

Recalibrating Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Security Statecraft in a Changing Geopolitical Environment

Bharish Soibam¹ 

¹Masters Student, Graduate School of International Relations, International University of Japan, Japan

Abstract

In an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific environment, Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) holds major relevance with its framework linking a normative regional vision to concrete security practices. Existing scholarship has largely interpreted FOIP as a diplomatic and inclusive vision for regional order or as a strategic response to China's rise and intensifying power competition. Yet, altogether, it seems not to fully explain how FOIP has evolved into a more operational framework of Japanese security statecraft. Drawing on neoclassical realism, the study argues that worsening geopolitical pressures have been filtered through domestic legal constraints, institutional, and alliance commitments, resulting in a gradual but significant recalibration of policy. Employing the concept of tactical hedging, it further explains how Japan has maintained FOIP's inclusive and rules-based rhetoric while deepening practical security cooperation. It highlights the 2022 Three Security Documents, the introduction of Official Security Assistance (OSA), and the relaxation of defence export rules as key instruments through which FOIP has been operationalized. The study contributes to the literature by bridging the gap between FOIP as a normative character versus strategic intent and the concrete mechanisms through which Japan operationalizes its evolving regional posture. In doing so, it shows that contemporary FOIP is best understood as being operationalized through security instruments while retaining its normative and inclusive rhetoric.

Keywords: Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), Official Security Assistance (OSA), Neoclassical Realism, Tactical Hedging

Received: 01/05/2026 | **Accepted:** 30/06/2026 | **Published:** 20/07/2026

Corresponding Author: Bharish Soibam (ORCID: 0009-0009-5751-7768) | **Email:** bharish.s@iuj.ac.jp

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Allahabad Academic Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License.

Introduction

Japan's foreign and security policy has changed significantly over the past decade in response to a more contested Indo-Pacific order. Central to this evolution is the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy, which originated under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as a broad, normative vision promoting the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and economic prosperity (Nagy 2021; Hosoya 2019). However, as systemic pressures have intensified – most notably China's maritime assertiveness, the geopolitical shock of Russia's invasion of Ukraine – Tokyo has profoundly recalibrated its approach (O'Shea and Maslow 2024). Viewing this shift through the lens of neoclassical realism, this essay argues that FOIP has moved from a purely diplomatic vision towards a highly operationalized framework as a concrete security instrument. The transformation, although not a complete abandonment of Japan's pacifist ideals, is a pragmatic adaptation where acute external threats are filtered through domestic institutional, societal, and legal constraints (Kim 2025). Through the practice of "tactical hedging" and the deployment of new, tangible policy instruments like Official Security Assistance (OSA) and revised defence export guidelines, Japan has successfully merged inclusive regional rhetoric with concrete military balancing, making FOIP both a normative framework and a practical instrument of security policy.

FOIP, originally promoted by Japan as a rules-based, open, and inclusive regional vision, has become a more structural diplomatic stance today. In recent years, Japan has introduced stronger security instruments, such as the 2022 security documents, the establishment of OSA in 2023, and revised defence equipment export rules, which have become operational mechanisms for reinterpreting Japan's FOIP vision. This raises the question: how and why has FOIP changed under a worsening geopolitical environment?

FOIP between Norms and Strategy

Firstly, a part of scholarship interprets Japan's FOIP primarily as a normative and diplomatic posture aimed at preserving a rule-based order through openness, connectivity and ensuring inclusiveness. Green (2018) argues that Japan's strategic worldview revolves around its FOIP vision, i.e., inherent benefits from a regional order rooted in the rule of law, transparency, and high-quality rules for trade and infrastructure. Yoshimatsu (2025, 586) identifies three distinct iterations of FOIP – FOIP 1.0 (2016), FOIP 2.0 (2018), and FOIP 3.0 (2023) – arguing that the promotion of the rule of law remains a consistent policy objective while security concerns have fluctuated over time. This remains essential for Japan to closely work with Global South countries in order to address the common global challenges and preserve the rules-based international order envisioned by FOIP (Yoshimatsu, 2025, 585). As

highlighted by Hosoya (2019, 25), Japan has transitioned to a “FOIP 2.0” – shifting away from confrontational rhetoric to emphasize a more cooperative, inclusive, comprehensive vision in response to the voices of Asian countries. Furthermore, Japan’s approach to regionalism, as pointed out by Nagy (2021), explains that FOIP relies on a ‘rational-legal perspective’ that stresses broad cooperation and transparency, which is fiscally sustainable infrastructure, contrasting it to a more state-centric model. Empirical evidence of Adebahr and Clasen (2026) supports this normative trajectory. It demonstrates a systemic content analysis of Japan’s MOD White Papers and the MOFA Diplomatic Bluebook spanning 2001 to 2024 that references to the rule of law increase significantly from 2016 onwards (Adebahr and Clasen, 2026, 104). It shows that the rule of law now ranks alongside peace, freedom and human rights as a leading norm underpinning Japan’s value-based foreign policy (*ibid.*, 114). Japan, as suggested, is intensifying its commitment to the rule-based order by embedding the rule of law across its various foreign policy domains, thereby elevating its own right as an independent foreign policy norm (*ibid.*, 114).

