



# CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

## In Focus

New Delhi

CAPS InFocus: 18/2024

01 May 2024

## Japan's outreach to the Pacific Island Countries in the Indo-Pacific

**Ms Simran Walia**

Associate Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies



Source: Japan times



**Disclaimer:** The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS]

This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial – No Derivatives 4.0 International License.

**Keywords:** Japan, Pacific Islands, Security, Indo-Pacific

Japan unveiled a foreign policy vision during Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's visit to New Delhi in March 2023, wherein he discussed the new plan for a free and open Indo-Pacific vision (FOIP). The third pillar of the FOIP is "multi-layered connectivity." Kishida reaffirmed Japan's goal of "increasing each country's options" and went on to list the "three important regions," which are the Pacific Islands, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. In this context, Japan's Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa visited Samoa and Fiji in February 2024 to engage with the Island countries and to lay the groundwork for the tenth Pacific-Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM), which will be held in July in Tokyo.<sup>1</sup> These initiatives were a part of Japan and its Oceania allies' decades-long engagement policy, but at their core are the higher stakes associated with China's attempts to gain more influence in the area.

**Background of their Cooperation**

"Ensuring peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, through establishing a free and open order based on the shared values and principles such as the rule of law," is the goal of Japan's vision for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." Japan has been stepping up its presence in the Pacific Islands since the announcement of FOIP in 2016, even though they may not be as crucial as the concepts of the South China Sea or the Indian Ocean. The Defense of Japan report and Defense Guidelines from 2018 included the Pacific Islands for the first time.<sup>2</sup> They said that Japan would encourage port and airport visits by the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) as well as exchanges and cooperation that make use of the capabilities and distinctive qualities of each SDF service.

The Japan-Pacific Islands Defense Dialogue took place for the first time in September 2021. The Maritime SDFs carried out drills with their counterparts in Tonga, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Palau the next year. With the opening of diplomatic posts in Kiribati and New Caledonia in January 2023, Japan now has diplomatic representation in ten Pacific Island Countries (PICs).

Japan is worried about allowing military and commercial ships to continue having unrestricted access to the oceanic routes. China may try to impose influence over who is allowed to pass through the Pacific Islands during times of peace and crisis if it can achieve political authority there. Therefore, Japan has a particular interest in advancing in the PICs. Moreover, Japan buys natural resources from PICs. It is especially dependent on the fisheries found in the Pacific Islands' Exclusive Economic Zones. Maintaining positive relations with the PICs is in Japan's self-interest.

The Kizuna (bond) project was established by Japan to "further strengthen the cooperation between Japan and the PICs through 'All Japan' efforts based on Japan's FOIP vision".<sup>3</sup> The PICs have not entirely embraced FOIP despite these results; some are concerned that it is an anti-China containment tactic. Only

the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and the Marshall Islands openly backed FOIP at PALM in 2018.

Tokyo has grown to be a significant supplier of development assistance as well as a security and diplomatically for PICs. Along with increasing marine capacity, providing disaster assistance, and humanitarian aid, Japan has boosted naval diplomacy and defence discussions in the region.

Tokyo primarily depends on the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) for the nation's international trade, which includes importing and exporting natural resources like oil and gas as well as industrial goods because Japan is an island state. Given that Japan lacks natural resources, the stability of the SLOCs is essential to the country's economy and security. Additionally, Japan hopes to win the island State governments' political support for upholding and strengthening the current international order. Japan significantly promotes these regional nations' sense of ownership and mutual understanding of the rules and norms it supports since the legitimacy of international rules and norms ultimately rests on the number of supporting states and the backing of big powers.

Japan has also worked with international partners to adopt a distinctly non-coercive stance toward the Pacific islands. Through a variety of channels, it has consistently attempted to cooperate with Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Australia and New Zealand are active participants in PALM meetings. By working together, the emphasis is shifted toward shared goals and positive transformational effects for the area. Japan has also adopted a new framework known as 'Official Security Assistance (OSA)' to further support developing countries in terms of their security needs.<sup>4</sup>

Japan's choice to dump treated radioactive water from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear facility into the Pacific Ocean this summer presents a contemporary challenge exclusive to Japan's relations with the PICs.<sup>5</sup> Not all of the PICs have embraced the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) conclusion that the discharge plan complied with international safety standards. Concerns were expressed about Japan's release of radioactive water during the Pacific Islands Forum in November 2023.

## **Way Forward**

Conceptually, Japan's FOIP vision emphasises the island states' strategic significance in the Indo-Pacific area. These island states are small and have little potential to influence the larger course of international politics as compared to the great powers. These nations are located in strategically significant regions that have the potential to either support or undermine normative stability and regional security in the Indo-Pacific. Thus, Japan's fundamental stance is to retain cordial ties with the island nations of the Indo-Pacific area and to react quickly to strategic emergencies.

Recently, in March 2024, Japan held the 2nd ministerial-level defence meeting with PICs and aimed to counter China's expanding military and maritime assertiveness in the region.<sup>6</sup> Japan should further bolster and continue playing a leading role in coordinating several efforts with nations like France, Australia and New Zealand.

The 'cornerstone' of Japan's diplomacy with the Pacific Island nations is PALM. Japan will have another chance to explain to Pacific Island nations the advantages of implementing its FOIP vision during the 10th PALM edition. Japan needs to organise a strategic reaction that links these states to its larger Indo-Pacific goals as China tries to exert more influence over the PICs. Japan's strategy needs to take into account the PICs' openness to its direction as well as chances for collaboration with Japan's partners and allies.

## NOTES:

---

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Call for Designs: 10th Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM10) Official Logo, February 06, 2024, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/ocn/pagewe\\_000001\\_00023.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/ocn/pagewe_000001_00023.html). Accessed on April 15, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Mina Pollmann, "PALM10: Japan's chance to engage with Pacific island countries," MIT Center for International Studies, November 30, 2023, <https://cis.mit.edu/publications/analysis-opinion/2023/palm10-japan%E2%80%99s-chance-engage-pacific-island-countries>. Accessed on April 17, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Purnendra Jain, "Japan's new security assistance to the Indo-Pacific region", Observer Research Foundation, January 08, 2024, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/japan-s-new-security-assistance-to-the-indo-pacific-region>. Accessed on April 18, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> International Atomic Energy Agency, "IAEA Finds Japan's Plans to Release Treated Water into the Sea at Fukushima Consistent with International Safety Standards", July 04, 2023, <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/pressreleases/iaea-finds-japans-plans-to-release-treated-water-into-the-sea-at-fukushima-consistent-with-international-safety-standards>. Accessed on April 19, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> "Japan, Pacific islands begin 2nd defense ministerial talks in Tokyo", *The Mainichi*, March 19, 2024, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20240319/p2g/00m/0na/038000c>. Accessed on April 20, 2024.