



# Understanding Maritime as a Core Discourse in Japan's Grand Strategy

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**Abstract:** The absence of strategic thinking in Japan polices have been a debate for decades. Scholars argue that 'strategy' has been understood through 'militaristic' aspects largely, and hence Japan's is reluctant to use the word- 'strategy' officially. However, it will be false to assume that Japan is a nation with no strategic vision, even if there is skepticism in using the term 'strategy'. This paper is a two-fold discussion. The first half of the paper navigates Japan's grand strategy and its evolution and secondly, the significance of maritime domain as a core discourse is addressed.

**KEYWORDS** *International Relations; Japan's Grand Strategy, National Security, Maritime, FOIP.*

## Introduction

*"The Problem is that, no matter how much we desire unmilitarised, absolute peace, we cannot achieve it straightway"*- Kosaka Masataka (1963)<sup>1</sup>

In international relations, the term 'strategy' denotes the interests of states that can have short, medium or long-term implication for a nation-state. (Goswami, 2014), strategy of a state is a way formulating the path to meet the end goal. It could include various aspect that a state deems best, such as it geographical position, cultural aspect of the country and most importantly drawing the core national interest that the state wishes to achieve. Hence, one contemplate what does 'grand strategy' in international relations mean? (Silove, 2017) states that, it is imperative that 'grand strategy' is not deduced as just the word 'grand' added to the term 'strategy'. Hence, reiterating the question, what does grand strategy mean? Is it necessary for a state to have a grand strategy?

## Grand Strategy in International Relations

A general understanding of grand strategy, implies to a vision that has long term prospects and implications for a state. (Silove, 2017) asserts that, it is inclusive of all spheres that defines statecraft such as military, economy and diplomacy. (Kirss, 2018) defines grand strategy as "... that collection of militaries, economic, and political means and ends with which a state attempts to achieve security." (Brands, 2014) argues "... an integrated scheme of interests, threats, resources and policies" which represents a "... conceptual framework that helps nations determine where they want to go and how they ought to get there". And (Martel, 2015) states that 'grand strategy' in international relations is "... highest level of strategy for the state in its operations and very existence". Hence, it can be implied that, over the years grand strategy as a subject of study has evolved in its scope, definition and understanding. It has gained prominence- particularly after the end of the cold war. Prior to the war, it has been argued that scholars of international relations largely focused on a state's foreign policies.

<sup>1</sup> The excerpt is cited from the translated version titled "A realist theory of peace". The original was published in January 1963 as "genjitsushugisha no heiwaron"

William Morrison describes grand strategy as a process. It needs an account of the priorities that a nation has set for itself. The process entails all the political, social and economic aspirations of a nation and the realities and challenges that behests the nation. The assessment must be realist one of not just one's adversary/opponent but of oneself as well. Here we can note how grand strategy varies from foreign policy, as it indicates all the facts and also examines that, domestic issues are very important parameter to proceed with formulating a nation's grand strategy. In fact, some scholars have argued that, grand strategy is more comprehensive than a nation-state's blueprint. As argued by (Silove, 2017), grand strategy should be analysed not just as a buzzword. She states, grand strategy is often understood only as a 'grand plan' or 'grand principles' or 'grand behaviour'. On the contrary, it is an intricate relationship between all of the above. This helps in understanding the scope of and further helps to develop a grand strategy. All nation-states have (certain) goals & objectives, that accounts as national interest. To achieve these goals, states adhere to certain strategy in coherence with (certain) principles. Therefore, (Silove, 2017), has stated that, documents (such as 'National Security Strategy') is good indication of what a nation's strategic ambitions are. Such documents project the interests, goals & objectives, policies, commitments and the capabilities that are required. It can therefore, be argued that all states have a 'grand strategy' in its statecraft.

### Understanding the evolution of Japan's Grand Strategy

After the defeat in the second world war, Japan showed an economic growth that can be called nothing less than a miracle. Also, as the only country in the world to have suffered the atomic bombing, Japan's stand on peace and stability for the world till date is astounding. The once imperial power and now a peace propagator makes Japan the land of Paradox. Where is Japan headed with all the economic gain? Was a major question that surrounded the Japanese experts for years-especially during the cold war era. Now, as we come to an era that is seeing changes every so often, Japan's purpose, where its headed has become a point of discussion again. What are the factors than that influence Japan's Strategic thinking?

