

# Japan's Strategic Approach toward Island States

## Case of the Pacific Islands

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### Abstract

This article explores the development of Japan's ways, means, and ends of engaging the Indo-Pacific island states, particularly the Pacific Islands. In so doing, it analyses how Japan situates those island states in its Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, what national interests Japan has for the Pacific Islands, and how Japan approaches the Pacific island states bilaterally and multilaterally. The paper then briefly examines Japan's policy toward other island states, namely Sri Lanka and Maldives, in comparison with the Pacific Islands and discusses the future prospect of Japan's strategic engagement with the Indo-Pacific island states.

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Since its announcement in 2016, Japan's strategic vision, Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), has become one of the most important foreign policy agendas.<sup>1</sup> China's challenge toward the existing rules-based international order propelled Japan to establish such a vision, and to maintain the normative frameworks of the current order, Japan's strategic horizon has expanded both geographically and qualitatively, covering the entire Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean and reaching the two continents of Asia and Africa.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Japan has strengthened and diversified its core strategic tools—namely, the Japan–US alliance; diplomatic engagement with regional states; facilitation to nurture and support unilateral frameworks, such as the Quad and the Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) triad; and support for existing regional institutions, particularly the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).<sup>3</sup>

As a result, Japan's strategic competition with China has intensified. However, such a phenomenon is not unique to Japan, as China continuously extends its diplomatic, economic, and military influence in the Indo-Pacific, including the island states that have been traditionally under the influence of other regional powers, such as Australia's influence over the Pacific Islands and India's influence over Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Given their geographical proximity, Japan also

attempts to enhance ties with those states. These small island states are in geostrategically important areas in the Indo-Pacific, and their alignment choices would likely affect the future strategies of regional major powers. Nevertheless, there is a lack of in-depth analyses on Tokyo's strategic relations with those small islands in the context of Japan's FOIP vision.<sup>4</sup>

Has Japan formulated its own strategic approach toward these geostrategically important islands? Does Japan collaborate and coordinate its policies with security and diplomatic partners in the region—such as Australia, India, and the United States—to maintain status quo and to prevent China from attaining excessive influence over those island states? Or does Tokyo create its own approach with minimal policy coordination with regional partners? What are the operating principles that Japan engages with those states?

### **Locating Indo-Pacific Island States in Japan's FOIP**

Japan's FOIP vision has been evolving over time, but its fundamental objective remains the same—to maintain and enhance the existing rules-based international order that Japan has benefited from since the end of World War II. Specifically, the vision's basic principles are based on the rules and norms that are stipulated by the UN Charter, such as democracy, human rights, state sovereignty, the respect for international law, peaceful resolution of international disputes, and non-use of forces. While the United States and other advanced democracies, including Western European states and Japan have largely promoted these principles, serious challenges have emerged to these principles, mainly in the wake of the rise of China.

This is primarily because the belief in the immediate post-Cold War era that political liberalization and economic growth are mutually constitutive and reinforcing is no longer the only predominant conviction in the international arena, and many have not seen neoliberalism as the only way for their political and socioeconomic development. In fact, as China has achieved rapid economic growth while retaining autocratic leadership, Beijing has shown an alternative path to development. While China has benefited from the existing open-market system without entirely committing to opening its own market to the world or altering its political system dominated by the Chinese Communist Party, this attracted many nondemocratic states in the world, particularly those states that are within the areas of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. Further, Beijing has started to strengthen China's ties with those nondemocratic regional states militarily, economically, and socioculturally. Along with China's apparent assertive behavior from the 2008 global financial crisis, when the world perceived the United States to be in decline, China's growing influence has become particularly

visible. This is well illustrated by Beijing's explicit refusal to accept the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration Tribunal ruling as well as China's socioeconomic influence in the region through the BRI.

In response, Japan launched the *Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy* in 2016, the initial version aimed to manage China's material and ideational challenges against the existing international order. Through this FOIP vision, Japan expanded its geo-strategic scope—covering eastern Africa to western America and comprehending two large oceans, the Indian and Pacific Oceans—which correspond to the land and maritime areas where China increased its strategic influence through the BRI. These vast areas cover maritime commons that have vital sea lines of communication (SLOC). Therefore, Japan advocates that the Indo-Pacific region should be “free and open” in a “comprehensive, inclusive, and transparent manner,” and function as “international public goods,” where every actor can enjoy stability and access.<sup>5</sup>

The FOIP vision evolved over time, but by 2018, it had established three fundamental pillars: (1) promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade, and so forth; (2) pursuit of economic prosperity; and (3) commitment to peace and stability.<sup>6</sup> Japan more concretely aims to promote the existing international norms and rules, facilitate economic connectivity through such means as infrastructure development and free trade agreements, and provide capacity-building programs, including the provision of law-enforcement equipment and training, to regional states that can ensure stability in their local security environment. Given Japan's constitutional and political constraints on its defense and power-projection capabilities, Tokyo uses international rules and norms and capacity-building programs to engage in soft offshore balancing against China.

