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Implementing the Indo-Pacific: Japan's region building initiatives

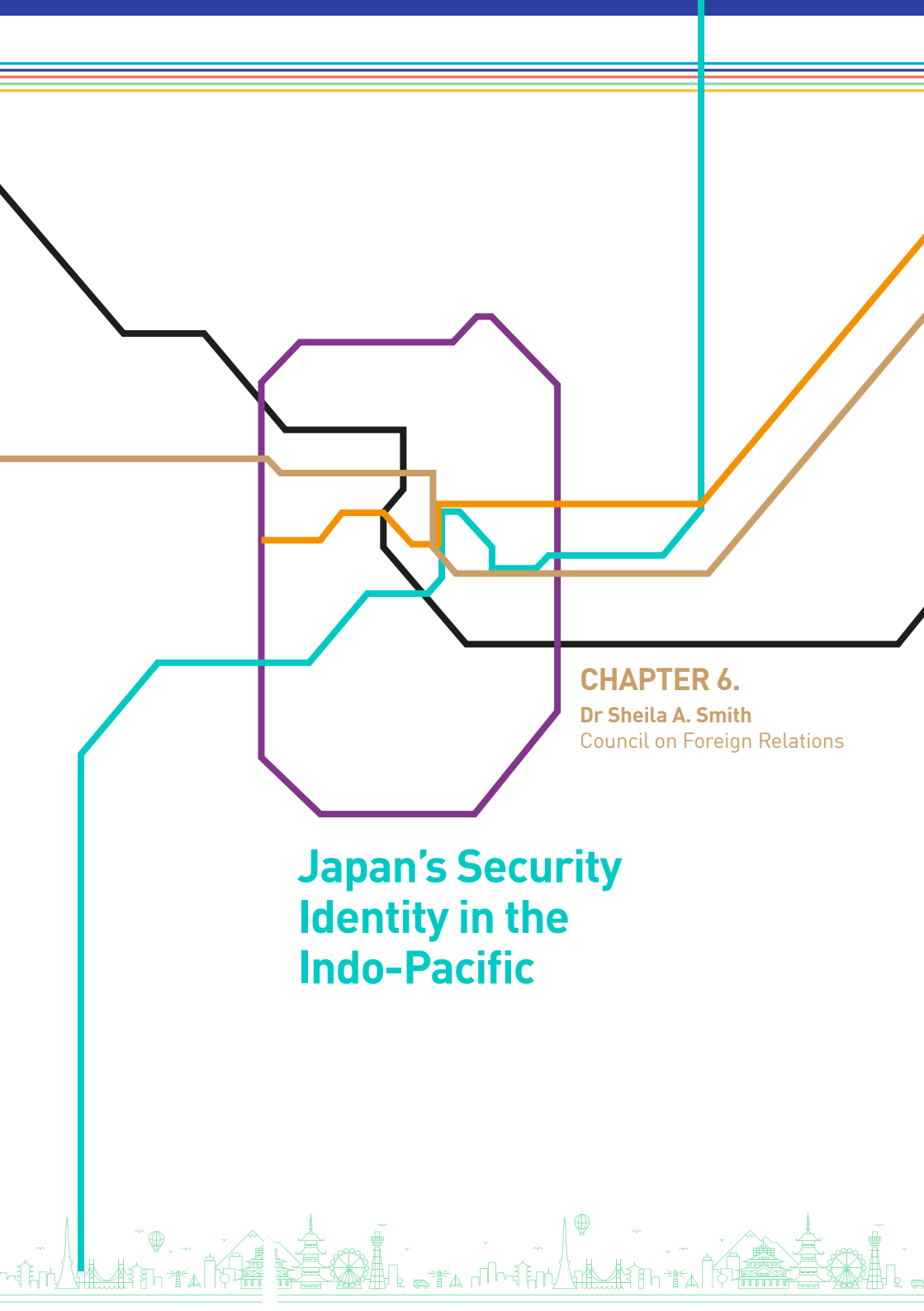
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Editor: Kyle Springer
Authors: Tomoo Kikuchi,
Kei Koga, Trissia Wijaya,
Priya Chacko, Jagannath Panda,
Tomohiko Satake, Sheila A. Smith



Perth USAsia Centre





CHAPTER 6.

