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Te Pokapū Akoranga Aorere o Aotearoa

JAPAN

AND THE

REGIONAL ORDER

- Dr Thomas Wilkins,

Senior Lecturer
Department of Government & International Relations,
University of Sydney



Japan and the challenge of regional order-building in the Indo Pacific

I. Introduction: Indo-Pacific regional order at a crossroads?

This paper looks at how Japan has, and is, responding to tectonic shifts in the regional order in the Indo-Pacific, and what policies/strategies it has devised and implemented to safeguard its own national interests and values in an increasingly severe security environment.

With the epic rise of China, and now India, to prominence, the Indo-Pacific region is now widely recognised as the engine of the global economy and geostrategic crossroads of the world. But despite its economic fluorescence, the region faces enormous challenges to stability and security as the Indo-Pacific Century continues to unfold. The superpower contest for supremacy between the US and China heralds the return of strategic competition and perhaps even a “second Cold War”, whilst regional tensions such as the South and East China Seas, the Korean peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, and various historical disputes, continue to simmer. In such a fraught environment, countries like Japan, alongside its allies and partners, have sought to maintain the strong status quo upon which regional prosperity, stability, and security has rested for decades. In order to achieve this, these countries have renewed their efforts to uphold a “rules-based order” (RBO), both regionally, and internationally. As President of JIIA, Kenichirou Sasae, argues ‘In the field of diplomacy, the “rules-based international order”, that until recently had been functioning despite its incompleteness, is under unprecedented strain.’ With new governments in both Tokyo under PM Yoshihide Suga, and the US, with President Joe Biden, now is an appropriate juncture to examine the vital question of regional order and appraise how Japanese policies, independently, and in tandem with allies and partners, will confront the challenges of the Indo-Pacific Century. This is an important exercise, as the 2020 *Diplomatic Bluebook* states: ‘It is necessary to craft new rules to meet the challenges of a changing world and emerging needs.’

The paper is structured as follows. First, it introduces how the notion of “order” in international affairs is conceived. It then provides a brief background to Japanese historical approaches to order-building since 1945 to tease out continuities and divergences with its current perspectives. The main text then proceeds to analyse these current perspectives and the diplomatic tools that Tokyo has wielded in service of its vision for a RBO in the Indo-Pacific.

II. What is “order”?

The term “order” in international politics, and in its academic guise of International Relations (IR) theory, is not always well-defined or understood. The term is often spoken without reflection and can often serve as an ambiguous place-holder for any number of related concepts (e.g. “international”/“regional system”, “regional architecture”, “multilateral institutions”, or even “US primacy”). The terms “international order”, “world order”, “global order”, “regional order” and “security order” are also frequently employed as descriptors and differentiators. The nomenclature also shifts to more normative (ideological) terrain when labels such as the “liberal international order” and the “rules-based order” (RBO) are invoked. For instance, the former is chiefly associated with American pre-eminence, whilst the latter embodies debates about *who* set the “rules”. We must therefore be alert to the specific usage of order-related terminology and its context throughout the analysis that follows.



Henry Kissinger's definition of "international order" (which applies equally to the sub-set of "regional order") serves as a useful definitional point of departure. In *World Order* he highlights 'a set of *commonly accepted rules* that define the limits of permissible action and a *balance of power* that enforces restraint when rules break down, *preventing one political unit from subjugating all others*'. Extrapolating on the nature of "order" in practice, Huiyun Feng and Kai He have pointed out that "order", whether global or regional, is a multifaceted concept that spans multiple domains – political, economic, and security. Moreover, they observe that different forms of order – norm-based, power-based and rules-based – often coexist within the system. Lastly, "order" is something that (major) actors as "architects" in the system aspire to "build", "maintain", "shape" or "revise", in accord with their own national preferences or "visions", and through their specific policies. It is at this stage that *subjective* ideological (values) may be introduced to the process of order-building alongside more instrumental (interest) orientated approaches. The resultant, *objective*, order will thus be a product of these interacting, often competing, processes. The concept and state of "order" is therefore dynamic and constantly evolving. As noted, it is manifest on both the *global* and *regional* levels, though it is the latter upon which this paper will chiefly focus.

