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Kinga Fülöpp: Independent Strategy or Adaptive Foreign Policy? – The Evolution of FOIP in Japan's Foreign Policy Thinking[1]

Executive Summary

- The evolution of Free and Open Indo–Pacific (FOIP) is shaped primarily by the external geopolitical environment, particularly the changing role of the United States in the region, and the growing economic, political and military influence of the People's Republic of China.
- FOIP serves as a strategic instrument in Japan's foreign policy, simultaneously seeking to sustain the United States' security commitment and strengthen cooperation with regional partners.
- FOIP functions as a „bridge narrative" between Japan and its partners by building on shared norms and interests while providing a framework for reconciling differing foreign policy priorities.
- The flexibility of FOIP represents both an advantage and a risk: it facilitates broader cooperation, but reconciling diverse interests may also lead to the dilution of FOIP's substantive content.
- The future effectiveness of FOIP depends on striking balance between adaptability and strategic consistency. Japan must strengthen its regional partnerships and expand its foreign policy autonomy while maintaining its alliance with the United States and preserving the substance of the concept.
- Middle powers can shape international discourse and regional cooperation, but their room for manoeuvre is constrained by geographical and capacity-related limitations. The effectiveness of political narratives depends on their ability to adapt to changing geopolitical conditions and diverse interests.

The turbulent geopolitical developments of recent years have highlighted the need for Japan to rethink its foreign policy options. In particular, the United States' shifting international role has forced the Japanese government to adapt to the changing security environment, whilst also having to contend with China's growing influence. In this process, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision has become one of the most important tools of Japanese diplomacy: it serves simultaneously serves to maintain the alliance with the US, to forge links with regional partners and to advance Japan's security interests.

1. Introduction

Japan's prime minister, ABE Shinzō announced the new pillar of Japan's foreign policy, the Free and Open Indo–Pacific (FOIP) in 2016. The new policy marked a turning point in Japanese diplomacy, which since the Second World War had relied more on the country's role in international organisations – and, even more so, on its close ties with the United States – than on the active and independent pursuit of its own interests. The FOIP broke with this tradition and articulated Japan's own, independent foreign policy interests. Although at first glance this may appear to be an entirely new direction, the question actually arises as to whether the FOIP is truly an independent foreign policy doctrine, or merely a new manifestation of seventy years of pro-American diplomacy. This analysis argues that FOIP is not a static

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narrative, but one that continually adapts to its changing environment in pursuit of Japan's peace and security. Among external factors, the most significant are the United States, Japan's most important ally, as well as China and the other countries in the region, which exert an influence on security in the Indo-Pacific.

The analysis first outlines the emergence and development of the FOIP vision, then examines how it has been influenced by the actions of the United States, China and the actions of the region's states, thereby highlighting that the fundamental aim of this diplomatic policy is, in fact, to maintain the United States' presence in the region and, through this, to safeguard Japan's security.

2. The definition and evolution of the Free and Open Indo–Pacific

2.1. Historical overview

Following the Second World War, Japan pursued a passive foreign policy and strengthened its capacity to assert its interests primarily by developing its economic power. One reason for this is Article 9 of the new Constitution adopted in 1947, under which Japan may not maintain armed forces or wage war abroad. Consequently, the country seeks to guarantee its own security through its principal ally, the United States, with which it has concluded several defence and cooperation treaties since 1952. Although Japan has continued to adhere to the provisions of the Constitution ever since, in reality the so-called 'peace clause' has been subject to repeated reinterpretation. Consequently, the Japan Self-Defence Forces have intervened in foreign affairs on several occasions. The most significant of these was its involvement in the Gulf War (1991). On the one hand, Japan provided financial support to the United States; on the other, after hostilities had ceased, it sent minesweepers to the region under its own flag. Later, during the War on Terror, the Japanese government announced a diplomatic principle known as the 'Arc of Freedom and Prosperity', through which it sought to assist the democratic transition in the Middle East and Eastern Europe (Eurasia). These two measures highlight that, even around the turn of the millennium, Japanese foreign policy tended to articulate its own interests in line with US interests, whilst the government presented this as a sovereign political interest.

