

Japan’s Confluence of the Two Seas Conception: The Influence of Mughal Prince Dara Shikoh’s 1655 Text “Majma’-ul-Bahrain” [The Mingling of the Two Oceans]

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Abstract

In his March 2023 visit to India, Japan’s Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida could not help but feel a sense of destiny when he put forth his vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) in New Delhi. PM Kishida reminded the Indian audience that FOIP, as a concept, was proposed by his esteemed friend and former Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe. It was in India that former PM Abe delivered a speech in 2007 in which he linked the Pacific and the Indian Oceans for the first time. This research paper chronicles the conceptual journey of Japan’s FOIP strategy and of India’s centrality to it. In his historic 2007 speech titled “Confluence of the Two Seas” Abe famously cited the title of the seminal 1655 book – *Majma’-ul-Bahrain* [The Mingling of the Two Oceans] authored by the Mughal Prince, Dara Shikoh, and said, “We are now at a point at which the Confluence of the Two Seas is coming into being.” This 17th century book is said to have been the inspiration, foundation, and title of Abe’s vision to nurture an open and transparent Indo-Pacific maritime zone as part of a “broader Asia.”

In his March 2023 visit to India, Japan’s Prime Minister Fumio Kishida could not help but feel a sense of destiny when he put forth his vision for a *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* in New Delhi. Kishida reminded the Indian audience that the *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* (FOIP) concept was proposed by his esteemed friend former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and stated:

Here in this country, former Prime Minister Abe delivered a speech that linked the Pacific and the Indian Oceans for the first time. India is the place where FOIP came into being. I also traveled here in 2015 as Minister for Foreign Affairs and spoke at an event... about how Japan and India should jointly lead the region and the world in the “Era of the Indo-Pacific.”¹

Declaration of the “Confluence of the Two Seas” Notion [New Delhi, 2007]

Prime Minister Kishida highlighted the necessity of developing FOIP, arguing that the international community is at a historical turning point. The balance of power is shifting dramatically, and the remarkable rise of India is one such example. With the “Global South” rising and the world becoming more diverse, a good understanding of historical and cultural backgrounds needs to be developed, which implies sharing responsibility for global governance.²

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¹ “The Future of the Indo-Pacific – Japan’s New Plan for a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ – Together with India, as an Indispensable Partner,” *Policy Speech* by Japan’s Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), New Delhi, March 20, 2023. Text released by the Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, available at https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202303/_00013.html

² Ibid.

Kishida pointed towards the changing paradigm in international relations, and termed FOIP a vision that is gaining rapid relevance. In this sense, FOIP (based on the *Confluence of the Two Seas* notion) was a visionary concept. In his description of Japan's plan to develop and achieve a *Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, PM Kishida unequivocally identified India as an "indispensable partner" when he stated:

I believe that Japan and India are in an extremely unique position in the current international relations and, furthermore, in the history of the world. India is the largest democracy in the world. I have always viewed with great respect at the way such a huge and diverse country as India has developed democracy. Japan, for its part, was the first country in Asia to achieve modernization and embrace democracy...[B]oth Japan and India have unique historical backgrounds. The people of the two countries humbly acknowledge that there are diverse values, cultures, and histories on this planet, and that fully understanding them is not an easy task. We are the kind of people who understand intuitively that the best way forward is to respect the other party and cooperate through dialogue.³

The ambit of Japan's *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* strategy launched and pushed during the second tenure of the Abe administration in December 2012 was initially conceived and formulated during his first term as prime minister, when he addressed the Indian Parliament in August 2007. During that visit, an interesting historical connect was established in reference to the Indo-Pacific by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. He stood in the Central Hall of the highest chamber of Indian democracy, to speak directly to the one billion-plus Indian population via its people's representatives. Speaking at the Parliament of India in August 2007, Abe considered it his "great honor of addressing the highest organ of state power in the largest democracy in the world."⁴ Abe presented himself on "behalf of the citizens of another democracy that is equally representing Asia" and put forth his views on the future of Japan and India. While discussing Indo-Japan relations, Abe said, "It gives me tremendous pleasure to be able to begin my address today with the words of Swami Vivekananda, the great spiritual leader that India gave the world – *the different streams, having their sources in different places, all mingle their water in the sea.*"⁵