III. Japan and the international order to the present: historical background

As a precursor to the analysis that follows, it is useful to briefly review modern Japan's traditional approach to questions of international/regional order through the Post-War, Cold War, and Post-Cold War periods, to understand the historical background and juxtapose traditional Japanese understandings with its current context. Through this process we can observe an evolution in the Japanese position through low-profile international passivity and economics-first contributions in the Cold War (the "reactive" phase) to reevaluation of its international contribution in the post-Cold War era, (the "adaptive" phase), through to the current "proactive" phase Japan entered in the 2000s, and which accelerated under PM Abe's second term from 2012.

Japan's "Reactive" phase:

In 1945 Japan emerged from the wreckage of the Great East Asia War and began to reconstruct its shattered economy and society under Allied Occupation. With the San Francisco Peace Treaty settlement in 1951/2 and Japan's admission to the United Nations in 1956, the country was again able to think about contributing to the international community. As Philip Lipsy and Nobuhiku Tamaki note 'In 1952, Japan, which regained its independence from the US [sic] Occupation, was forced to adapt once again to a new, drastically altered international order.' As the Cold War took hold, Japan played an important role as a "third pillar" in the "free world" alliance as it confronted the Soviet bloc. At that time regional order rested largely upon the US Hub and Spoke system of bilateral alliances, and its primacy upheld the wider "public goods" inherent in the so-called "San Francisco System" into which Japan became fully integrated. As a major beneficiary of *Pax Americana*, under the famous Yoshida Doctrine, Japan kept a low-profile under the US security umbrella as it concentrated almost exclusively on national economic development. Yet as Japan rose as an economic powerhouse from the 1960's onwards it gained the confidence to spearhead regional economic governance in the 1970s under the Fukuda Doctrine, aimed at South East Asian integration into its "flying geese" model, combined enormous disbursements of Official Development Assistance (ODA).

During the latter Cold War period, Japan has, perhaps unfairly, been characterized as a "reactive state" devoid of a clear sense of national purpose in the world. On this basis, Akira Iriye concludes, historically, that 'The nation has not made a notable contribution to the international order.' Yet, in the institution-building sphere, as much as the economic sphere, Tokyo actively



sought to play a major role in international organisations as they emerged, such as the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Group of Seven (advanced economies: G7) and regional ones, such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and strongly supported the UN, despite being excluded from membership of its highest councils. Because of the perceived one-dimensional economic aspect of Japan's efforts to support the international order ("check book diplomacy"), that was cruelly exposed by its inability to contribute militarily to the UN Coalition that ousted Iraq from Kuwait in the 1991 Gulf War, the reactive state label stuck. Yet, even if Japan struggled to meet revised expectations of its contribution to the "New World Order" proclaimed by the US at the close of the Cold War, the evidence above demonstrates that it was not entirely a moribund actor in terms of order-building.

Japan's "Adaptative" phase:

It was however, with the proclaimed "end of history" when the USSR imploded and the US became a unipolar power in the 1990s, that the notion of an American-led "liberal international order" fully emerged as the defining characteristic of the majority of the world system. John Ikenberry defines the liberal international order is 'a distinctive type of order, organised around open markets, multilateral institutions, cooperative security, alliance partnership, democratic solidarity and United States hegemonic leadership'. This closely conforms with, though is not quite synonymous with the "rules based order", to be discussed further below. During the post-Cold War period, Japan began to reevaluate its approach to global order, and shocked by negative responses to its purely financial contribution to the 1991 Gulf War, searched for ways to take on a more significant role commensurate with its status and capabilities in the world. Stung by the label of "economic giant" but "political pygmy", debates about the country's "international contribution" (*kokusai kōken*) dominated this period. As a result, Japan arguably entered an "adaptive" phase, as Thomas Berger, Mike Mochizuki and Jitsuo Tsuchiyama have characterised it. This period saw a greater determination to play a visible role on the global stage (the "Koizumi doctrine"). Typical of this approach, Brad Glosserman observes, PM 'Koizumi argued that Japan, as one of the chief beneficiaries of the liberal international order, needed to do more to sustain that order.'