Secondly, a substantial body of literature reads FOIP less as a neutral order-building but as a more strategic response to China’s rise, maritime assertiveness, and intensifying Indo-Pacific power competition. Nagy (2021, 10) interprets Tomohiko Satake’s view as a direct correlation between the FOIP and BRI, as he explicitly characterized FOIP as a geo-economic strategy, as an alternative to BRI. Driven by existential concerns over open sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) in the East and South China Seas, Nagy (2021) views FOIP’s focus on maritime security as a response to regional instability and Chinese assertiveness. While navigating the transition of power between the United States and China, Wilkins (2023, 98) describes Australia and Japan as engaging in a “triple hedge,” where middle-power diplomacy through FOIP acts as a critical mechanism to offset risks alongside being a traditional security partner with the United States. Abe’s Indo-Pacific strategy, according to Naidu and Ishida (2022), deliberately aimed at creating a regional balance of power that could counter China’s growing assertiveness through minilateral coalitions like the Quad and deepening defense cooperation with Southeast Asia. These views of balancing behaviour align with what Koga (2019, 289) conceptualizes the FOIP as “tactical hedging” – utilization of an ambiguous declaratory policy to build coalitions and signal strategic alignment without provoking any uncertainty.

However, this neutral order-building, but a more strategic response to China, has been complicated by the deeply ambivalent responses of ASEAN countries. As Shoji (2018) noted, ASEAN harbours two principal concerns: that FOIP could undermine ASEAN centrality, and that participation could be perceived as joining an effort to contain China. While most of the ASEAN members have formally agreed with FOIP’s basic principles, there remains an “undeniable tendency to avoid articulating

clear approval or unequivocal support for the strategy” (Shoji 2018). Tokyo, under the second Abe administration, has navigated this tension through deliberate rhetorical calibration – avoiding the term “strategy” in favour of “vision” for ASEAN consumption, followed by a \$100 million Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund under Kishida (Kamisuna 2025). This accommodation reflects Japan’s strategic effort to preserve the ASEAN engagement while simultaneously deepening its security commitments. The progressive institutionalization of the Quad represents the most concrete expression of FOIP’s balancing logic, though it has deepened ASEAN’s institutional anxieties. Koga (2023, 28) argues that the Quad poses a strategic challenge for ASEAN’s role as the pivot of regional multilateralism. However, throughout its process in involving from informal dialogue to institutionalization in 2021, Quad members engaged in tactical hedging toward ASEAN – rhetorically supporting ASEAN centrality while never clearly defining the institutional division of labour between the Quad and ASEAN (Koga 2023, 37).

Thirdly, more recent literature moves beyond what we discuss above as the normative-versus-balancing debate, i.e. Japan’s profound shift into a more proactive security actor. Hughes (2024, 162) extensively analyses the 2022 “three national security documents” – the National Security Strategy, National Defence Strategy, and Defence Buildup Program – arguing they enforce a “radical military trajectory” by discarding the one per cent GDP limit on defence expenditure since 1976. Japan has reinforced its defence capabilities, exclusively altering its defence-oriented policy, thereby increasing debate on Japan’s deviations from past stances and far more change than continuity in core principles (Hughes 2024, 183). Jain (2026, 38) noted that Japan has replaced post-war idealism with pragmatic realism – expanding the “proactive contribution to peace” mandate through an unprecedented increase in defense budget with further relaxation in arms transfer policy. A pivotal element of this transformation is the introduction of the Official Security Assistance (OSA) framework in 2023 (MOFA 2025). Hamada (2025) and Kim (2025) detail how OSA is distinct from Official Development Assistance (ODA) – OSA allows like-minded countries, such as Japan to directly grant defence equipment to the partner countries’ armed forces, helping to strengthen regional deterrence. Basu (2026) further illustrates this trajectory, documenting how OSA funding expanded rapidly from US\$ 13.8 million in FY2023 to US\$56 millions by FY2026, reflecting both greater geographic ambition and institutional consolidation of Japan’s security diplomacy.

Furthermore, Midford (2026) highlight the continuous erosion of Japan’s post war arms export bans, which shows the recent reforms permitting the export of lethal weapons and joint fighter jet development mark a major shift to strengthen its international security partnerships. Critically, however, Basu (2026) cautions that the Utokyo ROLES Survey in 2025 reveals a persistent tension between threat

perception and normative constraint: while over 65 per cent of respondents express concern about Japan's security environment, approximately 45 per cent continue to oppose the use of force under any circumstances – this finding is broadly consistent with the February 2026 level. This suggests that the pace of proactive transformation remains bounded by deep-rooted pacifist norms and that OSA's non-lethal framing is not incidental but politically necessary.

What remains less developed is the literature on how Japan's newer security instruments helped transform FOIP from a broader strategic vision into a more operationalisable form of Japan's statecraft. Much literature discusses FOIP either as a normative vision for international order (e.g. Hosoya 2019; Koga 2019) or as a strategic balancing strategy against China (e.g. Wilkins 2023; Naidu and Ishida 2022). As Kim (2025) argues, Japan's security adaptation does not represent a departure from its established diplomatic frameworks but rather their institutionalization; embedding security functions within existing normative structures rather than replacing them. While scholars recognize the macro-level strategic shifts, there remains a gap in systematically linking Japan's new mechanisms of evolving security frameworks – the deployment of OSA, the relaxation of lethal arms export regulations, and the operationalization of the three security documents – to the actual execution and materialization of FOIP's vision on the ground.

Theoretical Framework:

This study adopts neoclassical realism as its primary theoretical driver to explain the essence of the recalibration of Japan's FOIP strategy. As neoclassical realism argued, changes in the international system generate pressures on states; however, these pressures are not translated into a country's foreign policy (Rose 1998). As Rose (1998, 150) interpreted, such activities arise from a complex process – the pressures are filtered through domestic institutions, including elite perceptions and legal constraints. Building on this foundation, Vidal (2022, 26) demonstrates that analyses framed solely within the *gaiatsu* or “reactive state thesis” fail to capture the full explanation of variables underpinning Japan's foreign policy choices – specifically, the primary role that domestic political actors play in defining Tokyo's strategy independent of US pressure. By adopting a neoclassical realist approach that incorporates systemic stimuli and their interplay with intervening variable at the individual and domestic levels, Vidal (2022, 31) shows that external inputs are not automatically converted into outputs. Rather he draws on Zakowski et al. (2018) argument that the systemic stimuli are translated in Japan's foreign policies after been ‘filtered through the perceptions and ideology of leaders and its political apparatus, and by the bureaucracy’ (Vidal, 2022, 45). This framework fits Japan's case particularly well: one reason is that it explains why strategic adjustment occurs, and another is why such adjustment takes a gradual, selective process rather than a big overall transformation.

