

The Pacific Islands in Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' From 'Slow and Steady' to Strategic Engagement?

Author(s): H. D. P. Envall

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# The Pacific Islands in Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific': From 'Slow and Steady' to Strategic Engagement?

H. D. P. Envall

Japan's past engagement of the Pacific Islands, primarily developmental and generally low-key, is viewed as having been "slow and steady". However, as it has developed its 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) strategy, Japan has begun to dispense with this quiet approach and now adopts a more strategic set of policies towards the Pacific Islands. Japan's shift in style and the implications of a more contested Indo-Pacific region raise some important questions for Japan's future engagement of the region, especially in terms of how the Pacific Islands fit within the FOIP vision. Indeed, as FOIP evolves, it is likely that the past approach will continue to be reworked as Japan's Pacific Islands policies become more closely integrated into FOIP. Whether Japan has the capacity to deliver on ambitions for the Pacific Islands and the wider Indo-Pacific, however, remains open to question.

Japan's foreign policy on the Pacific Islands—sometimes described as "slow and steady"—has been for a long time tucked away in a sleepy corner of Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>1</sup> Over the past forty years, the Pacific Islands have not only played a small part in Japanese foreign policy but have also been largely separated from the wider transformation in Japan's strategic thinking, particularly over the past decade. Whereas Japan's overall policy on the Indo-Pacific has become increasingly strategic, its approach to the Pacific Islands has thus far remained largely developmental. Yet this wider transformation in Japanese strategic thinking has clear implications for its Pacific Islands policy and Japan's role in the region. A greater emphasis in Japanese policy on achieving strategic objectives through official development assistance (ODA), a commitment to making a 'proactive contribution to peace' (*sekkyokuteki heiwashugi*), and a preference for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) all indicate that Japan will dispense with this slow and steady approach and adopt a more strategic set of policies towards the Pacific Islands.

The importance of the Pacific Islands in Japan's FOIP strategy should not be exaggerated. Japan's main interests under such a program lie in the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and elsewhere. Nonetheless, the changing power dynamics of the Indo-Pacific and Japan's increasingly proactive outlook do raise questions as to how Japan might approach the region in future. The aim of this article is to understand Japan's current and likely future

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1 Melissa Liberatore, 'Slow and Steady Wins the Race—Japan and the Pacific Island Leaders' Meeting', *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 18 May 2018, <[www.aspistrategist.org.au/slow-and-steady-wins-the-race-japan-and-the-pacific-island-leaders-meeting/](http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/slow-and-steady-wins-the-race-japan-and-the-pacific-island-leaders-meeting/)> [Accessed 29 July 2019].

engagement of the Pacific Islands by focusing on three basic questions. First, what does Japan do in the Pacific Islands region? Second, where do the Pacific Islands fit within Japan's FOIP strategy? And third, what are Japan's interests in the Pacific Islands as they relate to this wider strategic policy? The central argument is that Japan's low-key, chiefly developmental approach to the Pacific Islands region will be recast as the FOIP strategy evolves. Indeed, the evolution of FOIP is likely to reshape Japan's Pacific Islands policies into a more complex arrangement of strategic and developmental thinking; it could push Japan to play a greater role in the Pacific Islands region. Whether slow and steady can win the strategic race in the Pacific Islands, however, is not clear. Tokyo's capacity and commitment to follow through on such a broad strategy remains open to question.

## What Does Japan Do in the Pacific Islands Region?

The Japanese government describes the Pacific Island countries as "important, longstanding partners, sharing the Pacific Ocean and addressing common challenges".<sup>2</sup> Japan began providing ODA to regional nations, notably Samoa and Fiji, in the early 1970s,<sup>3</sup> and it has attended the Pacific Islands Forum Post Forum Dialogue since 1989.<sup>4</sup> Still, not all of Japan's policies towards the region have succeeded or been well received. The region's nations have been critical of Japan's approach to ODA policymaking, how it addresses differences over fisheries and, indeed, its tendency to link these two issues.<sup>5</sup> In the 1970s, the 'Pan-Pacific Concept' promoted by the government of Prime Minister Masayoshi Ōhira largely overlooked the Pacific Islands dimension of the 'Pacific'. In 1980, Japan's proposal to dispose of nuclear waste in the Mariana Trench was strongly criticised by the then South Pacific Forum.<sup>6</sup> In comparison to earlier attempts, the Pacific Islands policy outlined by the government of Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone in 1987 offered a more comprehensive approach to engaging with the region. In what came to be known as the Kuranari Doctrine (named after then Foreign Minister Tadashi Kuranari), the Nakasone government sought to establish its interaction with the region around principles of independence, regional cooperation, stability, development and people-to-people engagement.<sup>7</sup>

A shift in Japan's approach from a chiefly bilateral to a more multilateral style came with the establishment of the Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM) summits in 1997. A triennial event hosted by Japan, PALM brings together leaders from sixteen countries and Japan.<sup>8</sup> Since 2010, Japan has also begun hosting PALM Ministerial

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2 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM)', 9 April 2018, <[www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/palm/index.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/palm/index.html)> [Accessed 23 July 2019].

3 Izumi Kobayashi, 'Japan's Diplomacy towards Member Countries of Pacific Islands Forum: Significance of Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM)', *Asia-Pacific Review*, vol. 25, no. 2 (2018), p. 91.

4 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2018: Japanese Diplomacy and International Situation in 2017* (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018), p. 86.

5 For example, see Sandra Tarte, 'Diplomatic Strategies: The Pacific Islands and Japan', Pacific Economic Papers no. 269 (Canberra: Australia-Japan Research Centre, Australian National University, July 1997), p. 6.