Dr Sheila A. Smith

Council on Foreign Relations

**Japan's Security
Identity in the
Indo-Pacific**

Japan has become the region's leading advocate for a "free and open Indo-Pacific." Seen through Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's eyes, the vast region bordering on the Pacific to the Indian Oceans would be governed by the rule of law, characterised by growing economic connectivity, and open to all who support an inclusive regionalism. Abe is not the first advocate of an Indo-Pacific framing for Japan's strategic interests, and he is not likely to be the last. Geographically, this is an expansive Japanese strategy, one that stretches from the Pacific to the Indian Oceans and includes three continents: Asia, Australia, and parts of Africa. All of Japan's resources are being brought to bear, and both public and private sectors share in the ambition to link the Indo-Pacific's maritime and land routes. Japan's Self-Defense Force (SDF) now plays an important role in Tokyo's regional outreach, partnering with Australian, Indian, as well as Southeast Asian forces to improve maritime security.

This Indo-Pacific framing emphasises values that Tokyo sees threatened across Asia. It is no accident that Japan views its democratic partners such as Australia, India, and many of the Southeast Asian nations as natural partners in maintaining a regional economic and strategic order. China's rising influence has worried many, and Japanese leaders have felt the pressure on their interests grow. Japan's approach to the Indo-Pacific marries its longstanding commitment to deepening economic ties across the region with a growing concern about the stability of maritime routes of commerce. In fits and starts, Japanese leaders have sought to play a constructive role in the region's efforts to grapple with China's growing assertion of its maritime power, and the Indo-Pacific vision brings the complexity of this task into focus.

Yet Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy is not only about its interests in this region. Prime Minister Abe has also deployed this regional vision to entice a new U.S. administration that has little interest in multilateralism to appreciate the benefits of Asian regionalism. Abe has had some success in persuading the Trump administration to see its interests in terms of a "free and open Indo-Pacific," but Washington remains far more interested in viewing U.S. interests through a bilateral lens with allies and competitors alike.



Japan's Indo-Pacific Vision

Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has been a forceful advocate for the Indo-Pacific, and yet he has shied away from describing Japan's approach to the region solely in strategic terms. The idea that Japan's regional interests extend from the Pacific to the Indian Oceans is at least a decade old. Tokyo's conservatives, in particular, have sought to align Japan's foreign policy with those of other democracies in the region, emphasizing their shared values.

During his first term as prime minister, Abe looked to India as a natural partner for Japan in developing this expansive regional vision. While visiting India in 2007, Abe referenced the "confluence of the two seas," and argued that Japan and India should come together to cooperate in a "broader Asia." The fact that both were democracies was important to Abe:

Now, as this new 'broader Asia' takes shape at the confluence of the two seas of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, I feel that it is imperative that the democratic nations located at opposite edges of these seas deepen the friendship among their citizens at every possible level²¹².

The first Abe government would develop and articulate this emphasis on democratic values in its "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" concept, which was first expressed in a 2006 speech by then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Aso Taro²¹³.

In 2016, Prime Minister Abe presented a far more formalised Japanese policy on a free and open Indo-Pacific in a joint statement with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In underscoring "the rising importance of the Indo-Pacific region as the key driver for the prosperity of the world," Abe and Modi "stressed the core values of democracy peace, the rule of law, tolerance, and respect for the environment in realising pluralistic and inclusive growth of the region."²¹⁴

The prime minister's advocacy of this Indo-Pacific vision relies heavily on Japan's traditional instruments of statecraft. Driven by economic initiative and opportunity, Japan's longstanding economic ties in Southeast Asia form the basis for its diplomatic engagement. Whereas China has increased its spending in the region, Japan has sought to leverage its own experience in building quality infrastructure, and its network of private sector companies have helped connect developing and developed markets. Of Japan's total Official Development Assistance in 2017, 21.1 per cent went to East Asian countries (a large majority of this in Southeast Asia), 23.5 per cent went to South Asian countries, and 12.8 per cent went to India alone²¹⁵.