2.2. The birth of FOIP: From the speech in Nairobi to the speech in Hanoi

ABE Shinzō first spoke about the FOIP concept in New Delhi in 2007, where he described India and Japan as the two most important states in the region, founded on democratic values, which bear a historical responsibility for maintaining peace and security in the region. In that speech, he spoke for the first time about the convergence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and the resulting new geopolitical concept. Although this concept had already existed in academic circles, it appeared in political discourse for the first time on that occasion.[2]

This initiative initially stalled after Abe lost the 2009 election, and the new government under Prime Minister HATOYAMA Yuiko sought to implement a China-friendly foreign policy within the framework of the East Asian Community.[3] However, with his re-election in 2012, Abe gave new impetus to his foreign policy reforms; in 2013, Japanese foreign policy was thus expanded to include five new pillars,[4] which laid the foundations for the official announcement of the FOIP in 2016.[5]

[2] ABE, Shinzo: Confluence of the Two Seas. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2007.08.22. [online, 2026.01.22.]
[3] HATOYAMA, Yukio: Japan's New Commitment to Asia - Toward the Realization of an East Asian Community. Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2009.11.15. [online, 2026.01.22.]
[4] 1. Freedom of opinion and expression; 2. The rule of law at sea; 3. The pursuit of free, open and interconnected economies; 4. Intercultural relations; 5. Youth exchange programmes
[5] ABE, Shinzo: The Bounty of the Open Seas: Five New Principles for Japanese Diplomacy. 2013.01.18. [online, 2026.01.31.]

Finally, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy was announced in Kenya. The concept is based on the strategic integration of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, thereby creating a new geographical region. The aim of the FOIP is to uphold the principle of the rule of law in this turbulent yet economically and strategically significant region, and thus to maintain international order.[6] Since the vision was first announced, however, the narrative has been subject to constant fine-tuning, and its scope has been continuously reinterpreted in response to changing international circumstances.

There is already a significant difference between the first version of the FOIP from 2007 and the strategy officially announced in 2016. ABE Shinzō's speech in India was primarily guided by geopolitical and security-policy logic: the strategic linking of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, freedom of navigation, and informal cooperation between the democratic maritime powers – Japan, India, Australia and the United States – were at the centre of his remarks. In contrast, the FOIP, officially announced in 2016, represented a significantly broader and more inclusive concept, which struck a conciliatory tone even towards China.[7] In 2018, in a further change, the FOIP was referred to as a 'vision' rather than a 'strategy' in official government documents.[8] This change may seem like a mere play on words, but it actually carries a serious political message. Whilst a strategy sets out specific steps and objectives, a 'vision' is a much more elusive concept, leaving room for individual interpretation and differing implementation mechanisms.

During KISHIDA Fumio's premiership (2021–2024), the vision of the FOIP was expanded. The aim was to apply its objectives not only at a regional level, but globally. The new FOIP, or FOIO (Free and Open International Order), aimed to safeguard the international rules-based order globally.[9] Globalisation was made possible, amongst other things, because from 2020 onwards, an increasing number of countries incorporated the FOIP vision, or a similar concept, into their own foreign policies – examples include the United Kingdom, the European Union, Germany and the Netherlands. It has become clear that it is no longer just the countries of the region that are monitoring developments there, but external actors as well. The official announcement of the latest FOIP vision took place once again in India, where Kishida justified the development of the concept by citing shifts in the balance of power, and set the initiative no less a task than to serve as a guiding framework for the international community.[10] As interpreted by the Kishida government, FOIO can be understood as a normative and geographical extension of FOIP, whilst at the same time significantly exceeding the ambitions of its predecessor. Its implementation therefore required advocacy capabilities that Japan did not possess. The new National Defence Strategy of 2022 was likely intended, in part, to address this shortcoming.

