

POLICY BRIEF

The Significance of Strategic Communications: Implications for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Initiative

Introduction

Strategic communications, meaning the coherent use of words, actions and other communicative means to achieve a policy goal, play a particularly important role in international affairs today for reasons that are related to the elevated role that values play in international security. Values are by their nature intrinsically linked to the formation of national interests and furthermore to the formation of the international order. As today's international confrontations arise from different interpretations by major powers of what constitutes a 'rules-based international order,' the role of values-based persuasion has been greatly elevated. In the light of this altered political landscape, strategic communications now need to occupy a central place in strategy to shape the international rules-based order, which is based on the capacity to convey both interests and values.

Indeed, a doctrinal review of strategic communications suggests that they have a *constitutive* function, in addition to defensive and resilience-building functions to protect against counter-narratives and malign influences. Strategic communications play a role in structuring the perceptions and behaviour of target audiences, putting them among the tools that states have to shape the international security environment.

Author

Chiyuki Aoi, University of Tokyo



EU-Asia project

Issue 2021/31
July 2021

Moreover, initiatives related to the now broadly-shared geopolitical notion of the Indo-Pacific need to be viewed in this context and their efficacy assessed. The now common recognition that events in the Indo-Pacific region determine the future of global security has inspired various ‘visions’ of the region as a shared geopolitical space. Countries as diverse as the United States, Australia and India, along with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and European countries have expressed a sense of urgency to keep the region stable, although there are differences in approaches and priorities. It remains to be seen whether those engaged are now able to coordinate their actions and narratives to produce coherent strategic communications that will support the vision of a rules-based order that they collectively endorse.

This policy brief first reviews the role of values in international security today. This is followed by a discussion of the functions of strategic communications, with a particular focus on their constitutive function. Next, there is an examination of the strategic and defence concepts of two key states in the Indo-Pacific region, Japan and Australia, showing how these two nations consider ‘constructing’ or ‘shaping’ the international environment among their top defence priorities. The brief next explores how strategic communications relate to the key tenets of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, which is perceived as a ‘shaping’ activity. The conclusion takes up the challenge of pursuing the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision as a values-driven strategy, with special attention to the need to coordinate strategic narratives and on-the-ground actions among like-minded countries.

Values in Contemporary Security Affairs

Values are becoming an ever more important driver in international affairs. Democracies face domestic political crises at home, where established norms of multilateralism are being challenged by forces that favour unilateralism and divisive ideologies, undermining the liberal world order from within. In international politics, the post-Cold War expansion of the democratic sphere that lasted for a quarter century is now being actively reversed as authoritarian states solidify their grip on power through suppression at home and divisive strategies abroad.

In particular, the rise of China has had great ramifications for the existing international order. In its ascendance, China has presented a very different vision of the world order, one that is backed up by a willingness to use force to challenge the status-quo in nuanced gradations. China has used strategic narratives such as the ‘Chinese Dream,’ supported by ‘discourse power,’¹ with the clear goal of turning its expanding material power, or power resources, into political influence. Efforts by Beijing to build its legitimacy on ‘historical rights’ have intensified long-running territorial tensions, for example in the China seas, where grey-zone operations are conducted to keep the situation below the threshold of conflict with the use of communications and legal arguments. Its preferences and claims of sovereignty and for non-interference cloud the future of human rights and democracy at home and abroad in places ranging from Hong Kong and Xinjian to Myanmar.

Competing visions of the world order on a broad spectrum of issues ranging from free trade to human rights to territorial issues have elevated the role of values-based persuasion in diplomacy and defence. Security and defence rely on strategic communications to convey both values and interests.

Strategic Communications and their Constitutive Role

Defined as “the use of words, actions, images or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives,”² strategic communications are multidimensional in both concept and their practical application to government policy. For example, strategic communications comprise a set of capabilities, typically in the fields of public information, public diplomacy, information operations and psychological operations.³ The orchestration of these various types of communication to support a political objective is the quality that makes government communications ‘strategic.’

