

An Analysis of “Rule-Based International Order” Advocated by Japan in the “FOIP” Strategy

Haoyu Song¹

¹ China Institute of Boundary and Ocean Studies, Wuhan University, Hubei, China

Correspondence: Haoyu Song, China Institute of Boundary and Ocean Studies, Wuhan University, Wuhan, Hubei, China.

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Abstract

Japan is the first country to advocate the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy. One of the basic values of this strategy is “rule-based international order”. From the background of its birth, the strategy is derived from Japan’s fear of China’s peaceful rise, the anxiety of “America first” doctrine and the worry of the rise of emerging Asia. Considering the different attitudes of various interested countries towards the “international order”, the “rules-based international order” advocated by Japan in the “FOIP” is essentially a limited regional order established by some groups of countries out of strategic interests.

Keywords: FOIP, Japan, regional order, rules

1. Japan’s “FOIP”

Japan is the first country to advocate the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy (hereinafter referred to as the “FOIP” strategy). As a new geopolitical concept, the “FOIP” strategy has undergone a transformation from abstract to concrete and from indirect to direct. The strategy was developed by Japan based on “Diplomacy that Takes a Panoramic Perspective of the World Map” and “Proactive Contribution to Peace.” The strategy stresses that Japan should play a leading role in Indo-Pacific region, ensure peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, through establishing a free and open order based on the shared values and principles such as the rule of law. The importance of “rules” has become increasingly clear in Japan’s diplomacy, which is one of the pillars of the “FOIP” strategy.

From the background of its birth, the strategy is derived from Japan’s fear of China’s peaceful rise, the anxiety of “America first” doctrine and the worry of the rise of emerging Asia.

China’s rapid rise is the immediate cause of the strategy. Japan sees China’s rise as a threat, creating great strategic anxiety. The South China Sea is Japan’s lifeline to the Middle East and North Africa from the Pacific Ocean through the Malacca Strait to the Indian Ocean. Japan believes that the South China Sea will become a loophole in its strategic security in the future because of China’s frequent access to it. Therefore, Abe believes that Japan, as “maritime states, have vital interests in the security of sea lanes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2007).”¹ In addition, the belief that the temperature difference between China and Indo-Pacific countries will continue is the psychological basis for Japan to construct the “FOIP” strategy to surround China (Xiaoxu Meng, 2021).² It is no wonder that the “FOIP” strategy is aimed at China everywhere. In essence, it is the product of the continuation of the Cold War mentality of western countries which pursues the so-called national security for the purpose of containment.

The strategic adjustment of the United States is the direct thrust of the strategy. During president Donald Trump’s term, it advocated the “America First doctrine”. The rapid rise of China and the strategic uncertainty of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region have caused strategic anxiety in Japan. Japan began to worry that the

United States would put itself first and gradually reduce its involvement in Asian affairs. At the same time, in response to the “responsibility sharing” theory, Japan is more actively pursuing the “FOIP” strategy. Later, the Biden administration’s positive response to the “FOIP” strategy boosted Japan’s confidence, and the U.S.-Japan Alliance became the basis of the “FOIP” strategy (Sina Net, 2021).³

Japan’s dependence on the U.S. makes the “rules-based international order” which it advocates distinctly “American”. Viewing the formation of the “FOIP” strategy, in the early stage, because the U.S. was neither active nor firm, Japan did not show its anti-China core in its diplomatic relations. On the contrary, it repeatedly expressed its opposition to the establishment of an “Asian version of NATO” and did not seek to contain any specific country. Yoshihide Suga stressed in his policy speech that “stable Japan-China relations are very important not only for the two countries but also for the regional and international community.” However, as the U.S. gradually hardened its policy towards China and showed more obvious support for the “FOIP” strategy, Japan’s attitude towards China suddenly changed. At the Japan-U.S.-India-Australia summit in March last year, Japan singled out China by name, saying that it strongly opposed any unilateral attempt to change the status quo in the East and South China seas, and accused China of having problems with international law in the Maritime Police Law of the People’s Republic of China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2021).⁴ In April, Japan-U.S. Joint Leaders’ Statement stressed that the Japan-U.S. Alliance is the cornerstone of Indo-Pacific security and that they “together have led in multilateral institutions, in expanding global commerce and investment, and in advancing peace, security, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region (WH.GOV., 2021).”⁵ Under the “support” of the United States, Japan has repeatedly used China’s human rights issues in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and the Diaoyu Islands dispute to construct anti-China narratives in an attempt to gain game advantage over China. Following the lead of the United States, the “rules-based international order” advocated by Japan has become a synonym for Western hegemonism and a new expression of values, while the “FOIP” strategy will inevitably lose its strategic independence and become a tool for the United States to maintain its status as a great power.

In addition, emerging countries and regions in Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Pacific have shown strong political and economic resilience, and their influence on international relations in the Indo-Pacific region has gradually expanded. Although they are not major powers that dominate the regional order, these countries actively participate in the formulation of rules in the Indo-Pacific region and constantly show their influence on the regional order. Moreover, they are full of experience and diplomatic wisdom in maintaining national independence and autonomy in great power politics (Tsutomu Kikuchi, 2021).⁶ Facing the rise and expanding influence of these emerging countries and regions, Japan has launched the “FOIP” strategy in line with its values and national interests in order to seek regional discourse and dominance.