It was at this point that criticism first emerged highlighting the link between the FOIP and the United States. Given the close US–Japan relationship, the question rightly arose as to whether the legal framework promoted by Japan was based on universal principles or merely a repackaging of US interests.[11]

ISHIBA Shigeru (2024–2025) scaled back his predecessor's global ambitions to some extent and once again placed the emphasis on the regional aspirations of FOIP. At the same time, he did not entirely

[6] ABE, Shinzo: Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI). Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2016.08.27. [online, 2026.01.22.]
[7] HOSOYA, Yuichi: FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy. *Asia-Pacific Review*, 26:1 (2019) 18–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/13439006.2019.1622868
[8] ABE, Shinzo: Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 196th Session of the Diet. Prime Minister's Office of Japan, Tokyo, 2018.01.22. [online, 2026.03.16.]; ABE, Shinzo: Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 198th Session of the Diet. Prime Minister's Office of Japan, Tokyo, 2019.01.28. [online, 2026.03.16.]
[9] Government of Japan: National Security Strategy of Japan. Cabinet Secretariat, Tokyo, 2022.12.16. [online, 2026.03.16.]
[10] KISHIDA, Fumio: Policy Speech by Prime Minister KISHIDA Fumio at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA): Japan's New Plan for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" — Together with India, as an Indispensable Partner. World and Japan Database, Tokyo, 2023.03.20. [online, 2026.03.16.]
[11] HAKATA, Kei – AIZAWA, Tasuku – CANNON, Brendon J.: Japan's Strategic Messaging for a 'Free and Open International Order (FOIO)': Can It Preserve its Indo–Pacific Achievements? *Focus Asia: Perspective and Analysis*, (2024).

abandon the promotion of FOIO either. Under the new concept, the FOIP became a regional manifestation of the FOIO,[12] while also articulating the idea of an 'Asian NATO'. In doing so, he entrusted the peace and security of the Indo-Pacific region to military cooperation similar to that of NATO.[13] The concept failed to win favour with the wider political scene, and so, following Ishiba's resignation, it disappeared from public discourse.

The latest version of the FOIP was unveiled by Prime Minister TAKAICHI Sanae on 2 May 2026 during her visit to Hanoi. The fourth version of the FOIP has now incorporated technological cooperation into the concept alongside the development of security capabilities, reflecting the rise of artificial intelligence and the opportunities and challenges it presents.[14] In her speech, Takaichi also emphasised the vulnerability of supply chains, citing the crisis in the Strait of Hormuz as an example, which is forcing countries in the East Asian region to develop their storage capacities and seek alternative solutions. The speech in Hanoi also emphasised the flexibility and adaptability of the vision, highlighting that *„ FOIP does not impose anything on anyone. It has grown flexibly, accepting a diversity of voices and adapting to the times. It is nurtured and evolves through your own voices—this is the very character of FOIP."*[15] By emphasising this approach, Japan has, whether intentionally or not, set itself at odds with the diplomatic stance represented by the Trump administration. At the same time, the official document continues to list the United States as its primary partner, and the key themes remain freedom, a rules-based order, etc. – that is, values traditionally associated with the US-led world order, although the new administration has seriously shaken the confidence of its allies.[16]

2.3. But why does FOIP evolve?

As is evident from the historical overview, the FOIP has undergone several changes since it was first announced. This can be attributed in part to domestic political factors, or more specifically, to changes in prime ministers. However, it cannot be said that this alone has influenced the vision, since, on the one hand, these prime ministers all came from the same party, the Liberal Democratic Party, and, on the other hand, changes can also be observed that took place during the administration of the same prime minister, ABE Shinzō. Previous research has highlighted that at least three distinct versions of the FOIP can be identified; furthermore, the globalisation of what was initially a regional initiative can be observed, a development attributed to changing challenges. Initially, the FOIP responded primarily to regional challenges, whilst later global factors also played a part in its development.[17] However, this still does not answer the question of why the FOIP is evolving. Why does it respond to challenges outside its region? To understand this, it is essential to examine Japan's environment, starting with the most significant influencing factor: the United States of America.