Richard J Samuels work has suggested that Japan's has a strategic culture and it has hovered and evolved based on some key elements. He argues the following, firstly, Japan's strategic thinkers and policy makers have always debated on whether Japan is a continental power or a maritime power. This particular strategic thought has paved way for Japan in trying to strategize as a continental nation or a maritime power. Kanehara Nobukatsu in an interview addressed that, it was the continental ambition that once drove Japan to the shores of China, Korea and the Southeast- which he opinioned was a mistake on Japan's part<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, Richards Samuels has stated that the discourse on the matter has now shifted to balancing in between maritime nation and continental nation rather than choosing one over the other. The second element that Richard Samuels discusses is that, after the war, Japan was battling with debate on maintaining economic wealth or gaining military strength, which in the longer run proved to be economically beneficial for Tokyo. The third element in Japan's strategic culture was the debate and dilemma of, if Tokyo should play or not play a greater role in global politics i.e., should it strive to be a great power or not (Samuels R. J., 2007).

According to Kenneth B Pyle, there is a fourth element in Japanese strategic culture. Professor Chie Nakane, stated "... The Japanese way of thinking is situational rather than principle..."<sup>3</sup> which implies that Japan's actions are not predetermined. It is not based on principles. Therefore, to state that Japan is guided by predetermined principle or guidelines especially in the international field is simply not the Japanese way (Wakaizumi, 1974). Hence, it would be a wrong discussion to assert that Japan is insular to its surrounding, as *Sekai no taisei*<sup>4</sup>- is present in the Japan's strategic culture. This means that Japan's studies the situation around it and strategy cater to the trend (s) of the world and bases its strategy. Hence, Kenneth B Pyle work "*Japan rising: The Resurgence of Japanese Power and Purpose*" argues that the primary determinant to understand Japanese strategic thought was to study the international affairs first, the author argues that, a realist pattern exists in Japan's behaviour and actions.

If one was to comprehend this argument, one need to draw inspiration from history. After having closed its borders for over two hundred in the Edo period, the Meiji leaders sent out the Iwakura mission' (one of the most critical missions in modern Japan's history). This mission was operated solely with the determination to understand the world outside of Japan. Further, the leaders decided that through the study of this mission, Japan would catch up to the west. This mission primary aim of the study to learn the advancement of the western world and to further bring back the relevant knowledge that would help restore and modernize Japan. This mission is a prime example of Kenneth Pyle's argument. He further argued that, Japan has (over the

<sup>2</sup> The statement has been cited from youtube channel wherein, the Professor Kanehara talked about his book *Rekishu no Kyokun*. For more details, see, <https://youtu.be/QDVVV5bvTYw?feature=shared>.

<sup>3</sup> In an interview with the Newsweek, the professor stated the above, when asked about where Japan was headed.

<sup>4</sup> Japanese word for 'situation of the world'.

centuries) cultivated the qualities of studying global trends, adapting it and accommodating accordingly for its national interest.

### Japan's grand strategy through the lens of National Security Strategy (NSS) 2013 and NSS 2022: Japan as a maritime state

In an interview Okazaki Hisahiko (former diplomat) once stated "... United States was built on principles-Japan was built on an Archipelago. Japan was shaped by its geography, homogenous population and a unique history which was a legacy of an archipelago"<sup>5</sup>. (Pyle, 2007) stated that this statement made by the diplomat is indicative of a key component of Japan's foreign policy and i.e. its strategic geographical location. To further add to this argument, it is the geographical position, coupled with changing global politics that makes Tokyo policies pragmatic/realist in nature. It is why Japan's security and economic strategy has often been described by experts on the pretext of Japan's age-old archipelagic geography. Japan is an island country surrounded on all sides by the sea, which means that any threats that befalls on the country will always approach via the sea. (Joseph F. Bouchard, 1984).