This has tremendous strategic consequences for Japan. Whereas China has sought to build roads to its south, Japan has an interest in land routes of transport from east to west. Both Japan and China see benefit in building routes across continental Asia, but now greater attention is being given to maritime routes of trade and commerce. Access to ports remains crucial to commerce, and Japan has been alarmed by recent Chinese efforts to increase access to ports and define terms for China's exclusive use of them. Today, Japan is planning to spend \$367 billion in infrastructure in Southeast Asia, far more than China²¹⁶.

Highlighting new economic needs across the region plays to Japan's economic strengths. Technological innovations have enhanced economic growth across East and South Asia, but not all nations have the resources to keep pace. Japan's Indo-Pacific policy includes support for both hard and soft forms of connectivity²¹⁷. Equally compelling for Tokyo is the construction of regional infrastructure needed to support a more diversified network for energy, including both the Middle East and North America.

The Abe Cabinet has stopped short of calling its Indo-Pacific approach a strategy, however, and instead puts it forward as a vision for the region's future. Earlier efforts to define an "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" that overtly cast Japan's interest in terms of a concert of democracies was seen as an attempt to isolate China²¹⁸. Even Abe sees little benefit from an overt strategy of containing Beijing, and instead insists that Japan's aim is to create an inclusive framing of a "free and open Indo-Pacific." At the end of the day, Tokyo's aim is to ensure a regional order based on the rule of law—a refrain that all Japanese leaders now use to preface their discussion of regional relations. Recently, at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2019, Japan's defence minister, Iwaya Takeshi, opened his remarks by referencing the need for the "free and open Indo-Pacific" to "consolidate the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific to foster peace and stability as well as economic prosperity, among regional countries."²¹⁹

Abe's Strategic Diplomacy

Abe has emphasised his Indo-Pacific vision in meetings with other leaders in the Indo-Pacific in the hope that they too will embrace this expansive vision for the region's future. His frequent summits with like-minded democratic leaders, including President Trump, have always included reference to a "free and open Indo-Pacific." Australia and India too have become increasingly important partners for Japan, and are particularly important to the Abe Cabinet as Washington's enthusiasm for leading cooperation in the region seems to have waned.

Japan's strategic partnership with Australia has only deepened in recent years. Japan and Australia have worked closely for over a decade in the Western Pacific, but the



opportunity for greater cooperation across the Indian Ocean has emerged as Tokyo and Canberra worry more about China's reach. As an ally of the United States, Australia offers Japan the possibility for the deepest military ties. Prompted in 2006 by trilateral dialogue between the U.S., Japanese, and Australian foreign ministers on how to leverage the two U.S. alliances in the Western Pacific, Japan's security partnership with Australia has now become one of its most developed in the region (see Table 1 below). Trilateral consultations between foreign and defence ministers continue, a bilateral "2+2" security consultation between Canberra and Tokyo began in 2007, and the two countries elevated their relationship to a "Special Strategic Partnership" in 2014²²⁰. Japan and Australia are now pursuing a reciprocal access agreement, designed to allow their military forces to operate from each other's territory²²¹.

