

# Confluence of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific

## How Japan's Strengths Can Shore Up American Weakness in the Pacific

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In recent years, the Indo-Pacific region has become the primary venue of renewed great-power competition, bearing the weight of tense Sino-US relations. Indeed, pointing to the impending competition in the Pacific in the twenty-first century, in 2009 former prime minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew presciently declared in Washington, “if you do not hold your ground in the Pacific, you cannot be a world leader.”<sup>1</sup> China’s rise presents a myriad of challenges that are an ocean away from the continental United States. Yet notwithstanding America’s global leadership and vast military power, Washington is incapable of maintaining stability alone.

Against this backdrop, Japan, which within the past century once dominated the region by force, now stands apart as a peaceful democracy, the world’s third-largest economy, and Washington’s most important ally on Beijing’s periphery. Although now a middle-power, Tokyo is no idle bystander but has championed a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept that seeks to promote the region’s stability and prosperity through upholding a rules-based international order.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Japan’s FOIP concept aligns well with US interests and warrants America’s full support. China’s economic centrality and influence pose a significant challenge to the realization of FOIP, but Japan is well-positioned to engage throughout the region. Moreover, Tokyo’s strengths in economic and diplomatic engagement fill critical gaps in Washington’s foreign policy.

### Japan’s FOIP Concept

Though elements of Japan’s FOIP vision have percolated in Tokyo’s foreign policy since at least 2007, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe officially unveiled FOIP at the August 2016 Tokyo International Conference on African Development.<sup>3</sup> Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) provided the three pillars undergirding this vision: (1) promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade; (2) pursuit of economic prosperity; and (3) commitment for peace and stability.<sup>4</sup> In pursuit of FOIP, Japan has undertaken multiple projects,

such as leading the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), investing in regional infrastructure and connectivity, and supporting maritime law enforcement in Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup>

Japan's whole-of-government approach likewise entails Ministry of Defense (MOD) support in the form of extensive regional defense cooperation and counterpiracy operations to promote a favorable security environment and security of major sea lanes.<sup>6</sup> Since 2009, the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) have continually supported counterpiracy efforts off the coast of Somalia with JSDF destroyers providing safe escort for more than 4,000 vessels and P-3C patrol aircraft contributing over 70 percent of the international community's warning-and-surveillance operations in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, in 2019, the JSDF conducted its first Indo-Pacific Deployment (IPD) with the flagship JS Izumo and a contingent of the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade.<sup>8</sup> Over several months, this deployment included port calls to Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam, with a robust schedule of defense exchanges, community relations events, and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief seminars.<sup>9</sup> A myriad of bilateral and multilateral naval drills with the US, Australian, Indian, French, and Southeast Asian navies additionally strengthened regional security cooperation.<sup>10</sup>

Japan also recognizes the importance of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in approaching the region. As the "convener of the region," ASEAN is a major player in shaping regional integration and the security landscape of Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific.<sup>11</sup> ASEAN hosts numerous venues, including the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, thereby facilitating high-level diplomatic and security dialogues.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Japan's Ministry of Defense announced its "Vientiane Vision," which acknowledges ASEAN's centrality and enhances Japan's enduring defense cooperation with ASEAN.<sup>13</sup> Fully recognizing partner-nation contributions to maintaining regional peace and stability, Tokyo likewise actively provides defense capacity building assistance throughout the region.<sup>14</sup> Through such engagement, Tokyo highlights FOIP's common ground with ASEAN under the ideals of "openness, transparency, inclusivity, and a rules-based framework."<sup>15</sup>

Though understood as a competitive response to China's rise, in official publications, Japan emphasizes that FOIP is an inclusive concept, open to cooperation with all.<sup>16</sup> Scholars describe the backdrop against which FOIP was birthed, noting that by 2010 China knocked Japan out of the world's number-two economy spot and was flexing its muscles in the East China Sea (ECS) and South China Sea (SCS) over maritime territorial claims, including the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands.<sup>17</sup> Kei Koga, in a survey of Japanese academics, notes the FOIP concept's ambiguity and seemingly contradictory inclusion of competitive and

cooperative elements vis-à-vis China.<sup>18</sup> While Tokyo displays some hedging behavior, the primary intent of Japan's FOIP concept is to buttress the "existing rules-based international order."<sup>19</sup>