In December 2013, Japan established the National security council and formulated the National Security strategy (NSS). This was momentous as the national interest, objectives, goals and principles that Japan stands for was clearly and comprehensively stated. A series of events in global politics coupled with increasing hostility in the immediate neighborhood compelled Japan to address these issues. The core objective outlined in the NSS (2013) were:

- i. Firstly, Maintaining sovereignty and independence. This was drawn by the growing territorial dispute with its neighbours; The northern territory dispute with Russia; Takeshima island dispute with Republic of Korea and Senkaku Island with China. The main objective was to increase its deterrence that would be necessary for maintaining its peace and security.
- ii. Secondly, to achieve the peace and prosperity through economic development. The second objective was to improve the security environment of the Asia-Pacific region by preventing the emergence of and reduce direct threats to Japan by strengthening the Japan-U.S. Alliance in all aspects.
- iii. Thirdly to maintain, protect and improve the international order based on rules and universal values. In doing so, Japan will play a leading and proactive role across international platforms<sup>6</sup>.
- iv. Fourthly and most importantly, the following was stated "... in addition, Japan's national interest are to achieve the prosperity of Japan and its nationals through economic development, thereby consolidation its peace and security. To this end, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, it is essential that Japan, as a maritime state, strengthens the free trade regime for accomplishing economic development through free trade and competition, and realized an international environment that offers stability, transparency and predictability" (MoD, National Security Strategy 2013).

Also, previously stated (MOFA, Diplomatic Bluebook 2009) "*Japan is a maritime state and trading nation that depends on maritime transportation for its imports of energy and food resources as well as much of its over-seas trade*". This argument states the significance that maritime determines for Japan. (Graham, 2006) work *Japan's Sea Lane Security: A Matter of Life and Death*, comprehensively narrated how vulnerable Japan's energy security is and how dependent it on the Sea Line of Communication (SLOC). According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) maritime transport review (2021), over 80 per cent of the international trade in goods are carried by sea. More than 90 per cent of trade in Japan is carried by sea and Japan share 3.67 per cent in export and 3.56 per cent in imports in world shares (UNCTAD 2022). Furthermore, being an export-oriented nation, it relies on the unfettered SLOC. Therefore, Maritime Strategy within the larger ambit of Japan's Grand Strategy is not only desirable but rather necessary and inevitable. Hence, securing the sea is equated to securing Japan's national and economic security. (Agawa, 2019) stated "the Seas around Japan are as rough as ever" and the growing contestation between states has, in one way or the other, has had its impact on the 'control of sea' often resulting in the development of maritime policies which have all resurfaced the significance of sea and the politics of reemerging as sea power, be it for military purpose or economic (or both). Furthermore, unilateral and forceful attempts to change the status quo of the region and beyond has made Japan's security environment more severe and complex. The ever growing threats had Japanese experts and policy makers alike debating on the adequacies of Japan's policies in securing its national interests. Therefore, in a changing maritime era, the participation of a maritime nation like Japan is inevitable.

<sup>5</sup> Excerpt cited from Kenneth B Pyle's work '*Japan's Rising: The Resurgence of Japanese Power and Purpose*'.

<sup>6</sup>For more details, read (MoD, National Security Strategy 2013) page 5. Visit [https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page1we\\_000081.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page1we_000081.html).

## The Free and Open Indo-Pacific: The maritime grand strategy

In the early 2000s, two Indo-Pacific formulations surfaced in Japan in the shape of the Indi-Asia & West-Pacific and the Japan-India-Arabian Sea Route. The former arose at the where its Director of Okazaki Institute-Vice-Admiral Hideaki Kaneda, made the argument that there was a need to consider East-Asia and West-Pacific region and Northern Indian Ocean region as an integrated region called the “Indi-Asia & West-Pacific region in the future” (Scott 2019). Japan’s Indo-Pacific discourse was then driven from the very top via Shinzo Abe’s prime ministership and he pushed Indo-Pacific frameworks and the birth of ‘Confluence of the Two Seas’ speech in the Indian parliament in 2007. Furthermore, Japan’s development of ‘Arc of Freedom and Prosperity’ in 2007 also highlighted Japan (re) turning its attention to maritime. Corollary to all these events and the NSS (2013), Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Kenya in 2016<sup>7</sup> made the official announcement of ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)’. What is Japan’s FOIP then? FOIP’s purpose has been clearly stated in its three pillars: i. Promotion and establishment of rule of law, freedom of navigation and over flight. ii. Pursuit of economic prosperity. iii. Commitment to peace and Stability.

