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## AGDA INSIGHT

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# Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision: Advancing Defence Engagement and Maritime Partnerships with the Gulf countries

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## Summary

1. Japan's Prime Minister Kishida Fumio visited Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar in July 2023. During his first diplomatic tour of the Gulf as premier, Kishida sought support from regional leaders on Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) vision. While FOIP is a central plank of its foreign policy, how Japan has promoted FOIP in the Gulf is not well understood, particularly the role played by its Self-Defence Forces (SDF).
2. This Insight evaluates the significance of maritime security in Japan's FOIP vision and SDF's contributions to Japan-Gulf ties. It argues that through defence engagement with the region, while relatively low-key, Japan has sought to demonstrate its commitment and presence. As the mosaic of maritime security partnerships shift alongside evolving regional power dynamics, Japan and its Gulf partners should consider opportunities to deepen their security and defence cooperation.
3. Japan's defence engagement with Gulf states have comprised port calls, joint exercises, as well as aircraft displays at air shows. Particularly noteworthy are the Maritime Self Defence Force (MSDF) destroyers deployed on anti-piracy patrols since 2009 and information gathering missions since 2020. These destroyers have also been tasked to conduct "goodwill" port visits and exercises, indicating the flexibility of the maritime instrument at Japan's disposal for defence engagement.
4. This gels well with Japan's strategic partners – United Kingdom, India, and France, among others – formulating new defence cooperation mechanisms and maritime arrangements with the Gulf states to suit the dynamics of a changing global order.
5. As Japan-Gulf ties diversify beyond hydrocarbon energy resources to include renewables, climate-resilient agriculture, and deeper educational exchanges, greater attention should be paid to whether Japan's defence engagement with the Gulf states can be ramped up. One of the three pillars identified in Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy is the need for increased international security cooperation with like-minded partners. Japan has invested heavily in this third pillar, notably with India, Australia, the UK and France.
6. In this environment, the Insight offers the following recommendations:
  - Develop deeper understanding of how Gulf states' response to Japan's FOIP vision is shaped by the desire for multi-alignment and omni-balancing.
  - Explore potential opportunities for Japan to "plug and play", first as an observer, into newly emerging military exercises that involve its strategic partners (France, UK, India), ally (US), and Gulf states such as UAE, with which Japan has a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.
  - Expand the use of Defence Cooperation Agreements to gradually transform Japan's defence and security partnerships with Gulf states.
  - Consider gradually expanding the spectrum of bilateral military exercises into non-kinetic air exercises involving transport aircraft and Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief, maintenance and logistics.

## The Issue

Japan's interests in the Middle East and the Gulf are well-understood. As former foreign minister Motegi Toshimitsu stated: "In the field of energy security, we depend on the Middle East to secure ninety percent of our crude oil needs, and that is why we consider peace and stability of the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries vital and extremely important for us".<sup>1</sup> That said, Japan-Gulf ties are diversifying quite significantly, with non-oil trade increasingly becoming a component of Japan's regional stakes beyond the energy sector.<sup>2</sup> This Insight focuses on how Japan has utilized defence engagements to promote its signature Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision in the Gulf.

A 2023 discussion of the "friendship" aspects of FOIP and the Gulf barely touched on the maritime dimensions of Japan's defence engagements with GCC states.<sup>3</sup> While ASEAN is identified by Japan as the "hinge of two oceans" (Indian and Pacific) in its FOIP vision,<sup>4</sup> the development of Tokyo's maritime partnerships with the GCC states has received much less academic and policy attention. Japan has clearly talked up its FOIP vision since former prime minister Abe Shinzo launched it in 2016. FOIP has since evolved from a "strategy" to a "vision" and remains fluid. (Prime Minister Kishida unveiled a "New Plan for FOIP" in India in March 2023). The initial motivation was and remains driven by Japan's desire to uphold the rules-based order in the face of an assertive China, compounded by threats from North Korea and Russia. Japan inhabits one of the roughest strategic neighborhoods among G7 powers, surrounded by less than friendly nuclear-armed neighbors. Nonetheless, Japan insists that the concept remains "inclusive" of all states who share its vision.