6 Kobayashi, 'Japan's Diplomacy towards Member Countries of Pacific Islands Forum', pp. 91–92.

7 Ibid., pp. 92–93. See also Stephen Henningham, *The Pacific Island States: Security and Sovereignty in the Post-Cold War World* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), p. 101.

8 These are Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Republic of Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

Interim Meetings every three years. Since 2014, it has also participated annually in Japan-Pacific Islands Leaders Meetings on the sidelines of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly.<sup>9</sup> A consistent feature of the PALM summits has been the emphasis placed on the commonalities shared by Japan and the other participating states.<sup>10</sup> The phrase ‘We are Islanders’ has been adopted regularly as the ‘theme’ of the summits, with different subtitles addressing specific areas for attention. At PALM5 in 2009, the subtitle was ‘Towards an Eco-friendly and Rich Pacific’.<sup>11</sup> By PALM8, held in Fukushima in May 2018, this had become a ‘Partnership Towards Prosperous, Free and Open Pacific’.<sup>12</sup>

This shift points to the transition of PALM, particularly since the mid-2000s, from a summit primarily focused on development and environment issues to one that also takes in strategic calculations.<sup>13</sup> At the fourth summit held in 2006, the Japanese government, in response to China holding its own Pacific Islands meeting in Fiji that year, announced an aid package of ¥45 billion for the next three years. At subsequent summits, until 2018, Japan gradually increased this sum. In the three years between PALM7 in 2015 and PALM8 in 2018, for instance, Japan offered ¥55 billion (approx. US\$460 million) in assistance, as well as 4,000 people-to-people exchanges, including places in Japan’s JENESYS (Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths) program for youth exchange and the Pacific-LEADS (Leaders’ Educational Assistance for Development of State) program for junior government officials, amongst other initiatives.<sup>14</sup> According to Izumi Kobayashi, the increase in funding “was, beyond a doubt, taken as a countermeasure against China”.<sup>15</sup>

However, while the Japanese government committed to 5,000 people-to-people exchanges at PALM8 in 2018, no concrete financial pledge was made in the same manner as PALM7, even as Japan has remained an active bilateral donor in the region.<sup>16</sup> Instead, the PALM8 agenda focused on maritime order, the rule of law and ocean sustainability, regional connectivity, sustainable economic development, wider international cooperation, and capacity building. The PALM Leaders’ Declaration called for “the complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula” and for North Korea “to immediately

9 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2018*, pp. 85–86.

10 See Grant Wyeth, ‘Japan Keen to Bolster Ties with Pacific Island States’, *The Diplomat*, 12 August 2019, <[thediplomat.com/2019/08/japan-keen-to-bolster-ties-with-pacific-island-states/](http://thediplomat.com/2019/08/japan-keen-to-bolster-ties-with-pacific-island-states/)> [Accessed 12 September 2019].

11 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘PALM 5: Islanders’ Hokkaido Declaration’, 22–23 May 2009, <[www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/palm/palm5/declaration.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/palm/palm5/declaration.html)> [Accessed 11 September 2019].

12 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘The Eighth Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM8) (Overview of Results)’, 19 May 2018, <[www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/ocn/page3e\\_000900.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/ocn/page3e_000900.html)> [Accessed 23 July 2019].

13 Recognition as an aid power is sometimes offered as a rationale for Japan establishing PALM. See Sandra Tarte, ‘Norms and Japan’s Foreign Aid Policy in the South Pacific’, in Yoichiro Sato and Keiko Hirata (eds), *Norms, Interests, and Power in Japanese Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 142.

14 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘The Eighth Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM8): Leaders’ Declaration’, 18–19 May 2018, <[www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/ocn/page4e\\_000825.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/ocn/page4e_000825.html)> [Accessed 23 July 2019]. See also Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2018*, p. 87; Japan International Cooperation Agency, ‘Aiming to Strengthen Ties with Islands in the Pacific Vol. 2: Supporting the Development of Human Resources for the Future’, 14 May 2018, <[www.jica.go.jp/english/news/field/2018/180514\\_01.html](http://www.jica.go.jp/english/news/field/2018/180514_01.html)> [Accessed 12 September 2019].

15 Kobayashi, ‘Japan’s Diplomacy towards Member Countries of Pacific Islands Forum’, p. 99.

16 Susumu Kuronuma, ‘Japan, US and Australia Push Back on China’s South Pacific Expansion’, *Nikkei Asian Review*, 3 July 2019, <[asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-US-and-Australia-push-back-on-China-s-South-Pacific-expansion](http://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-US-and-Australia-push-back-on-China-s-South-Pacific-expansion)> [Accessed 12 September 2019].

take concrete actions in accordance with UNSC [UN Security Council] resolutions”.<sup>17</sup> The Japanese government committed to support the region through its FOIP strategy, in the process underscoring the importance at least to Japan of “a free, open, and sustainable maritime order based on the rule of law in the Pacific”.<sup>18</sup>

