

The role of the QUAD and the partnership with South Asia: the importance of the Indian Ocean for Japan FOIP strategy

Interview with Nobuhito HOBO



Professor, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS). Executive adviser, GRIPS ALLIANCE. Former Ambassador of Japan to Sri Lanka and Maldives. Former Vice-President of Japan International Cooperation Agency.

Question 1: Could you explain the importance of the Indian Ocean for Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy?

One of the most important events was the Japan-United States Summit Meeting in April 2021. Mr. SUGA Yoshihide, then Prime Minister of Japan, held the meeting with the Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr., President of the United States of America, in Washington DC for the first time. It is worthwhile to note that Japan and the United States could reaffirm the shared strategy for the "Indo-Pacific" under the new presidency of the United States.

Reportedly the two leaders noted their commitment to universal values, including freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, and they shared their views on strengthening the Japan-U.S. Alliance, which is the cornerstone of peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. They also confirmed that Japan and the United States will strengthen their unity and

cooperation while partnering with like-minded countries such as Australia, India, and ASEAN countries towards the realization of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”.

Another important development was in relation to the G7 process. There were the G7 Summit Meeting in Cornwall, United Kingdom, in June, plus two G7 Foreign and Development Ministers’ Meetings in May and December.

At the G7 Foreign and Development Ministers’ Meeting in December 2021, the G7 ministers discussed on the “Indo-Pacific” with Foreign Ministers from the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) for the first time. They debated the importance of maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific, which is inclusive and based on the rule of law. It was a new development and a confirmation they shared the same values. Meanwhile, the situation was worsening in the region, including in the South China Sea over China’s claim of the nine dots line.

The Chair’s Statement of the Meeting tells us that the G7 strongly reaffirmed the commitments and positions set out at their previous meeting in May 2021, which are as follows: *“We remain seriously concerned about the situation in and around the East and South China Seas. We underscore the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, and encourage the peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues”*. The May meeting of G7 ministers also urged a peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea, considering the 12 July 2016 award rendered by the Arbitral Tribunal under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the SEA (UNCLOS).

It can be said that the common positions regarding the “Indo-Pacific” issue are steadily consolidated under the G7 framework.

Japan has seen an increased level of commitment from G7 members and other like-minded countries in 2021 to a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”.

Let me turn to QUAD. The most significant development in 2021 was the first two summit meetings, one in teleconference in March, and the first summit meeting in person held in Washington in December. QUAD is now rapidly becoming the most important alliance formed by Australia, India, Japan and the United States.

Through that process, it is understood that the Indian Ocean is inseparable from the Pacific Ocean, when the stakeholders talk about the maritime security and freedom of navigation of the most important sea-lane in the world. There are many stakeholders in Asia, Europe, Africa and American continents. In addition, many have pointed out that the center of gravity of the world economic growth is gradually moving from the eastern part of Asia to the westward direction in historical perspective.

**“It can be said that the common positions regarding the 'Indo-Pacific' issue are steadily consolidated under the G7 framework.
Japan has seen an increased level of commitment from G7 members and other like-minded countries in 2021 to a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'.”**

Question 2: After AUKUS what is the relevance and specificities of QUAD ?

Let me start with further explanation about QUAD. It is important to note that QUAD has a significantly wider agenda than before. It reflects the continued global pandemic of COVID-19, the accelerated climate crisis and an ever-more complex regional security context, as expressed by the QUAD leaders in their meeting in September 2021. QUAD is now an alliance that addresses not only maritime security, but also a diverse and specific agenda needed to realize a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” with resilience and inclusiveness. This agenda now covers such areas as COVID-19 vaccination through the “QUAD Vaccine Partnership”, science and technology cooperation, in line with the “QUAD Principles on Technology Design, Development, Governance, and Use”, and a new QUAD infrastructure partnership and so on.

QUAD has also a firm commitment to annual leaders’ meeting and foreign ministers’ meeting, which are supported by regular senior officials’ meetings and working groups. In the Joint Statement from QUAD Leaders dated September 24, 2021, the leaders reaffirmed their strong support for ASEAN’s unity and centrality and for the “ASEAN’s Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”. In the same paragraph of the Statement, they also welcomed the “EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”. Those clear statements by QUAD leaders exemplify their vision to have multi-layered relationships with other like-minded partners so as to share the same values with as many members of the world community as possible. In that context, it can be said that QUAD is of a highly “inclusive” nature.

AUKUS was formed in September 2021 as an enhanced trilateral security partnership among Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States in the Indo-Pacific region. AUKUS has a special emphasis on strengthening the Royal Australian Navy with nuclear-powered submarines and promotes deeper information and technology sharing. Japan welcomes the creation of AUKUS, which aims at the realization of the same values as QUAD, a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”, and the commitment to the rules-based international order. Japan considers that AUKUS and QUAD will be able to complement each other.

Question 3: India is at the forefront of strategic tensions with China. In that context, what could be the scope of Japan-India cooperation? Could India join the TPP?

It is true that India faces tensions with China in the north, along the mountainous border, as well as in the south, over the Indian Ocean and beyond.

I remember that, just during Chinese President Xi Jinping’s good will visit to India in September 2014, Chinese troops intruded inside the Line of Actual Control in the north and a Chinese submarine slipped into the Indian Ocean from the Colombo port in Sri Lanka. I saw the submarine by my own eyes twice in Colombo and was puzzled by the complexed relationship between India and China.