Japan is a maritime island nation dependent on overseas trade for resources and food. According to Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, FOIP seeks "to develop a free and open Indo-Pacific region as 'international public goods', through ensuring rules-based international order including the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful settlement of disputes, and promotion of free trade." FOIP is Japan's preferred version of regional order emphasising what Abe called the "confluence of two seas": the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean. More importantly, Japan has also sought to demonstrate its presence and showcase its commitment and capabilities towards realising the FOIP vision.

FOIP however cannot be just talked into existence through speeches, official government documents,

and press releases, it also needs to be demonstrated in practice and substance. As such, Japan's Ministry of Defence (JMOD) has identified tools of defence cooperation and engagement that help in achieving the FOIP vision. This included "bilateral/multilateral exercises, goodwill exercises, mutual visits of naval ships and aircraft etc."<sup>5</sup> This Insight considers the various mechanisms that Japan has utilized to add substance to the FOIP vision through engagements with GCC states.

## Gulf responses to FOIP

Despite Japan's recognition of the Gulf's strategic importance, the Gulf states' emphasis on Indo-Pacific matters has not been commensurate. Australia's Ambassador to Kuwait, for example, expressed surprise that Kuwait did not pay enough attention to or understand why the Indo-Pacific matters.<sup>6</sup> There is also little discussion publicly about Indo-Pacific policy in other GCC states. Some suggest that GCC countries may prefer the idea of a cooperative 'Blue Economy' over Japan's FOIP because of its perceived anti-China undertones.<sup>7</sup> It also seems that "Gulf countries (still) do not have a specific policy towards the Indo-Pacific region" and that "Gulf countries still approach this term with caution".<sup>8</sup>

This reticence on Japan's FOIP could be explained by the multi-alignment policy adopted by Gulf countries whereby equidistant relationships are cultivated with several Asian partners at the same time (Japan, China, South Korea, and India), while maintaining long-standing ties with the United States.<sup>9</sup> Gulf states also realize a need to enhance their strategic autonomy to avoid being forced to choose sides in US-China superpower rivalry and more recently, pressure from the US to impose harsh sanctions on Russia after the invasion of Ukraine.

This multi-alignment, amid a growing perception of US disengagement from the region, explains the diversification of Gulf defence partnerships towards countries such as China, India and South Korea. Seoul for instance has stationed its 'Akh' unit in Abu Dhabi to train UAE special forces since 2011 and sold M-SAM surface-to-air missiles ("Cheongung II") to the UAE. In 2021, India launched naval exercises with Saudi Arabia for the first time. India also participated for the first time in 2021 in the UAE-led Desert Flag multilateral air exercises on top of its regular bilateral India-UAE Desert Eagle air exercise. The UAE has also become the first Gulf state to purchase Chinese L-15 military jet trainers. These moves prompted suggestions of a "UAE push towards the Indo-Pacific".<sup>10</sup>

