



DEFENDING A RULES-BASED REGIONAL ORDER: AUSTRALIA AND JAPAN'S "FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC"

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The Special Strategic Partnership between Canberra and Tokyo was established as a vehicle through which these countries coordinate their regional security cooperation. According to the annual Foreign and Defence Minister's meeting Joint Statement it is "founded on common strategic interests and shared values including a commitment to democracy, human rights, free trade and the rules-based international order". Clearly Japan and Australia have considerable political, economic, and strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region, which sits astride the critical Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), through which the bulk of their trade and energy resources flow, and where the geopolitical tension between states continues to grow. Together, Tokyo and Canberra have sought to enhance the scope and depth of their cooperation in the face of a deteriorating security situation in this pivotal region.

Canberra has effectively backed Japan's vision for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific", or "FOIP", even though it uses the term "an open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific" to describe it. The FOIP strategy, for that is what it must be if it is to amount to more than a "vision", is an attempt by these "Special Strategic Partners", allied with the US, to shape the future regional order in a way amicable to their national interests. Despite official protestations to the contrary, the FOIP is a belated response to China's recent raft of architecture-building activities centering on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which are of course designed to shape regional order in the interests of Beijing. Both countries have responded with their declared determination to uphold "the rules-based regional and international order, respect for international law, freedom of navigation and overflight and unimpeded trade." This has catalysed joint efforts to create an appealing narrative which includes alternatives to Chinese economic largesse through joint ODA programmes aimed at development, capacity-bu-

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ilding, and the infrastructure needs of regional countries. They have been particularly alert to China's efforts to employ geo-economic instruments of power to gain influence – including so-called “debt-trap” diplomacy – such as the case of Sri Lanka's loss of control of its Hambantota port facility, due to Colombo's inability to meet its financial repayments. But they are also alarmed by the involvement of state-backed Chinese companies providing critical infrastructure to smaller countries in the South Pacific, which could result in Beijing becoming able to control entire “digital eco-systems” across the region. Cooperation under the FOIP also extends to the management of so-called “grey area” operations, such as the use of incursions by fishing fleets and maritime militia, backed by naval vessels over the horizon, to intimidate neighbours or infiltrate contested maritime areas.

There are two sub-regions that are identified as priorities for Japan-Australia cooperation under the broader umbrella of the FOIP: South East Asia and increasingly, the South Pacific (or Pacific Island Countries: PICs). In the case of the South East Asia, Canberra and Tokyo have used both their Annual Leadership Summits and “2+2” Foreign and Defence Ministers Meetings to repeatedly emphasise their concern over Chinese reclamation and militarisation activities in the South China Sea (SCS). They have urged all parties in the SCS to clarify their claims in accord with international law and United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and to resolve such disputes peaceably. In particular, they have pressed the involved parties to finalise the long-awaited Code of Conduct (COC) to reduce tensions, and have called for restraint, and end to the militarisation of the disputed territories. Although they officially place their confidence in ASEAN “centrality” to superintend such agreements, in practice they have both sought to provide capacity-building support (training, patrol boats), including through ODA programmes, to the affected littoral states of

South East Asia, through means of bilateral “strategic partnerships” with Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, whose national interests closely align with the FOIP. They have also exercised transit rights for military vessels and aircraft through the SCS (for example; Australia's Indo-Pacific Endeavour task force, and Japan's Anti-Submarine warfare drill), though both have been reluctant to assent to Washington's requests to joint Freedom of Navigation (FONOPs) within the 12 nautical mile exclusion zone of Chinese artificial features (as defined by China and Chinese maps) In sum, allied responses to the SCS issue have become widely viewed as a litmus test both of the willingness of regional states to resist any potential hegemonic ambitions on the part of Beijing, and of the resolve of the US to uphold its commitment to the liberal international order it created under the “San Francisco system” in Asia.

In the case of the South Pacific, Canberra and Tokyo have become alarmed at the extent of Chinese attempts to increase its geo-economic and geopolitical presence in this vital maritime space. Alarm bells sounded in Canberra about potential Chinese intentions to establish a military base in Vanuatu, though this did not eventuate. Nevertheless, Australia-Japan cooperation has swung into high gear with the Australian government's announcement of its so-called “Pacific Step-Up” initiative, including a dedicated Infrastructure Funding Financing Facility (\$2bnAUD), alongside the already substantial ODA (\$1.3bnAUD) and capacity-building efforts, and linked to their 2016 Australia-Japan Strategy for Cooperation in the Pacific aimed at “enhancing cooperation between Australia and Japan to support economic and social resilience, stability and prosperity in the Pacific”. Thus, Canberra has sought to assist the PICS with governance and policing efforts, and has now directed attention to assisting these countries in protecting their maritime resources, such as fishing stocks, from illegal fishing incursions, through the supply of patrol boats and training to



increase collective Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). To cap this, Canberra and Washington announced an agreement to establish a joint naval facility at Lombrum on Manus Island to counter creeping Chinese influence in the region. These efforts, taken together with Japan and the US, who both recently announced huge increases in financial assistance to the PICs for infrastructure development and capacity building, have been unofficially dubbed a “Pacific Pivot”.

Bilateral security cooperation to counter destabilising moves by the PRC as it chips away at the rules based international order through the use of “hybrid warfare” and exploitation of

“grey zones”, particularly noticeable in the SCS, and through the use of geo-economic tools and “influence operations” that undermine the sovereignty of PICs. Much of this is undertaken through the Special Strategic Partnership under the banner of the FOIP (a sort of replacement for the defunct US “rebalance”), and in cooperation trilaterally with their joint US ally. But the enhanced bilateral cooperation between Canberra and Tokyo is as much a recognition that the era of Pax Americana is waning, speeded towards its demise by President Donald Trump, and that in future, like-minded states such as Australia and Japan, will have to take on a greater burden of maintaining the kind of rules-based regional order upon which their security jointly depends.