It was in this historic speech that Abe questioned and identified where Japan and India stand historically and geographically. He answered this by borrowing a term from, and famously citing the title of, a seminal 1655 book – *Majma'-ul-Bahrain* [The Mingling of the Two Oceans] authored by the Mughal Prince Dara Shikoh⁶ and said, "We are now at a point at which the *Confluence of the Two Seas* is coming into being." The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and prosperity. This 17th century book is said to have been the inspiration, foundation, and title of Abe's vision to nurture an open and transparent Indo-Pacific maritime zone as part of a "broader Asia."⁷ It needs to be recalled that, following his

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Confluence of the Two Seas* – Speech delivered by Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, at the Parliament of the Republic of India, August 22, 2007, available at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Prince Muhammad Dara Shikoh, *Majma'-ul-Bahrain: The Mingling of the Two Oceans*, [Persian to English Translation] ed., M. Mahfuz-Ul-Haq, (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal Publications, 1929).

⁷ For further reading and details on the subject see, Monika Chansoria, "Japan's Relations with South Asia," in Sumit Ganguly and Frank O'Donnell, eds., *Routledge Handbook of the International Relations of South Asia*, (London: Routledge, 2022).

2007 *Confluence of the Two Seas* speech delivered at the Indian Parliament, Prime Minister Abe declared his vision the *Free and Open Indo-Pacific*.

Suggesting that a “broader Asia” breaking away from geographical boundaries had begun taking on a distinct form, Abe further stated that Japan and India have the ability and the responsibility to ensure that they further broaden, nurture, and enrich these seas to make them seas of the clearest transparency.⁸ Stressing the importance of Japan-India strategic cooperation in carrying out the pursuit of freedom and prosperity in broader Asia, Abe averred:

By Japan and India coming together in this way, this “broader Asia” will evolve into an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the US and Australia. Open and transparent, this network will allow people, goods, capital, and knowledge to flow freely.⁹

Originally a geographic concept comprising the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean that shaped linkages between the United States and East Asia, a free and open Indo-Pacific maritime zone has evolved into a geostrategic concept and strategy. When stretched beyond the Indian Ocean, it paved the way for what more commonly came to be known by the new framework of the “Indo-Pacific.” At its heart, a strategic system can be understood as a set of geopolitical power relationships among nations where major changes in one part of the system affect what happens in the other parts.¹⁰ The US policy pronouncements of “pivot” and later “rebalance” in Asia were almost concurrently followed by PM Shinzo Abe’s proposed Indo-Pacific concept and strategic framework in 2012. When Abe penned his book *Utsukushii kuni e (Towards a Beautiful Country)* in 2006, he publicly advocated the concept of a “broader Asia” consisting of nations in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Abe appeared to have anticipated Asia’s geostrategic future exclusively through the prism of political realism, and rightly so.¹¹ The concept of a “broader Asia” appears to have transcended geographical boundaries, with the Pacific and Indian Oceans’ merger becoming far more pronounced and evident than ever. To catch up with the reality of broader Asia, the Abe administration rehabilitated its focus on South Asia in general, and India in particular, within the ambit of Japan’s *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* strategy.

Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Framework: The Influence of the 1655 Text “Majma’-ul-Bahrain” [The Mingling of the Two Oceans]

The *Majma’-ul-Bahrain* (hereafter *Majma*) – a prose work written by Dara Shikoh in 1655 – dealt with the cross-cultural doctrine, and remains of considerable importance to this day owing to its deep-rooted historical connect.¹² In the long history of cross-cultural exchange and discourse between Islam and Hinduism, the comparative treatise *Majma* began to be regarded as a

⁸ *Confluence of the Two Seas* Speech by Shinzo Abe, n. 4.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Rory Medcalf, “The Evolving Security Order in the Indo-Pacific,” in David Brewster, ed., *Indo-Pacific Maritime Security: Challenges and Cooperation*, (National Security College, Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, July 2016); also see, Rory Medcalf, “The Indo-Pacific: What’s in a Name?” *The American Interest*, vol. 9, no. 2, Nov/Dec 2013, pp. 58–66.

¹¹ As cited in, Monika Chansoria, “Modi-Abe Personality Impacts Foreign Policy,” *The Sunday Guardian*, September 20, 2014.