Table 1. Recent Defence Cooperation and Exchanges with Australia (Apr. 1, 2015 - Jun. 30, 2018)

Oct. 2015	Participation in Japan-Australia Trident exercise 2015
Mar. - May 2016	Participation in Japan-U.S.-Australia joint cruising exercise
Apr. 2016	Participation in Japan-Australia Trident exercise 2016
May 2016	Joint exercise with Australian Navy submarines
Sep. 2016	Participation in multinational joint exercise Kakadu 2016 hosted by the Australian Navy
Sep. 2016	Visit to U.S. Yokota Air Base by Australian Air Force aircraft (KC-30A) and implementation of exchanges between inflight refuelling and airlift troops
Dec. 2016	Visit to Chitose Air Base by Australian Air Force aircraft (government plane: B-737) and implementation of exchanges between special airlift troops
Dec. 2016	Participation in Exercise Southern Jackaroo, U.S.-Australia military training exercise hosted by Australia Army
Dec. 2016	Visit to Chitose Air Base by Australian Air Force aircraft (government plane: B-737) and implementation of exchanges between special airlift troops
Feb. 2017	Dispatch of ASDF KC-767 to Australia
Aug. 2017	Visit to Australia by Central Readiness Force
Oct. 2017	Japan-Australia Trident (Navy)
Nov. 2017	Japan-Australia joint exercise (Navy)
Nov. 2017	Dispatch of C-2 to Australia (overseas flight training) and implementation of exchanges between troops
Dec. 2017	Implementation of exchanges between Central Readiness Force and Australian Army 1st Division

Source: *Defense of Japan 2018*, Ministry of Defense, 501, https://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/pdf/2018/DOJ2018_reference_web.pdf



Domestic politics have occasionally tempered the pace of Japan-Australian security cooperation, however. In 2014, Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Prime Minister Abe agreed to expand strategic cooperation through defence equipment and technology transfer.²²² Japan was invited to compete for the replacement of Australia's submarine fleet, signalling a significant departure for Tokyo in offering its military hardware for sale to another country. There was surprisingly little outcry in Japan, but politics in Australia were less forgiving, and the bid went to France²²³.

In 2018, Prime Minister Abe and Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison met in Darwin for their annual summit, a well-known base for Australian and now American forces. Here the two prime ministers shared their commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. The joint press statement reads, "the prime ministers noted the significance of their meeting in Northern Australia, at the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. They reaffirmed their commitment to deepen cooperation to ensure a free, open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific region underpinned by the rule of law, as enunciated in Australia's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper and Japan's vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific."²²⁴

A strategic partnership with India has long been an aspiration for conservatives in India and Japan, but Tokyo's recent acceleration of diplomatic cooperation with New Delhi has been seen as advantageous by the right and left alike in both countries. In 2008, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Prime Minister Aso Taro formalised an agreement on Japanese-Indian strategic cooperation, portending deeper economic and military ties²²⁵. More recently, Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister Abe have taken this cooperation to a new level in their frequent summits. The two countries have launched a 2+2 joint foreign and defence minister meeting, commenced negotiations on an acquisition and cross-servicing agreement and expanded cooperation and energy and infrastructure development. Today's agenda of cooperation between Tokyo and New Delhi reflects a sense of shared interests in both East and South Asia, although Japan and India still stop short of describing their relationship as an alliance²²⁶.