In this adaptive phase, roughly beginning around the 1990s through the 2000s, Japan ramped up its engagement with regional organisations, such as the ASEAN+3 and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and East Asian Summit (EAS) and contributed to a number of Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs), such as Cambodia (1992-3) and East Timor (2001/2). The American response to the 9/11 terrorist attack put pressure on Japan not to repeat its Gulf War *faux pas* and make a military-support contribution to the "War on Terror" in Iraq and Afghanistan, where it deployed JMSF assets to provide refuelling to allied warships in the Indian Ocean, and reconstruction teams to Iraq (2004-8). Moreover, as Japan's economic star waned during the "lost decades", the "economics first" diplomatic contribution became less tenable, prompting Japan to devise others means to contribute to the liberal order. This set the template for a greater involvement in international and regional affairs to sustain the liberal order, that carried over through the short-lived Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government (2008-2012) to the present. It reached its peak under Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) PM Shinzō Abe, who ushered in a "proactive" phase toward order-building, where Tokyo on occasion would play a leadership role, when he assured the world "Japan is back"!

IV. Japan's current "proactive" approach to regional order

Space precludes a comprehensive analysis of every facet of Japanese statecraft aimed at the maintenance of regional order, this section therefore simplifies the picture by presenting three main aspects - political, economic, and security – each of



which are naturally mutually constitutive and mutually supporting in practice. Though the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) “vision” is integral to the following analysis, the discussion below takes a broader consideration of Japan’s approach to regional order-building.

Political order:

During the 2010s Japan took note of the visible challenges from rising or resurgent powers to the liberal order, which had been obscured by America’s “unipolar moment” and its preoccupation with the War on Terror. A JIIA Report identified the ‘emergence of challenges posed by revisionist forces to the existing international order’ and ‘heightened wariness of those that prefer to maintaining the status quo and upholding the rules-based order.’ Japan’s desire to contribute more proactively to upholding the US-led liberal international order was further catalysed by the relative decline in American ability and willingness (under President Trump) to assume the entire burden of maintaining that order. Driven by PM Abe’s resolute leadership, which some have dubbed an “Abe doctrine”, Tokyo stepped up to affirm its commitment and responsibilities in upholding the regional order and for once set the terms of the discourse itself (shown by major Japanese influence in shaping the “Indo-Pacific” concept).

The “political” dimension of order has become manifested in diplomacy and related policy initiatives designed to showcase a Japanese “vision” for the Indo-Pacific region. In this instance Tokyo served as the “architect” of the FOIP (“*jiyūde aka reta Indotaiheiyō*” in Japanese) “vision” for the region, launched in 2016. Integral to the FOIP are the preservation of the liberal international order established and led by the US, and a consistent emphasis on the RBO it enshrines. As Kei Koga attests ‘the FOIP’s primary objective is to shape and consolidate regional order in the Indo-Pacific on the basis of the existing rules-based international order.’ Because of elements of ambiguity and flexibility, the FOIP can be made to serve as an “umbrella concept” for a range of elements Japan seeks to promote in the regional order, and which will also be examined in the sections that follow.

According to Tokyo ‘The core idea of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept is to establish a rules-based international order and consolidate principles such as free trade, freedom of navigation, and the rule of law, which are essential for the stability and prosperity of the region.’ The emphasis on “rules” is more explicit in Japanese foreign policy than witnessed previously (“Pillar 1” of the FOIP). It is also notable that Tokyo itself has displayed such independent leadership in promulgating this rules-led vision, indicating that Tokyo is no longer content to be a “rule taker”, as it was in the reactive phase above, but rather a “rule maker” in this proactive phase. This has much to do with the leadership of PM Abe. In a speech at Washington’s Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) around the start of his second term in 2013 he declared that “Japan must remain a leading promoter of rules”. He went on to enumerate what would later become the key principles of the FOIP, and emphasised how the task of guarding the “global commons” would be shared with the US and other like-minded regional states. The FOIP places priority on the observance of commonly agreed rules appertaining to freedom of navigation, free, fair, and transparent trade practices, and respect for international law. This assertion of the paramountcy of rules in the regional order, was designed to serve notice that unilateral and coercive power-based practices by “illiberal” actors were unacceptable to Japan and its allies and partners. By presenting a clear strategic narrative of Japan’s engagement with the region, it has sought to claim a more prolific role in shaping regional order. The employment of the RBO terminology in the major policy documents of the US, Australia, and others, has subsequently served to validate and reinforce this approach.