¹² R.P. Dewhurst, “Review: *Majma’-ul-Bahrain: or The Mingling of the Two Oceans*,” *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 2, (Cambridge University Press, April 1931), p. 460.

significant dialogue contributing to the Indic tradition's rich pluralism.¹³ *Majma*, a comparative hermeneutical attempt, illustrated how translations and interpretations can be textually rooted and how they profoundly impact cross-religious conceptual expansions across traditions as a result of translations.¹⁴

Muhammad Dara Shikoh (دارا شیکوه) (1615–1659), also known as Dārā Shikoh [and not Shikūh, which represents only the modern Persian pronunciation of the word], was the eldest son and heir-apparent of the fifth Mughal Emperor, Shah Jahan. Dara was never able to become king as he was barbarically executed by his younger brother Aurangzeb. Born in 1615 in Ajmer, Rajasthan (north-western India), Dara Shikoh was widely renowned for being an enlightened paragon of the harmonious coexistence of the heterodox cultural traditions and interactions of the Indian subcontinent. Known to be a patron of fine arts and music, he also indulged in art in the form of paintings and as a calligrapher of scripts and, given his avid interest in comparative religion and philosophies. Dara was identified as among the great synthesizers symbolizing the larger encounter between the Islamic and Hindu worlds.¹⁵

Dara Shikoh was a scholar in his own right, having been recognized in history for his translations of dozens of Sanskrit texts into Persian. He studied Sufi and Vedic philosophies extensively. His name has been inscribed in Mughal history more so for his scholarly works than for his understanding of the art of statecraft. He was devoted to finding a common mystical language between Islam and Hinduism. Towards this goal, he completed the translation of many *Upanishads* from the original Sanskrit into Persian by 1657.

However, perhaps his most celebrated and famous work to this day remains the 1655 treatise in Persian, *Majma'-ul-Bahrain* [The Mingling of the Two Oceans], devoted to the mystical and pluralistic affinities between Sufism and *Vedāntic* speculations. The works of the young prince became a major milestone of one of the greatest and longest movements of translations in human history (from Sanskrit and Hindi to Persian and Arabic).¹⁶

For that matter, the *Majma* and translation of the *Upanishads* became the culminating projects of his literary journey.¹⁷ The *Majma* includes 22 chapters/discourses in which Dara asserts that religions and languages share important features as they both are "semiotic systems" with the ability to "capture, preserve, and reify basic cultural values, to structure experience according to shared conceptual elements."¹⁸ The initial lines of *Majma's* text spelt out Dara's emphasis on describing ultimate reality through opposites.¹⁹ Dara Shikoh pointed out in his composition:

... having collected the views of the two parties and having brought together their points – a knowledge of which is essential and useful for the seekers of *Truth* – he (i.e., the author) has compiled a tract and entitled it *Majma'-ul-Bahrain*, or *The Mingling of the Two Oceans*,

¹³ Doha Tazi Hemida, *A Hindu-Islamic Translation: Retrieving Dārā Shikūh's Confluence of the Two Oceans*, (Columbia University, 2005), p. 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ For further details see, Munis D. Faruqui, "Dara Shukoh, Vedanta, and Imperial Succession," in Vasudha Dalmia and Munis D. Faruqui, eds., *Religious Interactions in Mughal India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 32.

¹⁶ Carl W. Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Arabic and Persian Translations from Indian Languages," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2003, p. 173, cited in Hemida, n. 13.

¹⁷ Faruqui, n. 15, p. 40, cited in Hemida, n. 13.

¹⁸ Tony K. Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter through Translation Theory," *History of Religions*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2001, p. 268, as cited in Hemida, n. 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 42.

as it is a collection of the *truth* and *wisdom* of two truth-knowing (*Ḥaḳ Shinās*) groups.²⁰

Considered a strong threshold towards that search, *Majma* significantly talks about expansion and of the two worlds overlapping. The book cites by example what water is to the waves, and how existence or consciousness is the water while the supreme self is the totality of waves.²¹ The book has been identified as one of the most prominent and significant paradigms of transcultural literature of early modern Indian history. The manuscript offers a discourse having a distinct philosophical/metaphysical approach with the aim to establish commonalities through observations of Hindu *Vedānta* philosophy and Sufism. In the framework of transcultural literature, the text was considered an accomplishment since it managed to transcend different boundaries, and eventually became identified as *Majma'ul-Bahrain*.²²

