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## **Japan's Position in the World**

*By Kitaoka Shinichi*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Having accepted Japanese-initiated concepts such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), the region should now consider the establishment of a "Western Pacific Union" which would reinforce the FOIP. And, as Japan continues with internal reforms to "normalise", it can work with the ASEAN member states to assist developing countries, using the approach of the Japan International Cooperation Agency, which has proven successful.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Prime Minister Shinzo ABE proposed the vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2016. This was based on the historical fact that Japan's economy expanded to Southeast Asia and South Asia, connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans into one.

FOIP was supported by US Presidents Barak Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden. As far as I know, there is no other vision that was supported by the three presidents.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) which brought India, Japan, the United States, and Australia together in a cooperative arrangement, was another example of Japan's leadership.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) was first proposed by the United States. But when Washington decided to withdraw from it, Japan continued with its efforts to create the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), of which Singapore is a very important member. As of now, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, China, Taiwan, Uruguay, Ecuador, and Costa Rica also want to join the CPTPP.

These visionary initiatives proposed by PM Abe show that Japan's influence is becoming stronger and more extensive even though its economy is still stagnant.

### **The Case for a Western Pacific Union**

The FOIP is a very good concept. But there is one weak point – Southeast Asia. If this region, which connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans, should come under China's sphere of influence, the FOIP might lose its clout significantly.

Japan must, therefore, strengthen its relations with Southeast Asia. For several years, I have been arguing for the creation of a "Western Pacific Union" for the region comprising Japan, Korea, the ASEAN member states, and possibly, Australia, Bangladesh, and the Pacific Island nations; much like the European Union in Europe.

The core of my argument is to pursue regional economic integration without the superpowers, i.e., the United States, China, and India, because they are likely to prioritise their national interests before the common interests of the smaller members. Japan may be a big power but it is trusted by the ASEAN member states. Japan's economic power, although smaller than China's, is also quite important.

We also need to continue trade and other business relations with China. Decoupling is very difficult. We need some support from United States for our security. Mostly importantly, we must avoid conflict with China. Japan and most of the ASEAN countries would agree on these.

### **Recent Changes in Japan's Security Policy**

There have been substantial changes in Japan's security policy in recent years.

Unlike Germany, Japan was not divided geographically after the Second World War but was politically divided internally on the issue of national security. The second half of Article 9 of the postwar Japanese Constitution prohibited the nation from possessing military forces.

Although many people thought that Japan, being a sovereign country, needed some military forces at least, about one third of the population stuck to the strict interpretation of Article 9. As a result, the conservative governments of Japan made compromises in order to get the support of these people.

These compromises included the following: i) Japan shall not send its Self-Defense Forces (SDF) overseas; ii) Japan will engage in defensive activities only (none on offence); iii) Japan will not export military weapons; iv) universities should refrain from military-related studies; and v) the military budget should be less than one per cent of the GDP.

These were all unnecessary and ill-guided policies. Because of the prohibition on arms exports, Japan's military industry has become very weak, while the SDF have not been able to participate effectively in UN peacekeeping operations, for example.

Japan's security policy began to change in 2013. The National Security Council was

established, and a National Security Strategy was approved. The new peace and security law of 2015 enabled the SDF to work jointly with the US military.

A review of other taboos, such as the ban on the export of weapons, and curtailment of military-related studies in universities, are now going on.

These are just some modest steps in Japan's efforts to become a "normal" country. The road was opened by Abe when he was prime minister from 2006-2007 and from 2012-2020.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is currently continuing the policies laid down by Abe. In 2022, he surprised with an agenda which included a rise in the defence budget and the lifting of the prohibition on military-related studies.

It was most remarkable that the opposition parties accepted this new agenda without resistance. This was an indication that the younger people were supportive of this change, whereas opposition to the government in 2015 comprised relatively senior people. I hope that this process of change would continue smoothly.

### **Japan and the Developing Countries**

Of the G7 countries, Japan is the only one which had the experience of a developing country. Having struggled with discrimination from the advanced countries, Japan understands how developing countries feel towards the developed countries.

With regard to Ukraine for example, many of the developing countries are reluctant to support it in its war with Russia. Why? First, they are suspicious about the double standards of the developed countries. Although the Russian invasion of Ukraine was a violation of international law, the United States did a similar thing to Iraq in 2003.

Furthermore, many African countries remember being colonised by Britain, France, Belgium, Italy, amongst other European countries, whereas they were supported in their independence struggles by the former Soviet Union.

How can Japan develop a good relationship with the developing countries? We need to understand and to work with them. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), for example, is much appreciated in these countries because of its approach. In Tanzania, where women do not have the chance to participate in sports because of gender discrimination, JICA planned a successful athletics programme for them, instead of criticising the discrimination as Western countries would tend to do.

In Pakistan, where girls are not able to go to school, JICA established small schools in the vicinity of the villages instead of criticising the policy. This indirect approach is very much appreciated by the developing countries. In this sense, JICA is very different as a donor organisation compared with those in the US, UK or other developed countries.

I believe that Japan can be a bridge between developed countries and developing countries by changing or modifying so-called universal principles, to make them more acceptable to the latter. I believe that Singapore or some other ASEAN member states

can also play this role. If we are united in airing this idea to the world, the world will listen to us.

Singapore has been quite active in proposing many ideas at the United Nations together with the other S5 countries, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, Jordan and Costa Rica. Although small, their voice is sometimes heard. If Japan is united with the ASEAN member states in proposing their ideas together, we could become more influential in the world.

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