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[12] ISHIBA, Shigeru: Policy Speech by Prime Minister Ishiba to the 214th Session of the Diet (第二百十四回国会における石破内閣総理大臣所信表明演説). Prime Minister's Office of Japan, Tokyo, 2024.10.04. [online, 2026.03.16.]
[13] ISHIBA, Shigeru: Japan's New Security Era: The Future of Japan's Foreign Policy. Hudson Institute, 2024. [online, 2026.03.16.]
[14] The three new guidelines are as follows: 1) building economic infrastructure for the age of AI and data including strengthening supply chain resilience for energy and critical materials; 2) co-creation of economic growth opportunities through public-private collaboration and rule sharing; 3) enhancing cooperation in the field of security to ensure regional peace and stability.
[15] TAKAICHI, Sanae: Foreign Policy Speech. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2026.05.02. [online, 2026.10.08.]
[16] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan: The Updated Free and Open Indo-Pacific: To be more resilient and prosperous together. 2026.05.02. [online, 2026.10.08.]
[17] HAKATA et al., 2024.; YOSHIMATSU, Hidetaka: The Development of Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Security Concerns and Instrumental Principles. *Global Policy*, 16:4 (2025) 579–588. doi: 10.1111/1758-5899.70006.; BALDAUFF, Nico – NAGY, Stephen: Reboot, Continuity, or Adaptation? Making Sense of Japan's FOIP Vision Update in the Context of China and Taiwan. *Chinese Political Science Review*, (78) (2024) 77–121.

3. The preconditions for FOIP

The Indo-Pacific is primarily a political rather than a geographical region. The concept first appeared in 20th-century German geopolitics, but has gained significant ground in geostrategic interpretations since the 2000s. The merging of the two oceans has created a geographical 'super-region' that is of decisive importance historically, culturally, economically, commercially and even militarily.[18] Last but not least, this region is home to the world's two largest economies: the United States of America and the People's Republic of China; thus, the Indo-Pacific geopolitical concept is clearly a key focal point in the unfolding competition between the great powers.[19]

3.1. The United States of America

Relations between the United States and Japan date back to the mid-19th century, when, after many decades, Japan finally opened its doors to international trade under American pressure. Following this, the island nation underwent rapid modernisation and then began to build its own colonial empire. It was as a result of this process that it came into conflict with the United States during the Second World War, which ultimately defeated it in 1945. The dynamics of relations between the two countries in the modern era took shape at this time.[20] As Japan's new constitution prohibited it from maintaining an army and waging war, the United States became the guarantor of the country's security. Accordingly, even in the second half of the 20th century, Japan frequently aligned itself with US narratives. This is how it eventually became a champion of democracy, an idea that first emerged in the 'Arc of Freedom and Prosperity' initiative.[21]

The 21st century, however, has brought about a significant international realignment. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the improvement in US-China relations, the importance of the East Asian region has diminished. In contrast, the spread of fundamentalist Islam has become a serious security threat, culminating in the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. In response to the attacks, the United States declared a 'war on terror', and as a result, the Central Asian states became a priority in its foreign policy.[22] Furthermore, stability in the Middle East has become a key issue due to the region's energy reserves; oil crises have shown the developed world that it is not only the developing nations that depend on them, but vice versa.

For Japan, the shift in US priorities was clearly demonstrated by the 2012 Senkaku incident, during which the People's Republic of China violated Japan's maritime borders. The US reaction at that time may have created a somewhat unexpected situation for the Japanese government, as just a year earlier it had seemed that the Obama administration was prepared to once again devote greater attention to the East Asian region within the framework of its 'Pivot to Asia' – later renamed 'Rebalance to Asia' – foreign policy.[23]

Under international law, the Senkaku Islands form part of Japan, but China disputes this and has made its position clear through military actions. In the 2000s, the islands' sovereignty was violated on

[18] From a historical and cultural perspective, the Indo-Pacific region encompasses both the cradle of humanity (Africa) and numerous areas whose cultures have left their mark on human civilisation (e.g. India, China, the Arabian Peninsula). Today, the region accounts for 60 per cent of global production and has a similar share of global maritime trade. The extraction and transport of fossil fuels are particularly important, with a significant proportion of this activity also taking place here. Furthermore, the Indian and Pacific Oceans contain several strategic chokepoints, such as the Straits of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca, the unimpeded operation of which is in the international interest.
[19] KHURANA, Gurpreet S.: What is the Indo-Pacific? The New Geopolitics of the Asia-Centred Rim Land. In: *Geopolitics by Other Means: the Indo-Pacific Reality*. Ledizioni, 2019, 13–32.
[20] TOTMAN, Conrad: *Japán Története*. Osiris Kiadó, Budapest, 2006.
[21] ASŌ, Tarō: Arc of Freedom and Prosperity: Japan's Expanding Diplomatic Horizons. Minister for Foreign Affairs, 2006.11.30. [online, 2026.01.22.]
[22] MAGYARICS Tamás: *Az Egyesült Államok Külpolitikájának Története*. 2nd ed., Antall József Tudásközpont, Budapest, 2014.
[23] CAMPBELL, Kurt: *The Pivot*. Twelve, New York, 2016.

