

**FROM MEDIATOR TO LEADER?
JAPAN'S EXPANDING STRATEGIC HORIZONS AND STEPS TOWARD
GLOBAL LEADERSHIP**

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Introduction

After a short and shaky first term as prime minister in 2006–2007, Abe Shinzo’s election as president of the Liberal Democratic Party in September 2012 came as a surprise to many.¹ Campaigning using the slogan “Take back Japan” (*Nippon wo torimodosu*), Abe’s second term appeared to go beyond Japan’s mainstream conservatism, as the new prime minister revealed his overtly nationalistic values and agenda. Many domestic and international analysts warned against his historical revisionist tendencies and the possibility of regional instability,² labelling Abe Shinzo “the most conservative leader in Japan’s postwar history.”³ As Japan-China tensions were mounting over territorial disputes and many were wondering about the intention behind Abe’s efforts to centralize executive power,⁴ 2016 marked a turning point for Abe Shinzo’s and Japan’s image in the international arena. His initial handling of newly elected U.S. President Donald Trump was widely praised by international Japan watchers,⁵ and Abe’s Japan enjoyed a new reputation for engagement, mediation, and proactive diplomacy. In particular, Japan’s 2016 unveiling and subsequent development of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision seems to have helped the country reach an unprecedented status of leadership on a global level. Has Japan truly succeeded in transitioning from a mediation to a leadership role? Will the new Reiwa era bring a significant and lasting change to Japan’s role in the global scene?

This piece argues that although Abe has taken tangible proactive steps in broadening its strategic horizons in recent years, Japan still has several significant challenges to overcome and weaknesses to tackle in order to be able to take on a greater role as a leader in the liberal international order. The present piece thus recommends to Japanese policy-makers:

- Greater emphasis on partnerships with countries beyond the traditional alliance with the United States;
- A review of its long-standing security and defence arrangements with the United States; and
- Rethinking ways to reconcile the Japanese government’s message to domestic and international audiences.

The FOIP Vision and Japan’s Proactive Role as Mediator

Prime Minister Abe Shinzo first officially revealed the FOIP strategy during his keynote address at the International Conference on African Development in Nairobi in August 2016. Although the concept was first mentioned by the Japanese prime minister more than 10 years ago, it is only in the last two years that the idea has been fleshed out as a major foreign policy goal for Japan. Its development then started to actively involve multiple players in the region, and the Trump administration enthusiastically endorsed the strategy in 2017. The U.S. military also renamed its Pacific Command the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command in May 2018, to reflect the Pentagon’s growing interest in India and alignment with FOIP. Since then, the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” has quickly become a very popular catchphrase in policy circles both in Washington and in Tokyo.

Many experts and scholars have tried to define or analyze what the concept entails, and most have commented that the FOIP strategy, gathering the United States, Japan, and India on one side, is obviously designed to counter China's extremely ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁶ The FOIP strategy has thus been received with great concern in some countries in the region, such as Pakistan, where some predict that pursuing the FOIP strategy will end up excluding Pakistan altogether and further strain U.S.-Pakistan relations.⁷

In this tense situation, Japan, more than the United States, will have to play a key role in ensuring that the FOIP strategy does not remain divisive or misinterpreted. In Abe's own words, "Japan bears the responsibility of fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans."⁸ Japan, as a status quo power, is placed in a very favourable position to foster communication among the regional players while maintaining a strong relationship with the United States. Although China is certainly in the backdrop of Japan's security rationale to promote the FOIP vision, Japan has recently made some efforts to present the FOIP concept as a more inclusive idea: in November 2018, the word "senryaku" (strategy) was replaced by "kōsō" (vision)⁹ to avoid unnecessary frictions with China and other actors in the region. Moreover, the Japanese government has attempted to create the impression that the FOIP vision is not all about security and military alliances: the people-to-people connectivity, quality infrastructure, and development are the aspects of the FOIP that the Japanese government intends to put a stronger emphasis on.¹⁰

