “Commitment for peace and stability (capacity building on maritime law enforcement, HA/DR cooperation, etc.).”¹⁰ These are all international rules and norms that Japan has long supported. Nevertheless, these pillars might change in the future, depending on the development of the region’s strategic environment. Particularly, as power diffuses across the region, a renewed rules-making mechanism may become necessary. The Suga administration must prepare for this challenge in the future.

Navigating Great Power Rivalry

Second, Japan still seeks a balance in its diplomatic relations with both the United State and China. Currently, Japan’s foremost ally, the United States, has begun to take a much tougher stance on China in terms of COVID-19, economics, and technological modernization. Many in Washington now believe the past approach of “engagement” to have been a mistake. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this trend.¹¹ To be sure, the Trump administration’s confrontational

approach toward China faces severe criticism, and there are debates over a means to manage its relations with China. Nevertheless, Washington’s tough posture toward China has garnered broad bipartisan support. America’s FOIP strategy is now part of an anti-China strategy, designed to force Beijing to follow existing international rules and norms. This trend will not easily be reversed.

On the other hand, Japan still attempts to engage China. Earlier this year, Abe invited Xi Jinping to Japan as a state visit in April and attempted to draft the “fifth document,” the fifth symbolic official document after the Sino-Japanese diplomatic normalization in 1972 that highlights the future vision of Sino-Japanese relations.¹² The visit was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, and rising tensions over the East China Sea mean that both leaders seem to have lost political traction for bilateral initiatives.

Suga recognizes the importance of Japan-China relations for national, regional, and global stability. He has advocated the need for common agendas.¹³ Even as he maintains a firm stance on territorial sovereignty and the rule of law, then, Suga has shown interest in persuading China to follow international rules and norms by

maintaining channels of communication at various levels, including the summit level.¹⁴ In this sense, there is a divergence in diplomatic posture between Japan and the United States. Yet, since the US-Japan alliance is the core of the FOIP vision, it will be necessary for both states to coordinate how to maintain consistency between Japan's softer and US tougher FOIP stance vis-à-vis China.

Realigning Institutions

Third, Japan's institutional strategy in the Indo-Pacific has yet to be clearly articulated. In the initial concept, Japan's emphasis was on the Quad as a central framework to realize FOIP.¹⁵ However, given diplomatic concerns raised by several ASEAN member states in 2018, Japan and the Quad members began to emphasize the importance of ASEAN unity and centrality.¹⁶ In response, with a strong push from Indonesia and a diplomatic coordination by Thailand as ASEAN chair, ASEAN issued its "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP) statement in 2019, which emphasized the "inclusiveness" of regional architecture and regional cooperation over "rivalry."¹⁷ ASEAN's priority is thus to neutralize great power rivalry and its negative spill-over effect to Southeast Asia and other sub-

regions of the Indo-Pacific. Japan immediately supported the AOIP. That said, it is still not clear what Japan and the Quad members expect from ASEAN. If the Quad members regard ASEAN's utility only as a dialogue convenor that provides multilateral communication channels, and if they attempt to create "effective multilateralism" that gets things done as the US Secretary State Pompeo indicated, some ASEAN member states would likely view this as diplomatic marginalization.¹⁸ To reassure ASEAN and garner its support for their FOIP vision, Japan and the Quad members need to clearly delineate ASEAN's role in the Indo-Pacific.

The Future of FOIP

These three factors show that more work needs to be done to realize Japan's FOIP vision—constructing a new regional rules-based order. This is the work that the Abe administration left out, and that the Suga administration needs to work on.

Two tasks should be prioritized. The first is to evolve the Quad into the Quad-Plus as an Indo-Pacific institutional framework. While agreeing the basic principles of the FOIP, Quad-Plus member and partner states will have to understand that there are diverging

national interests among them, and that cooperation will not be possible in all issue areas. Rather, an expanded Quad-plus could emulate the division of labor modeled by the Japan-Australia-US “Trilateral Partnership for infrastructure investment in the Indo-Pacific,” and the partnership between the United States and Japan on energy, infrastructure, and digital connectivity.¹⁹ In short, the Quad(-Plus) can function best as a forum to flexibly coordinate policies that advance the FOIP vision where possible. This means that the Quad can also expand its membership to any states that agree with the FOIP principles. Accordingly, it is in Japan's interests to ensure that the Quad-Plus formula it utilized to include more regional states, such as Vietnam and Indonesia, as well as European states, such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, to buttress the provision of international public goods such as knowledge-transfer rules, infrastructure development, and management of non-traditional security issues.

The second task is to strike a balance between ASEAN and the Quad. As mentioned above, some ASEAN member states are skeptical about the development of the Quad framework, which threatens to diplomatically marginalize

ASEAN and intensify great power rivalry with China. Without close consultation, institutionalizing the Quad could exacerbate ASEAN's concerns and skepticism. Also, given ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making process, it is important to reassure all member states in this regard. Therefore, Japan should propose to enhance ASEAN's role in the Indo-Pacific by forming “webs” of regional institutions. The starting point might be to create a Quad-ASEAN Track-II dialogue, as well as to link the Quad and ASEAN-X formula. The Quad's strength is its flexibility: it should actively engage ASEAN and its individual member state, offering reassurance and building partnerships. At the same time, in order to enable regional states to engage in deeper multilateral, strategic discussions and prevent great powers from irreversible political and economic decoupling, Japan should encourage ASEAN to further institutionalize the East Asia Summit, such as strengthening its secretariat functions and conducting more frequent Senior-Official level exchanges.

Japan's FOIP vision under the Suga administration aims to avoid an intensive confrontation between the United States and China by developing regional rules and norms that are based on the existing

international order. This will be a difficult task given that the consolidation of rules and norms will require a regional consensus. If the attempt fails, it will result in exposing intraregional divides. However, such a window of opportunity has not been closed yet. Japan is in a good strategic position to bridge the various regional powers. Proactively taking a normative leadership role in the Indo-Pacific by evolving the Quad, encouraging ASEAN to further institutionalize

EAS, and creating the linkages between them — all of these are goals worth trying for. ■

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Notes

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