In this context, Japan considers the island states in the Indo-Pacific region increasingly important. Since Japan is also an island state, Tokyo predominantly relies on the SLOCs for the country's international trade, including exporting industrial goods and importing natural resources, such as oil and natural gas. Considering that Japan does not possess natural resources, the stability of the SLOCs is vital for Japan's security and economy. From eastern Africa to western America, several island states are situated along major SLOCs in the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the Pacific Ocean. These island states can play the role of maritime nodes to seamlessly connect Africa, Asia, and the Americas, which promotes cross-regional prosperity. Conversely, should hostile state or non-state actors seize control of these islands, it would disrupt the SLOCs that provide Japan's and regional states' economic security.

Diplomatically, Japan also aims to gain political support from the island states for maintaining and enhancing the existing international order. As the legitimacy of international rules and norms depends on the support of major powers and

ultimately the number of supporting states, it is necessary to nurture these regional states' sense of ownership and mutual understanding of the rules and norms Japan strongly supports. This approach is important because, for nondemocratic states, liberal norms stipulated in the UN Charter, such as human rights and democracy, are generally aspirational, not imperative. These states' interpretation of those international norms is often different from the definitions advanced democracies. These interpretive gaps are certainly difficult to fill, but to minimize misunderstanding and miscommunication, Japan continually engages with those states so that they do not flatly reject the existing norms.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, Japan's FOIP vision conceptually highlights the strategic importance of the island states in the Indo-Pacific region. Admittedly, unlike great powers, those states are small and do not individually have the capabilities to shape a broader direction of international politics. Japan also does not have abundant resources to commit to every island state's economic development and security. However, these countries are situated in geostrategically important areas that could either promote or disrupt regional security and normative stability in the Indo-Pacific. Japan's basic position is thus to maintain amicable relations with the island states in the Indo-Pacific region and to readily respond to strategic contingencies.

The challenge is that many of the island states in the Indo-Pacific are still economically and politically unstable because of a lack of natural and human resources. Consequently, they become vulnerable to external powers' economic and political influence. As China's influence increases in developing states in the Indo-Pacific, Japan must reformulate its strategic posture toward those islands. In this sense, Tokyo's FOIP concept has served as a strategic tool to renew Japan's engagement with the regional island states. The next section will focus on Japan-Pacific Islands relations and analyze the development of such relations and the current strategic challenges.

### **The Pacific Islands and Japanese National Interests**

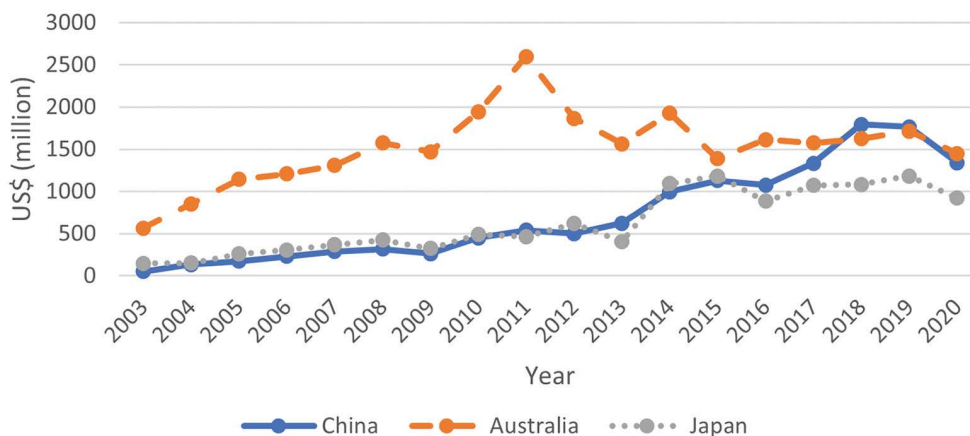
The Pacific Islands consist of 14 states divided into three regions: Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia. Micronesia is in the northern Pacific and includes Micronesia, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Palau, and Nauru. Melanesia is in the southern Pacific region, consisting of Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. Polynesia is the maritime area in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, consisting of Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Tuvalu, and Niue. There are also other islands that belong to France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, including French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, the Pitcairn Islands, American Samoa, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands.

Because these islands do not generally possess economic and human resources, they cannot generate substantial economic development by themselves and tend to rely on external powers' assistance. At the same time, their dependence also stems from the colonial experiences and political arrangements in the 19th and 20th century—prior to the independence movements of the 1960s, these islands were largely controlled by major powers, including Japan in the 1930s and early 1940s and the United States, Australia, and New Zealand in the post–World War II era under UN trusteeship. From 1960 to 1994, all 14 states gained independence. However, given their limited capabilities, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Palau have formulated Compacts of Free Association with the United States to facilitate the islands' economic development and ensure military protection. In contrast, other islands still possess strong ties with Australia and New Zealand. In addition, Tonga, Fiji (currently suspended), Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Kiribati, and Vanuatu have become members of the Commonwealth of Nations, a political association of 56 member states, the vast majority of which are former territories of the British Empire.<sup>8</sup> As such, the Pacific island states have generally cultivated strong ties with the Indo-Pacific Western powers.