But another crucial aspect of the RBO is the accent placed upon “values” as the source of, and justification for, such rules, and these bolster the point above. As Nobukatsu Kanehara of MOFA asserts ‘Twenty-First Century Japan must become a



country that believes in universal values and makes the case not for power alone but for justice in international society'. This, Glosserman posits, 'underlies the emphasis in Japan's diplomacy on values; they reflect respect for the rules.' It also stems from PM Abe's earlier enthusiasm for so-called "values-based diplomacy", first indicated in his initial brief stint at PM in 2006. By advancing Japan's credentials as democratic power that respects international law, protects human rights, and free trade, Abe was able to find common cause with countries such as the US, Australia and India; at one point characterising them as a "democratic security diamond". Democratically-anchored coalition building has since further extended to European powers with an interests in the Indo-Pacific, and with the EU itself, with such shared values featuring prominently in the resultant Strategic Partnerships. Indeed, Abe's attempts to 'create a coalition of the willing which can share the same values with Japan' was identified in a special report by the Japan Forum on International Relations (JFIR) in 2013. All of which is designed to magnify Tokyo's message and its influence. Moreover, values-led diplomacy also serves to unflatteringly highlight the authoritarian domestic nature of China and the "outlaw" nature of some of its foreign policies, such as the refusal to abide by the Hague arbitral ruling on maritime claims in the South China Sea, and use of coercive economic practices (see below). Yet, there are clear limits to the priority on values in Japanese diplomacy when this has created potential conflicts of interest in interactions with countries with non-democratic systems, such as Vietnam, for example, where the accent has been on "rules" rather than "values" per se. This continues the Japanese tradition of not intrusively pushing its own domestic values to the point of interference with the internal affairs of other countries.

Economic order:

The FOIP itself put priority on "rules" and the "values" that underpin them and this extends to the framing of the strong economic component of the original policy ("Pillar 2"). Given Japan's practice of economics-led foreign policy throughout the Cold War and Post-Cold War periods, this testifies to a continuity in Japan's approach to regional order-building. Indeed, Japan remains the world's third largest economy by (real) GDP, and the FOIP unveils ambitious plans for regional connectivity and infrastructure projects. By taking a forward-leaning stance, Japan can at least shape the terms and standards of regional economic governance in the region in accord with its own interests and values, even as China seeks to dominate the "rules" this sphere.

The FOIP commits Japan to a region-wide economic engagement strategy, in some ways designed to counter the influence of China's expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and provide attractive alternatives pathways to economic development and cooperation. Tokyo has been concerned that China is operating to standards antithetical to free and fair trade, and using economic statecraft to gain influence over weaker regional states ("debt trap diplomacy"), and punish others with economic coercion. In 2020 PM Suga affirmed, alongside Australia, 'trade should never be used as a tool to apply political pressure. To do so undermines trust and prosperity.' Part of the plan to dilute Beijing's dominance of regional economic governance was to join the US and other Pacific states in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TTP); also a major plank of the Obama-era "pivot"/"rebalance" strategy. President Trump's abrupt withdrawal from this in 2016, resulted in Tokyo stepping up (with Australia) to preserve the agreement in the form of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) as a means of maintain the necessary desired standards and rules in the regional economic order. As Lipsy and Tamaki note 'During the Trump administration, Japan increasingly emerged as a defender of core principals of the liberal order even as the US turned inward'.

Japan also progressively reached out to other important economic actors, signing the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) in 2018, building on existing EPAs, (such as Japan-Australia in 2014). In its economic interactions with regional states, Japan has sought to distinguish itself from China through provision of "quality infrastructure", including employment of local workforces and sustainable financing terms. Japanese investments in the Pacific Island Countries (PICS)



under the FOIP banner have focussed upon good economic practice and enhancing governance, to build infrastructure and resiliency among these countries. For example, Japan cooperated in 2019 with the US and Australia (as part of the Trilateral Investment Partnership) to supply an undersea telecommunications cable to Palau in 2019. In this way, countries are not forced to abide by Chinese “rules” of economic engagement for want of an alternative.