In addition, strategic communications are intrinsically linked to values and interests. As has been articulated in recent doctrinal debates at the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence,

1 Liu, Mingfu, 2015. *The China Dream: Great Power Thinking and Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era* (English edition). New York: CN Times Book, Inc.; Kejin Zhao, “China’s Rise and Its Discursive Power Strategy,” *Chinese Political Science Review* 1 (2016), pp. 539-564; Naoko Eto, “Japan-China Strategic Communications Dynamics under the Belt and Road Initiative: The Case of ‘Business Cooperation in Third Countries,’” in *Asian Perspective* 45:3 (Summer 2021).

2 Farwell, James, 2012. *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press. p. xix.

3 NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, “About Strategic Communications.” <http://www.stratcomcoe.org/about-strategic-communications> (accessed 18 November 2020).

strategic communications are “[a] holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment.”⁴ To ensure coherence, NATO has now put a strategic communications commander in charge of information operations, psychological operations and public affairs.

Of the multiple functions of strategic communications, two are most closely related to current security challenges, namely their constitutive and defensive functions. The constitutive (or ‘shaping’) function may be akin to what Paul identifies as the ‘proactive’ use of communication.⁵ Information not only ‘informs’ but also ‘influences,’ yet narratives and strategic narratives may play particularly influential roles in framing the perceptions and responses of target audiences. According to Freedman, narratives are “designed or nurtured with the intention of structuring the responses of others to developing events,”⁶ and it is from such intentions that the constitutive element of strategic communications arises. Reference to the ‘rules-based international order,’ currently perceived as a primary interest or goal by various states in Europe and Japan,⁷ is an example of the use of a narrative as a strategic communications medium. The rules-based order is as important a narrative in the Indo-Pacific region as it is in Europe, and it is the precise nature of these rules that is being contested in the region.

The second function of strategic communications is defensive, protecting against counter-narratives. Not all counter-narratives are malign, but states may resort to the above-mentioned proactive promotion of their own narratives and/or ‘reactively’ negate counter-narratives as false or harmful. As Paul notes, proactive countering of rival narratives and reactively defending against them involve different policy goals and means to do so.⁸ While the former

relies on coordination among government agencies to engage in coherent, consistent and well-coordinated messaging, the latter requires an apparatus for constant monitoring of various kinds of communication.

Furthermore, and increasingly importantly given the rapid evolution of communications technology, the defensive function of strategic communications involves protecting the information environment from malign communications or influence activities, a task that has become more exhaustive and challenging given the rapid evolution of the communications/information sphere. Such efforts involve, for example, monitoring social media platforms and ‘debunking’ disinformation and other forms of influence activities that are deemed malign.⁹

Understood thus, both the constitutive and defensive functions of strategic communications define the information environment in which world politics evolves. It is, however, particularly the constitutive feature of strategic communications that defines the way democracies employ them in an era when values and rules are contested and persuasion to shape audience behaviour is of particular importance.

The Significance of ‘Shape’: Examples from the Indo-Pacific Region

A nation’s security is increasingly understood to depend on its ability to ‘shape’ the international environment and global events as they develop. Doctrinal evolution in the UK after the 2015 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review, for instance, demonstrates the UK’s embrace of the notion that ensuring national security, prosperity and projection of influence rests on the ability to engage globally, to enhance ‘understanding’ of threats and risks, and to better shape

4 NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology*, (2019), p. 31.

5 Paul, Christopher, 2011. *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates*. New York: Praeger, pp. 52–59.

6 Freedman, Lawrence, 2006. *Transformation of Strategic Affairs*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, p.22.

7 For an analysis of focus, including reference to rules-based order, in the various European Indo-Pacific visions, see Gudrun Wacker, “Europe and the Indo-Pacific: Comparing France, Germany and the Netherlands,” Real Instituto Elcano, 9 March 2021, available at http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/ari29-2021-wacker-europe-and-the-indo-pacific-comparing-france-germany-and-the-netherlands (accessed 1 May 2021). Japan’s National Security Strategy (2013) states “. . . the maintenance and protection of international order based on rules and universal values, such as freedom, democracy, respect for fundamental human rights and the rule of law, are likewise in Japan’s national interests” (p. 4). The Government of Japan, *National Security Strategy*, December 2013.