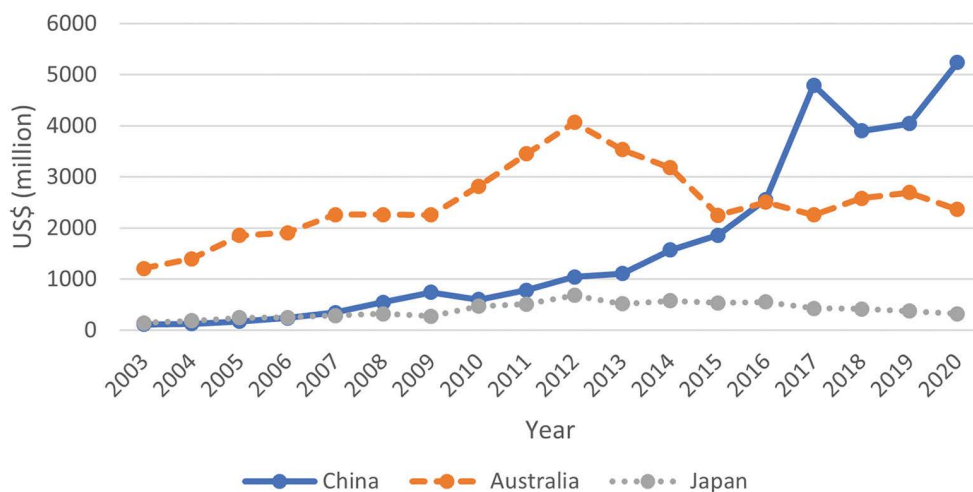
However, the twenty-first century saw a rapid change in this relationship between the Pacific island states and external powers. According to Takehiro Kurosaki, several factors contribute to this change, including heightened competition over marine resources for industrialization among developing states, and Western media's increasing interests in global issues, such as natural disasters and climate change, and China's increasing economic influence over the Pacific Islands.<sup>9</sup> After some of the Pacific Islands have become independent, they have attracted non-Western external powers such as China for their natural resources. This has provided the Pacific island states room for building its own diplomacy, an option for strategic autonomy rather than continuously relying on their suzerain states: Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.

Since 2006, China's advancement in the Pacific Islands has been particularly remarkable, as illustrated by Beijing's establishment of the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum. Economically, China's trade relations with Pacific Islands have rapidly increased since 2013. According to the Asian Development Bank database, the total export of goods from Pacific island states to China increased from US\$623 million in 2013 to US\$1.3 billion, while Pacific island states' imports from China rose from US\$1.1 billion in 2013 to US\$5.2 billion in 2020.<sup>10</sup> Compared with Australia and Japan, China's rapid increase in economic interactions with the Pacific island states significantly narrowed the trade gap between the amount of Pacific Islands' export to China and Australia. The amount of their imports from China rapidly surpassed

that of Australia.<sup>11</sup> These precipitous changes occurred after China announced the BRI in 2013 and in the wake of the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015. By 2022, 10 states—namely Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Micronesia, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu—have attained membership in the BRI, and five states, Cook Island, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu, have become members of the AIIB.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 1. Pacific island states' export to China, Australia, and Japan (2003–2020).** (Compiled by the author on the basis of the data from the Asian Development Bank)



**Figure 2. Pacific island states' import from China, Australia, and Japan (2003–2020).** (Compiled by the author on the basis of the data from the Asian Development Bank)

This development is significant because China now possesses a substantial economic relationship with the Pacific Islands. Furthermore, those island states tend to

import more goods from China than from other major powers, which increases their economic dependence on China. It should be noted that China's engagement is skewed toward Melanesia and is not necessarily equally distributed among all the Pacific Islands.<sup>13</sup> However, since 2016, Beijing's engagement with Micronesia, where the United States traditionally has strong diplomatic and economic ties, has become remarkable. Although all the Pacific island states are still mainly dependent on Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Japan for economic aid, this trend of China's economic presence in the region would likely shape their diplomatic behavior.<sup>14</sup> Left unchecked, China will soon become the number one trade partner for the region and increase its diplomatic leverage over the island states.