The study examines the changing environment of the Indo-Pacific geopolitical structure. This includes China's growing military and maritime assertiveness and uncertainty over the regional balance of power, which intensifies strategic competition among its neighbouring countries, such as Japan and South Korea. Japan's response to protect the regional order of its security and economic prosperity is mediated by several factors – domestic institutional processes, the dynamics of the US-Japan alliance, and postwar legal and normative constraints on the use and transfer of power (Sherrill and Hough 2015; Tana 2021). In Japan's foreign policy, these factors help explain why Japan's strategic adaptation often proceeds incrementally and gradual reinterpretation of policy rather than an outright rupture (Sherrill and Hough 2015, 248). In the FOIP context, this study identifies three specific domestic filters which mediate the systemic pressures. First, LDP coalition politics and factional bargaining have shaped the pace of security reform – constraining ambitions under Komeito coalition management during the Kishida era and accelerating them under Takaichi's consolidated majority following the LDP's landslide victory in 2026 February snap poll. Second, an institutional division of labour between key ministries shapes the pace and form of FOIP's operationalization. Here, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) broadly champion the rule of law as a fundamental diplomatic principle, while the Ministry of Defense (MOD) focuses its rule of law promotion much more narrowly on traditional security and maintaining the maritime order (Adebahr and Clasen 2026, 108). Third, there is a measurable shift in Japanese public opinion and strategic culture post-Ukraine which provide the necessary permissiveness for policymakers. According to the FY2025 Domestic Public Opinion Survey on Japan's Diplomacy 79.3 per cent of respondents agreed that the security environment surrounding the East Asian region is becoming increasingly severe (MOFA 2026b).

In the changing Indo-Pacific geopolitical environment, the study examined how Japan's FOIP strategy is being recalibrated. Here, the Japan's neoclassical realist framework adopted must be distinguished from what is regarded as a product of American pressure, or *gaiatsu*. The reative state thesis would predict that Tokyo's strategic shifts track closely with Washington's demand. Yet empirical record complicates this picture in three ways. First, key reforms preceded or ran parallel to, rather than following, explicit US demands, the OSA framework, for instance, was engineered domestically as a workaround to ODA restrictions, not in response to an American blueprint. Second, as Vidal (2022) demonstrates, domestic political actors, particularly LDP factional dynamics and the Komeito constraint, shaped the pace and form of reform independently of US preferences, most visibly in how the exit of Komeito from coalition under Takaichi unlocked reforms Kishida could not attempt despite equivalent US pressure. Third, the *gaiatsu* thesis cannot account for the specific rhetorical strategy Japan employs – the deliberate maintenance of normative, inclusive framing that is not required by Washington but is politically necessary for Tokyo's own regional coalition-building. Here, Neoclas-

sical realism, by contrast, treats US alliance dynamics as one intervening variable among several, explaining not just that Japan adapted but why the adaptation took this particular, hedged form.

The language of openness and inclusivity is not abandoned, but FOIP is increasingly supplemented with more concrete security instruments, including the 2022 Three Security Documents, OSA, and revised weapon transfer rules. As a result, neoclassical realism explains the shift in Japanese strategy: worsening external conditions pushed Tokyo to reframe FOIP more operationally and security-oriented, although the shift has been shaped by alliance commitments and domestic constraints.

To explain the style of this recalibration, the study draws on the concept of Kei Koga's tactical hedging - an ambiguous policy doctrine - that assists the hedger in assessing whether its partners are willing to cooperate; in this case, building a coalition towards the same or similar strategic objectives, though interests are not fully identical (Koga 2025). In Japan's case, FOIP continue to employ inclusive and non-exclusive rhetoric while deepening its strategic partnerships and security cooperation. As Koga argues, this ambiguity allows Japan to strengthen its regional position, although not framing any outright containment of China (Koga 2025, 110). Considering all these, neoclassical realism explains why FOIP has changed, while tactical hedging clarifies how Japan is implementing that change globally.

From Vision to Security Statecraft: Recalibrating Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific

Japan's FOIP, since its inception in 2016, has undergone a profound evolution, shifting from a largely normative diplomatic vision to a highly operational framework of security statecraft (Jain 2026; Koga 2026). This evolution presumably does not represent a complete break from Japan's post-war pacifist principles but reflects a pragmatic or strategic recalibration designed to navigate an increasingly perilous regional order (Jain 2024; Kim 2025). 2026 marks a decade of FOIP and has weathered severe external shocks like China's increasing military and maritime assertiveness, North Korea's repeated missile tests, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and, most recently, the US-Israel war with Iran. Driven by these severe shocks, Tokyo has shifted from relying almost exclusively on economic diplomacy to adopting a more proactive security posture, thereby embedding tangible military and defence cooperation into the core of its regional engagement (Kim, 2025).