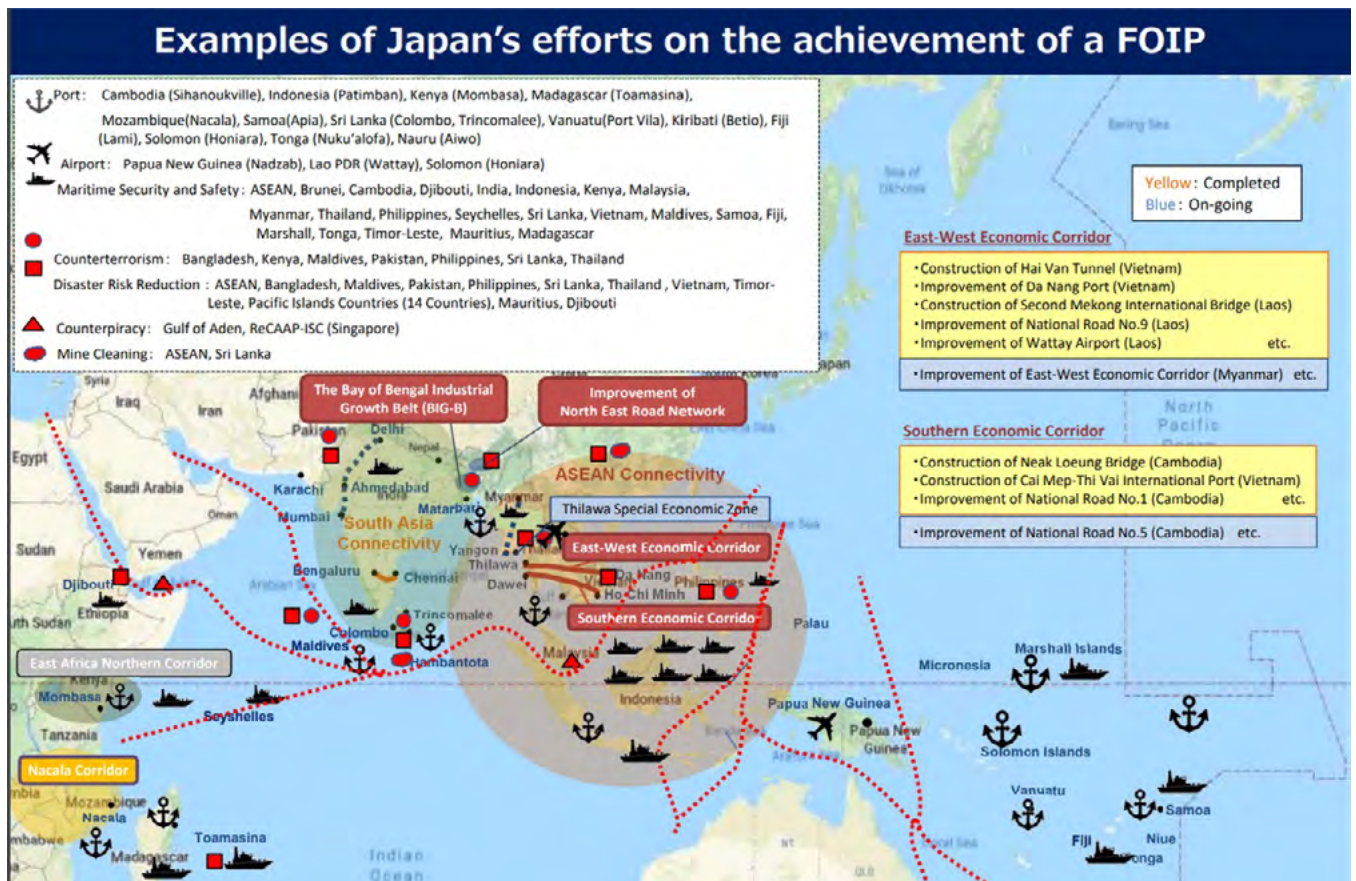


Against this backdrop, the question of what might Japan's FOIP entail for the Gulf states remains.

The Saudi-Japan Vision 2030 was unveiled in 2017 to set new directions for the strategic partnership between the two countries, including investment and finance, small and medium enterprises and capacity building, culture, sports, and education. The Japan-Saudi Arabia Defence Ministerial Meeting in Tokyo on 31 July 2023 agreed to further strengthen bilateral defence cooperation and exchanges including unit-level cooperation and also discussed defence technology cooperation. Meanwhile, a Defence and Security Subcommittee has also been set up under the auspices of the joint declaration on implementation of the Japan-UAE Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Initiative signed in September 2022. In a JMOD read-out of the Japan-UAE Defence Ministers' Video Teleconference of 10 March 2021, both parties decided to "promote defence cooperation and exchanges in order to uphold and reinforce the Free and Open Indo-Pacific". Previously discussed topics by the two governments included unit-to-unit exchanges between Maritime Self-Defence Force (MSDF) units and UAE Navy units (including goodwill training

during port calls), the possibility of cooperation in counter-piracy activities, and multilateral workshops, conferences and seminars.<sup>11</sup> In May 2023, Japan and the UAE signed a defence cooperation agreement concerning the Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology, the first such document between Japan and a Gulf state.