### **The United States and the Indo-Pacific**

As highlighted by the US Department of State (DOS), with nearly \$2 trillion in two-way trade, the futures of America and the Indo-Pacific "are inextricably intertwined."<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the United States can ill-afford not to prioritize a region that is home to nearly 60 percent of the world's population and more than 40 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>21</sup> If Washington is not engaged in the region, the United States will not only have less access to key portions of the world economy but will also cede influence to China.<sup>22</sup> Beijing has already inked the world's largest trade deal, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and will increasingly reshape international rules and norms to Chinese benefit.<sup>23</sup> China seeks to establish a Sino-centric hierarchy and hegemony in Asia, and as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt assert, the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific hinges upon US engagement.<sup>24</sup>

Washington's current Indo-Pacific initiatives are largely a continuation of policies dating back to the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. It was in 2000 that Condoleezza Rice, who served as President Bush's National Security Advisor, laid out a clear-eyed description of Beijing as a threat to the Asia-Pacific and "a strategic competitor, not the "strategic partner" the Clinton administration once called it."<sup>25</sup> Although the fateful events of 11 September 2001 dramatically turned the focus of America's foreign policy to the Middle East, the Bush administration had at least identified the challenge posed by China and impending threat to the Asia-Pacific region's stability.<sup>26</sup>

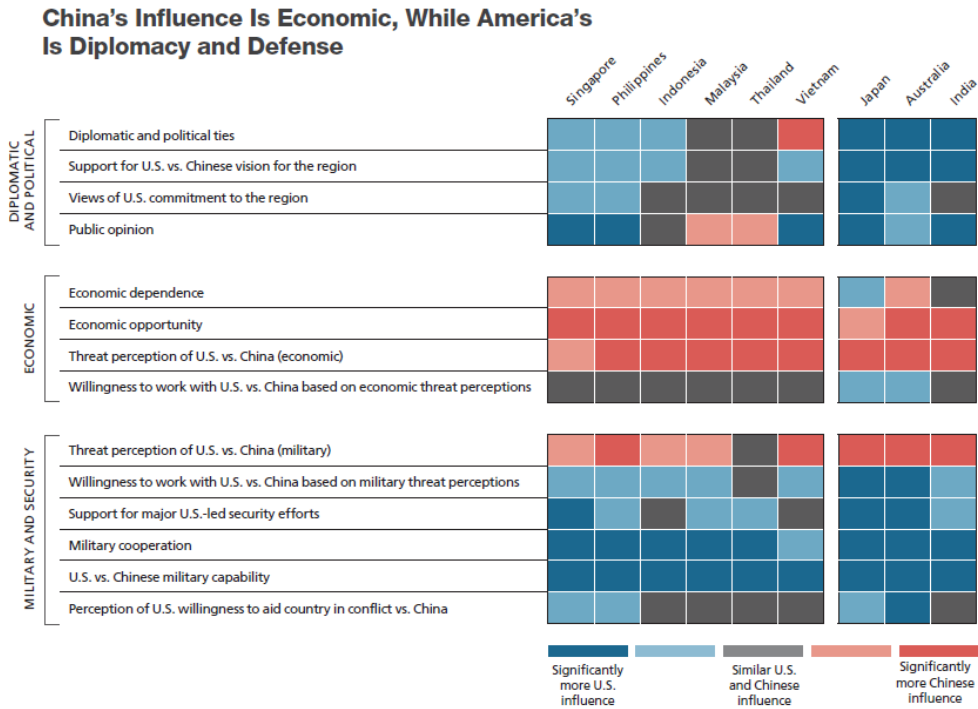
Continuing in this vein, in 2011 President Obama announced the "pivot" to the Pacific, signaling a degree of closure to years of large-scale military operations in the Middle East and the intent to shift focus to the Asia-Pacific and cope with China's rise.<sup>27</sup> The pivot included efforts to prioritize security cooperation with allies and partners, engagement with multilateral institutions, and economic policy in the region.<sup>28</sup> The Trump administration's FOIP narrative built upon many aspects of Obama's "strategic rebalancing," while also more explicitly responding to the challenges posed by China.<sup>29</sup> The US Department of Defense (DOD) promulgated its Indo-Pacific Strategy Report in 2019, which directly confronted China, labeling it a revisionist power.<sup>30</sup> The subsequent DOS FOIP vision stated that the US vision does not exclude any nation, nor ask countries to pick sides, though it sternly warned against the repressive vision of revisionist powers and condemned Chinese oppression and provocative maritime claims.<sup>31</sup>

