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# Free and Open: From the Indo-Pacific to the Red Sea and Beyond

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## Free and Open: From the Indo-Pacific to the Red Sea and Beyond

In August 2016, the late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe launched Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy in recognition of a number of serious challenges facing the region such as [“piracy, terrorism, proliferation of WMD, natural disasters and attempts to change the status quo.”](#) He proposed the following solution to those outlined challenges: [“a rules-based international order including the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful settlement of disputes, and promotion of free trade.”](#) FOIP builds on the work of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) between Australia, the US, India, and Japan which was launched in 2007.

Although it was speculated that [FOIP had been ditched](#) by current Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio during a policy speech on October 23, 2023, it was brought up in subsequent policy statements, including during a meeting between Kishida and Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen just two days later. [Both leaders confirmed their commitment](#) “to uphold and strengthen the free and open international order based on the rule of law, with the U.N. Charter at its core.” “Recognizing that the security of the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific is inseparable,” the leaders of Japan and Denmark reiterated that a “free and open Indo-Pacific” means one that is “inclusive, prosperous, secure, based on the rule of law, and protects principles including sovereignty, territorial integrity, peaceful resolution of disputes, as well as freedom and fundamental human rights.”

Building on the [economic imperative of infrastructure](#) to advance trade through the India-Middle East-Europe economic corridor (IMEC), EU participation in the FOIP strategy is more of a convergence of political paradigms that prize democracy and the rule of law as fundamental elements. Given the inherent political and cultural constraints of the EU being able to ‘export’ its governing model to Asia, EU–Japan relations are becoming vital. As a ‘strategic partner’ from 2003, Japan is cooperating with the EU on security issues such as [counterterrorism, conflict prevention and peace-building measures](#). Still, building a rules-based economic relationship with China dominates, as does the great potential the EU has to develop relations with many states across the Indo-Pacific.

The list of challenges affecting the Indo-Pacific as outlined by Japan could easily be a list of challenges affecting the Middle East. Indeed, through the conceptualization of FOIP, one is able to extend its parameters to include the Pacific Ocean, the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and littoral states around the Indian Ocean, including East African states, India, and the Gulf states.

### Escalation in the Red Sea

Supply chain issues continue unabated, whether during and since COVID-19, during the grounding of the container ship Ever Given in the Suez Canal in 2021, due to the Russian war in Ukraine or poor US-Sino relations. Regional escalations in the Gulf have affected choke points such as the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab.

Freedom of navigation has become an even more urgent and dominant concern in the region since the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. The Houthis, armed and supported by Iran, initially sought to support Hamas militarily by launching missile and drone attacks against Israel. From November 2023, the group then began attacking international shipping vessels in the Red Sea



beginning with the [seizure of the Galaxy Leader cargo ship](#) in a daring helicopter raid which it recorded and posted footage of online. In late November, the [USS Mason foiled a hijacking of a tanker by the Houthis](#), and on December 3, three merchant ships were hit by missiles in an attack [later claimed by the Houthis](#). The USS Carney shot down three Houthi drones launched the same day.

By February 24, 2024, the Houthis had launched [at least 48 attacks](#) on ships from a multitude of countries causing an exodus of [up to 90 percent of container ships](#) forced to reroute around the southern tip of Africa. The rerouting is adding weeks of delays, higher costs, and lower Suez Canal receipts for Egypt at a time of already strained economic conditions. In response, the US launched [Operation Prosperity Guardian](#) to support freedom of navigation with the participation of the UK and more than 20 other countries. Yet the altercations have still not ceased. On March 6, a [Houthi missile killed 3 crew members](#) on board a ship in the Gulf of Aden, and on March 9, the US, UK, and France [shot down dozens of Houthi drones](#) in the Red Sea.