several occasions, to which, much to the Japanese government's dismay, the United States failed to respond in any way. It was President Barack Obama who first spoke out against China's violation of the law following the 2012 incident, but in his message he merely called on Beijing to respect international law, which awards the disputed territory to Japan.[24]

For Japan, this incident led to a sobering realisation: it became clear that the United States had no intention of taking military action to defend Japan's interests.

3.2. The People's Republic of China

Chinese civilisation has shaped regional affairs for most of recorded history. This 'civilisational self-awareness' is also evident in the PRC's domestic and foreign policies of the 21st century. Thanks to the explosive success of China's reform policies, the country experienced an unprecedented economic boom from the second half of the 1970s onwards. The country's economy gained further momentum following its accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, which led to a shift in the balance of power in East Asia.[25] Japan had consistently held the title of Asia's largest economy and ranked second in the world, but from the 1990s onwards its economy effectively stagnated, and as a result of the 2008 economic crisis, it fell further behind China.

Its foreign policy approach underwent a similarly drastic transformation. From the 1970s onwards, the Chinese leadership refrained from active confrontation, and thus from asserting its interests decisively; however, under Xi Jinping's leadership (2013–), Chinese foreign policy has taken a complete U-turn. China now openly asserts its political leadership not only in its immediate region but also beyond, and seeks to play an active role in global governance and in its reform – which some regard as necessary.[26]

China's new, modern foreign policy has disrupted the status quo in several respects. Its economic dominance is felt not only in Asia but throughout the world. Its global initiatives – e.g. BRICS, BRI, etc. – offer alternatives to traditional 'Western' solutions. The deliberate development of soft and hard power (narratives, and the expansion of military and economic capabilities) suggests the possibility of further confrontations. From the perspective of FOIP, it is particularly important to highlight the A2/AD strategy, through which China seeks to ensure its own military security by developing a military capability that, if necessary, can prevent an adversary's free movement within the territory.[27] For this very reason, FOIP and the A2/AD strategy can also be interpreted as opposing concepts.

The growing Chinese presence and waning US attention ultimately prompted Japan to devise a strategy designed to refocus US attention on the East Asian region. This strategy is the FOIP.

4. The instruments of FOIP

The 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' vision was Japan's response to the shifting balance of power in the region.[28] Its primary aim is to redirect the United States' attention back to the East Asian region, thereby guaranteeing Japan's security. To achieve this, it is endeavouring to draw Washington's attention to the initiative on several fronts.

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[24] CAMOÇA GONÇALVES DE OLIVEIRA, Ana: Assessing Neutrality: The United States' Role in the Diaoyu Islands Dispute. E-International Relations, 2022.06.24. [online, 2026.03.02.]
[25] HUDDLESTON, Tom: "Carly Fiorina Says the Chinese "Don't Innovate."" TIME, 2015.05.26. [online, 2026.02.03.]
[26] PANG, Zhongying: From Tao Guang Yang Hui to Xin Xing: China's Complex Foreign Policy Transformation and Southeast Asia. *Trends in Southeast Asia*, no. 7 (2020), Yusof Ishak Institute.
[27] MERANER, Franz – ROMERO, Lisa: "China's Anti-Access/Area-Denial Strategy." The Defence Horizon Journal, 2023.02.09. [online, 2026.03.19.]
[28] Vörös Zoltán – Györgyi Dávid: The Changing Power Dynamics of the East Asian Region? The Escalating China–Japan Relations. *Nemzet és Biztonság*, 18:4 (2025) 67–82.

On the one hand, the FOIP covers numerous regions of key importance to the United States. These include East Asia, South-East Asia and South Asia, which are priority partners from an economic, strategic, commercial and technological perspective, amongst others. The Middle East is equally important in terms of energy resources and national security (terrorism). Africa is also a factor that could have a significant impact on the future of the world. On the other hand, the initiative sets out objectives that resonate with the values championed by the United States. These include, for example, the rule of law and the protection of the international order. Last but not least, the FOIP, through its geographical scope, revives the 'rimland' theory, which provided the theoretical underpinning for US strategy during the Cold War. Covering the rimlands is a tactic that has already secured victory for the Americans in one geopolitical contest, and it may resonate particularly loudly now that the theory of a 'second Cold War' has become a topic of academic discourse.

4.1. The evolution of FOIP in the context of US foreign policy

Even before the announcement of the FOIP, Japanese foreign policy had been sensitive to the United States' worldview. The aforementioned foreign policy initiative known as the 'Arc of Freedom and Prosperity', as well as the repeated reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Constitution, can easily be seen as paralleling the priorities of the Washington administration. In the case of the FOIP, this pattern of behaviour is also well documented.

Even prior to the announcement of the concept, there were instances where the Japanese political leadership took the position of its American ally into account and made explicit reference to it. This refers to the Armitage–Nye reports published in 2007 and 2012, which were critical of Japan's geopolitical role.[29] Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's first speech, in which he 'coined' the political concept of the Indo-Pacific region, and his 2012 speech entitled 'Japan is Back' at the CSIS can be interpreted as a defence of Japan.[30] In both, he emphasised Japan's role in the 21st century and its position as an active initiator of foreign policy.

Following the Senkaku Islands incident, Japanese foreign policy was also quick to make the defence of the international order, as championed by the Obama administration, a key priority of its diplomatic mission. The five new pillars of foreign policy announced in 2013 later reappeared in some form within the FOIP.[31]

It is also worth highlighting Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022. The Biden administration at the time devoted significant attention to the Ukrainians and provided them with support, meaning that the United States' priorities once again shifted towards the West. Consequently, in 2023, the Kishida government decided to globalise the FOIP, thereby providing an interpretative framework for the vision even for such a distant region, and assuring the United States of the Japanese government's unequivocal support.

The Trump administration's 'America First' policy raised the question of whether, in the event of an armed conflict, the United States would be willing to come to the aid of its allies. The new administration's scepticism towards NATO was also evident in the 2025 National Security Strategy, which set as one of its objectives the aim of enabling European countries to stand on their own two feet and assume primary responsibility for their own defence.[32] This may have led to the Ishiba government's idea that an 'Asian NATO' should be established, thereby institutionally ensuring the presence of US forces in the region.

[29] ARMITAGE, Richard – NYE, Joseph: *CSIS Report: The U.S.-Japan Alliance - Getting Asia Right through 2020*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington, D.C., 2007.; ARMITAGE, Richard – NYE, Joseph: *A Report of the CSIS Japan Chair: The U.S.-Japan Alliance - Anchoring Stability in Asia*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington, D.C., 2012.
[30] ABE, Shinzo: Japan is back. Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2013.02.22. [online, 2026.01.22.]
[31] ABE, 2013.
[32] The White House: National Security Strategy. The White House, Washington, DC, 2025. [online, 2026.03.16.]

The events mentioned above highlight that the development of Japanese foreign policy is closely linked to changes in US foreign policy. It can be said that the Japanese government is sensitive to the international role played by its principal ally and, as a result – despite the appearance of the FOIP – pursues a reactive foreign policy in which it aligns itself with the United States. At the same time, anomalies can also be observed: certain changes to the FOIP are, in fact, incompatible with US foreign policy. One such example is the announcement of the FOIP itself, which in 2016 was not justified by any internal or external events in the United States. Another good example is the reclassification of the strategy as a 'vision' in 2018, which may come as something of a surprise given the nature of US foreign policy. This suggests that Japanese foreign policy is also sensitive to the views of other actors.

4.2. The evolution of FOIP in the context of the foreign policy of China and the region

To fully understand the changes in the FOIP, it is therefore not enough to examine US foreign policy alone. The People's Republic of China and Japan's regional allies – with particular regard to the ASEAN member states and India – are also important parts of the equation.