## **Challenges to FOIP**

The greatest challenge to the realization of FOIP is China's sheer economic power and resultant influence. While Japan seeks some engagement with China and Tokyo's brand of FOIP is an inclusive concept, Beijing naturally seeks to re-shape the international order on Chinese terms and to serve Chinese interests.<sup>32</sup> Beijing portrays its rise as peaceful and mutually beneficial, promoting its concept of a Community of Common Destiny—where a community of states can prosper and harmoniously coexist.<sup>33</sup> Yet regardless of the friendly rhetoric on the surface, Beijing has an agenda and, like any country, maintains an unwavering commitment to its core national interests. In China's case, these interests include maritime rights and territorial claims that are sharply contested throughout the region and conflict with international norms.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, China will naturally challenge some aspects of FOIP in pursuit of national interests and regional dominance.<sup>35</sup> Though not directly stated, under the umbrella of national sovereignty, Beijing practically elevates its extensive territorial claims and maritime interests in the ECS and SCS to the same category as a core interest.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, in 2018 Pres. Xi Jinping proclaimed that Beijing would not “compromise ‘even one inch’ of any of its territorial and sovereignty claims,” while other party officials have similarly cited unshakable determination to protect all territorial claims and maritime rights.<sup>37</sup> Given Beijing's expansive range of core interests that often clash with international law and the sovereignty of other states, China's influence in the Indo-Pacific will be a challenge to the establishment of many elements of FOIP.<sup>38</sup>

Although many nations in the region may be wary of China's intentions, the economy is the dominant factor, and Beijing's regional economic clout is unrivaled.<sup>39</sup> As summarized by the RAND Corporation in figure 1, China wields greater economic influence across Indo-Pacific countries as compared to the United States on almost all metrics and with nearly all countries.<sup>40</sup> Surveys conducted by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) likewise reveal that Chinese economic influence dominates in Southeast Asia, and respondents even gave China the edge over the United States in terms of political and strategic influence in the region.<sup>41</sup> While the United States holds sway in terms of soft-power and military cooperation, Washington would do well to remember the mantra “it's the economy, stupid,” as partners largely place more value on economic concerns.<sup>42</sup>



**Figure 1. Comparison of US and Chinese Influence in the Indo-Pacific region.** (Bonny Lin, et al., *U.S. Versus Chinese Powers of Persuasion: Does the United States or China Have More Influence in the Indo-Pacific Region?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), 4, <https://www.rand.org/>).

China additionally bolstered its economic influence by concluding the RCEP trade deal in November 2020, which partly serves as a Chinese-led alternative to the CPTPP.<sup>43</sup> Contrary to the CPTPP, RCEP aims to establish international norms to Beijing’s liking, with notable omissions on standards for intellectual property, labor, and state-owned enterprises (SOE).<sup>44</sup> As such, RCEP gives China significant sway over how to write the rules for trade in the region. Thus, Beijing unreservedly utilizes SOEs to achieve geopolitical ends and engages in intellectual-property theft, disregarding international norms in an unrestrained pursuit of national rejuvenation.<sup>45</sup>