Problematically, in presenting the FOIP strategy in this manner at PALM8, Japan struggled to engage with the Pacific Island countries to find a coordinated outlook on the strategy. Accordingly, criticism of the process and outcomes of PALM8 has focused on Japan’s “propensity for informing the PICs [Pacific Island countries] of policies impacting or involving them, rather than co-creating such policies”. As Kaitu’u ’i Pangai Funaki and Yoichiro Sato explain, this tendency “inhibits the development of trust”.<sup>19</sup> That Japan was viewed by some participants as not having sufficiently consulted with the other participants prior to PALM8 helped create this distrust at Fukushima, which was exacerbated by the fact that these participants then viewed Japan as tying its ODA projects in the region to a commitment on FOIP.<sup>20</sup> Such problems may explain why the PALM8 members merely ‘welcomed’ Japanese initiatives in the region, such as FOIP, rather than endorsing them.<sup>21</sup> The problems of PALM8 also provide context to Japanese Foreign Minister Tarō Kōno’s visit to the region in August 2019 to further promote FOIP and gain greater regional support for the strategy.<sup>22</sup> Despite some clumsiness to its diplomacy, however, Japan has still managed to maintain its substantial regional engagement. The ‘slow and steady’ characterisation, as made by Melissa Liberatore, is in fact a recognition of the sustained nature of Japan’s involvement in the region, despite the apparent limitations of its diplomacy.<sup>23</sup> In addition to the multilateral initiatives outlined above, Japan maintains a substantial diplomatic presence in the region, with Japanese embassies in eleven of the Pacific Islands Forum full member states. Infrastructure development and technical training have been two key areas for Japanese cooperation. Tokyo has been involved in a range of construction projects in recent times, including the building of highways (Solomon Islands), wind-power generation systems (Tonga), and numerous road and bridge projects (as in Papua New Guinea), as well as port development (Vanuatu).<sup>24</sup> Combating climate change and the promotion of renewables have been a key focus of Japanese activities.<sup>25</sup> The Japan International Cooperation Agency has been an important institution for Japan in leading many such activities.<sup>26</sup>

17 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘The Eighth Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM8)’. The emphasis on North Korea followed illicit North Korean activities in the Pacific Islands region in order to avoid UN sanctions. See Kaitu’u ’i Pangai Funaki and Yoichiro Sato, ‘Wanted: A Strategic Dialogue with Pacific Island Countries’, *Japan Times*, 28 January 2019, <[www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2019/01/28/commentary/japan-commentary/wanted-strategic-dialogue-pacific-island-countries/](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2019/01/28/commentary/japan-commentary/wanted-strategic-dialogue-pacific-island-countries/)> [Accessed 12 September 2019].

18 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘The Eighth Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM8)’. See also Daniel Hurst, ‘Japan’s Pacific Island Push’, *Diplomat*, 24 May 2018, <[thediplomat.com/2018/05/japans-pacific-island-push/](http://thediplomat.com/2018/05/japans-pacific-island-push/)> [Accessed 23 July 2019].

19 Funaki and Sato, ‘Wanted’.

20 Ibid.

21 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘The Eighth Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM8): Leaders’ Declaration’.

22 Wyeth, ‘Japan Keen to Bolster Ties with Pacific Island States’. See also Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Foreign Minister Kono Pays a Courtesy Call on the Prime Minister of Fiji’, 5 August 2019, <[www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e\\_002569.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_002569.html)> [Accessed 12 September 2019].

23 Liberatore, ‘Slow and Steady Wins the Race’.

24 Ibid. See also Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *White Paper on Development Cooperation 2017: Japan’s International Cooperation* (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 2018), pp. 128–31.

25 Liberatore, ‘Slow and Steady Wins the Race’.

26 For example, see Japan International Cooperation Agency, ‘Aiming to Strengthen Ties with Islands in the Pacific Vol. 1: Promoting Renewable Energy’, 7 May 2018, <[www.jica.go.jp/english/news/field/2018/20180507\\_01.html](http://www.jica.go.jp/english/news/field/2018/20180507_01.html)> [Accessed 23 July 2019].

In terms of policy in the Pacific Islands region, Japan has implemented and sustained a low-key process of engagement. Japan has made itself a long-term player in the region's international affairs, building partnerships around an ongoing commitment to development. Japan is a major aid donor in Oceania, behind New Zealand and Australia and probably China.<sup>27</sup> Its goal of becoming an 'aid power' in the region, a reason for establishing PALM, has been broadly accomplished.<sup>28</sup> Notwithstanding the pressures—budgetary and otherwise—on its overall foreign policy, and development cooperation policies in particular, Tokyo has maintained a continued and visible presence in the region. It has done so, moreover, in the face of growing competition for strategic influence on the part of China, which has become a major player in the region across aid as well as lending, with its total aid and lending activities sometimes estimated to be around US\$1.5 billion since 2011.<sup>29</sup>

## Where Do the Pacific Islands Fit in Japan's FOIP Strategy?

Even as a regional aid power, however, Japan today faces significant challenges to its engagement of the Pacific Islands region. These relate to both how it manages its own strategic priorities and how it deals with the growing challenges of a more contested Asia-Pacific. The rise of China and the challenge this presents for Japan provide the immediate context for understanding the counterbalancing flavour of FOIP and Japan's enthusiasm for potential balancing groupings such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or 'Quad'.<sup>30</sup> Since 2010 especially, Japan has become increasingly entangled in disputes with China, particularly over the status of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea.<sup>31</sup> Given that FOIP represents Japan's chief attempt to respond to these strategic tensions, to better understand the future place of the Pacific Islands in Japanese strategic thinking, it is necessary to understand where the region fits within FOIP.

27 Liberatore, 'Slow and Steady Wins the Race'. See also Denghua Zhang, 'China, India and Japan in the Pacific: Latest Developments, Motivations and Impact', *DPA Discussion Paper* 2018/6 (Canberra: Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, 2018), <[dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2018-09/dpa\\_dp2018\\_6\\_zhang\\_final.pdf](http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2018-09/dpa_dp2018_6_zhang_final.pdf)> [Accessed 12 September 2019]; Alexandre Dayant, 'Follow the Money: How Foreign Aid Spending Tells of Pacific Priorities', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 17 April 2019, <[www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/follow-money-how-foreign-aid-spending-tells-pacific-priorities](http://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/follow-money-how-foreign-aid-spending-tells-pacific-priorities)> [Accessed 12 September 2019].