The term “transculture” grossly encompasses a particular kind of paraphernalia that expands beyond the boundaries. While discussing transcultural literature, the most significant question that determines the transcultural character is what kind of boundary/ies it crosses – topographical, social, religious, or linguistic.²³ In the framework of transcultural literature, *Majma*'s significance as a single text, and its voyage as well as purpose of transcending barriers becomes far more pronounced in a contemporary context when “The Mingling of the Two Oceans” is interpreted and refurbished by Japan as the *Confluence of the Two Seas*.

The thrust of *Majma* indicates the path, which can broadly be divided into two categories: the world around and the world beyond. *Majma* surpassed boundaries and became a pioneering example of transcultural literature in the early modern age.²⁴ It reflected the inner ethos of Indian spirituality with a distinct identity of divine harmony. Dara Shikoh acknowledged divine unity as a boundless ocean, where the *Truth* is one for everybody. In fact, the title *Majma'ul-Bahrain* is perhaps a symbolical representation of this boundlessness, which transcends the limitations of institutional religion, scriptural rules, lingual individuality, and doctrinal differences.²⁵

The World and Politics Around, and the World and Politics Beyond: Contextualizing “Majma” in Contemporary Asia

Majma was Dara Shikoh's attempt to manifest the spiritual affinity between two distinct religious traditions and cultures. The “Mingling of the Two Oceans” refers to the Hindu and Islamic traditions, each of which was regarded by Dara as a repository of knowledge and wisdom. At a maximalist level, Dara tried to create a syncretic Hindu and Islamic culture to promote greater unity between the two. At a minimalist level, he brought home the point that Hindus and Muslims have grossly misunderstood each other's religion as well as their own.²⁶

Following Shinzo Abe's 2007 reference to this seminal text, the current vice-president of India, Jagdeep Dhankhar, unveiled an Arabic translation of the *Majma'ul-Bahrain* in New Delhi

²⁰ Haq, ed., n. 6, *Majma'ul-Bahrain: The Mingling of the Two Oceans*, p. 38.

²¹ Dārā Shikūh and Asghar Ali Engineer, *Majma'ul-Bahrain, [Comingling of Two Oceans] Majma'ul-Bahrain: A Discourse on Interreligious Understanding*, (Gurgaon: Hope India Publications, 2006), p. 78; also see, Daryush Shayegan, *Les Relations de l'Hindouisme et du Soufisme d'après le Majma' al-Bahrain de Dārā Shokūh* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 1979), p. 33, cited in Hemida, n. 13.

²² Gargi Bhattacharya, “*Majma'ul-Bahrain: Transcending Cultural Boundaries in the Quest for ‘Truth of Truths,’*” *postScriptum: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies* [Special Issue on Transnational and Transcultural Spaces] vol. 4, no. 2, July 2019, pp. 248–258.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

²⁶ Haq, ed., n. 6, *Majma'ul-Bahrain: The Mingling of the Two Oceans*.

in September 2022. Speaking on the occasion, Vice-President Dhankhar defined Dara Shikoh as a genius, a skilled poet, and a scholar of Sanskrit. The vice president suggested that Dara was a torchbearer of social harmony and religious unity. In the book *Majma*, all the commonalities between Hinduism (*Vedānta*) and Islam (Sufism) pointed to the conclusion that the difference between Islam and Hinduism is only verbal. Mentioning that Dara Shikoh strove for improving dialogue between different religions, the vice-president called for the revival of Dara's legacy and the application of his spiritual thought to strengthen contemporary social cohesion, stating that the *Majma* threw invaluable light on the similarities between religions. Dhankhar recalled that India has a glorious heritage not only of "tolerance" for others' views but also a unique culture of "engagement" with all views – a culture of pluralism and syncretism. He further said that this spirit of mutual respect was exemplified by many Indian kings – ranging from King Ashoka more than two millennia ago to Prince Dara Shikoh a few hundred years ago.²⁷