The primary catalyst for this shift is the deteriorating geopolitical environment in the Indo-Pacific. China's ascent, with its relentless deployment of maritime "grey-zone" coercion in the East and South China Seas and the intensifying strategic competition between Washington and Beijing, has fundamentally challenged the regional status quo (Kim 2025; Teixeira 2018, 52). For Japan, this systemic pressure does not automatically or unrestrainedly lead to a military buildup. This adaptation, viewed

through an analytical lens, is best understood as a mediated process in which intense external threats are filtered through a complex web of domestic and institutional variables. As Kim (2025) expressed, Japan's pacifist constitution (Article 9) has deeply rooted anti-militaristic public norms, and managing the US-Japan alliance is closely tied to the nature and scope of its policy choices. At the same time, Japanese policymakers cannot engage in pure, overt military balancing for two reasons: one is the constraints of domestic legal frameworks, and the other is the fear of entrapment in American conflict or abandonment by a fluctuating US administration (Naidu and Ishida 2022). However, these domestic constraints causally necessitate an incremental approach that layers new security functions onto established diplomatic practices (Kim 2025). One clear example is the introduction of Official Security Assistance (OSA) in April 2023. Japan's first OSA package for the Philippines in 2023, providing a coastal radar system and related assistance to improve surveillance capacity, without engaging any overt military balancing (Shioyama 2023). This shows what the incremental strategy of Japanese policymakers entails and how they expand their security roles through established diplomatic instruments, such as assistance programs.

The 2022 Three Security Document

While the conventional reading of Japan's 2022 "Three Security Documents" often interprets primarily as a massive spending commitment, his perspective severely undersells their strategic significance. The 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) itself signals this paradigm shift, declaring that its new policies "will dramatically transform Japan's national security policy after the end of WWII from the aspect of its execution." To be sure, the budget trajectory towards 2% of GDP by 2027 – as emphasized by Jain (2026, 44) requires an investment of approximately 43 trillion yen (\$300 billion) – is genuinely historic. On a report of April 2026 by The Mainichi, Defense Minister Koizumi mentioned that using the projected GDP for fiscal year 2026, the ratio would stand at around 1.5%. However, the unprecedented spending is downstream of a fundamental strategic reorientation, and it is this doctrinal rupture that demands attention here. As Jain (2026, 44) notes, the upward trend is likely to continue, as the Trump administration wants its security alliances to spend more on defence. While the dramatic increase in its defence spending has attracted considerable attention, these expenditures reflects the product of as deeper transformation in Japan's strategic doctrine. As a result, understanding this doctrinal shift is therefore a prerequisite to explaining the subsequent expansion of defence budgets.

The official adoption of a "counterstrike capability" (*hangeki nōryoku*) is where the Three Security Documents most visibly depart from Japan's post-war posture, yet it also reflects "reinterpretation-not-rejection" framing most clearly at work. Rather than presenting it as a break from pacifism,

the government grounds the capability in a 1956 legal opinion by the Hatoyama administration, which permitted strikes against enemy missile bases as a minimum necessary measure of self-defence (Hughes, 2024, 166). The 2022 NSS deliberately anchor this doctrine in existing constitutional bounds, explicitly stating that counterstrike capabilities “fall within the purview of Japan’s Constitution and international law” and “do not change Japan’s exclusively defense-oriented policy” (NSS, 2022, 19). As Shinoda’s institutional analysis reinforces, the establishment of the National Security Council (NSC) and the NSS system integrated diplomacy, defence, and intelligence into one coordinating body (Shinoda, 2025). Similarly, the Defense Buildup Program reflects the doctrinal continuity by translating the strategic goals into concrete procurement. It is explicitly categorized in the framework that the acquisition of new ‘stand-off defence capabilities’ as a ‘minimum necessary for self-defense’ that operates strictly in accordance with the Three Conditions for Use of Force (Ministry of Defense, 2022). This reflects the 2022 documents a cross-agency coherence that made possible “reinterpretation-not-rejection” framing, a politically sustainable in a way earlier administrations could not achieve.

While the Three Security Documents codify an unmistakably harder security posture, Tokyo simultaneously deployed careful rhetorical hedging to manage the optics regionally. The NSS frames counterstrike capability not as offensive power projection but as a strictly bounded defensive measure language, which deliberately calibrated to reassure ASEAN partners and avoid triggering Beijing’s red lines. This is tactical hedging in its clearest form: the doctrinal content is operationally transformative, but the declaratory framing retains the grammar of Japan’s exclusively defence-oriented identity. The ambiguity is not incidental; it is load-bearing. Ultimately, the Three Security Document must be situated within the longer Abe-to-Kishida arc, tracking the continuous evolution of Japan’s “Proactive Contribution to Peace” narrative where the operationalization of FOIP becomes more visible with the beginning of Takaichi’s cabinet. As Jain (2026, 48) observes, Kishida’s administration added further momentum to Abe’s initial trajectory rather than redirecting it. The 2022 documents therefore represent the maturation of a strategic logic that began with the inaugural 2013 NSS, rather than a sudden Kishida-era innovation.

Official Security Assistance (OSA):

Official Security Assistance (OSA) is arguably the most structurally novel instrument in Japan’s recent security recalibration – an elegant institutional workaround that support FOIP vision with a direct defence capacity-building. Japan introduced Official Security Assistance (OSA) to project security-statecraft regionally. While traditional Official Development Assistance (ODA) forbids military use, OSA is explicitly designed to bypass such institutional hurdles, enabling Tokyo to directly supply

non-lethal defence equipment, such as coastal radar systems, to the Philippines – bolstering regional deterrence (Hamada 2025). However, as systemic pressures mounted, policymakers recognized that purely civilian aid was insufficient to address the deteriorating regional security environment (Kim, 2025, 365). Rather than triggering a deeply contentious constitutional debate by overhauling ODA, the government deliberately bypassed ODA's non-military restriction by engineering OSA in 2023 as a separate entity. This mechanism allows Japan to provide grant aid and non-lethal equipment directly to the armed-forces of like-minded countries, seamlessly bridging the gap between its pacifist normative constraints and its strategic imperative to act as a proactive security provider (Kim, 2025, 358; Basu, 2026; Walia, 2025, 1).