2. The Attitude of Various Stakeholders

Countries in the Indo-Pacific region are not bystanders but participants in the “FOIP” strategy. Although they cannot be a key force in regional and international political competition directly, these countries have great potential for development. With their growing national strength and their grasp of the important strategic position in the region, these countries are bound to play a leading force to form regional international relations in the future. However, countries in the Indo-Pacific region have ambiguous and uncertain attitudes towards the “rules-based international order” advocated by Japan in its “FOIP” strategy.

On the one hand, Southeast Asian countries make full use of the economic and political assistance brought by Japan’s “FOIP” strategy; on the other hand, regional organizations represented by ASEAN also show a tendency to participate in regional rule-making.

There is a sharp contrast of power among countries in the Indo-Pacific region. “Middle power” and “swing power” such as Indonesia, Middle East and North Africa can also have a great influence on the future Indo-Pacific order. They will not blindly follow the “FOIP” strategy and follow Japan and its allies to stand against China. In the future, they will continue to watch and choose between the balance of power to maximize their national interests. For example: On May 15, 2019, at an event held by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, Singapore’s Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan stressed that “the competition between the United States and China is inevitable, but it does not have to be a zero-sum game. Constructive competition should take place within the bounds of established international norms and an adherence to international law.” And he said, “And one point is that for us in the middle, and especially for smaller countries, we do not wish to be forced into making invidious choices (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, 2019).”⁷ Lee Hsien Loong, Prime minister of Singapore, said: “For non-great powers, the essence of post-Cold war strategy is to accept ambiguity. Being forced to choose is failure (Guancha Net, 2019).”⁸

ASEAN, which is most directly linked to the Indo-Pacific Strategy, also has its own interests and strategic considerations. Since the establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2015, it is naturally unwilling to become a hub for a “FOIP” strategy. Southeast Asian countries pursue a “the strategy of power balance” to ensure the

“ASEAN center” status in Sino-US relations, while they pursue a “double balance strategy” for Japan, India, Australia and other countries (Chen Xiuwu, 2021).⁹ At last year’s summit, ASEAN also reemphasized the importance of maintaining its centrality, playing a leading role in regional mechanisms and implementing the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) (People Net, 2021).¹⁰ ASEAN wants to maintain its centrality to play a leading role in the region, which is bound to be a hedge against the “FOIP” strategy.

Even the QUAD Allies had their own interpretations and individual national aspirations of Japan’s “rules-based order”. As one of the “Quads”, India is Japan’s most hopeful strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific. Yet non-alignment is the default gene of Indian diplomacy, and it does not want to be bullied into provoking China. India itself is also seeking the status of a world power, and its maritime security strategy has begun to show the momentum of seeking a larger strategic space beyond the Indian Ocean. In the future, India is likely to compete with Japan for dominance in the Indo-Pacific region, and its “advance east” policy will inevitably conflict with Japan’s “FOIP” strategy in the future.

Some European countries have held talks with Japan and sent warships in and out of the Indo-Pacific region to participate in military exercises. However, the main conflict among European countries is their relationship with Russia, not China. On the contrary, most European countries are unwilling to risk giving up their friendly and cooperative relations with China, and instead firmly support and participate in Japan’s “FOIP” strategy (Zhang Guihong & Qiu Changxiang, 2012).¹¹ European countries have long and good economic cooperation with China, and it is difficult for them to follow the path of Japan and the United States against China based on national interests.

3. The Essence of the “Rules-based International Order” Advocated by Japan

Japan has taken pains to sell the “FOIP” strategy and repeatedly stressed the need to maintain the “rules-based international order” to achieve a “free and open Indo-Pacific”, but its essence is to contain the rise of China and maintain the regional political and security order led by Japan and the United States. The “rules-based international order”, as the core value of the “FOIP” strategy, is still, on earth, the same as before the Cold War, namely unilateralism and power politics.

Under the change of the world strategic center of gravity “rise of the East, decline of the West”, the Indo-Pacific region is gradually becoming the center of global geopolitics, and the importance of the Indian Ocean has prompted Japan to pay more attention to the Indo-Pacific region. Japan’s Diplomatic Bluebook 2020 said, “Japan needs to pursue strategic diplomacy, while rationally accounting for and adapting to changes in the international situation (Thomas Wilkins, 2022).”¹² In order to ensure security, Japan formulated the “Indo-Pacific Strategy”, attempting to allow the Self-Defense Forces to enter the Indian Ocean and break through the limitations of the pacifist constitution. It also carried out “values diplomacy” and “Diplomacy that Takes a Panoramic Perspective of the World Map” to expand its role in international affairs.

Therefore, the essence of Japan’s “FOIP” strategy, which serves the Abe administration’s goal of amending the Constitution and changing the post-war system, remains unchanged despite the addition of “democracy,” “freedom” and “law”. The essence of the “rules-based international order” advocated by Japan and the United States is an international order that conforms to and safeguards the interests of Japan, the United States and its Allies.

4. Conclusion

“In the world, there is only one system, namely the United Nations (UN)-centered international system, and only one set of rules—the basic norms of international relations based on the UN Charter (The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2021).”¹³ However, the “rules-based international order” advocated by Japan in the “FOIP” strategy is essentially a limited regional order established by some groups of countries out of strategic interests. Therefore, in the actual implementation process, all countries have their own thoughts in mind. They give priority to “rules” that are beneficial to their own countries, and compete to be the makers of “rules”. Such an “international order” is bound to be full of struggle and disorder, which also violates international law and hampers regional peace and development. However, we cannot ignore that each country will have a huge impact on the political pattern of the Indo-Pacific region under the balance of various interests. In the future, we should be on guard against the encircling of the “FOIP” strategy, continue to unswervingly follow the road of peaceful rise, and firmly safeguard the international order based on international law.

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