Indeed, making the most of these economic opportunities and diplomatic engagement, China has attempted to change the Pacific Islands' diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. In 2019, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched recognition from Taipei to Beijing, which left only four states that recognize Taiwan—Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, and Tuvalu. Further, Beijing also attempts to strengthen China's traditional and nontraditional security ties with the Pacific Islands. In 2022, China and the Solomon Islands concluded a security agreement that was said to allow Chinese security forces, including armed police and military personnel, to assist the Solomon Islands in such events as social disorder and natural disaster while permitting China to use the Solomon Islands, with the latter's consent, as a logistical hub for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).<sup>15</sup> For digital infrastructure, China has invested in laying submarine cables in the Solomon Islands and the data center in Papua New Guinea, actions that faced resistance from regional powers, particularly Australia.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, China showed its active diplomacy toward the Pacific island states by proposing the China-Pacific Islands' Common Development Vision in the late May 2022.<sup>17</sup> Although China's attempt failed, this illustrates Beijing's proactive stance to strengthen its strategic ties with the Pacific island states.<sup>18</sup>

In this developing strategic environment in the Pacific, Japan has four fundamental interests to protect. First, Japan has had strong interests in securing its economic interests in the Pacific, particularly fishing rights and natural resources, such as natural gas, nickel, and copper. Japan's interests in fisheries, particularly tuna, have been strong enough to confront with even the Pacific island states. Notably, when the international community discussed formulating the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in the 1970s, Japan explicitly opposed the concept of the 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone, which would limit Japan's access to international fishing grounds, conceding its rights to the coastal states.<sup>19</sup> Eventually, Japan managed its relations with the island states by providing grant aid to retain Japan's fishing rights, as approximately

40 percent of Japan's total consumption of bonito and tuna, amounting to 159,000 tons, comes from the Pacific Islands.<sup>20</sup>

Second, Tokyo has important SLOCs in the Pacific, connecting Japan and Australia. Although most of Japan's energy resources, such as oil and natural gas, pass through the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, approximately 20 percent of Japan's imported coal and natural gas and approximately 7 percent of its imported beef, dairy products, and barley comes from Australia.<sup>21</sup> Those resources and products are generally exported from Australia's eastern ports, particularly the Port Botany, the Port of New Castle, and the Port of Brisbane, and the closest SLOC between Australia and Japan passes through the eastern part of the Pacific Islands.<sup>22</sup> In this context, securing the SLOCs in the South Pacific is Japan's vital national interest.

Third, Japan has a diplomatic interest in attaining and/or retaining the support of Pacific island states' votes in international fora, including the United Nations. This is particularly so in the UN Security Council (UNSC) reforms. Japan has been eager to gain a permanent seat at the UNSC, which is illustrated by the fact that Japan has served as a nonpermanent member for 11 terms since 1956.<sup>23</sup> Since the United Nations requires a two-thirds affirmative votes from the member states to change the UN Charter, such voting numbers matter. In 2005, when the UN reform gained diplomatic momentum, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Palau, the Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu supported the proposal submitted by the Group of Four, consisting of Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, in other international fora, such as the International Whaling Commission, the Solomon Islands supported Japan's position.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Japan values its relationship with the Pacific Islands.

Fourth, Japan has long-held security interests in the Pacific Islands. During World War II, Japan fought brutal battles, such as the Battle of Guadalcanal in 1942–43 with the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, and the Battle of Rabaul in 1942 with Australia. Since these territories are the entry points to the northwestern Pacific and Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands are strategically located important areas. In this sense, if China establishes military bases in these islands, this will likely create new ocean gateways that enables China's PLAN to have an easy access to the Pacific Ocean and increase its power-projection capabilities.<sup>26</sup> Particularly, as the potential presence of Chinese nuclear submarines in this area poses threats to the United States, Japan's foremost military ally, and would likely affect its extended deterrence to Japan. Thus, Tokyo will continue to have strategic stakes in these islands.

Those four interests are closely linked with each other, particularly in the context of China's growing challenges toward the existing international order. The next section will focus on the development of Japan's engagement in the Pacific.



## **Japan's Engagement in the Pacific: Bilateral Diplomacy and Multilateral Institutions**

Japan's diplomatic approach toward the Pacific Islands is based on the Kuranari Doctrine, put forth in Foreign Minister Tadashi Kuranari's speech, "Working Towards the Pacific Future Community," in Fiji in 1987. This doctrine crafted five diplomatic principles toward the Pacific Islands, namely (1) "respect for independence and self-help," (2) "support for regional cooperation," (3) "ensuring political stability," (4) "economic cooperation for development," and (5) "promoting people-to-people exchange," which Japanese government officials have continuously referenced ever since.<sup>27</sup>