The fact that the Gulf is a maritime domain naturally means the region is a crucial part of the FOIP vision, considering the massive amounts of energy resources and trade that pass through the Gulf on the way to the Indo-Pacific. In its first-ever landmark National Security Strategy issued in 2013, Japan outlined its "proactive contribution to peace" policy. The strategy document explicitly highlighted "the sea lanes extending from the Gulf through the South China Sea to Japan." The map below reproduced from Japan's MOFA document<sup>12</sup> clearly illustrates the sea lanes that traverse through the Gulf on the western edge of the FOIP. Yet, most of the examples listed about Japan's FOIP efforts are concentrated in South Asia, South Pacific and Southeast Asia. Despite the strategic importance of the Gulf, there seems strangely little going on in the region, at least from the map.



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, website

The Japan Ministry of Defence (JMOD) 2020 Defence White Paper (Defence of Japan) document provides more details in a section titled "MOD's Specific effort for FOIP" in the Middle East. This includes active participation in multinational security conferences held in the Middle East and calling at ports and airports by SDF's assets (aircraft and naval ships) in Oman, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain.<sup>13</sup>

As suggested earlier, Japanese presence in multinational security conferences is presented by JMOD as a pillar of Japan's efforts to achieve the FOIP vision in the Gulf. Kono Taro was the first Japanese foreign minister to attend the Manama Dialogue in November 2017. When he returned in 2019 to Bahrain, this time as the first ever Japanese defence minister to address the conference, Kono's speech alluded to Japan's role in maritime security: "The challenges to maritime security in the Middle East have provided an opportunity for economically developed Japan to meet its responsibilities within the international community".<sup>14</sup>

He listed Japan's past contributions such as Operation Gulf Dawn, the Maritime Self Defence Force (MSDF) minesweeping mission after the 1991 Gulf War and first overseas deployment since 1945. Kono also pointed to Japan's deployment of defence assets aimed at maintaining maritime security and freedom of navigation in the region, despite pressing security challenges closer to home from North Korea, Russia and China. These Japanese contributions included MSDF refuelling missions in the Indian Ocean providing support for US-led war on terror campaigns in Afghanistan, as well as MSDF commanders and liaison officers posted to Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151) Headquarters in Bahrain, the multinational anti-piracy taskforce established under a United Nations mandate. MSDF officers have in fact commanded CTF-151 four times. Kono also highlighted the MSDF's counter-piracy operations with two Maritime Patrol Aircraft and destroyers patrolling in the Gulf of Aden since 2009, as well as participation in the multi-national 'International Maritime Exercise' since 2012.

Bilateral/multilateral exercises in the Gulf is another tool of defence cooperation highlighted by JMOD as part of efforts to achieve the FOIP. The MSDF's annual signature Indo-Pacific Deployment (IDP) is explicitly presented as an activity designed "to realize a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'".<sup>15</sup> A long-range deployment lasting several months, IDP 2022 units for instance participated in several bilateral and multilateral exercises including US-led Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC), Australian-led Kakadu, the Japan-India Maritime

Exercise (JIMEX), as well as numerous port calls throughout the Indo-Pacific stretching from India, Southeast Asia to the south Pacific. IDP units usually consist of a large flat-top helicopter carrier (such as the Izumo-class) escorted by destroyers, and occasionally a submarine and aviation assets such as P-1 maritime surveillance planes.

Besides the IDP, there is a separate Indo-Pacific and Middle East Deployment (IMED) consisting of a smaller force of a minesweeper and minesweeper tender that is more tailored for the Middle East. Japan's 2022 Defence White Paper explained that "MOD/SDF conducted the FY2021 Indo-Pacific and IMED from December 2021 to April 2022 involving MSDF minesweepers, demonstrating Japan's deep commitment to the stability and prosperity of the region."<sup>16</sup> Like its larger IDP counterpart, the IMED similarly serves the purpose of achieving Japan's FOIP vision. IMED units have usually made port visits to Mina Salman, Bahrain, for courtesy calls on the commander of the Royal Bahrain Navy.

Japan has been a regular participant sending MSDF minesweepers to the multilateral International Mine Countermeasures Exercise (IMCMEX) since 2012 and now the International Maritime Exercise (IMX)/CUTLASS EXPRESS exercise series hosted by the United States. IMX combined with CUTLASS EXPRESS 23 focused on the coast of eastern Africa, another important node in Japan's FOIP vision linking the Indian Ocean with the Pacific. The largest multinational exercise in the Middle East, it spanned the Gulf, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Gulf of Aden, Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and East African coastal regions.