Along with these first steps toward leadership through the FOIP vision, since 2016 Abe's Japan has also made efforts to poise itself as bridge-builder, facilitator, and mediator. For example, Abe Shinzo tried to play the middleman in the Middle East and ease tensions between Iran and the United States in June 2019, stating: "We want to be able to carry the voice of the international community to Iran, not just the U.S."¹¹ Another example is Japan's declared intention to play the role of "mediator" (*hashiwatashi*) between nuclear states and nonnuclear states. The term was changed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2016 from "leader for nonproliferation and disarmament" in the 1990s to "mediator." Ironically, the change from "leader" to "mediator" is indicative of a shift to a more concrete and realistic perspective, which also resonates with Japan's recent heightened regional threat perception.¹²

One more example is the triple role of host, moderator, and facilitator that Abe Shinzo played at the G20 summit in Osaka in June 2019. In an unprecedented opportunity to show leadership, Abe stated before the summit that his hope was to achieve "beautiful harmony" among world leaders.¹³ The photograph of the Japanese leader sitting between Donald Trump and Xi Jinping captured Abe's intention not only to facilitate dialogue between the two nations, but also to reconcile the economic and the security spheres.

Last but not least, Abe's major efforts to become President Trump's close and personal friend seem to have gone beyond the famous Nakasone Yasuhiro-Ronald Reagan and Koizumi

Junichiro-George W. Bush friendships. In fact, some analysts even commented that Abe Shinzo could be a mentor figure to President Trump.¹⁴

Thinking Beyond the U.S.-Japan Alliance

Abe Shinzo's emphasis on Japan's key role in implementing the FOIP vision also exposes another interesting layer: Japan's attempt to think of a world order where the United States is a declining power. The *Asahi Shimbun* reported in early 2020 that at a conference in October 2019, political scientist Iokibe Makoto stated: "We always somewhat thought that the U.S.-Japan alliance would last forever, but with the arrival of someone like President Trump, that is not the case. There is no such thing as an eternal alliance."¹⁵ In fact, while the two countries have shared interests in the FOIP, and Abe Shinzo has been steadily cultivating a close and personal relationship with President Trump, some degree of uncertainty in the two countries' security relationship always lingers.¹⁶

Following the ill-timed reports of President Trump's musings that the United States should withdraw from the postwar bilateral Security Treaty with Japan in June 2019 while on his way to the G20 summit in Osaka, the Japanese government officially denied such a possibility, which would destabilize the U.S.-Japan alliance. Even though President Trump's reported remarks do not carry any substantial significance or consequences for the time being, the constant undermining of the alliance by the U.S. president cannot help but plant the seed of the doubt in Tokyo's mind. President Trump has been very vocal about the U.S.-Japan alliance, which he sees as an unequal and unfair military relationship.¹⁷ Even as a presidential candidate in 2016, he explicitly stated that Japan acquiring its own nuclear weapons would not be a bad thing for the United States.¹⁸ Abe's timing in promoting Japan's leadership role in implementing the FOIP vision therefore signals a determination to turn to other partners in the region and expand its strategic options globally. The FOIP vision thus serves four strategic purposes for Japan:

- Countering China's influence;
- Keeping a strong alliance with the United States;
- Building a strong network of allies and partners and preparing for a scenario where the U.S.-Japan alliance crumbles completely; and
- Enhancing Japan's image as a responsible and peaceful global leader that proactively offers financial assistance to developing countries.

Nevertheless, while policy alignment between the two allies is crucial, it will not be enough if Japan does not take on a different role from the United States in implementing the FOIP vision. Japan's relationship with countries adhering to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will thus become increasingly significant in promoting a rules-based economic order in the region. ASEAN countries are in fact not convinced that the United States will be a reliable partner because of its hawkish approach vis-à-vis China,¹⁹ which means Japan will need to test its diplomatic skills to promote those countries' trust in the Japanese FOIP vision.

Furthermore, Japan's recent engagement with European countries is noteworthy. Europe's reach and its involvement in security issues in the Indo-Pacific has traditionally been limited. While the United States encouraged Europe not to endorse China's BRI, many European countries have adopted a more flexible and pragmatic (albeit cautious) approach to the Chinese initiative. Japan, in the meantime, has started revamping its relationship with the European Union (EU): in July 2018, the two parties signed the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA). The SPA is the first ever bilateral political framework agreement that aims to strengthen the two parties' shared commitment to a rules-based global order and is a solid framework for bilateral co-operation, which also includes security co-operation and the promotion of nuclear nonproliferation.

