

# MP-IDSA *Commentary*

## How Japan Discovered India and Helped Invent the Indo-Pacific

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### **S***ummary*

The 'Indo-Pacific' emerged through the convergence of Japan's long-term strategic reorientation towards India ('Japan's India Shift') and India's eastward engagement.

The Indo-Pacific is often treated as a response to China's rise or as a strategic concept popularised in Washington. But that interpretation obscures a deeper origin story. The Indo-Pacific was not simply declared into existence. It emerged gradually through a transformation in Japanese strategic thinking, as India moved from the periphery of Tokyo's strategic imagination to its centre.

Most existing scholarship explains what the Indo-Pacific became—as a strategy, a regional order, or a geopolitical concept.<sup>1</sup> Less attention has been paid to the strategic transformation that made such an idea possible. This commentary argues that the deeper origins of the Indo-Pacific lay in Japan's long-term strategic reorientation towards India and the convergence of Japanese and Indian maritime regional strategies.

Japan's discovery of India as a strategic actor marked a turning point in how Asia itself was imagined. Over the past two decades, Tokyo moved beyond an East Asia-centric worldview and began to envision a broader maritime strategic geography linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans. India was no longer viewed as a distant South Asian partner, but as an indispensable pillar of a wider Asian maritime order. This long-term strategic reorientation amounted to what may be called Japan's 'India Shift'.<sup>2</sup>

This transformation was rooted in Japan's own maritime strategic tradition. Japan's prosperity has always depended on open sea lanes, global commerce, and a stable rules-based order. Strategic thinkers such as Tetsutaro Sato, Tanzan Ishibashi and Masataka Kosaka each argued, in different ways, that Japan's security and economic survival were inseparable from the wider maritime environment. After the strategic disasters of the Second World War, Japan rebuilt itself through its alliance with maritime democracies, economic openness and international cooperation. The Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) later translated these enduring principles into the strategic realities of 21<sup>st</sup> century Asia.<sup>3</sup>

By the early 2000s, Japan was already searching for a regional framework that extended beyond East Asia. During the post-Cold War period, Tokyo promoted Asia-

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Yuichi Hosoya, [“FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy”](#), *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2019, pp. 18–28; Kei Koga, [“Japan's 'Indo-Pacific' Question: Countering China or Shaping a New Regional Order?”](#), *International Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 1, 2020, pp. 49–73; Rory Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific*, La Trobe University Press, Carlton, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> [“Abe Shinzo on Japan's Diplomacy During the Seven Years and Eight Months He Was in Office \(Part II\): Strategic Thinking within the Free and Open Indo-Pacific”](#), Interview by Akihiko Tanaka, *Diplomacy*, No. 63, 31 March 2021.

<sup>3</sup> [“Free and Open Indo-Pacific: The Updated 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific \(FOIP\)'”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

Pacific regionalism through APEC and ASEAN-centred institutions. Yet as China's strategic weight expanded and debates over an 'East Asian Community' gathered momentum, Japanese policymakers increasingly questioned whether an East Asia-only framework remained adequate. Gradually, attention shifted towards a wider maritime Asia that included India, Australia, and the United States. The intellectual foundations of the Indo-Pacific therefore emerged well before the term itself entered diplomatic vocabulary.

Shinzo Abe's strategic innovation lay in recognising India not simply as a rising power, but as a structural partner in shaping Asia's future order. In his 2006 book *Toward a Beautiful Country*, Abe linked Japan's alliance with the United States to a broader vision of a 'new Asia' in which India would play a pivotal role.<sup>4</sup> His 2007 address to the Indian Parliament, 'Confluence of the Two Seas', was more than a symbolic diplomatic gesture. It presented the Pacific and Indian Oceans as a single maritime strategic space, anticipating the Indo-Pacific framework that would later shape regional discourse.<sup>5</sup>

China generated Japan's sense of urgency, but India generated its sense of possibility. Throughout the 2010s, concerns over China's maritime assertiveness—particularly around the Senkaku Islands and in the East and South China Seas—intensified. At the same time, ASEAN-centred regionalism appeared increasingly unable to manage the region's growing strategic tensions. Japanese policymakers consequently viewed the preservation of a rules-based maritime order as a core national interest. Yet Japan's response was never purely reactive. India's rise was simultaneously understood as an opportunity to build a more stable regional balance. Japanese strategic thinking therefore combined threat perception with strategic opportunity.<sup>6</sup>

Japan's 'India Shift' was translated into diplomatic strategy through an unprecedented deepening of relations with India.<sup>7</sup> Under Abe, India moved from the periphery of Japanese diplomacy to its strategic core. India and Japan institutionalised summit diplomacy, expanded maritime security cooperation, and strengthened strategic dialogue.<sup>8</sup> Building on that foundation, the Abe–Prime

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<sup>4</sup> Shinzo Abe, *Utsukushii Kuni e (Toward a Beautiful Country)*, Bungeishunju, Tokyo, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Shinzo Abe, “[Confluence of the Two Seas](#)”, Address to the Parliament of India, New Delhi, 22 August 2007.