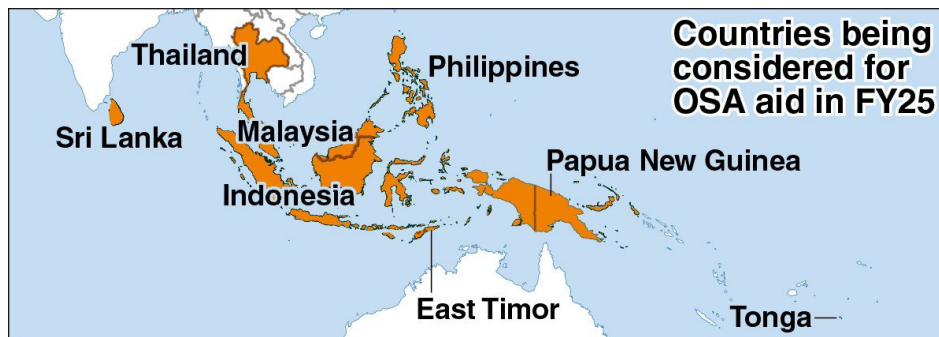
Table 1: OSA Recipient Countries and its strategic significance.

FY	Recipient	Grant (JPY)	Programme & strategic significance
2023	Philippines	¥600M	Coastal radar systems for Philippine Navy First-mover OSA grant; bolsters maritime domain awareness in the South China Sea, directly supporting Philippines against encroachment.
	Bangladesh	¥575M	Patrol boats for Bangladeshi Navy Extends Japan's security partnership into the Bay of Bengal; first OSA engagement with Bangladesh.
	Fiji	¥400M	Patrol boats & surveillance equipment for Fiji Navy Counters Chinese military influence in the Pacific; handover of monitoring equipment completed May 2025.
	Malaysia	¥400M	Monitoring & surveillance equipment for Malaysian Armed Forces Strengthens interoperability with a key ASEAN partner on South China Sea maritime security.
2024	Philippines	¥1.6B	RHIBs, coastal radar, air surveillance radar for Philippine Navy & Air Force Largest FY2024 grant; dual-service (navy + air force) coverage marks a qualitative deepening of the Japan-Philippines security partnership.
	Indonesia	¥1B	High-speed patrol boats for Indonesian Navy Engages Southeast Asia's largest military; supports Indonesia's maritime security in the Natuna Sea area.
	Djibouti	¥1.1B	Coastal radar system & infrastructure for Djiboutian Navy Strategically vital: secures the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait approach; Japan's first OSA grant to Africa, reflecting Horn of Africa sea lane priorities.
	Mongolia	¥1.3B	Air traffic control system for Mongolian Air Force Non-maritime OSA; addresses airspace monitoring gaps for a landlocked partner; signals broadening of OSA beyond naval equipment.

2025	Malaysia	¥3.1B	Diving support vessel & ceasefire monitoring equipment for Malaysian Armed Forces Largest single OSA grant to date; diving support vessel significantly upgrades Malaysian subsea and monitoring capability; ceasefire monitoring dimension is novel.
	Indonesia	¥1.9B	High-speed patrol boats for Indonesian Navy Continuation and scale-up from FY2024; signals sustained commitment to Indonesia's maritime patrol capacity.
	Philippines	¥900M	Boathouse & slipway construction for RHIBs for Philippine Navy Infrastructure grant following FY2023–24 equipment grants; enables sustained operational use of previously donated RHIBs.
	Thailand	¥500M	Disaster response & maritime SAR equipment for Royal Thai Armed Forces & Navy First OSA grant to Thailand; maritime search-and-rescue framing broadens OSA's humanitarian-security nexus.
	Sri Lanka	¥500M	UAVs for Sri Lanka Navy First UAV-centric OSA grant to South Asia; enhances Indian Ocean surveillance for a strategically located island nation.
	Tonga	¥300M	UAVs & military uniforms for Tonga Armed Forces UAVs for dual monitoring/disaster relief; continued Pacific engagement countering Chinese diplomatic inroads in the islands.
	Fiji	¥400M	Emergency medical care equipment for Fiji Military Forces Shift from surveillance to medical equipment signals OSA's evolving civil-military dual-use framing for Pacific partners.

Author's compilation

The structural innovation is matched by a rapid expansion in both budget and geographic scope, representing a deliberate operationalization of FOIP targeting maritime Southeast Asia and the Pacific as shown in Table 1. The OSA budget has grown consistently, scaling from a pilot US\$13.8 million in FY2023 to reaching US\$56 million for FY2025 (Basu, 2026; Walia, 2025, 4). This financial trajectory continues to rise with proposed of 18.1 billion yen (US\$116 million) for FY2026 (Shiga, 2026). Alongside this, the programme's geographic pattern reveals a calculated focus on key littoral states situated along vital sea lanes as shown in Figure 1.



Source: The Yomiuri Shimbun, 2025

By transferring coastal radars, patrol boats, and maritime domain awareness (MDA) systems to major critical nodes in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, Japan is methodically reinforcing regional deterrence capabilities and ensuring that FOIP translates into a tangible, rules-based security architecture without relying on provocative military deployments (Walia, 2025, 4; Kim, 2025). OSA itself is perhaps the purest institutional expression of tactical hedging. Japan does not frame OSA grants as military aid, however, the programme is consistently presented in the language of “capacity building,” “maritime domain awareness,” and “rules-based order.” Yet, we see that the recipients are exclusively armed forces, the equipment is strategically targeted at chokepoints along vital sea lanes, and the budget trajectory is accelerating in lockstep with China’s regional assertiveness. The normative framing and the strategic logic are running in parallel tracks, each serving a different audience, for ASEAN and Pacific Island partners are reassured by the development language, while Japan’s security partners receive a materially meaningful capability transfer.