Abe Shinzo's Japan, therefore, is making steady steps toward expanding its network of allies and partners, while preparing for the eventuality that the United States, as an ally, might slip in the background. Strengthening the EU-Japan strategic partnership and security co-operation is also in line with Europe's goal to sustain the liberal international order, but because it is still a brand-new type of co-operation, the outcomes and the extent of this agreement remain to be seen. What Washington can do, in the meantime, is welcome and encourage these initiatives involving Europe and Japan, and promote a growing engagement of European nations with the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision.

Conclusion: Challenges and Weaknesses Ahead

In the second half of his tenure, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has managed to somewhat eclipse the nationalistic traits of the first few years of his government by taking quick steps toward an overall proactive Japan, which Washington had requested of its ally since the end of the Cold War. However, critical security challenges, most connected to one another, remain for the Japanese government.

Although 2019 has once again shown that the U.S.-Japan alliance is solid and Japan is still keen to deepen relations with its long-standing ally, President Trump has ultimately not spared Japan in his aggressive request to increase the country's contribution to its Host Nation Support budget. In fact, Prime Minister Abe's great efforts to become President Trump's best friend and confidant do not seem to have paid off, as the U.S. government requested a four-fold increase of Japan's so-called "sympathy budget."²⁰ Moreover, this bleeds into the crucial issue of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence, as the United States seems willing to use the protection provided by their nuclear umbrella as a bargaining chip in the upcoming negotiations for Host Nation Support.²¹

In fact, the Japanese government needs to reconsider the weight of the nuclear component of U.S. extended deterrence. 2020 marks the tenth year since the Extended Deterrence Dialogue was first initiated by the two allies in 2010, which is an opportunity for Japan to review and rethink the security and defence arrangements that the country has with the United States, especially the role of nuclear weapons as opposed to conventional ones. Since Secretary of State

Mike Pompeo announced the U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in August 2019, there is still little clarity on how the withdrawal will play out in East Asia and what role Japan will have in case of a U.S. missile deployment in the region. Japan will need to be prepared for tricky negotiations on a possible hosting of ground-launched missiles on its territory. In turn, these discussions will need to be consistent with Japan's message and posture on global nonproliferation, arms control, and disarmament initiatives. Many of these challenges have a common denominator: the Japanese government will need to find ways to reconcile its message for the domestic public and its message for the international one.

Although many Japanese senior officials still seem to avoid thinking of a post-Abe Japan,²² Abe Shinzo's historically long term as prime minister will be coming to an end soon. With the postponement of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, which Abe envisioned to mark the conclusion of his term, the end of Abe's long premiership seems marred with lingering scandals, Abenomics' unimpressive results, indecisive leadership in handling the COVID-19 emergency,²³ and uncertainty of the future. The coronavirus pandemic has rocked all countries around the world and is certainly a major disruptive event that is changing the pace of foreign policy. Abe Shinzo's performance in the late years of his premiership will determine the country's future direction regarding its leadership potential and intentions in the liberal international order.

Notes

¹ See for example Mireya Solis, “Shinzo Abe’s Surprising Victory,” *Brookings* (September 28, 2012), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2012/09/28/shinzo-abes-surprising-victory/>.

² “Back to the Future,” *The Economist* (January 5, 2013), <https://www.economist.com/asia/2013/01/05/back-to-the-future>.

³ Kosuke Takahashi, “Shinzo Abe’s Nationalist Strategy,” *The Diplomat* (February 13, 2014), <https://thediplomat.com/2014/02/shinzo-abes-nationalist-strategy/>.

⁴ Sheila A. Smith, “Defining Defense: Japan’s Military Identity Crisis,” *World Politics Review* (May 12, 2015), <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/15747/defining-defense-japan-s-military-identity-crisis>.