8 Paul, *Strategic Communication*, pp. 58-59.

9 Former Australian Prime Minister M. Turnbull, for example, defined ‘malign’ influences as those that are covert and non-attributable, with the intention to coerce or to corrupt, so as to subvert legitimate political processes. Turnbull, Malcolm, 2017, “Speech Introducing the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference bill 2017),” December 7. For analysis of the impact of Russian and Chinese influence activities vis-à-vis Germany and the UK, and Japan and Australia respectively, see Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), “Countering Russian and Chinese Influence Activities.” (Washington DC, CSIS, 2020). <https://www.csis.org/features/countering-russian-chinese-influence-activities>.

the outcome.¹⁰ Indeed, the most recent UK defence reform document, the Integrated Review, has pivoted to the idea of ‘shaping’ the rules-based international order in this geopolitically-challenged time, as opposed to ‘preserving’ it.¹¹

It is notable that two governments in the Indo-Pacific region, namely Japan and Australia, have recently enunciated ‘shaping’ the international security environment as a primary defence purpose along with deterrence and countering or responding to aggression. In the case of Japan, the National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) adopted at the end of 2018, a defence doctrine that is couched in the principles endorsed in the 2013 National Security Strategy, defined Japanese defence purposes as three-fold: to “create,” “deter” and “counter.” The NDPG states that the first purpose of Japanese defence is “to create, on a steady-state basis, a security environment desirable for Japan by integrating and drawing on the strengths at the nation’s disposal.”¹² This reflects an assumption that the nation’s security will depend on its ability to shape the international environment to be amenable to the realisation of its values and interests. As is indicated in this definition, the ‘create’ category starts in peacetime (including grey-zone situations) and continues into ‘deterrence’ or ‘countering’ phases, as these categories are considered as a continuum. Japan’s Guidelines then align along the spectrum of peacetime and other contingencies various activities in the categories of independent efforts, Japan-US alliance related activities and security cooperation. The ‘create’ category is likely to overlap with values-based diplomacy and strategy, most notably security cooperation conducted independently or in alliances/partnerships.¹³

Marking a development in Japan’s strategic communications policy, the NDPG specifically links strategic communications with the ‘create’ category of defence purposes, pledging to “further advance steady-state efforts such as strategic communications by systematically combining all available policy tools (p. 9).” The defence doctrine further lists strategic communications under the section ‘From peacetime to “grey-zone” situations’ as a Self-De-

fence Force (SDF) activity undertaken in close collaboration with diplomacy, including in the context of SDF actions in security cooperation and defence diplomacy (p. 11). As is clear from this formulation, the NDPG puts a premium on security cooperation (defence engagement in Western parlance), which, performed as a strategic communications exercise, serves as a driver forming international relationships and ‘shaping’ the international environment. Critically, the defence doctrine links security cooperation to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision to be served by the SDF. Although in the document itself the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision and strategic communications are only indirectly linked, it is indicated that strategic communications also advance the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision through SDF performing security cooperation, consistently with the aforementioned constitutive function of strategic communications.

Likewise, in its most recent *Strategic Update (2020)*, Australia adopted similar defence purposes: shape, deter and respond.¹⁴ This formulation is justified on the basis of the country’s revised assessment of its strategic situation. *Strategic Update 2020* recognises that although the same drivers remained relevant since the country’s last defence review, the 2016 Defence White Paper, Australia faces a sterner strategic environment that is “markedly different from the relatively more benign one of the past, with greater potential for military miscalculation, including state-on-state conflict that could engage the ADF” (p. 17). The various regional trends the document identifies as having accelerated include strategic competition between the US and China, the assertive stance of major powers, integration of grey-zone activities, military modernisation, emerging and disruptive technologies, and the emergence or enhancement of high-intensity military conflict. These factors contribute to “reduced warning times” (or irrelevance of strategic warning time) when facing possibly simultaneous ongoing coercion, competition and grey-zone activities (p. 11-14).

The three-pronged defence objectives serve to fill the strategic void left by situations persisting in the Indo-Pacific region and further underline the need to engage continually with allies and partners in

10 HM Government, 2015. *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*; HM Government, 2017, *Defence Engagement*.