Ultimately, the establishment of OSA suggests that Japan is transitioning from a purely economic power into a proactive, strategic security actor in the changing environment of the Indo-Pacific to support its operationalization of rules-based, free and open international order. It demonstrates Tokyo’s ability to carefully navigate its domestic constitutional constraints to actively shape regional deterrence and build military capacity alongside its like-minded countries without abandoning its pacifist identity.

Defence Equipment Transfer Reform:

Japan along with its pacifist identity, there is a politically sensitive dimension of FOIP’s security recalibration represented by the progressive dismantling of Japan’s post-war arms export bans. Because of deeply entrenched domestic pacifist norms, this transformation has not proceeded through a single legislative rupture. Instead, it reflects an incremental and evolutionary approach to policy change, emphasising gradual adjustment to slowly broaden Japan’s security stance without provoking overwhelming domestic opposition (O’Shea and Maslow, 2024, 404). By gradually expanding the boundaries of permissible exports over a decade, successive administrations have systematically eroded the post-war export bans while nominally claiming to uphold Japan’s exclusively defence-oriented principles (Midford, 2026).

This incrementalism is evident when tracing the full sequence of export reforms. The trajectory began in 2014 when the Abe administration replaced the near-total ban on arms exports with the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology, framing transfers as a means to promote peace and enhance national security while strictly limiting finished products to five non-lethal

categories (Basu, 2026,). The Kishida administration subsequently pushed these boundaries further. In December 2023, the government revised the implementation guidelines to allow licensed products to be exported back to the licensor country, enabling the transfer of Patriot PAC-3 air defence missiles to the United States to replenish stocks depleted by American military aid to Ukraine and Israel (Ishimaru, 2026; Midford 2026). This was swiftly followed in March 2024 by permission to export the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) next-generation fighter jet – jointly developed with the UK and Italy – to third countries (Ishimaru, 2026).

The incremental sequencing of export reforms, when we analyse from non-lethal categories in 2014, to Patriot missiles in 2023, to GCAP in 2024, to full lethal exports in 2026, is itself a form of tactical hedging stretched across time. Each step is presented as a narrow, technical revision rather than a strategic rupture, allowing Japan to progressively dismantle post-war constraints while maintaining the fiction of continuity with its exclusively defence-oriented principles. It suggests that the ambiguity is deliberately preserved at each stage precisely because it buys political space domestically and diplomatic reassurance regionally.

The culmination of all these incremental recalibrations occurred under Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi. The political window for a full overhaul finally opened in late 2025 when the dovish Komeito party exited its 26-year coalition with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). This allowed Takaichi to form a government with the loose support of a like-minded conservative party, the hawkish Japan Innovation Party (JIP, or Ishin), providing her with the political capital to bring defence exports back onto the agenda with greater intensity (Jain, 2026, 34). Acting on the LDP-JIP coalition agreement, the Takaichi cabinet officially endorsed a landmark revision of the Three Principles on April 21, 2026, looking to loosen Japan's long-standing restrictions on weapons exports and marking the final step in a decades-long erosion (Ishimaru, 2026). This overhaul completely scrapped the five-category restriction for finished products and introduced a new two-tier classification system dividing equipment into weapons (lethal arms) and non-lethal capabilities. Under the new rules, exports of lethal equipment are permitted to 17 specific countries with which Japan has signed Equipment and Technology Transfer Agreements (ETTAs), fundamentally opening the door for Japan to supply lethal weaponry to its Indo-Pacific strategic partners (Ishimaru, 2026; Kelly, 2026). This suggests that Japan has fundamentally transformed its post-war military posture by officially adopting counterstrike capabilities, at the same time, proactively strengthening regional deterrence and security partnerships, all while strategically maintaining the façade of its exclusively defence-oriented policies.

Tactical Hedging and Operationalization of FOIP

Japan, through careful recalibration, employs what Koga termed tactical hedging – an ambiguous, temporary, and declaratory policy doctrine used to manage strategic uncertainty, allowing the state to delay final decisions on long-term alignments while building coalitions (Koga 2025, 110). These ambiguous declaratory policies include universal principles – such as the rule of law, economic prosperity, and freedom of navigation – that are mainly laid out in its FOIP principles. By maintaining a highly inclusive policy like this, Japan avoids explicitly antagonising Beijing while alienating South-east Asian partners who are wary of great-power confrontation (Koga 2026). Yet, beneath this cooperative and normative rhetoric, we see Japan actively facilitates the expansion of its minilateral security networks and deepens defence partnerships. Tokyo has sought to deepen its partnership through joint naval exercises and strategic dialogues with India, Australia, and, increasingly, Indonesia (Jimbo 2025). This dual functionality has allowed FOIP to serve simultaneously as an inclusive normative framework for the international order and as a strategic instrument of statecraft – maximising strategic flexibility while mitigating the risk of economic or military retaliation.

With the series of unprecedented concrete policy instruments introduced under the recent administration, Tokyo's aim to operationalize the evolving FOIP becomes evident. The watershed release of the 2022 Three Security Documents – the National Security Strategy, National Defence Strategy, and Defence Buildup Program – codified this strategic shift by committing to double defence spending to meet NATO standards and to acquire counterstrike capabilities, fundamentally altering the US-Japan alliance's division of labour (Hughes 2024). The ongoing reforms to the defence equipment transfer guidelines have, furthermore, eroded post-war export bans. In 2023, Japan was permitted to transfer lethal weapons like Patriot missiles to the United States and also developed a joint next-generation fighter jet (Rich and Ueno 2023). These mark some of the determinants that collectively materialized FOIP's strategic ambitions on the ground.