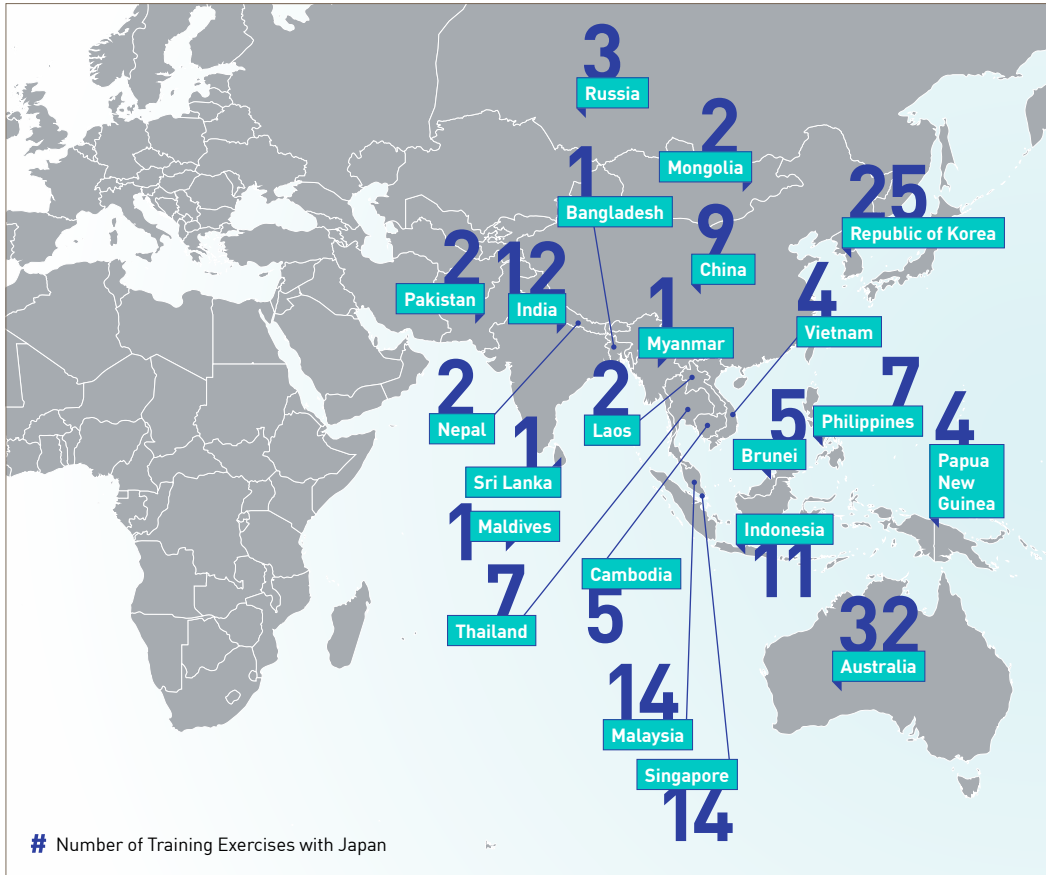
China's rise has occasioned considerable unease in both countries, and the Abe and Modi governments have countered some of Beijing's more obvious efforts to expand its reach from the Pacific to the Indian Oceans. For example, they have found common cause in supporting the maritime states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Japan brings greater maritime resources to the task, but India has not hesitated in offering help to Vietnam as it seeks to build its capacity to cope with Chinese maritime pressures. Tokyo and New Delhi have also seen fit to expand their economic cooperation along the eastern coast of Africa, where Chinese influence has rapidly grown. Modi has sought to implement his "Act East Policy," while Abe has worked on realising his "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." In other words, Japan helps to



attract India further into East Asia, while India supports Japan's growing interest in the Indian Ocean and even further west to the coast of Africa²²⁷.

For some in Tokyo, formalizing the relationship among the four democracies of the region—Japan, the United States, Australia, and India—still seems to make the most sense. But past hesitation in Australia and later India have made this “Quad” arrangement difficult to realise. Initially, fears that Beijing would view it as military encirclement hindered the realisation of the Quad. Today, however, Japan's desire to ensure ASEAN participation keeps it from leaning too heavily on the Quad framework to pursue its interests across the Indo-Pacific.