The Kuranari Doctrine has long historical roots. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Pacific Islands were first concerned about Tokyo's Pacific policy as it largely neglected the islands' "agency." This is well illustrated by a series of policy statements from Japan relating to the Pacific Islands before 1987. The first major policy doctrine launched by Japan in the Pacific was Prime Minister Masayoshi Ōhira's "Pan-Pacific Concept" in 1979. This showed the importance of cooperation in the South Pacific in such fields as maritime research, submarine cables, and forestry.<sup>28</sup> However, the doctrine did not consider the interests of the Pacific Islands, and in 1980, when Japan expressed its intent to release low-level nuclear waste in the Northern Mariana Trench under the London Convention, Micronesia and the Marshall Islands criticized the plan. This is because such behavior reminded the island states of their traumatic events regarding nuclear tests conducted by France, the United States, and the United Kingdom, and the aftereffects of such testing on the ocean and their nations.<sup>29</sup> Thus, in 1982, Prime Minister Zenkō Suzuki launched the "Suzuki Pacific Doctrine," but it was not satisfactory either since its contents were similar to the Pan-Pacific Concept and were not necessarily customized toward the Pacific Islands.<sup>30</sup>

In this context, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone shifted Tokyo's diplomatic posture toward the Pacific Island by promising that Japan would not release nuclear waste in the region.<sup>31</sup> This reflected the Kuranari Doctrine that saw the Pacific island states as equal partners and reflected Japan's bilateral and multilateral engagement in the region.

### ***Strategic Approach I: Bilateral Diplomacy***

Bilateral diplomacy is an important tool for Japan to understand local needs and conditions in each Pacific island state. In particular, there are vast political, economic, and social diversities existing among those island states, and the bilat-

eral diplomacy provides an opportunity to customize Japan's diplomatic approach and gain political support for Japan's initiatives, including the FOIP.

That said, as the Kuranari Doctrine illustrates, the Pacific island states' foremost needs have been development. Thus, Japan's traditional approach has revolved around grant provision for socioeconomic purposes. Given that most of Pacific Island economies do not generate extensive profits, Japan's economic assistance tends not to be in low-interest loans but instead grants for infrastructure development. Every year, Japan provides the island states approximately USD 1.5 million for nonproject grants and grants for specific projects, such as infrastructure development, which ranges from USD 0.8 million for sustainable development and climate change in the Cook Islands in 2015 to USD 27 million for enhancement of safety of Apia Port in Samoa in 2015.<sup>32</sup> Japan also promotes human development and people-to-people exchange through such means as the Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths (JENESYS) program, an exchange project aimed at strengthening connections among the youths in Japan and the Indo-Pacific.<sup>33</sup>

Natural disasters, such as typhoons, cyclones, tsunamis, floods, droughts, and volcano eruptions, frequently occur in the Pacific Islands, and Japan provides emergency assistance for major as well as minor disasters. In the past decade, Japan provided such assistance to Fiji, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Palau, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu, and Tokyo offered grants for enhancing the island states' capabilities for disaster prevention and management.<sup>34</sup> Since Japan is also prone to various natural disasters, its technology for building disaster-resilient infrastructure has been considered useful in the region.

To be sure, such development assistance does not necessarily lead the Pacific island nations to support every strategic initiative that Japan takes. While Tokyo links its development assistance to a broader strategic agenda, such as the "Partnership for Quality Infrastructure," which is conceptually subsumed into the FOIP vision, the Pacific Islands' responses have varied significantly. For example, eight of the 14 Pacific island states have not openly supported the vision, instead remaining silent or only expressing their intention to continuously discuss it.<sup>35</sup> Those who have supported the FOIP vision are Fiji,<sup>36</sup> the Marshall Islands,<sup>37</sup> Micronesia,<sup>38</sup> Palau,<sup>39</sup> Papua New Guinea,<sup>40</sup> and Samoa.<sup>41</sup> Although the island states that have strong ties with the United States tend to support Japan's FOIP, Samoa and Fiji also support the FOIP. Given the initial vagueness of the FOIP vision, some considered it mostly development-oriented, such as infrastructure development, while others viewed it as a strategic concept that could be part of great-power competition, particularly with China.<sup>42</sup> This created variances in the Pacific Islands' reactions.

In sum, amicable bilateral relations stemming from Japan's development assistance do not guarantee Japan clear support for the FOIP from all the Pacific island

states, considering the existence of the variety of strategic positions among the Pacific Islands. At the same time, it is also true that Japan did not receive explicit negative reactions from those who have yet to express support for the FOIP.<sup>43</sup>

### ***Strategic Approach II: Multilateral Institutions***

Multilateralism among the Pacific Islands has long been based on the Pacific Island Forum (PIF), which was regarded as the “region’s premier political and economic organization.”<sup>44</sup> Originally established in 1971 as the South Pacific Forum (SPF), the organization aimed to create a diplomatic space for the Pacific Islands and reduce the political influence of the South Pacific Commission (now, “Pacific Community”) that was established in 1947 and led by regional major powers, namely Australia, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.<sup>45</sup> Given geographic proximity and strong diplomatic influences, Australia and New Zealand are still core members of PIF, but the forum creates more equal diplomatic interactions between them and the Pacific Islands. The PIF began to be further institutionalized as the number of members increased, such as the establishment of the South Pacific Bureau for Economic Cooperation (SPEC) for the member states’ economic cooperation in 1973 that evolved into the broadly focused Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) in 1988. To enhance its relations with external actors, the PIF also created the Post Forum Dialogues at the ministerial level in 1989. Through this mechanism, Japan also created its own forum in 1997, the Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM), where leaders from Japan and the PIF member states meet every three years.<sup>46</sup>