However, the utility of tactical hedging is inherently temporal; as FOIP's conceptual ambiguity diminishes, the benefits of the strategy wane (Koga, 2019, 290). By moving from cooperative rhetoric to hard-security operationalization – evidenced by the OSA, counterstrike capabilities, and deeper integration into US power projection—Japan's strategic posture is becoming increasingly explicit. Consequently, Tokyo faces a growing dilemma: continued military operationalization risks eroding the very diplomatic ambiguity that previously prevented overt friction with China and reassured cautious ASEAN partners.

Japan's contemporary Indo-Pacific strategy has transcended its origins as a mere blueprint for economic connectivity with a rule-based international order. By carefully navigating Japan's domestic constraints amid severe geopolitical pressures, Tokyo has successfully institutionalized a proactive

and integrated security posture. This nuanced recalibration ensures that “the OSA does not represent a radical departure from the past, but the institutionalization of Japan’s incremental yet bounded security engagement strategy (Kim 2025, 382).

Conclusion:

The evolution of Japan’s FOIP strategy illustrates a profound recalibration of its national security posture. As this study has demonstrated through a neoclassical realist framework, Japan’s transition toward a more robust defence posture was not a simple, automatic reaction to the rise of China or the deterioration of the global security environment (Kim, 2025, 358; Vidal, 2022, 32). Rather, these severe systemic pressures were heavily filtered through Japan’s deeply entrenched domestic constraints – namely its pacifist constitution, legal restrictions on arms exports, and cautious public opinion (Kim, 2025, 358).

The resulting policy recalibration was gradual but transformative. By operationalising FOIP through the 2022 Three Security Documents, the pioneering OSA framework, and the incremental dismantling of defence export bans, Tokyo successfully equipped its regional diplomacy with tangible hard-power instruments. Crucially, Japan achieved this operationalization without discarding its post-war identity, relying instead on the logic of tactical hedging. By anchoring FOIP in an inclusive, normative rhetoric focused on the rule of law, economic prosperity, and freedom of navigation, Japan deliberately maintained a degree of strategic ambiguity (Koga, 2025, 9; Yoshimatsu, 2025, 4). This rhetorical framing served a dual purpose: it allowed Tokyo to legitimately deepen practical security cooperation and capacity-building with Southeast Asian and Pacific nations without forcing them to explicitly choose sides in the US-China rivalry, while simultaneously avoiding overt, immediate provocation of Beijing (Shoji, 2018, 2; Yoshimatsu, 2025, 4).

Thus, contemporary FOIP is best understood not as a purely diplomatic vision nor a purely military containment strategy, but as a hybrid framework where concrete security instruments are actively deployed behind a shield of inclusive, normative rhetoric. However, looking forward, Japan’s ultimate strategic challenge will be managing the diminishing utility of this tactical hedging. As Japan’s security operationalization becomes increasingly explicit – evidenced by the acquisition of counterstrike capabilities, the expansion of the OSA, and the push by conservative leaders like Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi for full lethal weapons exports – the strategic ambiguity that once defined FOIP seems rapidly fading.

If FOIP continues to utilize the strategic ambiguity further, Tokyo could maintain the very idea of normative credibility that made the strategy appealing to ASEAN, while expanding its security pos-

ture to help maintain the rules-based international order along with its like-minded countries. Therefore, Japan's defining challenge in the coming decade will not be the acquisition of military capacity, but rather the delicate balancing act of sustaining its normative legitimacy and coalition-building function while simultaneously embedding pragmatic, hard-security deterrence into the Indo-Pacific architecture.

References:

1. Adebahr, David, and Annika Clasen. "Law over Order? Japan's Growing Focus on the Rule of Law in Foreign Policy." *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 13, no. 1 (2026): 97–120. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970251401273>.
2. Basu, Pratinashree. "From Pacifism to Strategic Maturity: The Evolution of Japan's Security Diplomacy." Observer Research Foundation Issue Brief, no. 857, January 20, 2026. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/from-pacifism-to-strategic-maturity-the-evolution-of-japan-s-security-diplomacy>.
3. Goroku, Tsuyoshi, Takeshi Iida, Ichiro Kaji, Yu Koizumi, and Ryo Nakai. UTokyo ROLES Survey – Mar. 2026: Security, Alliance, and Foreign Engagement Research (SAFER) Project. Tokyo: RCAST Open Laboratory for Emergence Strategies (ROLES), Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology, The University of Tokyo, March 3, 2026. https://roles.rcast.u-tokyo.ac.jp/uploads/publication/file_english/234/publication.pdf.
4. Govella, Kristi. "The Adaptation of Japanese Economic Statecraft: Trade, Aid, and Technology." *World Trade Review* 20 (2021): 186–202.
5. Government of Japan. Defense Buildup Program. Tokyo: National Security Council and Cabinet of Japan, December 16, 2022. https://www.mod.go.jp/j/policy/agenda/guideline/plan/pdf/program_en.pdf.
6. Government of Japan. National Defense Strategy. Tokyo: National Security Council and Cabinet of Japan, December 16, 2022. https://www.mod.go.jp/j/policy/agenda/guideline/strategy/pdf/strategy_en.pdf.
7. Government of Japan. National Security Strategy. Tokyo: National Security Council and Cabinet of Japan, December 16, 2022. <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryoku/221216anzenhoshou/>

nss-e.pdf.