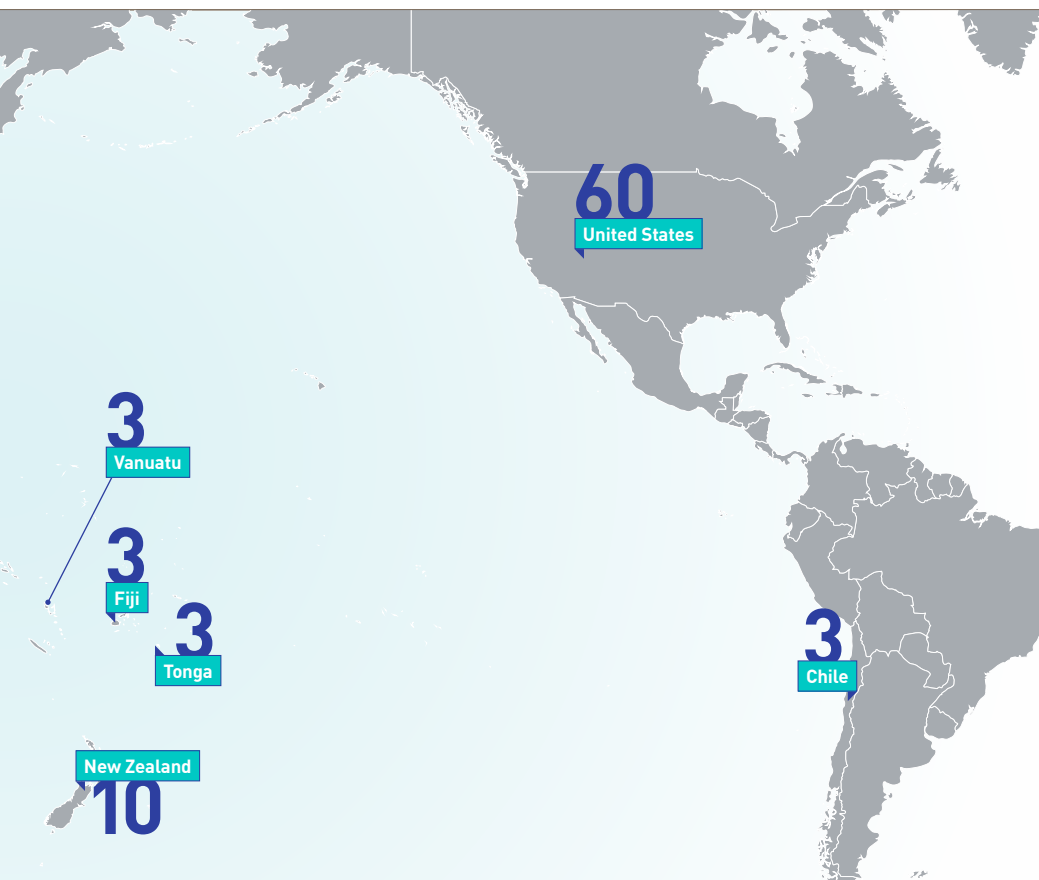
Map. Japan's Participation in Multilateral Training with Indo-Pacific Partners from April 1, 2015 to June 30, 2018.



The Self-Defense Force and Indo-Pacific Collective Action

The most striking aspect of Japan's Indo-Pacific vision is the increasing role being played by the Self-Defense Force (SDF) in its implementation. Whereas Japan's role in World War II continues to linger in the public memory throughout the region, the SDF today plays a critical part in building trust with Japan's Indo-Pacific partners²²⁸. Japan's military now participates regularly in multilateral military training exercises with a range of Indo-Pacific partners, and these exercises focus on operations as varied as disaster relief and humanitarian assistance to maritime security (see Map)²²⁹.

Source: Defense of Japan 2018, Ministry of Defense, 499-500, https://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/pdf/2018/DOJ2018_reference_web.pdf



Most notably, Japan's military has been invited to visit the Philippines and Vietnam, and the Ministry of Defense has expanded programs of assistance to these countries to help them shore up and expand their coastal defences. Alongside the United States Coast Guard, Japan's Coast Guard has also been involved in building regional capacity for law enforcement activities in territorial waters²³⁰.