China’s economic clout and corresponding influence likewise enable Beijing to exert considerable leverage and coercion when it suits Chinese interests. As a gauge of economic influence with ASEAN states, for example, China’s current bilateral trade with ASEAN equates to \$591 billion compared to \$272 billion for US-ASEAN trade.<sup>46</sup> Similarly Chinese represent the largest proportion of tourists to ASEAN countries, with over 25 million tourists in 2017 compared to 4 million

from America.<sup>47</sup> Thus, tourism also allows Beijing to throw its weight around at will, as Hanoi painfully experienced when 2014 SCS tensions led to China sharply cutting off tourism to Vietnam and the associated economic inflow.<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, economic power has enabled many of China's military gains in the region.<sup>49</sup> This is evidenced by China's economic coercion to fortify its territorial claims in the SCS, where Manila has not leveraged the 2016 United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea ruling against Beijing.<sup>50</sup> Acquiescing to Chinese influence, the Duterte administration ostensibly surrendered its SCS claims and largely sought to bandwagon with Beijing in pursuit of Chinese beneficence.<sup>51</sup> With the graphical depiction in figure 2, Jonathan Stromseth of the Thornton China Center explains that China's "capacity to exercise influence and leverage through economic interdependencies" already far exceeds that of the United States.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, as the Chinese Communist Party rejects international norms in pursuit of national interests; Beijing's vision of reclaiming its former glory as the Middle Kingdom and effectively relegating its neighbors to tributary status is a destabilizing challenge to a rules-based FOIP order.<sup>53</sup>



Source: "Asia Power Index," *The Lowy Institute*, 2019, <https://power.loyyinstitute.org/>.

**Figure 2. Current economic relationships**

Finally, despite Beijing's overwhelming economic influence, several factors may hinder China's geopolitical aims, thereby leaving an opening for Japan, the United States, and like-minded states to achieve a semblance of FOIP. Beijing shows no signs of slowing down its pursuit of national rejuvenation and attainment of regional hegemony, yet there are some cracks under the surface and growing external pushback. For example, since 2007, China's debt has rocketed eightfold now, upward of 300 percent of GDP, and Beijing will soon begin to reap the byproducts of

its draconian one-child policy in the form of an aging population and shrinking workforce.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, negative views of China are reportedly at a three-decade high comparable to the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre era.<sup>55</sup> The international community took notice of Beijing's aggressive expansionism in the region and systemic repression at home, as nearly a dozen countries have paused or canceled Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, 16 nations including eight of the world's ten biggest economies restricted or outright banned Huawei 5G products, and the European Union named China a "systemic rival."<sup>56</sup> This current state can be attributed both to Beijing forcefully overplaying its hand in the neighborhood on territorial disputes among other matters and the Trump administration's recognition of the "China Challenge" and forthright critique of Beijing's aggressive behavior.<sup>57</sup> Thus, notwithstanding Beijing's formidable array of national power and seemingly unstoppable momentum in the region, a Chinese-dominated tributary realm is not inevitable, and if Tokyo, Washington, and allies and partners join to play their cards well, an Indo-Pacific that looks more like FOIP is realistically attainable.

### **Where the United States Needs Japan's Strength in the Pacific**

Countering the challenge of Beijing's economic influence will be difficult, but Tokyo carries several strengths in this arena that complement American weaknesses vis-à-vis China. Japan's economic and diplomatic engagement within the region is noteworthy and warrants full US backing. From regional trade and investment to Japan's reputation and pragmatic engagement with the region's non-democratic states, Tokyo is quietly leading the way on several FOIP initiatives that round out US and partner efforts.

#### ***Economic Engagement***

In pursuit of FOIP Japan's role in regional trade is impressive. On trade issues Japan emerged as a regional leader under former Prime Minister Abe's leadership as Tokyo stepped up to fill the void left by Washington to complete the CPTPP.<sup>58</sup> Washington's abrupt withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership is widely considered a missed opportunity, and the Biden administration should consider following Japan's lead to join the CPTPP.<sup>59</sup> As Michael Goodman notes, an agreement like CPTPP not only demonstrates Washington's commitment to the region and provides a platform to promote a rules-based order, but it also carries the potential to shape China's behavior.<sup>60</sup> David Dollar similarly asserts that the primary reason for the United States to join CPTPP is to "preserve an open global trading system centered on the U.S."<sup>61</sup> If the United States does not pursue free-trade agreements in Asia, the American economy will be the biggest loser as

the region becomes even more tightly integrated into Beijing's sphere of influence.<sup>62</sup> For Washington, joining the CPTPP may require politicians to expend some political capital at home, but the alternative is to cede ground to China in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>63</sup> At a minimum the United States should work closely with Japan on trade issues and buttress Tokyo's role as a key leader within the CPTPP.