28 Tarte, 'Norms and Japan's Foreign Aid Policy in the South Pacific', p. 142.

29 'China's Largesse in Tonga Threatens Future of Pacific Nation', *Asahi Shimbun*, 11 July 2019, <[www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201907110018.html](http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201907110018.html)> [Accessed 11 September 2019].

30 Adam Liff argues that there is little evidence that Japan's recent engagement of China contains significant hedging elements. Rather, it has actually moved towards a more balancing-heavy strategy. See Adam P. Liff, 'Unambivalent Alignment: Japan's China Strategy, the US Alliance, and the "Hedging" Fallacy', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2019), pp. 453–91. Regarding the balancing aspect of the 'Quad', see H. D. P. Envall, 'The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue: Towards an Indo-Pacific Order?' Policy Report (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, September 2019), p. 5, <[www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/PR190909\\_The-Quadrilateral-Security-Dialogue.pdf](http://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/PR190909_The-Quadrilateral-Security-Dialogue.pdf)> [Accessed 12 September].

31 On Japan's dispute with China during this period, see Sheila A. Smith, *Intimate Rivals: Japanese Domestic Politics and a Rising China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 1–4. See also H. D. P. Envall, 'Japan: From Passive Partner to Active Ally', in Michael Wesley (ed.), *Global Allies: Comparing US Alliances in the 21st Century* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2017), pp. 27–28.

The government of Prime Minister Shinzō Abe has been particularly active in promoting the FOIP idea. Admittedly described as “nebulous” by the *Economist*,<sup>32</sup> FOIP centres on the idea of ‘maintaining and strengthening’ an international order stretching from the Indian to the Pacific Ocean. It is based around three broad objectives of: (1) ensuring key principles such as the rule of law and freedom and navigation are upheld through the region; (2) creating economic prosperity in the region by establishing greater economic connections; and (3) ensuring that the region is characterised by peace and stability by engaging in capacity building in such areas as maritime law enforcement, non-proliferation, and disaster risk reduction.<sup>33</sup>

Tomohiko Satake argues that FOIP has three important dimensions in terms of Japan’s strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific. Put simply, these are balancing, connectivity and order-building. *Balancing* refers to the aim of developing a stable, multipolar balance of power in the region that provides sufficient strategic space to accommodate both China as a rising power and the United States as the established, if declining, hegemonic power. From the Japanese perspective, a failure to achieve a regional power balance will lead either to a great-power war or to the domination of the region by China. Abe, for instance, has warned of the South China Sea becoming a “Lake Beijing”.<sup>34</sup> *Connectivity* focuses on the goal of building up the resilience of states in the region, such as against terrorism or natural disasters, particularly through greater development activities and the establishment of region-wide connections (especially linking the Indo and Pacific realms of FOIP). *Order-building* covers the creation of region-wide rules and norms of international conduct (e.g., the rule of law and processes around managing territorial disputes).<sup>35</sup> This order-building can be viewed as providing the mechanisms for constraining what would otherwise be the unchecked use of power in the region.

Consequently, although open to all supportive countries, FOIP is focused on linking Japan to other maritime powers through the Indo-Pacific—including the United States, but especially India and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members—through to Africa. This focus in South and Southeast Asia covers a range of issues, including the rule of law, maritime safety and capacity building, as well as development. Indeed, Satake argues that Southeast Asia, but particularly ASEAN, “is at the heart” of Japan’s approach to order-building in the FOIP strategy.<sup>36</sup> A similar observation might also be made about India, however. As its relationship with China has deteriorated, Japan has actively courted India as a strategic partner in areas covering nuclear cooperation,

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32 ‘Asian Countries Fear China, But Many Won’t Side with America’, *Economist*, 5 June 2019, <[www.economist.com/asia/2019/06/05/asian-countries-fear-china-but-many-wont-side-with-america](http://www.economist.com/asia/2019/06/05/asian-countries-fear-china-but-many-wont-side-with-america)> [Accessed 23 July 2019]. Owing to its ambiguities, there is considerable disagreement as to the exact nature of FOIP and whether it is a geo-economic, geopolitical or order-building strategy, or some combination of these. See Tomohiko Satake, ‘Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” and Its Implication for ASEAN’, *Southeast Asia Affairs*, vol. 2019 (2019), pp. 69–70.

33 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2018*, p. 20.

34 Shinzo Abe, ‘Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond’, *Project Syndicate*, 27 December 2012, <[www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe#5R2zcYPpL6wLTzTF.99](http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe#5R2zcYPpL6wLTzTF.99)> [Accessed 23 July 2019].

