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Two Japanese Scholars' Visions for the Indo-Pacific: An Assessment

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Summary

Japanese speculations on the Indo-Pacific have thus far largely followed American explanations and concepts. However, as the United States under President Donald Trump increasingly withdraws from its role as a security guarantor, and as China increasingly flexes its diplomatic and military muscles, two leading Japanese scholar-practitioners have presented alternative visions of the Indo-Pacific. Both of these visions envisage a central role for Japan in keeping the concept of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) relevant.

Introduction

Japan is one of the original modern articulators of the concept of the Indo-Pacific, yet scholarly reflections on the concept emanating from that country have largely been content to follow American conceptualisations. In recent times, two prominent Japanese scholars, both of whom have served in high official positions for prolonged parts of their career, have used the print media as a platform to express their unique conceptions of the Indo-Pacific. It will be useful to assess their views when considering the evolution of Japan’s policy towards the Indo-Pacific region.

Shinichi Kitaoka¹ served with distinction as an Ambassador of Japan to the United Nations (2004–06) and is a former head of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) (2015–22). As a prominent historian of Japan’s modern era, his work on a joint commission set up by the governments of Japan and China to investigate historical issues such as the Nanjing Massacre is also noteworthy. He also played a guiding role in the crafting of the ‘Abe Statement’ eventually delivered by then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2015.² This statement effectively ended the annual practice of Japanese prime ministers issuing formal statements expressing varying degrees of contrition for Japan’s actions during the Second World War.

Akihiko Tanaka is a political scientist specialising in computer-based data modelling. He has written some of the foundational works on Japan–China relations and Japan’s post-war diplomacy. He was formerly head of the prestigious graduate school for research in public policy and strategy, before being reappointed head of JICA in 2022 as Kitaoka’s successor. This was his second term as head of that organisation (the first being from 2012 to 2015).³ He also served on the East Asia Vision Group, a body advising the ASEAN+3 summit (from 1999 to 2001). He also collaborated with Kitaoka in framing recommendations that were influential in shaping Japan’s security policy in later years.

Common Narratives

Before understanding how both scholars frame the Indo-Pacific, certain common narrative threads in their conceptualisation must be highlighted. Both scholar-

¹ For a brief summary, see [“Profile of Former President Kitaoka Shinichi”](#), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Government of Japan. In the interest of full disclosure, I have had the privilege of interacting with Kitaoka-sensei during my visit to Japan in 2024.

² [“Statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe”](#), Office of the Prime Minister and his Cabinet, Government of Japan, 14 August 2015.

³ See [“Profile of JICA President Tanaka Akihiko”](#), JICA, Government of Japan. In the interest of full disclosure, I conducted research for a period of 10 months at the National Graduate Research Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS) in Tokyo during Tanaka-sensei’s Presidency of that institution in 2017–18.

practitioners cite two critical triggers that motivated their attempts to prescribe alternatives to the current Japanese policy regarding the Indo-Pacific.

The first is a perceptible dissatisfaction with the concept of ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP) formulation. Though both scholars acknowledge the seminal role played by former Prime Minister Abe in formulating the concept in 2007 during his address to the Indian Parliament, they express some discomfort with the way Abe’s successors have implemented it. Both seem to agree that Japan’s diplomacy towards the Indo-Pacific is drifting, though they disagree on the nature of the drift. Kitaoka argues that Japan’s diplomatic outreach to Indo-Pacific countries, Southeast Asia in particular, has been too lax and unimaginative.⁴ On the other hand, Tanaka argues that Japanese diplomacy is too unidirectional and geographically constricted.⁵

The other impelling argument both commentators make is the seemingly total abdication by the United States of America under President Donald J. Trump of its global role as the underwriter of the rules-based international order. Both note with some concern that Trump’s entry into the White House for a second term on 20 January 2025, followed by the chaotic months leading to the present day, has proven to be a shock to the international system.⁶ Noting Trump’s isolationist, xenophobic instincts, they both worry that the US network of security alliances that underpins strategic stability in the Indo-Pacific is in the process of unravelling at the very moment when China is increasingly flexing its military and economic muscles.

Their proposed solution to these two, not entirely unrelated, skeins of observation is for Japan to step up as a potential new guarantor of security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific. How it would do so, and which countries it would approach, is where their formulations diverge.

Kitaoka’s Western Pacific Union

Kitaoka relies on a forward-looking attitude towards Japan’s security and diplomacy when he presents his thoughts on what he calls the ‘Western Pacific Union’ (WPU). In the first articulation of the concept in November 2024, Kitaoka notes with pessimism the return of Trump to the White House, who he posits would reverse the US’ policy towards the Ukraine conflict and upend global trade regimes by imposing tariffs. He reads these as ‘changes that will threaten to fundamentally upend the post

⁴ Shinichi Kitaoka, [“Time to Break Away from Defence-only Policy”](#), *The Japan News by the Yomiuri Shimbun*, 22 November 2024.

⁵ Akihiko Tanaka, [“Major Powers Awaken to Inland Asia’s Importance”](#), *The Japan News by the Yomiuri Shimbun*, 22 September 2023.

⁶ Shinichi Kitaoka, [“Japan Should Strengthen Its Ties with Southeast Asia”](#), *The Japan News by the Yomiuri Shimbun*, 21 March 2025; Akihiko Tanaka, [“With Trump Back, Japan Must Expand Foreign Policy”](#), *The Japan News by the Yomiuri Shimbun*, 30 May 2025.

war order of the world’.⁷ In his second piece published on 21 March 2025, this pessimism deepens as he sees Trump’s actions ‘shock and baffle the world’. The magnitude of Trump’s apathy towards the international order, coupled with his advancement of ‘his “America First” policy without mercy’, leads him to argue that Japan needs to envisage a bottom-up overhaul of its security policy. At the same time, he argues that Japanese diplomacy must engage in the creation of a ‘Western Pacific Union’.⁸

Though he mentions it in his November 2024 piece, the WPU is fleshed out in his submission in March 2025. Noting that he has ‘proposed for several years now that Japan, Southeast Asia, Australia, Bangladesh and Pacific island nations establish a Western Pacific Union’ with the possible participation of South Korea, he argues that such a union is the need of the hour. It would, he argues, bring together a group of countries that surpass ‘the European Union in terms of economy and population size’. It is interesting to note that he characterises the European Union (EU) as culturally ‘Christian’, which he argues is positively juxtaposed with the ‘politically and culturally diverse’ union proposed by him.⁹ ASEAN would be the centrepiece of the new union, with Japan as the organising entity.

Who would this union position itself against/between? Intriguingly, Kitaoka proposes that the union will essentially be a balancing structure. “In the international community, the superpowers with huge populations and massive military and economic strength will have major influence”, he argues. “These would be the United States, China, Russia and India. Countries that *will not be superpowers* should form a coalition” (emphasis added).¹⁰ In a separate interview on 23 May 2025, Kitaoka elaborates that

the union I am envisaging would discuss a broader variety of matters to build consensus so it could hold out against China, Russia, India and the United States, which are *big powers with national egocentrism* (emphasis added).¹¹

Therefore, the WPU envisaged by him would position itself between and against both regional ‘superpowers’, China and India, as well as powers such as the US and Russia.

Kitaoka believes Japan is the appropriate country to lead such an initiative because it enjoys ‘unique relationships on top of their economic links’ and ‘the region has a

⁷ Shinichi Kitaoka, “[Time to Break Away from Defence-only Policy](#)”, no. 4.

⁸ Shinichi Kitaoka, “[Japan Should Strengthen Its Ties with Southeast Asia](#)”, no. 6.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Satoshi Ozawa, “[Interview/Shinichi Kitaoka: Japan Should Look to Future on 80th Anniversary of End of WWII](#)”, *The Asahi Shimbun*, 23 May 2025.

lot of trust in Japan’. These links include bilateral cooperation in maritime security, where he cites Japan’s Official Security Assistance (OSA) programme to highlight Southeast Asian states’ importance. He also mentions disaster relief cooperation as a sign of close cooperation. Interestingly, soft power influence is included as a source of close ties when he states that in ‘ASEAN countries, there are many government ministers and senior officials who have studied in Japan’ (implying that these officials would perceive regional issues in Japan’s light).¹² Coupled with a beefier defence policy, Kitaoka contends that the WPU, with Japan as its core, would have a decisive impact on global affairs given the US’ abdication of its role.