11 HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. March 2021.

12 Cabinet Office, the Government of Japan, *National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2019 and Beyond* (December 18, 2018), p. 8. http://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2019/pdf/20181218_e.pdf

13 Other peacetime activities listed include enhanced intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) activities and flexible deterrent options. 2018 NDPG, p. 11 (English version).

14 Government of Australia, 2020. *Defence Strategic Update*.

Australia's immediate vicinity, the Indo-Pacific and globally. The document states that Australia's defence planning will necessarily focus on its immediate region in the northern and eastern Indian Ocean through southeast Asia to Papua New Guinea and the southwest Pacific (p. 21). Defence engagement is, as in the case of Japan, a key driving force for relationship-building efforts. Furthermore, the focus on international engagement is included in the first defence purpose of 'shaping' Australia's strategic environment, with the document stating that "Defence will continue to build new, and strengthen existing, partnerships that support this objective" (p. 25). The document further states "This capacity to conduct cooperative defence activities with countries in the region is fundamental to our ability to shape our strategic environment" (p. 26).

As this brief review shows, the most recent strategic documents of these countries reveal converging rather than diverging visions of the strategic situations they face where grey-zone contingencies are viewed as eroding the space between peace and war, while a threat of high-intensity war has emerged. Based on such assessments, both documents stress the importance of security cooperation/defence engagement as a relationship-building activity that will help 'shape' the international environment, and in the case of Japan such activities are linked to defence strategic communications. Converging security perceptions are likely to form the basis for these countries to advance cooperation in securing a desirable international environment, for example through the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision.

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision as a 'Shaping' Activity¹⁵

Inasmuch as today's security critically hinges on states' ability to 'shape' the international environment, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision should be construed as a shaping activity with strategic communications as the central medium. That is to say, the Indo-Pacific vision is a strategic communications process through which the currently diverse

content and contours of values are collectively defined through dialogue and mutual engagement to eventually arrive at coherent and coordinated messaging among like-minded partners.

The concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) served as the key component of Japan's values-driven strategy during the Abe administrations to maintain security by reasserting the value of the rules-based liberal international order in the region.¹⁶ Having introduced the geographical notion of 'the Indo-Pacific' in a speech to the Indian Parliament in 2007, Prime Minister Abe then announced the FOIP initiative (then called a 'strategy') at the 2016 TICAD meeting in Nairobi, Kenya. The immediate predecessor of the concept was the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity (AFP), an idea launched in 2006 that was Japan's first, albeit short-lived, comprehensive and global assistance package with both economic and security components. This ambitious initiative sought to bring stability and prosperity to broad areas stretching from northern and eastern Europe to central Asia to Oceania, and in Japan's own vicinity in the Asia-Pacific region. As such, it represented Japan's effort to expand its diplomatic frontiers beyond traditional alliances and partners in order to help make its environment amenable to realisation of the country's interests and security in the region against a background of shifting power balances, and especially the ascent of China.¹⁷

The same vision continued in the FOIP initiative. It was understood to be an extension of the same comprehensive approach taken in the AFP with an enhanced focus on the maritime domain at a time when China's ascent was gaining global attention with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) commencing in 2013 and its military-constabulary actions in the China seas becoming more noticeable. The Japanese FOIP initiative is based on three principles: promotion of the rule of law, freedom of navigation and free trade; a pursuit of economic prosperity (especially by promoting connectivity); and a commitment to peace and stability (especially in the maritime domain). In implementation/practice, these principles are often considered to be in tandem with

15 The link between the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision and 'shaping' activities was presented by this author in her remarks at a conference hosted by the German Marshall Fund in Berlin in January 2019, and in a presentation at the World Policy Conference, 2019 (Marrakesch). See also Chiyuki Aoi, "Japan's Values-driven Strategy and Japan-EU Relations," *Japan-EU Relationship: Recommendations on SPA*, (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Japan Office, 2020). For a different conceptualization but using the same terminology, see Ryo Sahashi, "The Indo-Pacific in Japan's Foreign Policy," CSIS, Strategic Japan working paper (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019); Kei Koga, "Japan's 'Indo-Pacific' Question: Countering China or Shaping a New Regional Order?" *International Affairs* 92: 1 (2020), pp. 49–73.