Japan’s approach to the economic dimension to regional order-building in line with its rules/values principles is also witnessed in its participation in multilateral (economic) institutions aimed at increasing regional integration. Though the FOIP offers Japanese alternatives to the BRI (in partnership with countries such as the US, Australia and India), Tokyo is fully engaged with regional economic organisations. Its accession to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2020 signalled Tokyo’s strong support for ASEAN-led economic governance. This further extends to Japanese support ASEAN-led regional architecture, such as the EAS and ARF, which also touch on security issues. The appearance of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific in 2019 was viewed positively by Tokyo as a means to create linkages with the FOIP. By way of deference toward “ASEAN centrality” MOFA provides the assurance that ‘The concept of FOIP does not intend to create new institutions or compete with existing institutions.’ With huge investment and significant trading stakes in South East Asia, this sub-region of the Indo-Pacific has taken on an outsized role in the Japanese approach to regional order (echoing the 1970s Fukuda Doctrine), especially as Tokyo seeks to diversify its economic focus away from its over-dependence upon China and reduce vulnerability to Chinese economic coercion.

Security order:

Though the security dimension of the FOIP is slightly more muted (Pillar 3: ‘a commitment to peace and stability’), so as not to arouse regional concerns about Japan adopting a fully autonomous security profile, it remains an integral element of Japan’s overall approach to order-building. Indeed, this accounts for its rebranding as a “Vision” rather than as originally a “strategy” (*senryaku*) to assuage ASEAN apprehensions. When security concerns arise, or are alluded to in relation to the FOIP for example, they continue to be framed as part of the RBO. Interestingly though, as the FOIP has continued to evolve security aspects have started to re-emerge more prominently in more recent iterations, such as the *Diplomatic Bluebook 2020*. It now states:

‘With the further emergence of various threats, including the severe security environment of the Indo-Pacific region, piracy, terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, natural disasters, and illegal fishing, there is a growing need for the countries of the region to cooperate toward a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.”’

At the core of the regional security order for Japan is the continued pre-eminence of the US as upholder of the balance of power that necessarily undergirds the liberal international order (as per Kissinger’s characterisation of “order” cited above). As Tamaki attests ‘The nature of the Japan-US alliance is inextricably linked to the US-led liberal international order.’ For example, the official American adoption of the FOIP in 2019, not only amplifies Japan’s message, but provides new point of convergence through which to operationalise their alliance relationship, within which Japan has shown its determination to play a greater role (as per the 2015 *US-Japan Defense Guidelines*).

The US-alliance and the remnants of American regional primacy are not the only element of the Japanese approach, however. Indeed, Japan no longer exclusively relies on the US-alliance to uphold the RBO in the Indo-Pacific. Instead, Tokyo has expanded its strategic horizons in the search for new partners to support its vision of a RBO. Key Strategic Partnerships have been nurtured in the region with Australia, India, and several South East Asian states among the most prominent, reinforcing enhancing economic ties at the same time. The *Diplomatic Bluebook 2020* recognises that ‘No single country can maintain



or enhance the rules-based international order alone. Japan works with a broad range of partners who share the vision of FOIP; no country is excluded from partnership.’ In the case of Australia and India, Japan shares values and interests, many embodied in the FOIP, which knit them together in support of a common vision of regional order. For instance, these powers all remain concerned with maritime security threats (as indicated in the FOIP), and work actively together in joint military exercises aimed at improved Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) against “gray area” incursions, as well as Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HA/DR). These bilateral partnerships are brought together trilaterally through the US-Japan-Australia (Trilateral Strategic Dialogue) and the Japan-India-Australia trilateral forum.

