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Japan and Indo-Pacific: International Public Goods or Global Commons?

By Wada Haruko

SYNOPSIS

*In the context of its “Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)” vision, the Japanese government translates the same Japanese keyword “*kokusai koukyouza*” into two English terms: “international public goods” and “global commons”. While this nuanced difference implies where the priorities lie in the vision, the “Indo-Pacific” which Japan envisions should be both.*

COMMENTARY

JAPAN IS one of the earliest proponents of the concept of Indo-Pacific. Since then Prime Minister Abe Shinzo announced the concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) in August 2016, the idea of FOIP has evolved and resonated with other countries such as the United States, Australia, India and the European Union.

This is the result of Japan’s persistent effort to seek a deeper understanding for the FOIP vision both at home and abroad. Japan has developed its FOIP narrative and popularised it outside the country in an integrated and strategic manner through a whole-of-government approach, strengthening its information dissemination in foreign languages.

Terminology Gap and Why It Matters

When looking at Japan’s FOIP narrative, one can note a terminology gap in the English translation of the Japanese word “*kokusai koukyouza*”. It is sometimes translated as “international public goods”, and sometimes as “global commons”. The difference in this translation had led to the differing priorities of the multi-tiered goals when advancing the FOIP vision.

Australian academic Oliver Morrissey defines international public goods as “global public goods that benefit... everybody throughout the globe”.

On the other hand, according to other academics such as Mohanan Bhaskaran Pillai and Geetha Ganapathy Dore, “global commons” refer to “natural resource domains that are not subject to national jurisdictions and are accessible to all nations”. Other scholars identify global commons to include the high seas, the atmosphere and outer space.

The Four Tiers in Japanese Thinking on FOIP

The choice of the term matters not only because it determines the means to provide and consume benefits throughout the international community and how to ensure accessibility to natural resource domains worldwide. It also defines the priorities within the narrative.

The basis of FOIP has been that the free and open seas are the source of peace and prosperity in the world. The goals of FOIP therefore can be divided into four tiers. The *first-tier* is to promote peace and prosperity across the Indo-Pacific region. The *second-tier* is to ensure free and open seas, which is the foundation of the first-tier goal.

The *third-tier* is to establish a free and open maritime order to realise the second-tier goal. The *fourth-tier* is to spread principles indispensable in achieving the third-tier goal, such as the rule of law and freedom of navigation.

As a result of the differing terminologies, the priorities in Japan’s FOIP narrative swings between the second-tier and the third-tier: swinging towards the second-tier when using the term “global commons”, in other words towards security; and swinging towards the third-tier when using the term “international public goods”, in other words, towards diplomacy for managing international order.

“*Kokusai Koukyouzaï*” as Global Commons

The Japanese government has used the term “*kokusai koukyouzaï*” to mean “global commons” in terms of security. The Ministry of Defence’s white paper *Defence of Japan* has been referring to “*kokusai koukyouzaï*” (“global commons”) in Japanese and “global commons” in English since 2009. This was after the US introduced this terminology in its 2008 National Defence Strategy. In 2010, the then Japanese Minister of Defence delivered a speech entitled “Japan’s Policies Regarding the Ocean as a Global Commons” at the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore.

Defence of Japan 2011 described that “global commons” generally do not come under the exclusive jurisdiction of a country, rather, they belong in the connected and shared domains of the world that all countries are dependent on for national security and prosperity.

Japan’s National Security Strategy (NSS), formulated in December 2013, referred to risks that can impede the utilisation of and free access to “global commons”, such as the sea, outer space, and cyberspace. Related to the seas, the NSS argued that “Open

and Stable Seas” are upheld by maritime order based on fundamental principles such as the rule of law and the freedom and safety of navigation and overflight. These in turn constitute the basis for peace and prosperity of the international community.

The subsequent two National Defence Program Guidelines (NDPGs), which set forth the basic policy for Japan’s defence, reflected this understanding too. Moreover, the third Basic Plan on Ocean Policy, following a Cabinet decision in May 2018, stated that the government was promoting FOIP to develop the Indo-Pacific region as “global commons”. This was to bring about stability and prosperity to all countries in the region by maintaining and strengthening the free and open maritime order.

Thus, Japan has consistently regarded the seas as “global commons” and contributed to ensure “Open and Stable Seas”. The government aims to enhance a free and open maritime order as “international public goods,” to maintain the seas as “global commons”. Based on its use of the term “global commons”, Japan’s focus tilts more towards the second-tier goal: how the seas should be.

“*Kokusai Koukyouzaï*” as International Public Goods

The Japanese government also uses “*kokusai koukyouzaï*” to mean “international public goods” in its FOIP narrative, following the then Prime Minister Abe’s policy speech to the Diet in January 2018. He argued that the waters from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean must be ensured to be “*koukyouzaï*” (“a public good”). *Diplomatic Bluebook 2018* and 2019 argued that maintaining and strengthening the Indo-Pacific region’s free and open maritime order as “international public goods” would bring stability and prosperity. Based on its use of the term “international public goods”, Japan’s focus is aligned with the third-tier goal: how the seas are managed.

As Japan’s FOIP vision develops further, this third-tier goal has evolved to assume the meaning of a more comprehensive order. The *Diplomatic Bluebook 2020* stated that the core idea of the FOIP concept was to establish “a rules-based international order” and consolidate principles such as free trade, freedom of navigation, and the rule of law. The *Defence of Japan 2021* also recognised that the FOIP vision was rooted in the concept of ensuring peace and prosperity of the entire Indo-Pacific region and consequently the world by realising “a free and open order based on the rule of law” in the region.

“Indo-Pacific”: International Public Goods + Global Commons

The Japanese government has been changing its manner of translating “*kokusai koukyouzaï*” depending on which tier of the goals the FOIP vision is mostly meant to fulfil. The difference results from the dual meanings of “*kokusai koukyouzaï*”. Due to a limitation of word-for-word translation, the government sometimes has chosen “international public goods” to appeal the necessity of establishing a rule-based international order that benefits everyone, and sometimes “global commons” to highlight the significance of the inherent nature of the seas, which ensures free access to everyone. In other words, the translation gap is no more than a difference in which tier the focus lies in the FOIP vision.

In sum, the “Indo-Pacific” which Japan envisions is both “international public goods”

and “global commons”. Japan’s FOIP has the potential to attract more partners as it appeals to both – the ones attracted to the concept of “international public goods” and the ones attracted to the concept of “global commons” – as long as it is successful in presenting an elaborated narrative of FOIP. This will lead to a better appreciation of Japan’s FOIP vision and its contribution to the stability of the “Indo-Pacific”.

Wada Haruko was a Visiting Associate at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. She is an official at Japan’s Ministry of Defense (MOD). The views expressed here are her own and do not represent the views of the MOD or of the government of Japan.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg