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Exploring shifts in Japan's foreign policy: Nomenclature and country emphases before and after the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'

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Abstract

The impact of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision on Japan's foreign policy is often taken as axiomatic. An examination of changes in foreign policy nomenclature and their empirical effects on a state's international relations presents a more nuanced picture, however. Expert interviews and text mining of official government publications from 2012-2021 from four foreign policymaking ministries reveals discernible shifts in Japan's foreign policy language since the initiation of FOIP, for instance. Nevertheless, the study finds no observable trends in Japan's foreign policy engagement with East Africa, at the western edge of the Indo-Pacific, despite Tokyo's increased emphasis on specific countries or transport corridors.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, foreign policy analysis, Japan, text mining, nomenclature

Introduction

When Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced his peculiar vision for the Indo-Pacific, he did so not in Tokyo, New Delhi, or Bangkok. Instead, he chose Nairobi, Kenya, in East Africa, as

the venue to unveil what is now considered by many to be a revolutionary, geopolitical moment. The occasion was the sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) in August 2016 – a fitting development since its mission aims to promote Africa's development through strengthening multilateral cooperation and partnership.

Since TICAD in Nairobi, Tokyo has continued to advocate and define Japan's signature foreign policy of the 21st century: the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, or FOIP. Japan's FOIP reportedly aims to build and protect the rules-based international order through freedom of navigation and free trade. Japan views these actions as essential for achieving regional stability and prosperity given its reliance on maritime transport.

In terms of wider international relations, FOIP is seminal and indicative of shifting global power distributions. It is Japan's reaction to China's rise and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The normative aspects of FOIP reinforce Japan's identity as a regional leader and global player defending the liberal order, partially informing its position vis-a-vis China.

Despite its vague nature, FOIP has reportedly motivated and animated Japan's foreign policy since 2016. From this, it follows that the direction and engagement of Japan's ministries with countries across the Indo-Pacific have changed and been refashioned around the FOIP concept and geographized political reality. This article attempts to answer two questions: what nomenclature changes are evident in Japan's foreign policymaking ministries since FOIP's advent? And to what extent has policy changed toward Eastern Africa post-FOIP?

Defining and implementing Japan's FOIP

Japan's MOFA defines the Indo-Pacific as "international public goods" developed "through ensuring the rule-based international order." The FOIP's features include upholding this order and maritime security, as well as enhancing economic ties through connectivity projects.

Given FOIP's connectivity emphasis, it has been compared to China's BRI infrastructure investment initiative, though the extent they are strategic competitors is debated. Nevertheless, FOIP aims to differentiate Japan through principles like "quality infrastructure" versus perceived issues with BRI projects.

The genesis of FOIP was the product of Abe's thoughts with advisors like Nobukatsu Kanehara and Tomohiko Taniguchi. Their creative additions have influenced Japan's self-conceptualization and role as a global economic and political power shedding postwar pacifism. Japan's shift from

"central country" to "normal country" seems motivated by systemic factors like the growing China threat and desire to bolster deterrence with the US.

While Abe and advisors were architects of FOIP's nomenclature, Tokyo's attempts to maintain relevance through concepts emphasizing freedom, rules, and quality speak to FOIP partially informing Japan's global position vis-a-vis China. This dynamic has brought the Indo-Pacific construct to the forefront geopolitically as like-minded states align strategies.

Japan's FOIP and its foreign policy ministries

Japan's foreign policymaking structure involves the Cabinet deciding policies, the National Security Council (NSC) discussing national security issues, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) formulating and implementing foreign policy coordinated with other ministries.

Advisors like Kanehara and Taniguchi at the NSC played key roles developing FOIP alongside Abe. MOFA then created documents defining FOIP's scope and aims, with nomenclature like "rules-based" and "quality infrastructure" differentiating it from China's BRI.

MOFA coordinates with other ministries operationalizing FOIP policies. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is MOFA's primary vehicle for administering official development assistance (ODA) globally, including FOIP infrastructure projects promoting its vision.

The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) oversees economic policies integral to FOIP, like supporting private companies' business activities across the Indo-Pacific. Cooperation with the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), METI's sister implementing agency, has increased Japan's emphasis on private-public partnerships (PPPs) versus traditional ODA.

While FOIP policies appear top-down from Abe's Cabinet, senior MOFA officials were central to forming the concept, later defined and explained in MOFA texts. METI's imprimatur is also visible in the private sector emphasis. Longstanding bureaucratic rivalries between METI and the larger MOFA contributed to this evolution better aligned with Abe's economic vision.