In addition to trade, regional infrastructure investment is another key component within the economic domain. Here Beijing's influence continues to grow with BRI, while the United States has not presented any substantial alternatives to compete. The Asian Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) point out the critical need for trillions of dollars of infrastructure investment to support the growth of developing nations throughout Asia and the world—and Beijing is skillfully leveraging its SOEs to answer the call.<sup>64</sup> The United States is right to be suspicious about the BRI, in terms of Beijing's geopolitical intentions and BRI's opaqueness, questionable quality, and debt-trap concerns.<sup>65</sup> Yet for some developing countries, even if Beijing's terms and intentions are not entirely favorable, as exclaimed by a former Pakistani official, in some areas "China is the only game in town."<sup>66</sup>

However, notwithstanding Beijing's expansive economic footprint, for decades Japan—not China—has been the leader in infrastructure investment in Southeast Asia, and Tokyo still maintains an edge over China in terms of dollars (\$367 vs. \$255 billion) and total projects (240 vs. 210).<sup>67</sup> Going forward, as Beijing's \$1 trillion BRI gains steam, Japan may not be able to match the dollar amounts put forth by China; however, Japan's regional investment and economic influence remain significant.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, in 2015 Tokyo launched the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, which provides more than \$100 billion in collaboration with the Asian Development Bank (ADB).<sup>69</sup> Notable projects under this "Partnership" include funding for India's Delhi Metro and a large-scale bridge in Mongolia's capital.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, as seen in figure 3, Vietnam receives more than half of Japan's Southeast Asia investments—to the tune of \$209 billion—with nearly \$60 billion for the landmark high-speed rail project linking Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City.<sup>71</sup>

In championing "quality infrastructure," Tokyo offers transparency, long-term sustainability, and local job creation along with the transfer of skills and technology—a compelling package that implicitly critiques the standards often associated with BRI.<sup>72</sup> Though Japan also strikes an inclusive tone, Tokyo emphasizes the need for both "quality" and "quantity" and has even cooperated with China on some third-country BRI projects since 2017.<sup>73</sup> China's rapidly increasing economic influence in the region is undeniable, as evidenced by Beijing becoming ASEAN's largest trading partner in 2009 and the nearly 900-percent growth of Sino-ASEAN trade since 2001.<sup>74</sup> Yet, on the whole, Tokyo continues to put forth

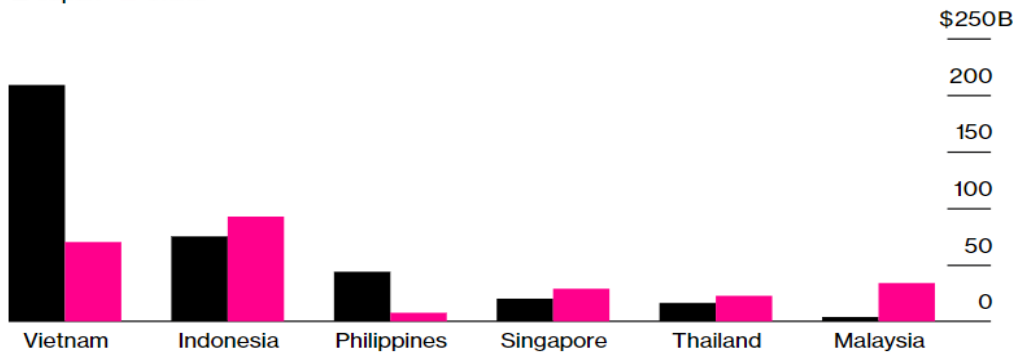


a substantial and attractive alternative to Chinese investment. Of note, such investment can help mitigate China's "economic cabbage strategy," whereby Beijing's investments might secure key regional infrastructure with geopolitical and security implications.<sup>75</sup> Tokyo also demonstrated its regional leadership abilities as former Prime Minister Abe chaired the 2019 Group of 20 and secured international endorsement for "Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment."<sup>76</sup> Thus, Japan's infrastructure development initiatives can at least modestly reduce the region's economic dependency on China while also challenging Beijing to raise its infrastructure investment standards.

### Building Battles

Japan far outpaces China in value of infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia

■ Japan ■ China



Source: Fitch Solutions (data provided 18 June 2019)

**Figure 3. The value of Chinese and Japanese infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia**

In contrast to the robust scale of Tokyo's economic investments, US commitments to date are a drop in the bucket compared to the BRI. Initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Business Forum and the Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development (BUILD) Act are an encouraging step in the right direction but to date are of negligible scale.<sup>77</sup> The BUILD Act offers superior quality, transparency, and private-sector solutions to Southeast Asia and should be tailored to support US strategic interests, yet the \$60 billion commitment is easily overshadowed by the trillion-dollar BRI.<sup>78</sup> As detailed above, Japan's leading role in regional infrastructure development makes Tokyo an ideal ally to increase cooperation with on this front.

On a positive note, the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation recently concluded Memorandums of Understanding with counterparts in Japan and Australia, which led to a jointly financed \$1 billion energy project in Papua New Guinea.<sup>79</sup> This was a modest albeit important step for Washington. Indeed, the value of allies and partners is often touted from a defense and security perspective,

as former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford, USMC, expressed that “allies and partners are our strategic center of gravity.”<sup>80</sup> Yet, it would be a grave mistake to not fully leverage allies and partners in the economic realm. If played correctly, increased economic engagement from the United States and like-minded states can help reinforce the footing of Indo-Pacific nations to better withstand Chinese economic coercion. While the Trump administration made progress on this front, the overall tone of transactional foreign policy and the wielding of tariffs and tough trade deals with longstanding friends partly undercut these efforts.<sup>81</sup> Going forward, the United States should work in tandem with Japan to prioritize the expansion of additional cooperative initiatives in the economic domain to counter Chinese influence and buttress FOIP.

### ***Diplomatic Engagement***

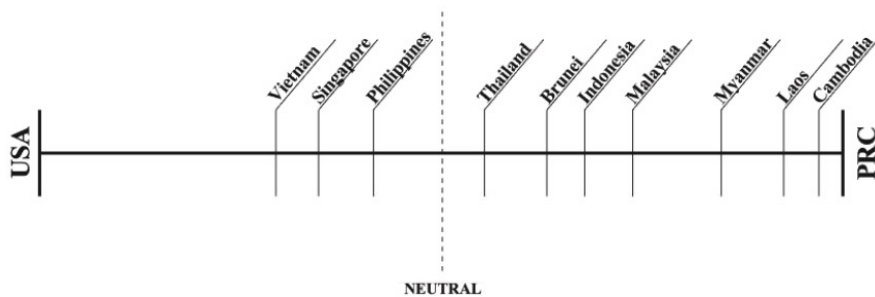
Japan’s reputation within Southeast Asia is likewise a notable strength that complements US influence in the region. Renowned China scholar David Shambaugh describes Southeast Asia as the current epicenter of US-China competition, where the prevailing narrative, even if empirically questionable, is a dominant China and a declining America.<sup>82</sup> Shambaugh’s depiction in figure 4 highlights the strength of Beijing’s influence, which is largely underwritten by its economic might and proximity in the region.<sup>83</sup>

Yet, whereas Washington tends to frame competition with Beijing as a zero-sum game, countries in the region do not want to pick sides and certainly cannot openly challenge China without the risk of severe economic blowback.<sup>84</sup> Japan too must hedge against the reality of China’s rise in its backyard. Thus, Tokyo’s inclusive spin on FOIP carries greater regional appeal.