For a long time, the geopolitical paradigm most widely used to denote the massive expanse stretching from Northeast Asia to South Asia and vast oceans and seas – namely, the Pacific Ocean, the South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean—was termed the "Asia-Pacific." Subsequently, the idea of the "Indo-Pacific" evolved over time, recognizing the seemingly blurring lines between geoeconomics and geopolitics. It also demonstrates a gradual convergence of opportunities and challenges in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Sustained economic growth, relative political stability, and social cohesion have enabled major powers in Asia to exert expanding influence in shaping agendas and global rule-making.²⁸ Asia has ascended as a pivot amid these changing global economic and strategic realities. The resurgence of the Indo-Pacific, described as the "maritime underbelly of Asia," has become the locus of maritime activity in Asia. A gradual evolution of the Indo-Pacific concept has resulted in varied ideas and perspectives.²⁹

While in 1941 Japan did not see, or at least hesitated to consider, India as part of its imagination of Asia, by the first decade of the next century Tokyo was seen attempting to integrate India into its strategic landscape by introducing the concept of an Indo-Pacific region due to the rise of China and its potential challenges to Japan's strategic interests. The idea of connecting the two oceans as a single geopolitical sphere continued to be at the center of Japan's contemporary foreign policy thinking. To promote this idea, Tokyo introduced various initiatives, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (*Quad*) in 2007 (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States), the Democratic Security Diamond, and, most significantly, the *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* framework and strategy.³⁰

One of the most widely popular notions in geopolitical thinking is the postulate that geography is destiny, leaving leaders with limited choices because of the landscape of their nations.³¹ However, even if the notion that geography is destiny is accepted, it is important to be aware that

²⁷ Indian Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar's speech at the unveiling of the Arabic translation of the *Majma'-ul-Bahrain* at the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, New Delhi, press release by Vice President's Secretariat, September 9, 2022, Press Information Bureau, New Delhi.

²⁸ Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy and Ankush Ajay Wagle, "ASEAN, India, and the Indo-Pacific: Evolving Regional Maritime Environment," in Ceren Ergenç, ed., *ASEAN as a Method: Re-centering Processes and Institutions in Contemporary Southeast Asian Regionalism*, (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 74; also see, Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy, "Indo-Pacific: One Region, Many Visions?" *RSIS Commentary*, no. 23, February 2019.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 73–74.

³⁰ Shofwan Al Banna Choiruzzad, "The confluence of the two seas: The rise of the Indo-Pacific region and ASEAN Centrality," in Ceren Ergenç, n. 28, p. 52.

³¹ For further reading and details on the subject see, Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics*, (London: Elliott & Thompson, 2015), pp. 1–2, cited in Choiruzzad, n. 30.

regions are not. Regions are constructed socially and politically by various actors for numerous purposes, including governments, the epistemic community, and the private sector.³² In this context, “East Asia” is not always “East Asia.” Even the word Asia itself was, in the beginning, an ancient Greek conception, referring exclusively to a region known today as the Near or Middle East.³³ It was only with the arrival of European colonialism that “Asia” became the term that includes the large area from Japan to the Middle East because the colonial powers juxtaposed these colonized areas with Europe’s own identity.³⁴ Later, this Asian identity started to be embraced by “Asians” themselves, creating a shared identity to fight against European colonialism. A sense of solidarity against Western colonial rule gave birth to the strong connection between nationalism and Pan-Asianism. For an instance, the Japanese victory against the Russians in the Battle of Tsushima in 1905 was understood by many Asian nationalist leaders not only as Japan’s victory but also as their own.³⁵

It was in this context that the concept of “East Asia” as a regional identity was introduced. Despite the internal debate within Japan on whether the modernizing country should consider itself as part of Asia for its cultural affinity, or, should it consider itself as “escaping Asia” because it had been successfully modernizing itself,³⁶ Tokyo campaigned for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. The promise of common prosperity and the support for nationalist independence movements convinced many nationalist leaders of Asia to ally themselves with Imperial Japan. However, “East Asia” faded away from the imagination of the newly independent Asian countries post-WWII.³⁷

Confluence of the Two Seas and ASEAN Centrality

The emergence of competing strategic visions related to areas surrounding the Pacific and Indian Oceans has been one of the primary challenges to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Centrality. Both China and India see the Indian Ocean and East Asia as an integrated stage for their strategic play. While China is not likely to concede to India’s primacy in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), the latter too, would not be willing to accept Southeast and East Asia as China’s exclusive spheres of influence. If China’s navy is going south to the Indian Ocean, the Indian navy is going east towards the Pacific Ocean.³⁸