16 Tomotaka Shoji, "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy and Asean – Anxiety and Expectations [Jiyu de Hirakareta Indo-Taiheiyo to ASEAN-Fuan to Kitai]" International Information Network Analysis, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, September 2018, available at <https://www.spf.org/jina/articles/shoji-southeastasia-foips.html> (accessed 1 May 2021); Nobukatsu Kanehara, *Security Strategy* [Anzen Hoshō Seisaku] (Nikkei Shuppan, 2021), pp.258-259, p.261.

17 Shotaro Yachi and Masayuki Takahashi, *Gaiko no senryaku to kokorozashi* [Foreign Affairs Strategy and Principles] (Sankei Shimbun Shuppan, 2009), pp.142-146, pp.149-50.

related policy areas, for example official development assistance (ODA) principles centring on respect for local ownership.¹⁸ With regard to the first principle in particular, analysts note a progressively lighter emphasis on democracy and human rights as a means of reducing the risk of confrontation with China and better accommodating the sensitivities of its southeast Asian partners.¹⁹

During the same period, the concept of the Indo-Pacific served as a driver for promoting relationship-building *globally*.²⁰ The idea of ‘the Indo-Pacific’ as a vast emerging geopolitical area covering the Indian and Pacific Oceans and adjacent land areas grew out of Prime Minister Abe’s reference to the area in a speech in the Indian Parliament in 2007 (although there are previous uses of the same term, for example by the US Navy), which eventually drove closer India-Japan security ties. The idea of the Indo-Pacific as a security centre of gravity came to be shared by Australia and the United States, which together with India and Japan formed the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the so-called Quad. Critically, however, there was an immediate European dimension to the notion of ‘Indo-Pacific’ after France declared itself to be an Indo-Pacific nation, with some 1.5 million French citizens residing in island territories in the Indo-Pacific, and more than 11 million square kilometres of exclusive economic zone (EEZ), 93 percent of the total, the second largest in the world, held by France.²¹ The United Kingdom, with its historical affinity with this region as a naval power, was also an early supporter of the Japanese FOIP concept. The National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (2015) declared Japan to be the UK’s closest partner in Asia, and engagement with states in what is now the Indo-Pacific region became the backbone of the UK defence effort in this region. The recent publication of the Integrated Review further emphasises the importance that the UK attaches to the Indo-Pacific, as the document endorses the geopolitical concept of the Indo-Pacific within the UK’s defence strategy.²² The recent renaming of the head of Asia-Pacific policy at the Foreign,

Commonwealth and Development Office as Director-General for the Indo-Pacific is indicative of the emphasis the nation puts on the region. Likewise, France has recently newly appointed an ambassador to the Indo-Pacific. In a notable development, Germany, which had long been reluctant to endorse the FOIP notion, published its own Indo-Pacific vision, and was later followed by the Netherlands.²³ The EU followed suit in April 2021 by publishing its own ‘strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.’²⁴ Outside Europe, ASEAN and the US have also set out their own distinctive visions for the Indo-Pacific.²⁵

These visions and strategies follow diverse approaches according to each entity’s foreign and security policy priorities, but basically the concept of the Indo-Pacific has entered the lexicon of the security policies and relations of these countries along with a spreading recognition of the extent to which this region will impact future global security. Thus, the Indo-Pacific vision has served as a force ‘shaping’ international relationships globally on security matters in the region.

A key dividing line that has emerged among the recent flurry of publications concerns variants of the notion of ‘strategic autonomy’ in the documents, especially those of France, Germany and ASEAN. Viewing the dynamic between the competing superpowers, the United States and China, as essential feature of the strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific, these documents stress that Europe and ASEAN refuse to choose between the two parties and that they will strive to create a space in which multilateralism and a multipolar order are allowed to develop. For example, the French Indo-Pacific vision notes that in the light of the “structuring effect of the China-US competition,” the decline of multilateralism and the “shrinking of the geostrategic space” France needs to “reaffirm” its strategic autonomy and the importance of alliances and multilateralism, pledging to keep its forces “capable of signalling their willingness and their resolve, in support of a political will, to protect our sovereign territories and areas against grey-zone operations or any act of

18 Shinichi Kitaoka, “Vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific” *Asia-Pacific Review* 26:1 (2019), pp. 7-17.