While America’s reliability seems to be in question, public opinion polls in South and Southeast Asia reveal that trust in Japan is at its highest levels ever.<sup>85</sup> As it stands, the Trump administration’s “America First” foreign policy naturally made traditional allies and partners question America’s dependability, inducing undue friction and creating an opportunity for Beijing to exploit the seams between the United States and like-minded partners.<sup>86</sup> The deterioration of Washington’s reputation within the international community is corroborated in Southeast Asia by ISEAS surveys, as well as globally in the Gallup Poll of International Respect for U.S. Leadership.<sup>87</sup> However, surveys of major Southeast Asian states—including Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia—indicate that Tokyo is viewed most favorably across the board, while views of Washington and Beijing widely vary.<sup>88</sup> Hiroyuki Suzuki accurately assesses that Japan is well-positioned to play a critical role in the Indo-Pacific, given its multilayered rela-

tionships throughout the region, while Kei Koga suggests that Japan can “bridge the gap” between competing visions for the region.<sup>89</sup>

## Spectrum of ASEAN States’ Relations to USA & PRC



**Figure 4. Spectrum of ASEAN states’ relations to United States and People’s Republic of China.** (David Shambaugh, “The Future of U.S.-China Relations in Southeast Asia” (webinar, Stimson Center, facilitated by Yun Sun, 14 December 2020, <https://www.stimson.org/>).

Unlike the United States, Japan is also well-suited to engage even the non-democratic states in the region. This is especially important considering the consensus-based nature of ASEAN and that states such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar are sometimes outliers. The strength of Chinese influence over Cambodia for example was manifested in 2012 when Phnom Penh took the unprecedented action of blocking ASEAN’s joint communique due to verbiage that challenged Beijing’s stance in the SCS.<sup>90</sup> Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi’s recent Southeast Asian trip that included a substantial visit to Phnom Penh highlights the role that Tokyo plays in this space.<sup>91</sup> With Beijing’s growing influence in mind, Tokyo has maintained strong relations with Cambodia. While Cambodia is often viewed as a Chinese client state, Japan’s soft-power appeal is significant.<sup>92</sup> Tokyo continues to support infrastructure development in the country and remains Phnom Penh’s largest traditional donor, having provided roughly \$3 billion in official development assistance over the past two decades.<sup>93</sup> In return, Phnom Penh has thus far voiced support for Japan’s FOIP concept.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, given Cambodian relations with the United States and the West generally remain

tenuous over human rights and democracy issues, Tokyo's relationship with Phnom Penh is all the more important.<sup>95</sup>

Washington would do well to follow suit with prioritizing relations with allies and partners to include nondemocratic states in the Indo-Pacific. A growing chorus of academics and policy advisors agree on the importance of allies and partners to successful foreign and security policy and note the substantial relative advantage that Washington has over Beijing in this regard.<sup>96</sup> Yet, while the Biden administration made a stylistic pivot from Trump's "America First" in proclaiming "America is back," allies and partners have increasingly noticed Washington's foreign policy say-do gap. For example, America's abrupt 31 August withdrawal from Afghanistan caught NATO allies off guard.<sup>97</sup> Shortly thereafter the clumsy rollout of the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) alliance surprised and enraged the French, leaving some to wonder at the similarity of Trump's and Biden's foreign policy underneath the rhetorical surface.<sup>98</sup> Such missteps suggest that the Biden administration is not living up to its *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (2021), which made constant mention of allies and partners, calling them "America's greatest strategic asset" and vowing to "revitalize America's unmatched network of alliances and partnerships."<sup>99</sup>

There is also a danger that the Biden administration may go too far on an idealistic crusade for democracy when a more pragmatic approach is warranted considering the geopolitical realities and Beijing's influence. The new national security guidance claims that "democracy is essential to meeting all the challenges of our changing world" and that "we must join with like-minded allies and partners to revitalize democracy the world over."<sup>100</sup> Yet, such an approach risks marginalizing constructive relations with nondemocratic states that are vital partners in balancing against China—such as Vietnam.