35 Satake, ‘Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy”’, pp. 73–76.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 77.



trade, infrastructure investment and defence cooperation.<sup>37</sup> Abe has been notably active, promoting the idea of a closer alignment between FOIP and India's 'Act East Policy', such as via greater regional 'connectivity', enhanced maritime security cooperation and more joint cooperation with ASEAN.<sup>38</sup> As Satake notes, the logic of deepening cooperation with India under FOIP is to coax India to do more to counterbalance China.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, Takeshi Yūzawa has argued that China has been "one of the main causes" for Japan's push to deepen its relationship with India.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Japanese analysts invariably view the growing Indo-Japanese relationship in the context of China's rise.<sup>41</sup>

Abe himself has been prominent in both defining and promoting FOIP.<sup>42</sup> In 2007 (during his first stint as Japanese prime minister), he talked of a "broader Asia" taking shape at the "confluence of the two seas of the Indian and Pacific Oceans".<sup>43</sup> In 2012, he raised the idea of a "democratic security diamond" that would help to "safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian ocean region to the western Pacific".<sup>44</sup> In August 2016, in Africa, he talked of a "union of two free and open oceans and two continents" and of a "confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and of Asia and Africa".<sup>45</sup> Three months later, in November 2016, at a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Abe contended that a "free and open Indo-Pacific" would be "vital to achieving prosperity in the entire region."<sup>46</sup> Elsewhere, Abe has been a strong proponent of reforming Japan's own strategic outlook under the banner, noted earlier, of making a 'proactive contribution to peace'. The aim of this policy has been to increase Japan's capacity for deterrence, build up its alliance cooperation with the United States, and expand its diplomacy around the region.<sup>47</sup> To these ends, Japan has enacted numerous policy changes. It has reformed its domestic security institutions, such as by reinterpreting the Constitution to give the country the right to collective self-defence. It has begun to build up and reorient its defence forces to enable them to deter and repel aggression to the south of Japan and to

37 H. D. P. Envall, 'Japan's India Engagement: From Different Worlds to Strategic Partners', in Ian Hall (ed.), *The Engagement of India: Strategies and Responses* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), pp. 46–49. See also H. D. P. Envall and Ian Hall, 'Asian Strategic Partnerships: New Practices and Regional Security Governance', *Asian Politics & Policy*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2016), pp. 98–99.

38 Government of Japan, 'Japan–India Joint Statement: Toward a Free, Open and Prosperous Indo-Pacific', 14 September 2017, p. 1, <[www.mofa.go.jp/files/000289999.pdf](http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000289999.pdf)> [Accessed 31 July 2019].

39 Satake, 'Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" and Its Implication for ASEAN', p. 71.

40 Takeshi Yūzawa, 'Nichin Kankei no Genjō to Kadai' [Indo-Japanese Relations: Current Conditions and Problems], *Kokusai Mondai* [International Affairs], no. 571 (2008), p. 43.

41 For example, see Takenori Horimoto, 'Taikokuka suru Indo: Chūgoku to no Taihi' [India Becoming a Great Power: The Contrast with China], *Gaikō* [Diplomacy], no. 6 (2011), p. 116.

42 See Hidetaka Yoshimatsu, 'The Indo-Pacific in Japan's Strategy towards India', *Contemporary Politics*, (2018), pp. 6–8, doi:10.1080/13569775.2018.1556769.

43 Shinzo Abe, 'Confluence of the Two Seas', speech at the Parliament of the Republic of India, 22 August 2007, <[www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html)> [Accessed 23 July 2019].

44 Abe, 'Asia's Democratic Security Diamond'.

45 Shinzo Abe, 'Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI)', 27 August 2016, <[www.mofa.go.jp/afr/af2/page4e\\_000496.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/afr/af2/page4e_000496.html)> [Accessed 23 July 2019].

46 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Japan–India Joint Statement', 11 November 2016, p. 1, <[www.mofa.go.jp/files/000202950.pdf](http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000202950.pdf)> [Accessed 23 July 2019].

47 Government of Japan, 'National Security Strategy', 17 December 2013, p. 5, <[www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf](http://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf)> [Accessed 31 July 2019]. See also H. D. P. Envall, 'Japan's "Pivot" Perspective: Reassurance, Restructuring, and the Rebalance', *Security Challenges*, vol. 12, no. 3 (2016), pp. 15–18.



act further afield, such as in the South China Sea.<sup>48</sup> It has also sought to pursue strategic partnerships around the region, such as with India and Australia.<sup>49</sup>

Thus viewed, the Pacific Islands still fit within FOIP only at the margins, with development the central overlapping interest. However, the Pacific Islands region constitutes only a small part of Japan's ODA across the Indo-Pacific. Of the major subregions making up the FOIP region—East and Southeast Asia, Oceania, Sub-Saharan Africa, and North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia—the Oceania subregion, which covers the Pacific Islands countries, counts for less than 1 per cent of ODA spending across FOIP. The main subregion by far is East and Southeast Asia, which takes up just over 75 per cent of Japan's ODA across the region.<sup>50</sup> Development is also just one of FOIP's main policy pillars. The other two, the rule of law and capacity building, are more important to Japan in terms of its wider strategic reorientation, whether the purpose of FOIP is geo-economic, geopolitical or order-building. If Japan is to become a regional power with some capacity to resist Chinese hegemony, Tokyo must manage the multiple challenges of building up its own deterrence capabilities, ensuring that the United States stays engaged in the region, and improving its capacity to build regional coalitions.<sup>51</sup> Achieving region-wide economic connectivity and greater capacity-building are now seen as the chief means of meeting this challenge.

## What Are Japan's Interests in the Pacific Islands as They Relate to FOIP?

Putting Japan's goals concerning the Pacific Islands region into the broader context of the FOIP strategy is not to dismiss the importance of these goals. Japan has a range of national interests in the Pacific Islands region, from securing access to fisheries and sea lanes for trade, such as those connecting Japan to Australia, as well as enhancing Japan's diplomatic support, especially at the UN.<sup>52</sup> Achieving sustainable development and reducing the region's unique vulnerabilities, such as climate change and other

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48 It should be noted that not all these policies originated with the Abe government. The reorientation of defence strategy southward started with the previous government led by the then Democratic Party of Japan. See H. D. P. Envall, 'Clashing Expectations: Strategic Thinking and Alliance Mismanagement in Japan', in Yoichiro Sato and Tan See Seng (eds), *United States Engagement in the Asia Pacific: Perspectives from Asia* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2015), pp. 76–77.