19 Yuichi Hosoya, “FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *Asia-Pacific Review* 26:1 (2019), pp. 18-28.

20 The notion cannot be equated with a geographical region with a clear boundary or solely with QUAD, nor is it strictly a regional endeavour.

21 Republique Française, Ministère des Armées, *France’s Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific*, 2019, p. 7.

22 HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*.

23 The Federal Government of Germany, *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific: Shaping the 21st Century Together*, 2020). The Netherlands, *Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia*.

24 Council of the European Union, *EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, 16 April 2021.

25 ASEAN, “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.” The United States of America (Department of State), *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* (November 2019).

coercion,”²⁶ while also guaranteeing the strategic autonomy of India and France’s southeast Asian partners. Likewise, the German document stresses that in the light of a growing fear among regional actors regarding “the formation of new blocs, accompanied by pressure to decide in favour of one side” and the accompanying need for regional structures to “protect themselves against hegemony and preserve their decision-making autonomy,” Germany will promote relations most notably with ASEAN, with its key principle of ASEAN centrality.²⁷ ASEAN’s Indo-Pacific vision is likewise couched in the traditional ASEAN approach founded on the principle of ASEAN centrality. Despite differences in nuance and background, this stance favouring – and believing in the feasibility of – strategic autonomy may be contrasted with the more status-quo-oriented view of Japan, which purports to defend the existing liberal international order in which Japan’s security and prosperity have been situated for the past 70 years. To maintain this order, Japan pledged to fill the gap left by the United States under the Trump administration, for example by playing a leadership role in the conclusion of the CPTPP.²⁸ In the same spirit, Japan has sought to expand its security relations far beyond its traditional partners in Asia.²⁹ In southeast Asia particularly, it has sought to deepen security cooperation through activities such as port visits, capacity-building measures, joint exercises and training, with the resultant enhanced presence of SDF in the region intended to send messages of “assurance” to partners.³⁰ Australia, on the other hand, which has a relationship of close economic interdependence with China yet is increasingly targeted by influence operations,³¹ also has a close alliance with the United States. Australia also supports multilateralism and favours a multilateralist order over bifurcation, but like Japan it may feel less inclined to declare strategic autonomy from either party.

This is not to say that Japan (with its bitter historical and territorial disputes with China) or Australia can afford to be squarely confrontational towards China. A recent analysis of these countries’ strategic communications involving China indicates a “layered” communications strategy. In other words, these nations maintain multiple avenues of communication depending on the policy area.³² Analysts note that Japan switched the language of FOIP from ‘strategy’ to ‘initiative’ (and now to ‘vision’) and has since chosen to collaborate with China’s BRI through private-sector initiatives in third countries amid improving bilateral relations in the spirit of the earlier policy of a “mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests” announced in 2004. It has also encouraged China to follow FOIP principles in return (although to date China has refused). This seeming change of emphasis (from apparently countering to embracing China) has confused global audiences about what Japan’s true intentions are.³³

European articulations of the Indo-Pacific vision also have problems of clarity. The FOIP idea did not fare well in Europe, particularly when the United States under the Trump administration started to support it in 2017. The confused notion prevailed that the FOIP vision was US-led and confrontational towards China, with which Europe was enjoying expanding economic relations at the time. Although the Biden administration has yet to formulate its policy towards the Indo-Pacific, the Trump era Indo-Pacific strategy projected through the prism of the previous administration’s tough China policy presented a vision of an Indo-Pacific region diametrically opposed to China, and was therefore distinct from the approaches of other countries, including Japan.³⁴ Having embraced the idea of the Indo-Pacific, however, European countries also face communication issues. The European nations’ visions of the Indo-Pacific are neutral and endorse a multi-

26 Republique Française, Ministère des Armées, p. 5, p. 12.

27 Federal Government of Germany, p. 24.

28 Aoi, “Japan’s Values-driven Strategy and Japan-EU Relations.”

29 Paul Midford and Wilhelm Vosse, *Japan’s New Security Partnerships: Beyond the Security Alliance* (Manchester UP, 2017).