The PALM is a uniquely institutionalized forum, as all the PIF members’ leaders participate.<sup>47</sup> As discussed above, Japan’s national interests in the Pacific Islands closely connect to fishing and regional stability, and thus, Japan’s agendas in the PALM generally focus on means to promote economic development and sociopolitical stability in those island states. That said, the PALM’s agendas evolved over time. For example, in the post-9/11 period, when international terrorist groups aimed to target failed states as safe havens, PALM’s socioeconomic development agendas began to be framed as security issues. Also, in 2009, responding to serious environmental challenges, the PALM adopted the concept of the Pacific Environment Community (PEC) and created the PEC fund for relevant capacity-building programs and technology transfer.<sup>48</sup> Institutionally, the PALM started to hold the PALM Ministerial Interim Meeting, where ministers from the member states gather to update one another and discuss the progress of cooperative projects.<sup>49</sup> This meeting is held in between the PALMs and contributes to close policy coordination between Japan and the PIF members.

For their parts, Australia and New Zealand have played enhanced roles since the early 2000s. Both states have long committed to fostering socioeconomic development in the region through economic assistance, but Australia has begun to play a more active role in the security field as well. This was largely triggered by the 2002 Bali bombing that killed 88 Australians, after which Canberra started to highlight a possibility that the fragile Pacific island states would become the center of threats to Australia's national security and erode the nation's sphere of influence.<sup>50</sup> This was illustrated by the establishment of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), through which Australian forces intervened in the Solomon Islands' domestic crisis with the consent of the PIF members in 2003.<sup>51</sup> Multilateral institutions in the Pacific Islands are thus predominantly organized by the PIF and the PALM.

However, this regional institutional architecture has gradually changed because of the rise of China. Beijing uses its own diplomatic frameworks, particularly the BRI, to strengthen economic and diplomatic ties with the regional states. The strategic implications for the Pacific Islands here are that they do not rely on the traditional regional powers, namely Australia and New Zealand, as much as they once did. This provides options for those small island states that seek strategic autonomy.<sup>52</sup> In fact, there are several diplomatic maneuvers in the PIF—Palau, Micronesia, Nauru, Marshall Islands, and Kiribati indicated their intention to withdraw from the organization.<sup>53</sup> The direct cause was the institutional norm of the election of the PIF secretary general, by which the Micronesian states considered that the next secretary general would be selected from their subregion. When that failed to materialize, the Micronesian states protested by showing their intention to withdraw.<sup>54</sup> While the Suva Agreement was concluded in July 2022 to prevent the withdrawal, Kiribati decided to leave the organization as it had not been consulted in the discussions leading to the agreement.<sup>55</sup> This indicates that the PIF is not the only crucial multilateral platform for these island states. For example, Fiji proposed the establishment of the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) in 2013. This was Fiji's response to its PIF membership suspension from 2009 to 2014 in the aftermath of the island's 2006 coup.<sup>56</sup> This new regional institution provides a forum purely for the Pacific island states to discuss their own agendas and interests. These events show that the PIF's influence has been waning over the past decade.

In this context, Japan has pushed forward the concept of the FOIP in the Pacific Islands through the PALMs. Japan's strategic approach to the Pacific Islands is to respect the centrality of regional states and to facilitate their economic and political capacity rather than imposing Tokyo's norms and ideas.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, Japan is aware of China's growing influence in the Pacific Islands since the

inception of the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum in 2006, resulting in competition over economic aid in the region.<sup>58</sup> However, Prime Minister Shinzō Abe slightly shifted Tokyo's policy emphasis from quantitative competition to value-oriented competition in terms of aid. In 2015, Japan emphasized the importance of rule of law in the sea, such as the UNCLOS, and the rules-based maritime order, expressing regional concerns regarding illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.<sup>59</sup> Also, to facilitate sustainable development in the region, Japan reaffirmed the importance of quality infrastructure that could secure "resilient, reliable and durable transport and communications links and access to energy as well as the sustainable development of agriculture, fisheries and tourism."<sup>60</sup>

After the announcement of Japan's FOIP in 2016, Tokyo began to explicitly advocate the principles of the FOIP. The chairperson's statement following the 2017 PALM Ministerial Interim Meeting touched upon the importance of the "Free and Open Maritime Order" that stemmed from international law, respect of sovereignty, non-use of force, peaceful resolution of disputes, the freedom of navigation and overflight, and the clarification of the claims based on international law, which implicitly targeted China's ambiguous claim of the "nine-dash line."<sup>61</sup> In 2018, the theme of PALM 8 was "We are Islanders—Partnership Towards Prosperous, Free and Open Pacific."<sup>62</sup> It was not the "Indo-Pacific" because the Pacific island states did not have close geographical connections with the Indian Ocean region. Nevertheless, the principles remained the same. Inviting new members, namely New Caledonia and French Polynesia, Japan reiterated the importance of maintaining and enhancing the existing rules-based order, particularly the rules-based maritime order and environmental sustainability.<sup>63</sup> These initiatives were generally well received by the Pacific Islands.