Contextualizing in the above reference, Japan’s *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* strategy matches up with India’s *Act East* policy. Further, the strategic ties between Japan and India are pushing for an Indo-Pacific vision that is “balanced, open, inclusive, stable, transparent, and rules-based economic, political, and security driven.”³⁹ In this joint strategic vision, Tokyo and New Delhi find a “confluence of the two seas.” Though ASEAN generally welcomes the initiatives of major powers

³² Choiruzzad, n. 30, p. 54.

³³ David Camroux, “‘Asia, Whose Asia?’ Evolving Conceptions of an Asian Community from the 1920s Till Today,” in Heribert Dieter (ed.), *The Evolution of Regionalism in Asia: Economic and Security Issues*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 12, cited in Choiruzzad, n. 30.

³⁴ Camroux, *ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

³⁵ For further reading and details on the subject see, Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia*, (New York: Allen Lane, 2012).

³⁶ As cited in, Kazuo Ogura, *Japan’s Asian Diplomacy: A Legacy of Two Millennia*, translated by David Noble, (Tokyo: International House of Japan, 2015), pp. 41–44.

³⁷ Choiruzzad, n. 30, p. 54.

³⁸ For further reading and details on the subject see, Mohan Malik, “China and India Today: Diplomats Jostle, Militaries Prepare,” *World Affairs*, vol. 175, no. 2, 2012, pp. 76–78.

³⁹ For further reading and details on the subject see, Vinay Kaura, “India-Japan Relations and Asia’s Emerging Geopolitics,” *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, vol. 29, no. 1/2, 2016, pp. 17–18.

in the economic sense, ASEAN member states have been found warily navigating to manage their relationships with all the major powers amidst these developments. While China and Japan are the main trading partners of the ASEAN countries, India's rapidly growing economy is also becoming increasingly important for them.⁴⁰

Further, ASEAN has welcomed Japan's "Expanded Partnership for High-Quality Infrastructure,"⁴¹ an initiative often seen as Japan's answer to China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Belt & Road Initiative.⁴² In terms of security, many ASEAN countries remain worried about China's growing assertiveness in the region creating a division within ASEAN. For the first time in its 45-year history, for instance, ASEAN's leaders failed in 2012 to agree on a *Joint Communiqué* due to diverging views on China's actions in the South China Sea. The move was described a "harbinger of future trends."⁴³ Just when the major powers and regional stakeholders are beginning to reimagine the map with an identified Indo-Pacific region, ASEAN cohesion is increasingly coming under doubt.

This leads to the question "Will the emergence of an Indo-Pacific region as a consequence of the inclusion of the Indian Ocean Region in the regional imagination of major Asian countries degrade ASEAN Centrality?". This puts the future of ASEAN Centrality in a major spot amidst the rise of the Indo-Pacific region. ASEAN could well view the Indo-Pacific region in a balanced manner wherein its "Centrality" will likely dwindle, as few member states will deal with players such as China, the US, Japan, and India in a flexible and *à la carte* manner.⁴⁴ Another scenario could be that of an Indo-Pacific region with ASEAN at its center, eventually finding a way to bring back its cohesiveness and being united to face the challenge of great power rivalries.⁴⁵ The third scenario could be that of two separated but connected regions, wherein the Indo-Pacific's regional imagination will struggle to be fully realized.

The fundamental concept of FOIP remains that stakeholders will enhance the connectivity of the Indo-Pacific region, foster the region into a place that values liberty, the rule of law, and freedom from force or coercion. A significant region that FOIP seeks to cover was outlined in Kishida's speech, namely, Southeast Asia. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and FOIP are visions that resonate with each other. Japan announced that it will make a new contribution of \$100 million to the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund, being mindful of the ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit to be held in Tokyo in December 2023. Later this year, Japan will also renew the comprehensive Japan-ASEAN Connectivity Initiative, which seeks to promote efforts to strengthen hard and soft connectivity.

Conclusion

Analyzing the past decades of Asian politics and policies brings to the fore certain momentous developments that have redefined Asian geopolitics, expectedly impacting South Asia and the

⁴⁰ Choiruzzad, n. 30, p. 64.