⁵ See for example Motoko Rich, “Relief in Japan After Shinzo Abe’s Visit With Trump,” *The New York Times* (February 13, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/13/world/asia/trump-japan-shinzo-abe.html>.

⁶ Axel Berkofsky, “Tokyo’s ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’: Quality Infrastructure and Defense to the Fore – Analysis,” *Eurasia Review* (March 21, 2019), <https://www.eurasiareview.com/21032019-tokyo-free-and-open-indo-pacific-quality-infrastructure-and-defence-to-the-fore-analysis/>.

⁷ Syed Ali Zia Jaffery, “Pakistan in the Indo-Pacific: Caught in the Geopolitical Crossfire,” *South Asian Voices* (February 14, 2019), <https://southasianvoices.org/pakistan-in-the-indo-pacific-caught-in-the-geopolitical-crossfire/>.

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI),” https://www.mofa.go.jp/afr/af2/page4e_000496.html.

⁹ “インド太平洋、消えた「戦略」政府が「構想」に修正 [Indo-Pacific, the Government Replaces ‘Strategy’ with ‘Vision’],” *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (November 13, 2018), <https://r.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO37648990S8A111C1PP8000?s=5>.

¹⁰ The National Diet of Japan, House of Councillors, Shigeru Kanda, “自由で開かれたインド太平洋と米中対立 [The FOIP and the US-China Rivalry]” (June 2019).

¹¹ Daniel Hurst, “What Did Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe Accomplish in Iran?” *The Diplomat* (June 14, 2019), <https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/what-did-japanese-prime-minister-shinzo-abe-accomplish-in-iran/>.

¹² Sayuri Romei, “Japan and the Nuclear Challenge in a New Era of Rising Tensions: Balancing Between Disarmament and Deterrence,” *Air Force Journal* (Fall 2019): 76, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/JIPA/journals/Volume-02_Issue-3/04-Romei.pdf.

¹³ “Japan Aims for ‘Harmony’ at G-20. Is It Sidestepping Climate Change?” *Washington Post* (June 28, 2019), https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/japan-aims-for-harmony-at-g-20-is-it-sidestepping-climate-change/2019/06/28/c8da3c26-9998-11e9-a027-c571fd3d394d_story.html.

¹⁴ Joshua W. Walker, “Trump Needs a World Leader Buddy,” *Politico* (February 9, 2017), <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/02/trump-needs-a-world-leader-buddy-214761>.

¹⁵ “「永遠の日米同盟」は幻想か 圧力の「負荷実験」に直面 [Is ‘the Eternal US-Japan Alliance’ an Illusion? Facing a ‘Stress Test’ Under Pressure],” *Asahi Shimbun* (January 12, 2020), <https://digital.asahi.com/articles/ASN162SY7N16ULZU002.html?jumpUrl=http%253A%252F%252Fdigital.asahi.com%252Farticles%252FASN162SY7N16ULZU002.html%253Frequesturl%253Darticles%252FASN162SY7N16ULZU002.html%2526amp%253Bpn%253D5>.

¹⁶ “Editorial: Japan Must Take Trump’s Security Treaty Musings Seriously, but Coolly,” *Mainichi Shimbun* (July 2, 2019), <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20190702/p2a/00m/0na/004000c>.

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¹⁹ “Asian Countries Fear China but Won’t Side with America,” *The Economist* (June 6, 2019), <https://www.economist.com/asia/2019/06/06/asian-countries-fear-china-but-many-wont-side-with-america>.

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²² Author’s interviews with former and current senior government officials, Tokyo, October 2019.

²³ Jeff Kingston, “COVID-19 Is a Test for World Leaders. So Far, Japan’s Abe Is Failing,” *The Diplomat* (April 23, 2020), <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/covid-19-is-a-test-for-world-leaders-so-far-japans-abe-is-failing/>; “「遅すぎる緊急事態宣言…」一番恐ろしいのはコロナじゃなくて安倍晋三 [‘A State of Emergency Declaration that Came Too Late’ The Scariest Part Is Not the Corona Virus but Shinzo Abe],” *President Online* (April 10, 2020), <https://president.jp/articles/-/34403>.