On the one hand, we must take into account the shift in Chinese foreign policy: the assertive and open pursuit of its interests, its regional and global engagement, and its deliberate ambitions as a great power.[33] The global strategies announced over the past ten years, including the Belt and Road Initiative announced in 2013 and subsequently published at government level in 2015, have clearly aimed at actively reshaping neighbouring and more distant regions.[34] However, this may have a detrimental effect on Japan's ability to assert its interests.

Another phenomenon that clearly demonstrates that Japan's other allies are also capable of influencing the development of the FOIP is Japan's own reinterpretation of the FOIP, namely its reclassification of the strategy as a 'vision'. This can be explained by the fact that the FOIP initially emerged as a primarily military concept within US diplomacy: the US Pacific Command was renamed USINDOPACOM in 2018.[35] However, this may have prompted Japan's other allies – who generally favour strategies of neutrality or hedging – to keep their distance, as the previously inclusive narrative had clearly taken on an anti-China tone. The shift from a strategy to a vision was intended to resolve this tension, as it meant that the objective became the primary focus, whilst the means of implementation were given greater flexibility.

On this basis, it can be stated that the FOIP is a reactive foreign policy strategy, as Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae also pointed out in her speech in May 2026. The vision is just as sensitive to the international behaviour of Japan's primary ally, the United States, as it is to the attitudes of the country's regional partners.

In light of the information outlined above, an action-reaction table can be drawn up (Table 1), which clearly illustrates the reactive nature of the FOIP, whilst also highlighting that, in certain cases, the United States also monitored changes in Japan's foreign policy. This is illustrated not only by the adoption of the FOIP, but also by the 'Pivot to Asia' (later renamed 'Rebalance to Asia') foreign policy announced by the Obama administration in 2011.

[33] Vörös Zoltán: Kínai geopolitika a 21. században – A globális világrend megkérdőjelezése? *Eurázsia Szemle*, 2:1 (2022) 8–28.
[34] Eszterhai Viktor: Az Új Selyemút. *Eszmélet*, 109:1 (2016) 116–131.
[35] U.S. Indo-Pacific Command: History of United States Indo-Pacific Command. [online, 2026.03.19.]

ACTION	REACTION
2007: Armitage–Nye report	2007: ABE Shinzō's speech in New Delhi
2009-2010: The Hatoyama government's China-friendly foreign policy	2011: Pivot to Asia
2012: Armitage–Nye report	2012: ABE Shinzō's speech in the CSIS
2012: Obama's statement on the Senkaku Islands	2013: five new pillars of foreign policy
2015: Announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative	2016: Announcement of FOIP strategy[36] *2017: Incorporating FOIP into US foreign policy*
2018: Establishment of USINDOPACOM	
→ *Concerns of regional allies*[37]	2018: FOIP's transformation to vision
2021-: Global initiatives of the People's Republic of China 2022: the Russian-Ukrainian war, US support	2023: Globalization of FOIP – FOIO
2025: Trump's second term in office, the 'America First' policy	2025: The idea of an 'Asian NATO'

5. Conclusion

The analysis shows that FOIP's evolution is driven primarily by the behaviour of Japan's allies, particularly the United States, rather than by changes in successive Japanese governments. Furthermore, the initiative appears to be a response to Chinese foreign policy. In this regard, however, it is also worth asking what exactly is the role of the FOIP vision within Japan's foreign policy strategy? What is the aim of the concept, and how does this relate to its flexibility?

The balance of power in Japan's immediate neighbourhood has undergone significant changes, necessitating a reassessment of the country's security environment and the post-Second World War security architecture. Japan, which has traditionally been tied to the Western alliance system, must now simultaneously contend with China's economic, political and military rise, as well as the changing role of the United States in the region. In this situation, the Japanese political elite is striving to maintain the country's security; however, to do so, it also needs to engage its regional and global partners. At the same time, the foreign policy interests and priorities of these partners may differ significantly from one another. Whilst the United States seeks to preserve and strengthen its own international position amidst great-power rivalry, for many regional states, balancing, maintaining a peaceful environment and keeping their distance from great-power confrontation are also important considerations. Japan therefore needs a foreign policy framework that enables the harmonisation of differing interests and provides scope for cooperation between the various actors.