⁴¹ "ASEAN, Japan renew commitment to strengthen cooperation," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, August 29, 2016, available at <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Overseas-Mission/Ministry-of-Foreign-Affairs-Permanent-Mission-of-the-Republic-of-Singapore/Past-Highlights/2016/08/ASEAN-Japan-renew-Commitment-to-Strengthen-Cooperation>

⁴² As cited in, Masaaki Kameda, "Abe Announces \$110 Billion in Aid for High Quality Infrastructure in Asia," *The Japan Times*, May 22, 2015, available at www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/05/22/business/abe-announces-110-billion-in-aid-for-high-quality-infrastructure-in-asia/#.WaEUfVFLfIU

⁴³ For further reading and details on the subject see, Barry Desker, "ASEAN Integration Remains an Illusion," *PacNet* #17, March 16, 2015.

⁴⁴ Choiruzzad, n. 30, pp. 65–66.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Indian Ocean Region. By 2030, Asia will contribute most to global growth,⁴⁶ thus underscoring its importance and that of the Indo-Pacific. These realities have driven Japan's policies and approaches for operating in the IOR as they underwent a major phase of transformation. The first signal of this was the lifting of the ban on overseas deployments to enable Japan's Self-Defense Forces to dispatch armed troops to Iraq in 1992.⁴⁷ The subsequent transition and evolution has reached a point when today, notably, nearly 40 percent of all Japan's Self-Defense Forces' missions have occurred in the IOR, and nearly half of Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) goes to IOR countries.⁴⁸

While cross-oceans initiatives will continue to be pushed by major and regional powers, what remains to be seen is whether they will be able to truly transform the Indo-Pacific into a single, integrated region.⁴⁹ The evolution of ASEAN cohesion, the trajectory of great power rivalry, and the progress of the various Indo-Pacific initiatives by stakeholders will be the primary determinants that decide the future of the *Confluence of the Two Seas* vision.

In his 2009 *Foreign Affairs*' essay, Robert Kaplan argued that the "center stage of the 21st century" will be the Indian Ocean.⁵⁰ The rise of China and India as well as their increasing need to secure energy sources and routes, together with the rising involvement of other important players from East Asia, most significantly Japan, will ensure that this region has a tremendous impact on global politics.⁵¹ However, Shofwan Al Banna Choiruzzad submits a modification to Kaplan's argument that the Indian Ocean must increasingly be seen as a geopolitical complex, an integrated region with East Asia and/or the Pacific Ocean.⁵² At least, that is what Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam, and India seem to foresee in their strategic visions. While the future of the Indo-Pacific region remains uncertain, the ability of ASEAN member-states to consolidate their individual and collective positions, the willingness of major powers to manage competition with their rivals, and the ability of those major powers to materialize their grand initiatives⁵³ regionally will define the future of this 21st century center stage.

⁴⁶ For further reading and details on the subject see, Praneeth Yendamuri and Zara Ingilizian, "In 2020 Asia Will Have the World's Largest GDP; Here's What That Means," *World Economic Forum*, December 20, 2019, available at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/12/asia-economic-growth/>

⁴⁷ John Hartle, "The Normalization of Japanese Policy in the Indian Ocean Region," *Policy Report*, Analysis and Policy Observatory, Australia's Global Interests, June 21, 2018; also see, Chansoria, "Japan's Relations with South Asia," in Ganguly et al., n. 7.

⁴⁸ Peter Wyckoff, "Making Waves: Japan and the Indian Ocean Region," *Commentary*, The Stimson Center, May 1, 2017.

⁴⁹ Choiruzzad, n. 30, pp. 65–66; for related reference and reading also see, Evan Laksmana, "An Indo-Pacific Construct with 'Indonesian Characteristics,'" [*The Strategist*], Australian Strategic Policy Institute, February 6, 2018, available at www.aspistrategist.org.au/indo-pacific-construct-indonesian-characteristics/

⁵⁰ For further reading and details on the subject see, Robert D. Kaplan, "Center Stage for the Twenty-first Century: Power Plays in the Indian Ocean," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 88, no. 2, 2009, pp. 16–32.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Choiruzzad, n. 30, pp. 66–67.

⁵³ *Ibid.*