Akihiko Tanaka’s FOIP+++

Tanaka’s vision for the Indo-Pacific aims to extend the concept to nearly its breaking point. In two articles published in September 2023 and May 2025, he outlines his ideas of making hitherto peripheral regions of the globe a prominent part of Indo-Pacific doctrine. In the 2023 piece, he uses the backdrop of rising US–China tensions and the Ukraine conflict to underline the importance of hitherto ignored geographies within the Global South, namely, inland Asia. To him,

Inland Asia spans Mongolia, the five Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan and the three Caucasian countries of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia.¹³

Tanaka proposes that

as [Japan’s] coinage of the geographic concept of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” has led to the convergence of Southeast Asia, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa...it now should come up with a new concept of a “free and open inland Asia”...with a comprehensive strategy encompassing the region from Mongolia to Central Asia to the Caucasus.

He further proposes that ‘Japan should enhance support for inland Asian countries that seek new ocean- or sea-bound transit routes as an alternative to those via China and Russia’, with ‘a “central corridor” linking Azerbaijan with the Black Sea via Georgia’ as a possible starting point. For Mongolia, he proposes that Japan assist in developing ‘aviation-based connectivity’.¹⁴

In 2025, Tanaka expanded his original proposal. He urged that Japan adopt a multi-nodal diplomatic strategy to actualise what he calls a ‘FOIP+++’, which he notes would involve a radical expansion of the Japanese-origin concept. Under the new

¹² Shinichi Kitaoka, “[Japan Should Strengthen Its Ties with Southeast Asia](#)”, no. 6.

¹³ Akihiko Tanaka, “[Major Powers Awaken to Inland Asia’s Importance](#)”, no. 5.

¹⁴ Ibid.

concept, Europe, Central Asia and Central and South America would join traditional geographies associated with FOIP. To realise FOIP+++, Tanaka outlines ambitious plans of replacing the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) with JICA’s assistance programmes, cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on defence and reconstruction of Ukraine, cooperation with the European Union on cross-cutting challenges such as climate change, and the continuation of substantial trade and developmental diplomacy in Central Asia and Latin America. ‘Proactive’, nimble-footed diplomacy, he argues, would serve to expand the benefits of the FOIP concept to regions farther afield.¹⁵

Assessment

How should India look at these proposals? It is obvious that Kitaoka’s version of the Indo-Pacific is the more concerning one, as it would not only uncouple the Western Pacific from a (presumably) Eastern Indo-Pacific, but it is also redolent of precisely the kind of sphere-of-influence thinking liberal internationalists criticise Trump for. Further, the WPU vision seems to be overestimating the amount of trust placed on Japan by elites within Southeast Asia. To be sure, Japan does enjoy an almost hegemonic level of trust in matters relating to economy and diplomacy. However, it is totally uncertain at the moment whether such trust would translate into the kind of strategic trust that is required for Japan to become a net security provider. Further, the significant populations of Indian- and Chinese-origin Southeast Asians may not necessarily feel comfortable with a grouping that designates their ancestral homelands as ‘big powers with national egocentrism’.

Tanaka’s proposal is more interesting, in that his FOIP+++ not only speaks to Japan’s growing interest in Central Asia and Europe, but also envisions a landward dimension to the hitherto maritime focus of the Indo-Pacific concept. It is also a more inclusive vision. However, these advantages are counterbalanced by strong disadvantages. Stretching the FOIP concept too far would not be conducive to maintaining the coherence of the concept. It would also dilute the importance of several states such as the Pacific Island states and the littoral states of the South China Sea. Indeed, asking Myanmar to worry about connecting Mongolia to the world and vice versa may not be a very feasible concept at all, as both states have vastly different priorities and interests *vis-à-vis* China and other states in the region. Further, the FOIP+++ vision relies overmuch on faith in Japan’s capability to continue to deliver public goods in the same way that other countries in the region can. Thus, beyond the laudable focus on connectivity, it is difficult to be optimistic about this vision either.

¹⁵ Akihiko Tanaka, “[With Trump Back, Japan Must Expand Foreign Policy](#)”, no. 6.

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