



USALI Perspectives

A Long-Term Vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific

The international liberal order must become truly universal

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The greatest contribution of the late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to world politics was his vision of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP). He previewed the strategic concept in a speech to the Indian parliament in 2007, and shared it in full-blown form on August 27, 2016 in a speech to African heads of state in Nairobi, Kenya

The idea that peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Pacific and Indian oceans are linked was well

received by the African audience as well as in American, European, and Asian capitals. US President Donald Trump immediately embraced the concept and the US Pacific Command in Hawaii was renamed the US Indo-Pacific Command in 2018. Australia, Britain, France, Germany, the European Union, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations all followed suit by launching their own Indo-Pacific strategic visions one after another.

There are two reasons why the FOIP vision was so widely accepted. First, it clearly articulates the strategic transformation of international politics in the first half of the twenty-first century. It sheds light on the growing strategic distance of Japan and the United States from an increasingly authoritarian and belligerent China while India grows closer to Japan and the US. It recognizes that the world has entered a new phase of competition among great powers, and that India has a key role to play in upholding and expanding the liberal international order.

International stability has been predicated since 1945 on the interaction of two strategic triangles. The first triangle is the predominantly maritime Western framework encompassing Europe, maritime East Asia, and North and South America. These nations are tied together by the leadership of the United States.

The second triangle comprises the continental powers of Russia, China, and India. The United States has always tried to exploit tensions among these three continental powers to its advantage. During the Cold War, the United States took advantage of the Sino-Soviet split and engaged with Beijing to confront Moscow. Japan soon followed suit in normalizing relations with the People's Republic of China.

One unexpected byproduct of this diplomatic maneuvering, however, was that “non-aligned” India grew closer to the Soviet Union due to New Delhi's wariness of China. China under Mao had attacked Indian territory in 1962. Moscow for its part needed India to face off against the new lineup of Washington, Tokyo, and Beijing. Even now, a large part of India's weapons are made in Russia. As the strategic competition between the United States and China has heated up in the new millennium, India has slowly grown distant from Russia and come closer to the US-Japan alliance.

This is the opportunity that Abe saw as early as 2007. He called for the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions to be viewed as a single strategic whole, with India as an important partner of the West. Abe believed that the West does share universal values and strategic interests with India, which could emerge as another superpower in this century.

India is the hope of the liberal international order. Its population will soon surpass that of China, and is ten years younger. India will soon surpass Japan as an economic power. Its fleet is developing blue-water capacity. India still needs Russia to counterbalance Xi Jinping's powerful China. But Dr. Kissinger's framework of “the West plus China face the Soviet Union plus India” is being replaced by “the West plus India face China and Russia.”

However, Abe's strategic vision was not for a simple confrontation with China. He wanted to expand the liberal international order to include India and the rest of the Global South, and contend with China in the realm of ideas.

This leads to the second reason for FOIP's wide acceptance: India has been a democracy since 1947. When Roosevelt teamed up with Stalin to crush Hitler, and Nixon joined with Mao to confront the Soviet Union, both choices were the typical maneuvers of naked power politics. By contrast, embracing India, the democratic state birthed by Gandhi and nurtured by Nehru, could bring into existence a massive democratic coalition of nations spanning the coasts of the Indo-Pacific region.

In this century, Asia and Africa are gaining in political and economic power. Asia alone will account for sixty percent of the world's population and production. Western nations could be marginalized if they do not join hands with the rising Global South. Westerners should remember that while they were industrializing and democratizing themselves in the nineteenth century, they also were expanding their colonial empire globally and denying the human dignity, human rights, and sovereignty of the people of the colonized Asian and African nations. Their history was

erased and their borders were redrawn arbitrarily.

Asia's long and deep traditions of political philosophy are not inimical to Western liberal ideas. Mencius, a quasi-saint in the Confucian school, wrote more than 2,000 years ago that the people's will is heaven's will, and that a ruler who rejects heaven's will must perish. He even wrote that a bad king can be decapitated because heaven has withdrawn his mandate to rule. Closer to our time, Mahatma Gandhi's concept of satyagraha, or holding firmly to truth, had a strong influence on Martin Luther King's civil rights movement against institutionalized racism in the US.

What Asians lacked was not a philosophical foundation for democracy but the institutions needed to guarantee it, such as parliaments, free elections, universal suffrage, a free press, and an independent judiciary.

The West is at an inflection point: it can expand into the Global South or it can be marginalized. Joining hands with India in this context is beneficial not only for India, but also for the West itself. The liberal international order is precious, but not robust. Ideals such as love, conscience, human dignity, non-alienable human rights, democracy, and rule of law will continue to shine and will never fade in human history. But these ideals have very often been

trampled upon, denied, and destroyed by cruel dictators.

China and Russia reject joining with the West in support of these values. They still live by the law of the jungle, according to which the strongest country freely expands its territories while the weak are subjugated. They cannot understand that government is a mere instrument to enhance the well-being of the people who entrusted power to it for the pursuit of their happiness. With India in its camp, the West has hope of winning the competition of ideas between individualism and liberalism on the one hand, and collectivism and authoritarianism on the other.

The industrial revolution in Great Britain changed human history forever. Since then, humans have struggled to create a modern industrial society. Progress has come not from communism or any other form of

dictatorship, but from individualistic democracy and free markets. During the twentieth century, humankind also struggled to eliminate colonialism and racial discrimination. The answer they found was the establishment of the global liberal international order.

Now the liberal order should expand into the Global South. The international liberal order is no longer only white and Christian. It will become much more diverse, colorful, and truly universal.

China lacks an equally compelling vision to lead humanity. Abe believed that the West can win a marathon with China because we will never be like them (autocratic), but they could become like us (democratic) one day. To that end, the West must be united and stand hand-in-hand with rising India. The victory of the West will come with China's transformation into a democracy, too.



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