However, the Pacific island states were not ready to express strong support for Japan's FOIP concept. Unlike ASEAN, these states did not have an intention to formulate their own Indo-Pacific strategic framework or to incorporate Japan's FOIP concept in their respective national policies.<sup>64</sup> Rather, the Pacific Islands' general stance appears to be to select facets of the framework with which they feel they can work with Japan, such as environmental protection on the basis of international law, the quality infrastructure development, and rule of law in the maritime domain. As a result, while Japan incorporates the Pacific Islands into the FOIP vision and reiterates its significance in the PALM and PALM-related meetings, the region has yet to regard such a strategic concept as the region's policy.<sup>65</sup> In 2021, the PALM 9 sought common grounds between the PIF's "Framework for Pacific Regionalism" and Japan's FOIP, which focused on five priority areas of functional cooperation under Japan's new initiative, the "Pacific

Bond (*Kizuna*) Policy,” namely (1) COVID-19 response and recovery, (2) sustainable oceans based on the rule of law, (3) climate change and disaster resilience, (4) strengthening foundation for sustainable and resilient economic development, and (5) people-to-people exchange and human resource development.<sup>66</sup> Although these resonate with the principles of the FOIP, the Pacific Islands as a group have not taken a unified strategic position in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Strategic Implications for Other Island States: Sri Lanka and Maldives**

Japan uses bilateral and multilateral diplomacy to gain support for its FOIP concept toward the Pacific Islands. Although there has yet to be a consensus to regionally support Japan's FOIP vision among the Pacific island states, Japan was able to gain certain diplomatic support in a bilateral setting. In other regions, particularly South Asia, there are similar situations in the island states: Sri Lanka and Maldives. They are both located in strategically important maritime areas, where vital SLOCs exist in the Indian Ocean. While India had a diplomatic, economic, and social influence over these states, China has begun to increase its economic influence over both nations. Indeed, Sri Lanka increasingly depends on China for its imports and economic assistance, which was often illustrated by the facts that Colombo joined the BRI in 2017 and was forced to provide its BRI-funded Hambantota port to China for a 99-year lease when Sri Lanka could not make good on the project's debt.<sup>67</sup> Maldives also depends on China for its import, which surpassed the amount to India in 2016.<sup>68</sup> As such, the balance of power in the Indian Ocean, at least in economic terms, has been changing.

Japan's diplomatic approach in South Asia is, however, constrained. Most notably, Japan does not have its own multilateral forum like the PALM to engage with Indian Ocean island states. Admittedly, there is the region-wide South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). However, the political rivalry between India and Pakistan has effectively hamstrung the organization as a functional body over political, economic, and security agendas. As the SAARC agendas are confined to nonstrategic ones, Japan's engagement through SAARC has also been limited to an exchange program through JENESYS and financial assistance through the Japan-SAARC Special Fund. Thus, to facilitate Japan's FOIP vision in South Asia, bilateral diplomacy has been the main tool.

Bilaterally, Japan-Sri Lanka relations have been positive. Japan has consistently provided Sri Lanka grants and low-interest loans for education, food security, maritime security, and infrastructure development. Since 2013, Japan has highlighted the importance of an open and free maritime domain as a public good, considering Sri Lanka's potential to become a “maritime hub of the region.”<sup>69</sup> In 2015, Japan and Sri Lanka elevated their relationship to a comprehensive partner-

ship to facilitate cooperation in the maritime sphere, while Japan further aimed to support Sri Lanka's socioeconomic development under the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure.<sup>70</sup> On this basis, Sri Lanka expressed its support for Japan's FOIP vision as early as April 2017, and both nations established a foreign ministry policy dialogue at the senior official level and institutionalized the dialogues for the realization of the FOIP.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, such enhancement of bilateral relations does not determine Sri Lanka's strategic position. Facing continued instability of the domestic political and financial situation, such as its high default risk and dramatic leadership changes in 2022, Sri Lanka often abrogates the agreements with Japan, such as the development of the Port of Colombo in 2021 and relies instead on China for assistance.<sup>72</sup>