MSDF mine counter-measure operations in the Gulf have long drawn controversy: from the earlier mentioned MSDF minesweeping Operation Gulf Dawn and so-called "Gulf War trauma"<sup>17</sup> to Abe's comment that efforts to blockade or disrupt maritime trade in the Straits of Hormuz could trigger Japan's right of collective self-defence.<sup>18</sup> Former defence minister Nakatani Gen supported Abe's point, saying that if undersea mines disrupted oil supply, it would significantly impact daily lives of the Japanese people, potentially threatening the country's existence. These comments highlight concerns about mine warfare or disruptions in the Gulf for a geographically-distant country like Japan.

Apart from the gains in tactical capabilities MSDF derived from these exercises and the opportunity to advance Japan's FOIP vision in the Gulf, these deployments also enable Japan to build relationships with other participating navies that MSDF previously

had relatively limited interactions with, compared to MSDF's links with the US Navy. For instance, in 2016, MSDF minesweepers worked closely with the UK Royal Navy during IMCMEX.

In this context, defence minister Kono's mention of Japan's contribution to anti-piracy patrols off the coast of Somalia deserves further discussion. Since 2009, two MSDF destroyers (Deployment Support-Group for Counter Piracy Enforcement) have been deployed along with two P-3C maritime patrol planes (Deployment Air Force Counter Piracy Enforcement). This has since been reduced to one destroyer. In 2013, Japan joined the multinational Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151) and in May 2015, it assumed the rotational command of CTF-151, the first time that SDF personnel took command of a multinational task force.

## Continuous MSDF presence

Japan's first overseas base to support its anti-piracy patrols, Djibouti is described in publicly available Cabinet Secretariat reports as "located on the western side of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific where Japan maintains a SDF base, it is the Gateway to Africa for Japan".<sup>19</sup> Japan also utilised its presence in Djibouti to enhance its profile in the Gulf and Middle East. The mission parameters of deployed MSDF destroyers have extended beyond simply counter-piracy patrols per se in the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia. They also engage in port calls and goodwill exercises with Gulf states such as the UAE and Oman.

There have been numerous replenishment visits for supplies at Salalah port in Oman for instance by the MSDF counter-piracy patrol surface units. Besides receiving supplies from Salalah, these destroyers have conducted defence engagement activities. JS Samidare, which was deployed to the region on both counter-piracy operations and information gathering missions, for instance, also execute what the Japanese Embassy in Oman called a "goodwill exercise"<sup>20</sup> in the form of a PASSEX (Passage Exercise) in the Arabian Sea with the Royal Navy of Oman ship Khasab in June 2022.

Besides the CTF-151 deployment, Japan's other sizable presence is the "information gathering" missions from 2020, although this deployment has not explicitly been framed by JMOD in terms of achieving the FOIP vision. After mysterious attacks on oil tankers in the Straits of Hormuz, Japan deployed a MSDF destroyer to "collect information" in February 2020. Before the deployment, then-PM Abe personally visited Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman to explain the mission and seek support, which he received.

The MSDF mission's geographical parameters exclude the Gulf and Strait of Hormuz (instead focusing on the Gulf of Oman, the northern Arabian Sea, and the Gulf of Aden to the east of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait). The deployment of MSDF aviation assets accompanying its surface units also deserves attention. The pair of P-3C maritime patrol aircraft deployed in Djibouti initially for the counter-piracy mission are now coordinating with MSDF destroyers on the "information collection" mission in the northern Arabian Sea. MSDF destroyers deployed as part of the Deployment Surface Force for Counter-Piracy Enforcement also now engage in this information-gathering mission. The same MSDF surface and aviation units are now effectively performing the two missions of counter-piracy and information-gathering.