While certainly America should maintain its moral compass and stand for human rights throughout the world, to broadly diagnose that spreading democracy throughout Asia is in the best interest of the United States may be an idealistic bridge too far. Speaking from an Asian perspective, Lee Kuan Yew cautions that America's brand of "supremacy of the individual and free, unfettered expression" is not universal, although Singapore is considered a democracy in some regards.<sup>101</sup> Yet, even if the universality of liberty and freedom can be affirmed, Washington's recent experiences in the Middle East and Afghanistan serve as grave reminders that attempting to force democracy on a nation is often an ill-advised and calamitous undertaking. Neglecting to engage with the region's nondemocratic states would be a missed opportunity, not least of all for the simple fact that these states are more likely to fall into Beijing's camp in the absence of engagement from the United States and its allies.

As Shambaugh astutely points out, there is not a firm correlation between regime type and a state's relationship vis-à-vis the United States and China; Vietnam is the closest to China in terms of regime type, yet Hanoi is quite wary of Beijing, whereas the Philippines under Pres. Rodrigo Duterte displayed that even a democratic ally can swing toward Beijing's camp.<sup>102</sup> Congressional barriers may inhibit US engagement with nondemocratic Southeast Asia states, but Washington should work to overcome these self-imposed restrictions where feasible, while simultaneously collaborating with Tokyo to leverage Japan's strengths in this area.<sup>103</sup>

Therefore, it makes sense that Washington ought to throw its weight behind Tokyo and support Japan's FOIP efforts, as Tokyo adeptly engages the neighborhood's democracies and nondemocratic states alike. Here Japan takes a pragmatic approach: accepting the difficulty of compelling another state to change its domestic policies, Tokyo treads lightly on human rights issues and prioritizes maintaining influence and access with nondemocracies.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, recognizing that all its neighbors have a contribution to make, Tokyo seeks all the partners it can find to help curb Chinese regional influence.<sup>105</sup>

## Conclusions

The Indo-Pacific region is vital to American prosperity and perhaps the most visible arena of great-power competition with China. US policy in the region should take a whole-of-government approach with robust economic and diplomatic engagement in conjunction with allies and partners. As Washington promotes its Indo-Pacific strategy, Tokyo is uniquely positioned to make a difference in the region, and Japan's role should not be undervalued. Japan's FOIP initiatives align well with US interests and warrant Washington's full support. Beijing's massive economic influence and plans for a China-centric order will certainly conflict with elements of FOIP, but Japan's longstanding economic investment in the Indo-Pacific—combined with Tokyo's soft-power edge—will enable Japan and like-minded nations to make measured headway toward the realization of FOIP.

As the US military reorients to the Indo-Pacific, it is critical to understand China's regional influence and coercive power and the proclivity of partners and even allies to hedge, seeking to avoid Beijing's ire. These dynamics can impact how far US allies and partners are willing to take military cooperation. As an example, one need look no further than Manila, as the Duterte administration has cozied up to China and threatened to nullify the Visiting Forces Agreement that underpins military cooperation with the United States.<sup>106</sup>

For Washington, Japan is America's "most important ally in the Asia-Pacific region," and the US-Japan alliance is the "cornerstone of peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific."<sup>107</sup> America's power in the military domain and forward-

deployed presence in the Pacific is duly complemented by Japan's quiet strength in the economic and diplomatic realms. Tokyo's leadership in the region stems from its presence, reputation, and longstanding economic ties. Tokyo's inclusive approach and the breadth of Japanese investment in Southeast Asia also fill significant gaps in Washington's foreign policy, and Japan adeptly maintains influence with the entire neighborhood—including the region's nondemocratic states. Thus, Washington should play a supporting role to bolster Tokyo's efforts, deepening cooperation and staying in lockstep with Japan on regional initiatives. Indeed, as America mulls the renewed significance of the Indo-Pacific region, Washington would do well to remember that the surest road to a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" runs through Tokyo. 🌟

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