49 H. D. P. Envall, 'The "Abe Doctrine": Japan's New Regional Realism', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2020), p. 46. For an analysis on Japan's partnership with Australia, for example, see Michael Heazle and Yuki Tatsumi, 'Explaining Australia–Japan Security Cooperation and its Prospect: "The Interests that Bind?"' *Pacific Review*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2018), pp. 38–56.

50 The figures are from 2016 and exclude contributions to international organisations. See Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Priority Policy for Development Cooperation FY 2017', April 2017, p. 8, <[www.mofa.go.jp/files/000259285.pdf](http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000259285.pdf)> [Accessed 31 July 2019].

51 See H. D. P. Envall, 'What Kind of Japan? Tokyo's Strategic Options in a Contested Asia', *Survival*, vol. 61, no. 4 (2019), pp. 117–30. In this regard, the Japanese government was no doubt heartened by the update of America's own Indo-Pacific strategy in mid-2019. See US Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, 1 June 2019).

52 Kobayashi, 'Japan's Diplomacy towards Member Countries of Pacific Islands Forum', p. 100. See also Susumu Kuronuma, 'Japan, US and Australia Push Back on China's South Pacific Expansion', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 3 July 2019, <[asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-US-and-Australia-push-back-on-China-s-South-Pacific-expansion](http://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-US-and-Australia-push-back-on-China-s-South-Pacific-expansion)> [Accessed 15 September 2019].

environmental challenges, are central components of Japan's ODA program for the region. As Japan's *White Paper on Development Cooperation 2017* states, the "Pacific island countries are not only Japan's 'neighbors' that are bound by the Pacific Ocean, but ... also have historical ties with Japan".<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Japan's interests in the Pacific Islands region so far as FOIP is concerned are strongly developmental, with an emphasis on addressing "vulnerabilities unique to small island developing states".<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, it is possible to read between the lines of FOIP to see how Japan's deeper strategic aims might shift its interests in the Pacific Islands region. For Japan, simply *being in* the region in a visible and accepted way is perhaps as important as what it might do in the region. The growing presence of China in the Pacific Islands region means that it has become more urgent for Japan to press its own leadership credentials around the region and to distinguish its approach from that adopted by China. As noted earlier, the FOIP strategy should be viewed, in the Pacific Islands region as it is elsewhere, as a type of counter-balancing policy vis-à-vis China.

Japan is pursuing balancing interests in the Pacific Islands region across a range of FOIP dimensions. In the area of connectivity, for example, Japan is already actively seeking to counter the influence of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by deepening its own investment and infrastructure development in the region. Japan has added to existing investment and development initiatives (e.g. from the Asian Development Bank) by pursuing further opportunities for cooperation, including expanding the recently established trilateral partnership between Japan, Australia, and the United States for greater infrastructure investment in the Indo-Pacific. Accordingly, the Trilateral Partnership for Infrastructure Investment in the Indo-Pacific, operationalised in November 2018, is intended to help "deliver major new infrastructure projects, enhance digital connectivity and energy infrastructure, and to achieve other shared development priorities in the Indo-Pacific". By June 2019, the three governments had reviewed potential projects in "electrification, gas value chains, and digital connectivity" and had sent a joint mission to Papua New Guinea to identify possible schemes. Electrification and liquefied gas projects have been high on the agenda.<sup>55</sup>

53 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *White Paper on Development Cooperation 2017*, p. 128.

54 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Priority Policy for Development Cooperation FY 2017', p. 10.

55 'Joint Statement of The Governments of Australia, Japan, and the United States of America on the Trilateral Partnership for infrastructure investment in the Indo-Pacific', 17 November 2018, <[www.pm.gov.au/media/joint-statement-governments-australia-japan-and-united-states](http://www.pm.gov.au/media/joint-statement-governments-australia-japan-and-united-states)> [Accessed 4 October 2019]. On the proposed electrification project (which also brings in New Zealand), see Prime Minister of Australia, 'The Papua New Guinea Electrification Partnership', 18 November 2018, <[www.pm.gov.au/media/papua-new-guinea-electrification-partnership](http://www.pm.gov.au/media/papua-new-guinea-electrification-partnership)> [Accessed 4 October 2019]. Some have questioned the viability of this project. See Shane McLeod, 'Plugging in PNG: Electricity, Partners and Politics', *Interpreter*, 10 April 2019, <[www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/plugging-png-electricity-partners-and-politics](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/plugging-png-electricity-partners-and-politics)> [Accessed 4 October 2019]. On subsequent developments, see Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'US, Japan, Australia Reaffirm Commitment to Indo-Pacific Infrastructure Development', 25 June 2019, <[dfat.gov.au/news/media/Pages/us-japan-australia-reaffirm-commitment-to-indo-pacific-infrastructure-development.aspx](http://dfat.gov.au/news/media/Pages/us-japan-australia-reaffirm-commitment-to-indo-pacific-infrastructure-development.aspx)> [Accessed 4 October 2019]. For reporting around a possible liquefied gas project, see also Hisao Kodachi, 'Japan, US and Australia begin own "Belt and Road" in South Pacific', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 25 June 2019, <[asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-US-and-Australia-begin-own-Belt-and-Road-in-South-Pacific](http://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-US-and-Australia-begin-own-Belt-and-Road-in-South-Pacific)> [Accessed 23 July 2019]. For more on the connections between the ADB, FOIP, and other infrastructure investment initiatives, see Hidetaka Yoshimatsu, 'New Dynamics in Sino-Japanese Rivalry: Sustaining Infrastructure Development in Asia', *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 17, no. 113 (2018), pp. 724–25.