## Port calls, goodwill exercises and aircraft visits

Port calls, mutual visits of ships/aircraft and goodwill exercises are among other mechanisms identified by the JMOD as supportive of the FOIP vision in the Middle East. These can take a few forms. For instance, the MSDF Training Squadron is a long-range overseas training cruise lasting several months. It has been going on since 1957. With the GCC states, the squadron has made repeated visits to Omani ports such as Salalah and Muscat in 2009, 2010, 2012, and 2022. Port calls may also involve a single vessel, for instance destroyer Kirisame made a port call at Zayed Port (the UAE) in 2017 while deployed on the counter-piracy mission. Another destroyer Teruzuki visited Mina-Salman in Bahrain in 2017, while similarly deployed on counter-piracy patrols. As previously mentioned, the IMED23 minesweepers also visited Mina Salman while participating in the IMEX. These port calls usually comprise some cultural exchange activities or courtesy calls to local dignitaries.

Alongside maritime assets, JMOD also identified aviation assets as part of its contribution to FOIP in the Middle East. Besides the deployments of MSDF P-3 patrol planes for counter-piracy and information-gathering missions mentioned above, Japan showcased its Kawasaki C-2 transport aircraft for the first time at the 2017 Dubai Airshow, with repeated return visits in 2019 and 2021. The Japanese Air Self-Defence Force (ASDF) chief of staff attended the November 2019 airshow and met with the commander of the UAE Air Force. At the airshow, Japan also explained the C-2 capabilities to visitors. Earlier in June 2019, ASDF conducted unit-to-unit exchanges with the UAE Air Force which has previously expressed interest in purchasing the C-2.



## Defence Cooperation Agreements

Defence Cooperation Agreements (DCAs) are another emerging policy instrument for Japan to transform its defence and security relationships with partners in the Gulf. By signing multiple DCAs, Japan has transformed its strategic partnerships, for instance, with the United Kingdom to enable more regularised defence engagements such as exercises of growing complexity and joint development of defence equipment. As for DCAs with GCC states, in May 2023, Japan and the UAE signed a defence cooperation agreement concerning the Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology. Although Japan has inked many similar agreements with European and Southeast Asian countries, this is the first time Japan has signed such an agreement with a partner in the Middle East.

## Defence Industry Cooperation

Emirati defence company EDGE Group is reportedly keen to collaborate with Japanese company Mitsubishi Electric on the procurement of air surveillance radars.<sup>21</sup> Earlier in 2016, Japan signed a memorandum of understanding to boost defence exchanges with Saudi Arabia and hold working level talks on maritime security. Other similar memoranda have been signed with Bahrain and Qatar. These are primarily political statements of intent which may help pave the way for more significant agreements further down the line such as the Transfer of Defence Equipment agreement with the UAE, if there is sufficient convergence of interests and political alignment between partners. Saudi Arabia has also discussed potential for aerospace cooperation with Japan. Reports suggest that Saudi Arabia has requested to join the UK-Japan-Italy Global Combat Air Programme, although Japan's response has been reportedly lukewarm.

## Regional Minilateralism and Military Exercises

Emerging minilaterals are reshaping security and defence dynamics with potential implications for Japan's FOIP and defence engagement in the Gulf. The UAE-France-India inaugurated their trilateral Maritime Partnership Exercise in 2023, following the first ever participation of the UAE in the long-standing bilateral France-India Varuna exercises in 2021. The UAE contribution has usually been a Maritime Patrol Aircraft. The UAE is emerging as an active Gulf minilateral actor in the region. After normalising relations through the 2020 Abraham Accords, the UAE and Bahrain have held joint naval drills with the

US and Israel in the Red Sea for the first time in 2021. These drills were more of an opportunity for partners to familiarise themselves with each other, rather than involving high-end content such as missile launches or advanced assets like submarines.<sup>22</sup> The Emirati Air Force commander also attended the Israel-led multinational Blue Flag exercises in 2021 for the first time, although Emirati warplanes did not fly. In 2022, Oman hosted Exercise Khunjar Hadd with French Marine Nationale participation, on top of the regular US Navy and UK Royal Navy participants. Britain has developed its Joint Logistics Support Base at Oman's Duqm port to support UK maritime operations in the region and beyond, together with an Omani-British Joint Training Area and a British Army Land Regional Hub.