30 Alessio Patalano, “‘Commitment by Presence’: Naval Diplomacy and Japanese Defense Engagement in Southeast Asia,” in James D. J. Brown and Jeff Kingston, eds, *Japan’s Foreign Relations in Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018); John F. Bradford, “Japanese Naval Activities in Southeast Asian Waters: Building on 50 Years of Maritime Security Capacity Building,” in *Asian Security*, DOI: 10.1080/14799855.2020.1759552, pp. 1-26;

31 CSIS, “Countering Russian and Chinese Influence Activities.”

32 Corey Wallace “Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, and Layering Strategic Communications” and Eto, “Japan-China Strategic Communications Dynamics under the Belt and Road Initiative” in *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 45, No.3, Summer 2021.

33 Sahashi, “The Indo-Pacific in Japan’s Foreign Policy.”

34 The United States, Department of State, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific*. See also the recently released declassified U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>

polar structure for development of the region. Even this nuanced stance provoked China into responding, most probably to sow divisions between the US and Europe. According to China's Xinhua state news agency, "Germany's latest policy guidelines ... herald a US-Germany convergence in the future of their attitudes and overall policy lines in handling issues in this region ... China-Europe relations may never be the same."³⁵ Similarly, China reacted to the French Indo-Pacific vision by declaring that "France is following the US footsteps to contain China."³⁶ Actions count as well as words. As Françoise Nicolas of the French Institute of International Relations wrote, "From a French perspective, the objective of its Indo-Pacific strategy is neither to antagonise nor contain China. Although there is no anti-China tone in France's Indo-Pacific strategy, its defence of freedom of navigation, in particular in the South China Sea, may be perceived as such."³⁷ Messaging via deeds may also add up to pressure on China at a time when European nations are augmenting their military footprints in the Indo-Pacific region. For example, in February 2021 a French frigate took part in a joint exercise with Japan and the US in the sea west of Kyushu, Japan. France also announced that it had sent the nuclear attack submarine *SNA Emeraud* to the South China Sea, where China allegedly deploys nuclear submarines.³⁸ The United Kingdom is also reportedly planning to send the newly built *Queen Elizabeth* aircraft carrier to the Indo-Pacific. Germany too will probably send a frigate.³⁹

In the light of these developments, what needs to be recognised is that the Indo-Pacific vision is now shaping a communicative dynamic whereby the engaged parties are using the vision as a strategic narrative through which to structure the responses of others. They hope the combination of such narratives and actions will over time have the tangible effect of creating a policy space that allows for their preferences to prevail. The cumulative outcome of the now-available visions does display a common thread: a preference for multilateralism. However, for the common preference to have any kind of tangible effect, the messaging – the combination of words and deeds – has to be coordinated among the stakeholders. It is of critical importance to manage the Indo-Pacific vision as a strategic

communications exercise through which to shape international relationships on the basis of common preferences, at the same time attempting to engage China from the standpoint of multilateralism. Essentially, too, it is still a value-laden process around which debate will increasingly arise over matters relating to human rights and democracy in the region in relation to the rules-based order. On such matters, choosing to remain 'neutral' could run the risk of benefitting China. If the region's long-term military and security confrontations escalate, moreover, Europe and ASEAN will then be faced with a much-diminished space for autonomy. Essentially, however, the heavy stakes invested in events in the region underline the necessity of continual (perpetual) engagement by all these stakeholders, among whom China must be included.

The Indo-Pacific Vision in the Future

The above explanation has highlighted the essential role of the Indo-Pacific vision in shaping the international environment, rather than being a static policy framework. The vision should nonetheless foster efforts to arrive at a set of common principles shared among the key stakeholders that can be clearly communicated to other stakeholders, to the broader international community and to China and the states and regions that it influences. This paper endorses, albeit tentatively, the principle of multilateralism as a common foundation on which to anchor related principles. As such, the constitutive function of strategic communications should be clearly recognised and utilised.