Methods

To test nomenclature changes, seven FOIP-associated terms were located, and text mining searched MOFA's Diplomatic Bluebooks, JICA's reports, JETRO's economic publications, and METI's trade white papers from 2011-2021.

Qualitative data came from expert interviews. Eastern Africa was selected as a case study region, with text mining searching for mentions of countries and key transport corridors in publications to locate evidence of changing foreign policy engagement strategies.

Results

The results show increased FOIP terminology usage by all four ministries after Abe's 2016 Nairobi speech. Terms like "free and open" and "Indo-Pacific" appeared or increased across three ministries post-2016. Others like "quality infrastructure" and "rules-based" also saw higher usage by multiple ministries.

Some findings differed across institutions. "Maritime security" was absent except in JICA texts, likely because the case study focused only on the Africa sections of MOFA's Bluebooks. However, its appearance aligns with JICA's blue economy development role.

Officials explained uneven usage stemmed from differing mandates, with the private sector-oriented METI/JETRO being more "agile" while MOFA/JICA oversee larger ODA budgets and projects. Nevertheless, all appear influenced by senior MOFA figures central to FOIP's genesis alongside Abe's advisors.

Corridors and Countries

On corridors, MOFA and METI used "corridor" more post-FOIP, while JICA and JETRO did the opposite. Mentions of Kenya's Mombasa Corridor increased in MOFA and JICA texts, but Mozambique's Nacala Corridor saw mixed results.

For countries, only Mauritius and Rwanda had higher mention rates post-FOIP. Kenya references rose in MOFA, JETRO and METI publications but fell in JICA's. Other states showed varying mention rates across ministries.

Discussion

The findings partially confirmed FOIP's 2016 promulgation generated new nomenclature adopted by the four ministries, signaling efforts to showcase evolving foreign policies addressing challenges like China's rise. Novel terms and intensified usage reveal Tokyo's intent to define its normative geopolitical vision.

Some terms were prioritized over others based on factors like institutional roles. MOFA's Bluebooks naturally lacked "maritime security" mentions when examining just the Africa sections,

while JICA's focus matched its development work.

Uneven adoption between nimbler METI/JETRO and budget-resourced MOFA/JICA stemmed from varying mandates, though all were influenced by senior MOFA figures instrumental in FOIP's genesis alongside Abe's advisors.

Engagement with Eastern Africa

The lack of observable trends in Eastern African country/corridor references potentially indicates geographic remove and limited resources meant Tokyo did not prioritize revamped engagement despite FOIP rhetoric.

An ex-ambassador noted JICA's ODA faces constraints in high debt-risk nations absent exemptions. OECD rules also opened some projects to lower-bid priced competitors. The private sector's wariness of emerging markets coupled with bureaucratic inertia and regional instability also stymied plans to expand via PPPs.

Meanwhile, corridors remained vital for realizing MOFA's Indo-Pacific vision through maps and ODA projects, though implemented differently. MOFA emphasized connectivity through iconic corridors, while JICA executed projects along them. However, METI/JETRO took a more holistic regional PPP approach after past corridor failures like Nacala's.

The results underscore the gap between high-level expressions of foreign policy evolution and actual implementation. While institutional texts signal change through novel nomenclature, empirical realities suggest pragmatic constraints around shifting Japan's economic diplomacy across the Indo-Pacific's farthest reaches.

Conclusion

The study reveals discernible shifts in Japan's foreign policy language with FOIP's 2016 advent but no corresponding trends suggesting revitalized engagement with Eastern Africa. This highlights divergences between leaders' rhetorical ambitions and bureaucratic policy implementation.

While FOIP nomenclature may increasingly saturate government publications, tangible policy changes could remain constrained by factors like limited resources, entrenched regional priorities and private sector hesitancy toward unstable markets. Nevertheless, Japan's infrastructure buildout in places like Mombasa alongside China's BRI projects holds potential for both strategic

competition and economic complementarity benefiting regional stability.

The findings contribute vital insights for international relations theory and practice. Locating changes to states' foreign policy nomenclature provides key indicators of their evolving approaches to the world. Examining gaps between novel rhetorical framings and empirical realities is crucial for assessing substantive strategic shifts.

For Japan, FOIP remains rhetorically central across administrations, suggesting economic, political and development strategies across the Indo-Pacific are being redefined around its principles - even if bureaucratic inertia means sweeping engagement with faraway regions has yet to fully materialize on the ground. As FOIP's architects intended, Japan's normative vision appears aimed at showcasing an increasingly confident global actor looking to shape emerging economic geometries beyond its immediate neighborhood.