For Japan, projects such as this should also be attached to a set of established international norms and principles. At the Group of Twenty (G20) Summit held in Osaka in June 2019, the participants adopted a package of six principles of infrastructure development, including guidelines for such matters as sustainable development, efficiency, environmental protection, and governance. These were quickly seen as balancing against China's BRI.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, balancing behaviour can be found in Japan's interests regarding regional resilience and order-building. Japan has been active in building up the resilience of nations around the Indo-Pacific, especially in developing regional players' capacity to maintain their territorial sovereignty. Already, Japan has undertaken such a role in Southeast Asia, via supplying coast guard vessels to countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam. It is now also providing resilience and capacity-building training to Fiji.<sup>57</sup> As Japan's emphasis on territorial sovereignty suggests, these efforts are often tied in with normative ideas around law and order. In this regard, Japan's interests in the Pacific Islands are not unique but do align well with the larger FOIP strategy. Japan is seeking to play a significant role in the Pacific Islands region as a way of supplementing and supporting its larger broader goals, whether that be in terms of balancing, capacity-building or order-building.

In terms of FOIP's maritime space, for instance, Japan's interests are still chiefly in the South China Sea, the Straits of Malacca and the Indian Ocean. Once again, Southeast Asia is at the heart of Japanese strategy, owing to the 'Confluence of the Two Seas' idea. The convergence of these two maritime domains in Southeast Asia makes it the key linkage-point upon which the entire FOIP framework rests. Further, Southeast Asia offers substantial capacity-building opportunities for Japan as it seeks to counter China by boosting key bilateral partnerships, such as with Vietnam or the Philippines. Japan's aim here is to support international norms around territorial disputes, especially in the South China Sea. Speaking in 2014, Abe outlined what Japan saw as the core international principles for resolving maritime territorial disputes in the region—to follow international law, restrain from using force to push claims, and settle disputes peacefully.<sup>58</sup> Southeast Asia is significant, therefore, both because the region is central to FOIP's notion of connectivity and because it adds to Japan's balancing options.<sup>59</sup>

56 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'G20 Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment', 29 June 2019, <[www.mof.go.jp/english/international\\_policy/convention/g20/annex6\\_1.pdf](http://www.mof.go.jp/english/international_policy/convention/g20/annex6_1.pdf)>. See also Tomohiro Osaki, 'In Blow to China, Japan's "Quality Infrastructure" to Get Endorsement at Osaka G20', *Japan Times*, 25 June 2019, <[www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/06/25/business/economy-business/blow-china-japans-quality-infrastructure-get-endorsement-osaka-g20/](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/06/25/business/economy-business/blow-china-japans-quality-infrastructure-get-endorsement-osaka-g20/)> [Accessed 23 July 2019].

57 On Japan's support of the Philippines coast guard, see Hidetaka Yoshimatsu, 'Japan and Southeast Asia', in Alice D. Ba and Mark Beeson (eds), *Contemporary Southeast Asia: The Politics of Change, Contestation, and Adaptation*, 3rd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 258. Regarding recent Japan–Fiji cooperation, see 'Shōchō Ōdan "Indo Taiheiyō Shisetsudan" ga Suishin Nichibeigō no Fijii Shien' [Cross Ministerial 'Indo-Pacific Mission' Promotes Support of Fiji by Japan, US, and Australia], *Sankei Shinbun* [Sankei Newspaper], 13 July 2019, <[www.sankei.com/politics/news/190713/pli1907130029-n1.html](http://www.sankei.com/politics/news/190713/pli1907130029-n1.html)> [Accessed 23 July 2019].

58 Shinzo Abe, 'Peace and Prosperity in Asia, Forevermore: Japan for the Rule of Law, Asia for the Rule of Law, and the Rule of Law for All of Us', Keynote Address, 13th IISS Asian Security Summit, The Shangri-La Dialogue, 30 May 2014, <[www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page4e\\_000086.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page4e_000086.html)> [Accessed 23 July 2019].

59 Yoshimatsu, 'The Indo-Pacific in Japan's Strategy Towards India', pp. 5–6. See also Shahana Thankachan, 'Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy": Reality before the Rhetoric?' *Maritime Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2017), p. 85.

By comparison, Japan's maritime interest in the Pacific Islands region lacks this linkage dynamic and, instead, is concerned with promoting its idea of a rules-based order along with the norms and principles underpinning it. Even as territorial disputes are less relevant to the Pacific Islands, from the Japanese perspective, the region's states could still play a role in upholding and promoting these order-building principles more widely. In both Japan's statements on FOIP and the 2018 PALM Leaders' Declaration, expressions of commitment to the rule of law and freedom of navigation are prominent, along with commitments to 'peace and stability' and cooperation on maritime safety.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, at PALM 2018, the leaders restated the importance of respect for international law, "including freedom of navigation and overflight and other internationally lawful uses of the seas".<sup>61</sup> The Pacific Islands region also provides Japan with an opportunity to deepen many of these international norms, including those which have particular saliency for the Pacific Islands. Japan is therefore supportive of a range of additional norms, including environmental-protection norms such as the management of ocean resources (e.g., combatting illegal fishing).<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

To conclude, a useful way of assessing the likely implications of FOIP for Japan's future approach to the Pacific Islands is to extend the application of Satake's three dimensions of FOIP—balancing, connectivity and order-building—to the region.<sup>63</sup> The logic of FOIP across these dimensions points towards Japan seeking to achieve a more complex set of policy objectives in the Pacific Islands in future. Goals around connectivity, including development and resiliency, will understandably remain central to Japan's approach. However, the evolution of FOIP thus far suggests that Japan's engagement will broaden to encompass more concrete actions across the other dimensions as well. Balancing and order-building features are likely to underly most if not all new policies, even if at a smaller scale than elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific.