This role is fulfilled by the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision, which avoids creating an overt image of an enemy and places the emphasis on shared interests and objectives. At the same time, it also invokes norms and values – such as a rules-based international order and the protection of international law – which are important to the United States and may contribute to sustaining American engagement in the region. The FOIP thus serves as a bridging narrative between Japan and its partners: it is flexible enough to encompass diverse interests within a common framework, whilst being concrete enough to

[36] The announcement of the FOIP in 2016 can, however, also be seen as a strategic move, to which the United States – and subsequently Japan's other allies, such as the ASEAN member states, Australia and European countries – responded by incorporating the vision into their own foreign policies.
[37] Countries in the region criticised the inclusion of a military perspective, which can be interpreted as a reaction to the United States' move, whilst at the same time leading to the FOIP being transformed into a vision.

influence foreign policy decision-making. It is this duality that makes the vision both effective and vulnerable. Its survival therefore depends to a large extent on whether successive Japanese governments are able to continue to harmonise the interests and motivations of their partners under a single narrative, without the concept becoming hollowed out or Japan's foreign policy coming into conflict with its own objectives whilst adapting to external expectations.

An analysis of Japan's foreign policy also highlights that, even within an international system defined by the balance of power between the great powers, middle powers retain a degree of autonomy and may be capable of influencing the shape of the evolving world order. Although political narratives are often interpreted primarily as tools of the great powers, the example of the FOIP shows that even a middle power is capable of developing a concept that can influence not only the thinking and decisions of states of similar or lesser stature, but even those of the political leaders of the great powers. This is particularly significant in the current geopolitical environment, which is shaped both by China's rise and by changes in the United States' international engagement. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney also alluded to this in his 2026 speech at Davos: "*other countries, especially intermediate powers […], are not powerless*."[38] At the same time, the FOIP also highlights that the scope of middle-power narratives is constrained by geographical and capacity limitations; consequently, their relevance and effectiveness depend to a large extent on their ability to adapt to the changing international environment and the interests of various actors.

Based on this analysis, further changes to the FOIP are also likely, and these may even occur within a single government term. Japan's scope for manoeuvre in foreign policy continues to be significantly influenced by its security dependence on the United States; at the same time, its economic and diplomatic capabilities enable Japan to shape the framework of regional cooperation through its own initiatives and to reflect its perception of itself as a middle power in its foreign policy narrative. The Takaichi government's FOIP approach reflects a more critical stance towards US foreign policy, whilst its efforts to strengthen regional ties suggest that Japan is seeking to expand its room for manoeuvre in foreign policy and to assign a greater role to regional cooperation in promoting security in the region. This does not necessarily mean that the alliance with the United States is being sidelined; rather, it can be interpreted as an effort to diversify Japan's foreign policy toolkit and its partnerships. At the same time, a major challenge for the FOIP is the Trump administration's scepticism towards the post-Second World War system of rules and institutions, which manifested itself, on the one hand, in the sanctions imposed against the International Criminal Court,[39] and in President Donald Trump's open criticism of the rules-based international order.[40]

For the proper interpretation and implementation of the FOIP, it is therefore important to take into account the concept's role as a bridging narrative, the resulting ongoing fine-tuning, and Japan's regional and capacity constraints. One distinctive feature of the vision is that it does not require all participants to pursue the same interests or priorities: it provides them with the opportunity to engage with the common framework in line with their own perspectives and means. This inclusivity may facilitate broader cooperation; however, the effectiveness of the FOIP continues to depend on the extent to which flexibility can be reconciled with the conceptual consistency of the framework and with Japan's own foreign policy objectives.

[38] CARNEY, Mark: Special Address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada, World Economic Forum, Davos. 2026.01.21. [online, 2026.10.20.]
[39] The Guardian: 'US imposes new sanctions on international criminal court'. *The Guardian*, 2026.10.09. [online, 2026.10.11.]
[40] YANG, Maya: 'I don't need international law': Trump says power constrained only by 'my own morality'. *The Guardian*, 2026.01.08. [online, 2026.03.18.]

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