Japan–Maldives relations are also relatively stable. Japan recognizes the geostrategic importance of Maldives in the Indian Ocean region and continuously supports the nation's socioeconomic development, mostly through the provision of grants, given Maldives' limited economic resources.<sup>73</sup> While Japan and Maldives have yet to elevate their bilateral relations to a strategic partnership, their cooperation encompasses economic development, maritime security, and regional affairs.<sup>74</sup> In 2017, Maldivian president Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom expressed his support for Japan's FOIP vision, aiming at enhancement of bilateral relations through such means as the establishment of the Japan–Maldives Policy Dialogues in 2018.<sup>75</sup> Given Yameen's general support for China, Maldives' support for Japan indicates its desire to expand the strategic options. Even after President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih won the election of 2018, Maldives' relations posture toward Japan remained the same, and Solih expressed his support and cooperation for the realization of the FOIP.<sup>76</sup>

This quick review of Japan's approach toward Sri Lanka and Maldives illustrates similarities to Tokyo's approach toward the Pacific Islands. Using its development assistance and exchanges at official and non-official levels, Japan aims to strengthen comprehensive ties with states in the Pacific Islands and island states in South Asia. While Japan has more diplomatic tools to engage the Pacific island states than South Asia through its own regional forum, PALM, Japan still closely cooperates bilaterally with Sri Lanka and Maldives. Nevertheless, those states also have their own agency, and the instability of domestic politics and the danger of debt-trap in particular affect their relationships, as the Sri Lanka case shows.

### **Conclusion: Future of Japan's Strategic Approach to the Indo-Pacific**

Since the Abe administration formulated the FOIP vision in 2016, Tokyo has incorporated the Pacific island states into Japan's strategic scope. Although it was not

entirely clear the degree to which Japan would invest in those island states and strengthen strategic ties with them, over time, Tokyo's constant engagement through socioeconomic development assistance has enabled Japan to smoothly transform such assistance into deeper strategic relationships. Japan's approach is essentially to gain support for FOIP through bilateral means and nurture an environment where regional fora would collectively endorse Japan's strategic vision. In this way, Tokyo would be able to not only strengthen a strategic "line" between Japan and each island state but also nurture an "area" where the entire region can be a general supporter for Japan.

Obviously, this is not always successful. In South Asia, there is no multilateral forum to discuss general regional strategic positions, due to the India–Pakistan strategic rivalry and India's desire for "strategic autonomy." All the Pacific island states have similar diplomatic positions prioritizing their own regional and national socioeconomic development, but such policies do not always lead these states to reach consensus on their own regional strategic position. Moreover, domestic politics also play an important role in determining and changing these states' national stances. Now that their geostrategic position is attractive for great powers because of the intensification of the US–China rivalry, these island states have more strategic options to choose where and how they should receive economic assistance, which also creates diverging opinions in the domestic arena. As a result, Tokyo faces difficulty in nurturing regional collectivism among those island states to clearly express support for Japan's FOIP.

Nevertheless, such efforts remain relevant. The reason those island states have several strategic options is precisely because external states, such as Japan, engage with them. Without such engagement, the island states do not have any options and would instead lean to a particular great power that would rapidly alter the regional balance of power. In fact, a power shift in the Indo-Pacific islands caused by China's continuous rise is likely to intensify as Beijing aims to increase its diplomatic and economic influence as well as military presence in the southern Pacific. This is well illustrated by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's trip to the region and his efforts to conclude a regional pact in May 2022, which while not fully successful paid some dividends in specific island states.<sup>77</sup> Thus, Japan's strategic engagement provides those island states an opportunity not to completely lean toward China.

Currently, the United States aims to formulate a diplomatic coalition with Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom through the partnership called the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP).<sup>78</sup> These regional powers have been historically the most influential actors in the southern Pacific and have significant experience working together. Japan is a latecomer in engaging the region strategically with these powers. The PBP could be an important strategic initiative to the Pacific island states in terms of diversifying their options and mitigating risks. However, the partnership's coopera-



tive agendas and the initial scope are still limited. In fact, the partnership tends to emphasize the importance of the PIF, which includes the suzerain powers, while not mentioning new regional groupings, such as the PIDF. This posture could make the Pacific island states uneasy because the PBP can be seen merely as a device to counter China, control the region, and entrap the island states into a great-power rivalry.

In this context, Japan's multilateral initiatives in the region, such as the PALM, could potentially become useful frameworks. This is because the initiatives generally emphasize functional cooperation, including addressing climate change and emphasizing less strategic cooperation. This would likely keep the Pacific island states' strategic options open by meeting their domestic and regional needs without being involved in great power competition. In other words, the initiatives that have less strategic emphasis would actually have greater strategic benefits for the regional states.

The Pacific island region has now become a theater for great-power rivalry between the United States and China. While maintaining the regional rules-based order is the core strategic objective for Tokyo and would lead Japan to confront China in some areas, it is not Japan's intent to divide the region by engaging in such strategic rivalry. In this context, Japan needs to make the most of its existing initiatives such as the PALM, facilitate functional cooperation, and neutralize the negative strategic effect of the US–China rivalry. ♣

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