8. Hamada, Maya. "Establishment of Japan's Official Security Assistance (OSA): Background and Significance." *Asia-Pacific Review* 32, no. 2 (2025): 12–33.
9. Hosoya, Yuichi. "FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy." *Asia-Pacific Review* 26, no. 1 (2019): 18–28.
10. Hughes, Christopher W. "Japan's 'Three National Security Documents' and Defense Capabilities: Reinforcing a Radical Military Trajectory." *Journal of Japanese Studies* 50, no. 1 (2024): 155–183.
11. Ishimaru, Jumpei. "Japan Loosens the Reins on Defence Exports." International Institute for Strategic Studies, April 27, 2026. <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2026/04/japan-loosens-the-reins-on-defence-exports/>.
12. Jain, Purnendra. "Japan's New Security Assistance to the Indo-Pacific Region." Observer Research Foundation, January 8, 2024. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/japan-s-new-security-assistance-to-the-indo-pacific-region>.
13. Jain, Purnendra. "Proactive Pacifism and Beyond: Japan's Foreign and Security Policy Pivots to Pragmatism Replacing Idealism." *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 13, no. 1 (2026): 33–53.
14. Jimbo, Ken. "Japan's Indo-Pacific Security Cooperation with India, Indonesia and Australia." Observer Research Foundation, August 2, 2025.
15. Johnson, Jesse. "Japan Takes Step Closer to Easing Rules on Export of Lethal Weapons." *Japan Times*, February 25, 2026.
16. Kamisuna, Takahiro. "Why ASEAN Is Crucial to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific." Institute of Geoeconomics, March 3, 2025. <https://instituteofgeoeconomics.org/en/research/2025030301/>.
17. Kelly, Tim. "Japan Opens Door to Global Arms Market with Biggest Export Rule Change in Decades." Reuters, April 21, 2026. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/japan-opens-door-global-arms-market-with-biggest-export-rule-change-decades-2026-04-21/>.
18. Kim, Seunghyun. "Recalibrating Aid, Reshaping Security Strategy: The Strategic Logic

- Behind Japan's Official Security Assistance." *Korean Journal of International Studies* 23, no. 2 (2025): 357–393.
19. Koga, Kei. "Institutional Dilemma: Quad and ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific." *Asian Perspective* 47, no. 1 (2023): 27–48. <https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2023.0001>.
20. Koga, Kei. "Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Strategy: Tokyo's Tactical Hedging and the Implications for ASEAN." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (2019): 286–313.
21. Koga, Kei. "Withering FOIP? Japan's Evolving Indo-Pacific Vision from Kishida to Ishiba." *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 13, no. 1 (2026): 7–32.
22. López i Vidal, Lluç. "Beyond the Gaiatsu Model: Japan's Asia-Pacific Policy and Neoclassical Realism." *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 9, no. 1 (2022): 26–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970221076641>.
23. Mainichi Shimbun. "Japan Approves Major Defense Export Policy Change." *Mainichi Japan*, April 17, 2026. <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20260417/p2g/00m/0na/032000c>.
24. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Official Security Assistance (OSA). February 2025. https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/fp/ipc/page4_005828.html
25. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Official Security Assistance (OSA). May 11, 2026a. https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/ipc/pagewe_000001_00268.html
26. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. FY2025 Domestic Public Opinion Survey on Japan's Diplomacy. March 6, 2026b. https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_02153.html
27. Midford, Paul. "Japan Eyes Lethal Weapons Exports." *East Asia Forum*, February 12, 2026. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2026/02/12/japan-eyes-lethal-weapons-exports/>.
28. Nagy, Stephen. "Sino-Japanese Reactive Diplomacy as Seen Through the Interplay of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision (FOIP)." *China Report* 57, no. 1 (2021): 7–21.
29. Naidu, G. V. C., and Yasuyuki Ishida. "Japan's Security Reforms under Abe Shinzo: Setting the Stage for Proactivism in the Indo-Pacific?" *Strategic Analysis* 46, no. 3 (2022): 277–292.

30. Pollmann, Mina. "Japan Is Moving to Expand Defense Exports. Constitutional Revision Is a Bigger Ask." *The Diplomat*, February 26, 2026.
31. Rich, Motoko, and Hisako Ueno. "Japan Relaxes Export Restrictions to Sell Patriot Missiles to U.S." *New York Times*, December 22, 2023.
32. Rose, Gideon. "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy." *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144–72. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100007814>.
33. Sherrill, Clifton W., and Richard A. Hough. "Current Japanese Security Policy towards China and Neoclassical Realism: Testing IR Theories." *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 2, no. 3 (2015): 237–265. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347797015601912>.
34. Shinoda, Tomohito. "Japan's National Security Policy Making under the Second Abe Cabinet: The Role of the National Security Council / Secretariat." *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 10, no. 4 (2025): 413–428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911251355728>.
35. Shioyama, Momo. "Japan's Latest Chapter in Military Cooperation: Official Security Assistance (OSA)." *New Perspectives on Asia*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 21, 2023. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/japans-latest-chapter-military-cooperation-official-security-alliance>
36. Shoji, Tomotaka. "The 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy' and ASEAN: Anxiety and Expectations." *International Information Network Analysis (IINA)*, September 18, 2018. <https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/shoji-southeastasia-foips.html>.
37. Tana, Maria Thaemar C. "Aid, Peacebuilding, and Human Security: Japan's Engagement in South Sudan, 2011–2017." *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 16, no. 3 (2021): 289–302. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15423166211014811>.
38. Walia, Simran. "Japan's Official Security Assistance (OSA) Policy Towards Southeast Asia." *Issue Brief*, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, August 12, 2025. <https://idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/japans-official-security-assistance-osa-policy-towards-southeast-asia>.
39. Wilkins, Thomas. "Middle Power Hedging in the Era of Security/Economic Disconnect: Australia, Japan, and the 'Special Strategic Partnership'." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 23, no. 1 (2023): 93–127.

40. Wilkins, Thomas S. "Australia and Japan Facing 'Disruptive' Challenges to the Rules Based Order in the Indo-Pacific." Policy Brief. Tokyo: Japan Institute of International Affairs, September 26, 2018.
41. Yoshimatsu, Hidetaka. "The Development of Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Security Concerns and Instrumental Principles." *Global Policy* 16, no. 4 (2025): 579–588. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.70006>