But it is the growing strategic cooperation between the militaries of Japan, Australia, and India that defines Tokyo's current Indo-Pacific orientation. As noted above, the Australian and Japanese militaries work together almost as closely as they do with the United States. They exercise together and operate together, the leaders of their navies, armies, and air forces meet regularly for strategic dialogues, and they now are cooperating in the development of defence technology and equipment. The two militaries undertake an increasing array of bilateral and multilateral training, including disaster response, anti-submarine warfare, and mine countermeasures. In 2019, the two air forces announced plans to conduct fighter jet exercises together for the first time²³¹.

Both Canberra and Tokyo have an interest in expanding their maritime cooperation. Both navies participate in the annual RIMPAC exercise organised by the United States, but they also exercise bilaterally and have cooperated together in numerous multilateral exercises. The Japanese Ministry of Defense's 2018 white paper, *Defense of Japan*, depicts the increasing maturity of this military relationship, with unit-level exercises between their surface fleets and submarine forces, their air forces, and their armies²³².

Maritime security operations have also intensified as Chinese activities in the South China Sea have increased. Furthermore, Australia has participated with the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) and other navies in the waters between Japan and the Korean peninsula to monitor the compliance of UN sanctions in effect against North Korea²³³. Alongside the United States, Japan and Australia have emphasised capacity building in maritime law enforcement and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands.

The SDF has also been an increasingly important partner for India's military. Just as with Australia, Japan has begun to participate in U.S.-Indian military exercises. In 2007, Japan's MSDF participated in its first goodwill exercise with U.S. Navy and the Indian Navy off of Japan's Boso peninsula²³⁴. In 2009, the MSDF participated in the U.S.-India Malabar exercises when they were held off of Japan, and then became a permanent partner in this maritime exercise alongside India and the United States in 2015. The Malabar exercises involve a range of operations, including combat simulations involving fighter jets deployed on carriers as well as interdiction operations, and the exercises are held in waters across the Indo-Pacific²³⁵. Bilateral



discussions are also held between the various military services, and India and Japan are discussing the possibility of sharing defence technologies.

Japan's navy plays a prominent role in demonstrating their country's Indo-Pacific interests. The MSDF now conducts annual Indo-Pacific deployments. The 2019 Indo-Pacific deployment, led by Rear Admiral Egawa Hiroshi, included the *JS Izumo* and the *JS Murasame* and four carrier-based aircraft. This deployment included visits to Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam. In 2018, the deployment took place from August to October and included visits to India, Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines²³⁶.

Despite this expanding role for Japan's military in regional cooperation, Tokyo has not gone so far as to permit their military to change its basic defensive orientation²³⁷. Japan's SDF continues to operate in the region based on the premise that the use of force can only be justified in terms of Japan's security. However, deploying the SDF in peacetime with regional partners demonstrates Japan's willingness to deploy its military to contribute to the future peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific.


China, the United States, and Japan's Indo-Pacific Vision

Japan's articulation of an Indo-Pacific vision is tied also to two of its most demanding strategic relationships. Mounting concern about China's growing influence and worry about the future of the U.S. role in the Indo-Pacific inform how the Abe Cabinet has pursued its interests.

Recent summit meetings between Japanese and Chinese leaders, however, have resulted in some steps toward finding common cause in supporting regional development. Prime Minister Abe visited Beijing last year, and President Xi Jinping will visit Japan for the G-20 meeting this month, evidence of greater stability in the bilateral ties between Asia's two major powers. Bridging their differences over the future of the region could pose some challenges, however. While Abe's "free and open Indo-Pacific" emphasises inclusivity and collective action, Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative seems designed to produce a China-led economic order. While both leaders continue to advocate for their own initiatives, Abe and Xi have found some development projects where they can try to work together²³⁸. Nonetheless, Japan and China will likely continue to compete for influence across Indo-Pacific, and any convergence in their views of the future could take time to develop.