Japan views India as a crucially important country for peace and stability in the world. Japan and India have strengthened cooperation under the commitment of the “Japan-India Special Strategic and Global Partnership” since 2014. Japan and India committed to have an annual leaders’ meeting and to work together for peace and stability in the region, not only bilaterally but also with other like-minded countries in various forms.

Let me refer to the speech of H.E. Mr. Nahendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, on the occasion of the Shangri La Dialogue held in Singapore in June 2018. In his keynote address, he said “the Indo-Pacific region is a natural region” and stated India’s vision with special emphasis on the inclusiveness as follows: *“It stands for a free, open, inclusive region, which embraces us all in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity. It includes all nations in this geography as also others beyond who have a stake in it”*

As for the bilateral relationship between Japan and India, economic resilience is one of the most important areas of cooperation. It covers such issues as currency stabilization, strengthening the trade relation and supply chains as well as industrial development. Japan extends Official Development Assistance (ODA) to India with the tune of 2.7 billion USD in 2019 (Gross), which is the highest amount for Japan as well as India. Japan’s ODA has covered, among others, connectivity projects in India’s northeastern region since 2003. This was followed by the establishment of “Japan-India Act East Forum” in 2007. Japan views connectivity as the key word to bridge India and ASEAN countries.

In the field of maritime security, we see the steady progress of the Exercise Malabar. All QUAD countries participated in the Exercise in two consecutive years, 2020 and 2021.

QUAD, as a four countries’ mechanism, has identified a number of areas of cooperation in order to enhance “resilience” in the region. Those areas are the COVID-19 pandemic, Science and Technology (S&T), including climate issues, cybersecurity and biotechnology, in addition to quality infrastructure and human resource development.

In addition, Japan and India inked the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement in February 2011.

In that context, I believe that Japan welcomes India to join any mega-agreement of comprehensive economic partnership on India’s own merit. India has several options for the future. Those might be the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and/or the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), although India has decided to keep its distance with RCEP for the time being. As academic studies on such new generation trade agreements suggest, India might be able to enjoy economic benefits through “tariff” and “non-tariff” ways under those mega-agreements if it agreed to participate.

Question 4: Are there possibilities of trilateral cooperation, particularly in the maritime domain, between Japan, India and EU member states or the EU?

Yes, Japan welcomed the “Joint Statement on India-EU Leaders Meeting” in May 2021. That is one way, I understand, to expand the wings of cooperation from the viewpoint of QUAD, too. There is a lot of room for cooperation with like-minded EU member states as well as with the EU.

For example, in April 2021 India joined the La Perouse naval exercise in the Indian Ocean for the first time. The exercise was led by France and other QUAD countries also participated.

The world witnessed a number of like-minded endeavors in 2021 even if one only considers the field of maritime security.

In February, the French nuclear attack submarine SNA Emeraude, along with the support ship BSAM Seine, conducted a patrol in the South China Sea, demonstrating France's capacity to deploy a maritime capacity in the region with other strategic partners. The submarine joined three Indonesian warships to participate in a naval exercise in nearby Sunda Strait while Indonesia is in dispute with China over the nine-dash line.

In September 2021, British aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth made a first call at a port in Japan. The Queen Elizabeth participated in a joint exercise with warships from the United States, the Netherlands, Canada and Japan before the call. The exercise was part of international efforts to achieve a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific".

In December 2021, the German frigate Bayern, which was on a seven-month patrol in the Indo-Pacific, reportedly crossed the South China Sea in what is German's first Indo-Pacific voyage in 20 years. The crossing of the South China Sea is meant to underscore Germany's commitment to freedom of navigation and to the rules-based international order.

Another encouraging example is the "France's Indo-Pacific Strategy 2021" forwarded by President Emmanuel Macron in July. I am quoting the following remarks by the French President with my sincere respect: *"As a fully-fledged Indo-Pacific country, France also wants to be a stabilizing force, promoting the value of freedom and rule of law. We aim to provide solutions to the security, economic, health, climate and environmental challenges facing countries in the zone"*.

Question 5: How do you envisage the future of QUAD?

We will continue our efforts until the purpose of QUAD is materialized. It is a matter of both values and our future beyond the boundary of QUAD countries.

I would like to draw your attention to the very venue of the first speech introducing the concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" by then Prime Minister of Japan, Mr. Shinzo Abe, in 2016. The venue was in Nairobi, Kenya, on the occasion of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI). Mr. Abe talked about the future of the Indo-Pacific region from the soil of Africa.

As it is symbolic to show Japan's starting point, I am quoting the following lines telling the original vision of the future: *"What will give stability and prosperity to the world is none other than the enormous liveliness brought forth through the union of two free and open oceans and two continents. Japan bears the responsibility of fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and of Asia and Africa into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and make it prosperous. Japan wants to work together with you in Africa in order to make the seas that connect the two continents into peaceful seas that are governed by the rule of law. That is what we wish to do with you. The winds that traverse the ocean turn our eyes to the future"*.

There might be some differences about the understanding of the geographical coverage of the “Indo-Pacific”, future areas of cooperation and envisaged timespan, even among QUAD countries. Nonetheless, I believe Japan will maintain the commitment taken at the starting point and the underlining vision.

January 2022