From the GCC side, only Bahrain joined Operation Prosperity Guardian. Other GCC states decided to sit out the operation partly in an effort to avoid any steps which could be interpreted as an escalation by Tehran. Even prior to Operation Prosperity Guardian, [the UAE left the US-led Gulf maritime coalition in May 2023](#) to avoid becoming embroiled in further escalations against Iranian or Houthi interdiction of shipping. Given that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have already experienced Houthi attacks, they are keen to avoid actions that might compromise the nascent diplomacy-first approach with Tehran. The [European Union has also launched a defensive mission](#) with both NATO and the EU [condemning 'Houthi interference'](#) in the international freedom of navigation.

The Houthi attacks on international shipping are reminiscent of Somali piracy further south from Bab al-Mandab. While those attacks spiked between 2005 and 2012, the attacks in the Red Sea could [reignite the piracy issue](#) due to rerouted international shipping, a change in the focus of the EU NAVFOR (European Union's Naval Force)- Atalanta from counter-piracy to broader maritime security in the North Western Indian Ocean, as well as Somali fishing policy and consequently, more foreign fishing vessels coming in. The Somali-based violent Islamist group al-Shabab may also be encouraging ship hijackings and ransoms for economic gain. Constraining al-Shabab will be dependent on the 2023 plan to ['search and destroy'](#) the group, supported by Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti.

### **FOIP principles and the Red Sea**

There is evidence that the Arab Gulf states are not seeking confrontation with Iran, and similar to Japan and the FOIP, are now attempting to advance win-win cooperation, stability, and trade opportunities. Nevertheless, Red Sea security threats tend to emanate from the under-appreciated determination and capacity of violent non-state actors, assisted in some cases by Iran. Their impact could have been better managed through a more effective regional security mechanism such as [ASEAN's Convention on Counter Terrorism and the ASEAN Comprehensive Plan of Action on Counter Terrorism](#). In the current situation, the rising Houthi status in the region reflects poor US policymaking that has tolerated the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza for too long, and on some other issues in the Middle East that Gulf partners have weighed in on.

Whilst FOIP has greater access to various forms of multilateral support from ASEAN, the QSD, and AUKUS (Australia, UK, and US), it is potentially far more difficult to manage given the claims



being made by China in the region. Whilst FOIP is potentially harmonious with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), there is still the question of managing fractious US–Sino relations, underscored by the findings presented in the [2024 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community](#). The US is responding to the rise of China with various policy adaptations, including the AUKUS nuclear powered submarine deal. Announced in 2021 and [expected to cost \\$368 billion over the next three decades](#), AUKUS will place a large financial burden on the Australian defense budget and stretch US and UK submarine production. But ultimately, AUKUS will allow Australia to retire its old Collins-class submarines which have to surface, or 'snort,' every [70 days](#) to recharge batteries and replenish oxygen supplies. In the future, Australian nuclear-powered submarines should be able to remain submerged much longer, even up to 20 years if necessary, subject to food rations and human endurance, vastly improving force projection.

Whilst US-Sino tensions have not devolved into open conflict, even in a localized conflict such as over Taiwan, there is a risk that the [US or India might close the Strait of Malacca](#). In response to this 'Malacca Dilemma,' Beijing has been working to stabilize state partners, provide security assistance, and build up its own naval capabilities in response. Thus, these bottlenecks in the international trading system can create tensions and contribute to greater threat perception, even when all other things are equal. With states in the Euro-Atlantic region expressing interest in the Indo-Pacific, it is clear that the interruption of supply chains affects all trading nations. There is therefore the need to establish a clear normative approach to free and open waterways given other contexts such as the Black Sea where efforts to control through force have led to interrupted grain exports from Ukraine and Russia.

Forums and channels for communication and coordination such as ASEAN and the QSF highlight the missing link between effective multilateral regional security organizations and concrete and long-term security proposals which can be carried through to implementation. Since there are few recent successful counterinsurgency and state-building project experiences for western states to draw on, Tokyo is ideally suited to contribute beyond FOIP to advance capacity building projects, especially in Somalia. Japan lacks the convening power that the US could have in resolving multiple regional challenges through new policy adaptations. However, its normative influence, economic prowess, and potential for greater military assertiveness, especially when coupled with the influence of like-minded allies, will continue to help address many concerns central to regional and international security.

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