One can also argue that FOIP is Japan’s effort to keep the geostrategic routes or SLOC (essential for communication, trade, transport)- which geostrategic implications especially for littoral or archipelagic states open and free. This argument originates from the need drawn to chain of supplies, which require infrastructural development with (mostly) dual purpose of serving the military and civilian and this then requires ‘control’ or at least neutrality within the surroundings for peaceful transits. The control of SLOC is a central tenet of classical maritime theories, be it in Alfred Thayer Mahan’s work “*The influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-19783*” or his critic Sir Julian Corbett’s work ‘*Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*’. Corbett identified that, the widely used term ‘sea control’ denotes the use of sea unchallenged and the corollary to ‘sea control’ is ‘sea denial’, which essentially means the negative use of control by limiting the use of sea for the enemies, by creating barrier for movement of people and military (Graham, 2006). The eminence of sea power, lies in the ability to control SLOC, while the power to insure security of these communications to one’s self, and to interrupt them for an adversary, affects the very root of a nation’s strategic approach (Yoshihara 2006). It is in this central discourse in contemporary China approach/attempt in controlling the common sea, Japan sees China’s attempt to close the seaways. Hence, there was an uproar amongst the Japanese policy community when, Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide’s used the phrase “peace and prosperous Indo-Pacific” at the Association of South East Asian Nation (ASEAN) summit in November 2020. His decided to abandon that modification and revert to the familiar “free and open Indo-Pacific” phrase, which clearly shows the Japan’s commitment to this framework (Igata 2021). One can also observe the transition in terminology from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific and the debate on the nomenclature, however, what needs more focus is the shift of power from Atlantic to Pacific, which Japan has clearly identified. It can also an interesting observation on the insistence and importance of the term ‘Free’ in Japan’s FOIP. The debate can be reverted to the importance of uninterrupted sea for trade for Japan. If one was to observe the initial route that led to the conceptualizing of Indo-Pacific i.e. Indi-Asia & West-Pacific and the Japan-India-Arabian Sea Route, the major sea route for Japan is identified in it for three interlinked reasons; Maritime trade, energy security and China. Therefore, the need to secure sea line of communication (SLOC) for trading, safe passage of merchant ships and securing its energy imports is indebted to the free and open Indo-Pacific, as Japan as staked its’ future in the region. It is perhaps for this reason that Kanehara Nobukatsu stated that, “*The greatest contribution of the late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the world politics was his vision of a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)’*”<sup>8</sup>. And eminent scholar Michael J Green has called Abe’s FOIP as ‘Japan New Grand Strategy’. Further as put forth by (Watanabe, 2019), Japanese strategic thought has been enshrined in Tokyo’s FOIP.

## Conclusion

The article provided the reader with a comprehensive and a divisive narrative. On the one hand, if one was to dictate understanding grand strategy through the works of (Silove, 2017), her work clearly state that, although all country has a ‘grand strategy’ vision or goals in its statecraft, official announcement and documents such as ‘National Security Strategy’ indicates a nations’ strategic ambitions are. Such documents project the interests, goals & objectives, policies, commitments and the capabilities that are required. Hence, by that definition, the NSS (2013 & 2022) can be regarded as Japan’s grand strategy. Scholars such as Michael J Green on the other have affirmed that FOIP is Japan’s grand strategy. This article however, attempts for the reader to note that, the primary factor that determines what Japan grand strategic vision is its archipelago and

<sup>7</sup> Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI) August 27, 2016. For more details [https://www.mofa.go.jp/afr/af2/page4e\\_000496.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/afr/af2/page4e_000496.html)

<sup>8</sup> Excerpt cited from Nobukatsu Kanehara, “A Long-Term Vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” in *USALI Perspectives*, 3, No. 23, April 10, 2023. For more details, <https://usali.org/usali-perspectives-blog/a-long-term-vision-for-a-free-and-open-indo-pacific>

its archipelagic surrounding. Hence, one can conclude that maritime is a core discourse that entails Tokyo's grand vision and strategy.

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