<sup>6</sup> “[National Security Strategy 2013](#)”, Government of Japan, 17 December 2013.

<sup>7</sup> G.V.C. Naidu and Yasuyuki Ishida, “[India–Japan Defence Ties: Building a Strategic Partnership](#)”, *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 43, No. 1, 2019, pp. 13–27.

<sup>8</sup> Kei Hakata and Yasuyuki Ishida, “[Abe Shinzo and Japan's 'Discovery of India'](#)”, *The Diplomat*, 11 April 2025.

Minister Narendra Modi partnership elevated bilateral relations to a Special Strategic and Global Partnership in 2014.<sup>9</sup>

The Indo-Pacific emerged through the convergence of Japan's India Shift and India's eastward engagement. While Japan was reorienting its strategic outlook towards India, New Delhi was transforming its ‘Look East Policy’ into the ‘Act East Policy’.<sup>10</sup> By 2015, the two countries were doing more than strengthening bilateral relations. They were articulating a shared vision of regional order. Maritime security, connectivity, and the rule of law became the common language of what would soon be known as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific. This strategic thinking had already begun to crystallise within Japan's policy community before FOIP was formally announced in Nairobi in 2016.<sup>11</sup>

India was not a passive recipient of a Japanese vision, just as Japan was not merely reacting to American strategy. The Indo-Pacific took shape through the strategic convergence of two Asian powers that increasingly viewed Asia through the same maritime lens. Japan's search for a new Asia with India thus found its strategic expression in the Indo-Pacific vision.<sup>12</sup>

The Indo-Pacific created the shared strategic geography that later enabled the Quad's revival. Contemporary narratives often treat the Quad as the starting point of Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Historically, however, the sequence ran opposite. A shared Indo-Pacific strategic imagination emerged first; only later did the Quad acquire institutional momentum. The Quad was therefore less the architect of the Indo-Pacific than a product of it. The Indo-Pacific itself was never conceived primarily as an anti-China construct. It was a broader effort to reimagine maritime Asia around openness, connectivity and strategic balance.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [\*\*“Tokyo Declaration for Japan-India Special Strategic and Global Partnership”\*\*](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 1 September 2014.

<sup>10</sup> [\*\*“Act East Policy”\*\*](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 23 December 2015; Mercy A. Kho, [\*\*“The Origin of ‘Indo-Pacific’ as Geopolitical Construct-Insights from Gurpreet Khurana”\*\*](#), *The Diplomat*, 25 January 2018; C. Raja Mohan, [\*\*“The Asia-Pacific or the Indo-Pacific: Changing Geo-political Priorities”\*\*](#), in Toh, Singh, and Thuzar (eds), *ASEAN and India*, World Scientific, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> [\*\*“Japan’s Diplomacy in the Era of the Indo-Pacific”\*\*](#), JIIA Research Project Report (FY2013–2014), Japan Institute of International Affairs.

<sup>12</sup> Fumio Kishida, [\*\*“Special Partnership for the Era of the Indo-Pacific”\*\*](#), Policy Speech at the Indian Council of World Affairs, 18 January 2015; [\*\*“Japan and India Vision 2025: Special Strategic and Global Partnership Working Together for Peace and Prosperity of the Indo-Pacific Region and the World”\*\*](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 12 December 2015.

<sup>13</sup> [\*\*“Australia-India-Japan-U.S. Consultations on the Indo-Pacific”\*\*](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 12 November 2017; [\*\*“Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement: ‘The Spirit of the Quad’”\*\*](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 13 March 2021.

The deeper significance of the Indo-Pacific lies in its redefinition of Asia's strategic map. It emerged when Japan moved beyond an exclusively East Asia-centric worldview and embraced a wider maritime conception of regional order. India stood at the centre of that transformation. China's rise accelerated the process, but it did not determine its direction. The deeper story is the convergence of two strategic trajectories—Japan's India Shift and India's eastward engagement—which together transformed the Pacific and Indian Oceans into a shared strategic space.

Regional orders are built not only through power shifts, but through shifts in strategic imagination. The Indo-Pacific emerged because Japan and India gradually came to imagine Asia through the same maritime lens. That shared vision later found institutional expression in FOIP, the Quad, and the evolving architecture of maritime Asia. Looking back, Japan's discovery of India was not simply a bilateral diplomatic adjustment. It helped reshape the strategic geography of Asia itself.

## About the Author

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