Two shifts are especially worth emphasising. First, balancing is likely to become more noticeable. As Japan seeks the support of Pacific Islands nations in resisting the influence of other external players, such as China, it may pursue deeper defence-related cooperation. Whilst it is highly unlikely that Japan will establish a direct military presence in the region, Tokyo may do more in the way of joint military exercises and, especially, work on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, elements of balancing will become more apparent in other FOIP areas such as connectivity and resilience. That Japan is seeking to balance against China's BRI through joint infrastructure

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60 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2018*, p. 20.

61 Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'The Eighth Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM8): Leaders' Declaration'.

62 Ibid.

63 Satake, 'Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" and Its Implication for ASEAN', pp. 73–76.

64 HADR cooperation has been part of Japan's approach to regional community-building for some time, especially in terms of its cooperation with Australia and the United States. See H. D. P. Envall, 'Community Building in Asia? Trilateral Cooperation in Humanitarian and Disaster Relief', in Yuki Tatsumi (ed.), *US–Japan–Australia Security Cooperation: Prospects and Challenges* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2015), pp. 53–54.

projects with Australia and the United States, as noted earlier, is a good example of this pursuit of balancing goals across a range of FOIP dimensions. The recent announcements on resiliency (particularly HADR) and capacity-building cooperation with Fiji indicate how such policies might develop further.

Second, order-building will also likely become a greater priority. In part, this may simply entail further rhetoric at bilateral and multilateral meetings such as PALM. Japan will continue to emphasise the importance of international law for resolving territorial disputes peacefully and the need for actors in the region to commit to appropriate international frameworks in resolving their disputes. Beyond rhetoric, Tokyo may well seek to support regional norms through further actions that, once again, take on a balancing flavour. Here, Japan may attempt to support Pacific Islands states in their task of maintaining sovereignty over their vast maritime domains, such as through greater investment in surveillance and policing capabilities and via upgrades to coast guard equipment and training. This would follow the country's approach to Southeast Asia. For the Pacific Islands, the obvious option for Japan would be to work closely with established partners, such as Australia and the United States, via the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) or, bringing in India, via the Quad.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the Quad is often viewed as a potential mechanism for cooperation amongst these actors on HADR in the region.<sup>66</sup> Likewise, the TSD partners have already announced their objective of improving engagement with the Pacific Islands.<sup>67</sup> Infrastructure investment activities, such as those noted above, are also likely to take on an increasingly order-building dimension, especially around the types of rules and principles that apply to such projects, as indicated by Japan's inclusion of global investment principles in the outcomes of the Osaka G20 Summit.

Overall, then, Japan's Pacific Islands policies are shifting to a more strategic form of engagement. Japan will likely play a greater role as an external actor in the region, with its position becoming more complex and multidimensional and, perhaps, more 'normalised'. This would tie in with the country's ambition to become a more 'normal nation' (*futsū no kuni*) in international affairs, an objective it has pursued for much of the post-Cold War period.<sup>68</sup> Whether the region will become a larger part of Japanese grand strategy is less clear, however. As this article has indicated, the focus of the FOIP strategy lies primarily in Southeast Asia and, to some extent, India. More likely, the Pacific Islands will remain a relatively minor part of Japan's overall foreign policy. Further, the breadth of FOIP—extending from Africa to the Americas and covering security, trade and diplomacy—will place significant demands on Japanese policymakers as they seek to realise these ambitions. As some of the problems surrounding the PALM8 summit in 2018 have highlighted, Japan may lack the capacity to carry through on these commitments.

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65 For more on Japan's security cooperation with Australia, including in the Pacific Islands region, see Thomas S. Wilkins, 'After a Decade of Strategic Partnership: Japan and Australia "Decentering" from the US Alliance?' *Pacific Review*, vol. 31, no. 4 (2018), p. 504.

66 Kate Stevenson and H. D. P. Envall, 'The "Quad" and Disaster Management: An Australian Perspective', in Yuki Tatsumi and Jason Li (eds), *International Disaster Response: Rebuilding the Quad?* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2019), p. 15.

67 Marise Payne, 'Trilateral Strategic Dialogue Joint Ministerial Statement', Minister for Foreign Affairs, Minister for Women media release, 2 August 2019, <foreignminister.gov.au/releases/Pages/2019/mp\_mr\_190802.aspx> [Accessed 13 September 2019].

68 See Andrew L. Oros, *Normalizing Japan: Politics, Identity and the Evolution of Security Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 72; H. D. P. Envall, *Japanese Diplomacy: The Role of Leadership* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), p. 78.

A major power in relative decline, and facing numerous fiscal, demographic and strategic challenges, Japan may find itself too stretched to accomplish all its agenda. Regardless of whether it is enough to win the race, therefore, 'slow and steady' may have to suffice.

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*H. D. P. Envall is a Fellow / Senior Lecturer in the Department of International Relations at The Australian National University.*