Saudi Arabia debuted its multilateral air exercise Spears of Victory in 2022, while India held naval exercises with Saudi Arabia for the first time in 2021. For its part, Japan has participated in exercises such as Malabar and La Perouse which comprise membership that overlaps with Varuna (India and France). Japan has also attached geo-strategic significance to its bilateral exercises with India in terms of its FOIP vision: the 2021 Japan India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) "showed robust Japan-Indo cooperation and unity for upholding and reinforcing Free and Open Indo-Pacific".<sup>23</sup>

Emerging minilateral exercises may provide a platform for Japan to enhance defence engagement with Gulf partners such as the Saudis, UAE and Bahrain. Whether and how Japan finds its place in these exercises hinges on political will and strategic calculation of all parties involved.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Japan's influential business federation, Keidanren, has repeatedly called for early conclusion of a Japan-GCC Free Trade Agreement (FTA), most recently in December 2022.<sup>24</sup> Keidanren argues that Japan's bilateral efforts with the Japan-Saudi Vision 2030 and the UAE Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Initiative should provide impetus for more sustained engagement with the regional organisation. The same may well be said for Japan's promotion of its FOIP vision in the Middle East on a region-wide basis with the GCC.

Japan's 2020 Diplomatic Blue Book emphasised the importance of "Rule-Making to Bolster Free and Open Global Economic Systems" through promotion of economic partnerships such as the successfully concluded Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.<sup>25</sup> After years of suspended trade talks between Japan and the GCC, it

was announced in July 2023 during PM Kishida's visit to Jeddah that these talks would resume. The Japan-GCC Strategic Dialogue Senior Officials and Experts Meeting has been held on several occasions in the past decade. This could provide a platform for consultations on enhancing Japan's defence engagement with the GCC, although it must be noted collaboration amongst GCC members themselves has also been slow.<sup>26</sup>

Japan's former foreign minister Kono once laid out what he thought Japan's comparative advantage might be: "We can play an honest broker in the Middle East, as we have no colonial history or negative footprint in the region."<sup>27</sup> This suggests that compared to Southeast Asia, which experienced brutal military occupation by Imperial Japan in World War II, Japan may find a more receptive audience in the Middle East. Japan has also maintained friendly relations with Iran, a rarity among G7 powers. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian visited Tokyo in August 2023 for talks with Foreign Minister Hayashi and Prime Minister Kishida. While the thawing of relations between GCC states and Iran may accord more geopolitical space for Japan to position itself as a neutral actor in the region, Japan has always had limited political influence. Whether or not the Gulf states will prioritise Japan's FOIP vision appears ambiguous. The role Japan envisages for the Gulf in its FOIP also remains unclear (apart from the importance of maritime sea lines of communication).

Seeming rapprochement between Japan and South Korea (both Asian powers with growing roles in the Gulf) so far seems limited to shared concerns over North Korea and China, exercises and summit meetings facilitated by their common US ally. The Yoon administration unveiled South Korea's first ever Indo-Pacific strategy in 2022, adopting the Indo-Pacific concept for the first time albeit without the "free and open" terminology preferred by Japan's FOIP (and the US). Despite the historic trilateral US-Japan-South Korea summit at Camp David in August 2023, how trilateral cooperation may be operationalised beyond the Korean Peninsula in a Southeast Asia or Taiwan Strait contingency, much less further afield in the Gulf, poses continuing challenges. Domestic Japanese opinion remains wary of how sustained rapprochement can be, given the complexities of South Korean domestic politics. Nevertheless, it is likely that Japan will adopt the same playbook in the Gulf as it has in Southeast Asia and other parts of the Indo-Pacific where SDF presence has grown, routinised and even become part of the "new normal" as Japan pursues its FOIP vision. As in Southeast Asia, SDF has implemented a careful incremental, predominantly maritime approach, premised largely on friendly courtesy port calls and goodwill exercises with Gulf militaries such as the UAE and Oman. These do

not, as yet, entail high-end kinetic "live" fire exercises comparable to those which Japan has conducted with other exercise partners such as India or the United Kingdom and Australia.