Most significant however, is their minilateral combination in the form of the so-called “Quad”. Though often mistaken as the mechanism through which the FOIP is to be enforced, the four “Indo-Pacific powers” approximately subscribe to its principles in so much as it relates to maintaining the RBO. The March 2021 Quad meeting, which occurred for the first time at the Head of Government level, claimed that the powers were ‘united in a shared vision for the free and open Indo-Pacific’. It further declared their commitment to ‘promoting a free, open rules-based order, rooted in international law to advance security and prosperity and counter threats to both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.’ The minilateral grouping has thus become a critical platform for Japan as it seeks to imprint its own vision of regional order. Added to this external support for the FOIP/RBO is the participation of additional states in the “Quad-plus” process, and not least the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership, enunciated at the same time as their EPA in 2018. Such extensive efforts at coalition-building greatly support the maintenance of the RBO for Japan, as intended.

The security aspects of the FOIP take on a further dimension when combined with Japan’s internal efforts to increase its security capabilities in order to play a more credible role alongside its allies/partners, and from which it cannot be fully detached. As part of what Andrew Oros dubs a “security renaissance”, Japan has steadily reformed its security apparatus across a wide spectrum of activities. To wit, the 2016 Peace and Security Legislation (including “collective defense” provisions) and ‘Strategic Promotion of Multi-Faceted and Multi-Layered Defense Cooperation’ are also calibrated to the service of the FOIP vision, as the *Defense of Japan 2020* testifies. To wit, it states that ‘It is important to establish this region as a free and open global commons to secure peace and prosperity in the region as a whole.’ It stresses, as above, defense collaboration with regional and extra-regional actors, and places a major emphasis on maritime security, though enhanced JSMF activity/cooperation and capacity-building assistance. Per Kissinger’s definition above, though the emphasis of Japan’s approach to order is on “rules”, Tokyo remains cognisant that ‘balance of power’ still matters if such normative efforts are to have persuasive effects on recalcitrant actors. As the JFIR Report recognises: ‘To implement its values [or “rules”]...a country must maintain a certain level of capability in both security and economic terms’. This points to the effective synergies exhibited in Japan’s order-building approach.

V. Conclusions: Proactive efforts to uphold a RBO

In a short space this paper has unpacked how Japan has approached the conundrum of Japanese regional-order building through “reactive” and “adaptive” phases, to the more “proactive” national approach witnessed today. Indeed, Lipsy and Tamaki observe that ‘Japan’s diplomacy also shows remarkable consistency in the idea that the US-led liberal order has been the foundation of regional peace and prosperity.’ Though the broader notion of a liberal international order has typically centred on US hegemony or primacy (during the unipolar moment), Japan has elected to concentrate on the fundamental elements that addressed a RBO, with American primacy remaining a means to that end, though no longer indispensable to it.



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Its order-building efforts have thus reflected its broader strategy of coalition-building and a diversification away from total reliance on the US. For its part, as a country well-endowed with national capabilities, but not able to influence order-building to the degree attainable by the superpowers, its efforts have been more *regional* than comprehensively *international* (global) in focus.

Hence, Japan has adopted a leading role in spearheading a RBO, based on values, that seeks to undergird the prosperity, stability and security of the Indo-Pacific region and respond to challenges to this order wherever they may be found. For the first time Japan has taken a major role in setting the agenda through its contribution to the discourse on the “Indo-Pacific” concept (beginning with Abe’s “confluence of two oceans” speech in 2006). But, central to putting its approach into practice has been its FOIP vision, alongside a plethora of associated activities such as domestic legislation and recalibration of its defence posture. The unprecedented strides achieved under former PM Abe, have bequeathed a strong legacy to his successor, PM Suga, to build upon, showing a determination to assume greater burdens and contribution to “public goods” more explicitly than in the past. Through its proactive approach to regional order-building under Abe Japan has acquired a new sense of national purpose and a greater profile in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.



About the Author, Dr Thomas Wilkins



Dr Thomas Wilkins is a Senior Lecturer in International Security at the Department of Government and International Relations (GIR) at the University of Sydney. He is also a Senior Fellow (Non-Resident) at the Japan Institute for International Affairs (JIIA) think-tank in Tokyo. He specializes in Asia-Pacific/Indo Pacific security issues, middle power and alignment theory. He has published widely in academic journals such as *Review of International Studies*, *The Pacific Review* and *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. He co-edited the volume *Rethinking Middle Powers in the Asian Century: New Theories New Cases* (Taylor & Francis 2018), and his latest monograph is entitled *Security in Asia Pacific: The Dynamics of Alignment* with Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019.

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