As a U.S. ally, Tokyo still wants to see the United States deeply embedded in managing strategic competition across the region. The United States has identified China and Russia as strategic competitors, and views of China have hardened considerably in Washington²³⁹. This has not been unwelcome in Tokyo, and Japan in its December 2018 National Defense Program Guidelines noted similar concerns about the growing





threat from China, North Korea, and Russia²⁴⁰. Prime Minister Abe has been persistent in his effort to persuade U.S. President Donald Trump of the merits of collective action with Japan and other partners across the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, several foreign policy and defence principals in the Trump administration have endorsed this Indo-Pacific regionalism. Two Secretaries of State have embraced an Indo-Pacific framing of U.S. interests and have sought to increase the economic resources available to contribute to the economic development of the region²⁴¹. But U.S. Indo-Pacific policy relies heavily on a hard power edge. The Department of Defense this year produced its formulation of an Indo-Pacific strategy, highlighting the need to meet China's growing military challenge²⁴².

Abe has made little progress in persuading Trump to embrace a regional trade approach, however. After withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Trump administration has doubled down on its economic confrontation with Beijing, ratcheting up the imposition of tariffs on Chinese goods destined for the U.S. market. The spill-over effects on the global economy of sustained economic tensions between the two largest economies could be shattering for Japan, especially if President Trump decides to go through with threatened sanctions against the global automobile industry. A U.S.-China trade deal may yet be in the offing, but the demonstrated effect of the new U.S. bargaining strategy on trade has been significant²⁴³.

Abe's preference remains a diplomatic coalition of like-minded states who can bring their national resources to bear to sustain regional peace and stability. But Japan's Indo-Pacific vision could be impeded by unrestrained strategic competition between the U.S. and China. Economic interdependence remains at the heart of Japan's approach to ensuring peace across the region, and its emphasis on greater connectivity across the Indo-Pacific reflects this fundamental Japanese aim. Thus, Japan has also sought common cause in its call for a "free and open" regionalism.



Conclusion

While hard power is not the primary tool of Japan's Indo-Pacific vision, the Abe Cabinet has embraced greater collaboration between the SDF and other regional militaries, creating opportunity for collective action should maritime security be threatened.

Maritime interests drive much of the strategic cooperation with other Indo-Pacific powers, especially Australia and India. China's growing military reach has raised Tokyo's concerns about the regional balance of military power. But new worries about future U.S. choices in the region are also influencing Japan's Indo-Pacific choices. Should the U.S. become too distracted or lose interest in playing a pivotal role in Asia, others will need to take up the slack.

Japan's willingness to increase its weight in the Indo-Pacific military balance thus reflects the increased pace of change in regional relations. Coupled with Japan's considerable economic ties across East and South Asia, this new hard power edge to Tokyo's presence in the Pacific and Indian Oceans ambition also introduces greater opportunity for a more hardy regionalism by the Indo-Pacific powers should strategic competition between China and the U.S. intensify.



Endnotes

- ¹ TICAD is led by the Japanese government and co-sponsored by the United Nations, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the African Union Commission (AUC) and the World Bank. From TICAD I in 1993 until TICAD V in 2013, the summit-level meetings were held every five years in Japan. It was decided in TICAD VI that TICAD VI will be held in Kenya in 2016, and thereafter every three years, hosted alternately in Africa and Japan.
- ² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2018, 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' December 20. Available from: https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page25e_000278.html
- ³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2018, 'What is Free and Open Indo-Pacific?: Outline' December 20. Available from: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000430632.pdf>
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- ¹⁵ For example, Japanese delegate's speech did not indicate the FOIP in the 2017 Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) while it did so in the 2018 forum. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2017), 'Statement by Mr. Iwao HORII, Special Envoy of the Prime Minister and Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, at PIF Forum Dialogue Partners Session, 7th September, 2017 at Apia, Independent State of Samoa'. Available at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000289035.pdf>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2018), 'Statement by Mr. Iwao HORII, Special Envoy of the Prime Minister and Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, at PIF Forum Dialogue Partners Session 4th September, 2018 at Republic of Nauru'. Available at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000395565.pdf>
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