Confidence and trust-building, demonstrating Japan's commitment to the region's security and its FOIP vision through presence of MSDF and ASDF has been the focus, on top of training utility derived from exercises with Gulf militaries and gaining familiarity operating in the region. It matters that Japan's presence has involved MSDF vessels on low-key goodwill exercises or friendly courtesy port calls or missions serving a public good such as counter-piracy patrols. The presence of foreign ground forces carrying weapons on combat exercise is a particularly sensitive matter for sovereign nations and a "relatively high hurdle".<sup>28</sup> As a former commanding general of the Japan Ground Self-Defence Force (GSDF) Northeastern Army commented:

"When attempting to build trust gradually with a country with which there have been few security ties, it is very difficult, especially for the host country, to receive troops with weapons as a form of defence diplomacy using land forces, and initial exchanges must be limited to visits by high-ranking officials and educational exchanges. Even if exchange of troops is to take place, exchanges with the land forces will generally begin with exchanges related to humanitarian assistance/disaster relief without weapons, after a certain level of trust has been established, for example, through visits of naval vessels by the naval forces."<sup>29</sup>

Only after several years of patient goodwill exercises and port calls by MSDF destroyers to build trust and mutual confidence with the Philippines did Japan send ASDF F-15 Eagle interceptors for the first time ever to an ASEAN country in December 2022 for a 'goodwill' unit-to-unit exchange. There was still no kinetic exercise involved. Certainly, the Gulf is not Southeast Asia, and Japan has different interests at stake in both regions. Together with the considerable logistical issues and resources involved in undertaking longer-range deployments (both MSDF and ASDF) to the Gulf compared to Southeast Asia, the cost-benefit calculus for Japanese policymakers will need to be seriously evaluated alongside potential overstretch.

Japan has continued to demonstrate its commitment to the Gulf through despatch of its MSDF and ASDF in a variety of mechanisms. While bi/multilateral exercises, courtesy port calls, air show displays and goodwill exercises do confer some operational utility, Japan's defence engagement also serves regional order-building



goals in achieving the FOIP vision.

On face value, Japan's presence aligns well with the desire of Gulf states to diversify their security and defence partnerships towards Asia. Japan's 2022 National Defence Strategy stated that "With Coastal States of the Indian Ocean and Middle Eastern countries, Japan will promote defence cooperation". The political intention to ramp up defence cooperation with the Gulf is clear. However, Japan's strategic focus and SDF capabilities remains rightly focussed on its immediate neighbourhood. How exactly the proposed doubling of the defence budget will be attained amid domestic political wrangling over funding sources is another lingering uncertainty.

Against this backdrop, the following are some recommendations to promote Japan's FOIP Vision in the Gulf region:

- As a self-described "honest broker", Japan should tailor defence engagement based on the understanding that Gulf states responses to Japan's FOIP vision is shaped by their desire for multi-alignment and omni-balancing. This means offering Gulf states more choices and alternatives amidst US-China rivalry, rather than choosing sides.
- Gulf governments should consider their policy positions on the Indo-Pacific concept in general and Japan's FOIP in particular. Public efforts to explain the Indo-Pacific concept and its strategic relevance to the Gulf could be launched. This could be done by stressing on defence and security necessities, maritime and aviation connectivity, infrastructure, trade, financial, and commercial aspects.
- Governments on both sides could explore potential opportunities to "plug and play" (initially as observer) into emerging configurations of minilateral military exercises that involve Japan, its strategic partners (France, UK and India), ally (US), as well as the Gulf states.
- They could consider gradually expanding the spectrum of Japan-Gulf military exchanges into non-kinetic air exercises involving transport aircraft and Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief, maintenance and logistics. Bearing cost-benefit calculations in mind, exercise content and assets deployed could be adjusted as trust grows. A Gulf version of the Professional Airmanship Programme or Ship Rider Programme that Japan runs for ASEAN member states on aviation and maritime security may be considered, potentially delivered trilaterally with partners like the US and UK or France and

India. Japan could explore opportunities with the UK's Joint Logistics Support Base in Duqm, Land Regional Hub and Omani-British Joint Training area for exercises and deployments.

- Finally, options should be developed to expand the use of Defence Cooperation Agreements to gradually transform Japan's defence and security partnerships with Gulf states, as it has with European and Southeast Asian partners.

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