The key challenge related to this point is the management of a comprehensive approach that encompasses the rules-based order, promotion of economic prosperity and mechanisms for ensuring peace and stability (especially in the contested maritime domain). The Indo-Pacific vision offers strategic guidance (in the form of a narrative), but in practice it is sometimes at odds with or even subordinated to other policy areas, for instance the principles governing the longer-established ODA. This tendency has created considerable confusion about the priorities and emphasis of the Indo-Pacific vision, especially when it is translated into actual on-the-ground projects, complicating internation-

35 Katerina Ang, "Europe Pivots to Indo-Pacific with 'Multipolar' Ambitions," *Nikkei Asia*, February 2, 2021.

36 Cited in Françoise Nicolas, "France's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Inclusive and Principled," *East Asia Forum*, 12 December 2020.

37 *Ibid.*

38 Hiroyuki Akita, "Oshugun anadorenu taichu atsuryoku, [Never Underestimate European Military Pressuring on China], *Nikkei*, 4 March 2021.

39 On the cautious approach Germany is taking on this matter, see Hans Kundnani and Michito Tsuruoka, "Germany's Indo-Pacific Frigate may Send Unclear Message", Chatham House, 4 May 2021, available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/germanys-indo-pacific-frigate-may-send-unclear-message> (accessed 14 May 2021).

al efforts to coordinate different approaches and priorities. Over the decades, for example, Japan's principles of ODA avoided explicit prioritising of human rights and democracy and stayed away from conditionalities, favouring 'constructive engagement.' This position was more easily accepted by the southeast Asian countries but was diametrically opposed to the approaches of Europe and the United States. This exemplifies the difficulty in ensuring strategic coherence coordinated across states and relevant government agencies in accordance with an agreed vision. To endorse the Indo-Pacific vision jointly with like-minded countries would in particular require a shift of focus to the strategic level. Indeed, the very value plurality among those stakeholders may lie at the heart of the matter. The contours of values that support the broad Indo-Pacific vision will come into dispute as the region becomes a battleground over the future of democracy and civil and political rights in Hong Kong, Xingjian and Myanmar, among other places.

Last but not least, efforts to engage China in the Indo-Pacific vision both at the political and practical levels may also encounter difficulties as long as China finds *communication* advantages in refusing to support the Indo-Pacific vision. Politically, refusing and undermining the Indo-Pacific vision with accusations of 'containment' has worked for China so far, as, validity aside, such accusations bedevil coordination of China policies among stakeholders. At the practical level, attempts to send a message of 'assurance' to China by engaging with it in joint investment projects in third countries, a scheme that countries such as France, Japan, the Netherlands and Australia among others have signed up to, have been thwarted. Attempts at 'shaping' China by persuading it to accept corporate governance and environmental protection through such joint projects have proved more aspirational than real, as China has preferred to pursue only the narrow goals of gaining access to technology and management skills through these projects while refusing to acknowledge more widely shared norms.⁴⁰ Difficulties aside, the whole engagement scheme is more than a typical investment project that would make sense at the private enterprise level. Instead, it should be seen as a political communication game of trying to shape each other through messages of inducement (assurance). More than the outcome of the on-the-ground projects themselves, it is the political communication advantages China gains by withholding cooperation that matter.

Discussion such as this underlines the essential strategic communications dimensions of the Indo-Pacific vision. The vision should be managed as a strategic communications exercise and its efficacy properly envisioned as a shaping activity.

40 Mathieu Duchatel, "Triple Win? China and Third-Market Cooperation," Institute Montaigne, Blog 10 July 2019. Eto, "Japan-China Strategic Communications Dynamics under the Belt and Road Initiative."

The Global Governance Programme

The Global Governance Programme (GGP) is research turned into action. It provides a European setting to conduct research at the highest level and promote synergies between the worlds of research and policy-making, to generate ideas and identify creative and innovative solutions to global challenges. The Programme is part of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies of the European University Institute, a world-reknowned academic institution. It receives financial support from the European Commission through the European Union budget. Complete information on our activities can be found online at: globalgovernanceprogramme.eui.eu

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

The Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (RSCAS), created in 1992 and directed by Professor Brigid Laffan, aims to develop inter-disciplinary and comparative research on the major issues facing the process of European integration, European societies and Europe's place in 21st century global politics. The Centre is home to a large post-doctoral programme and hosts major research programmes, projects and data sets, in addition to a range of working groups and ad hoc initiatives. The research agenda is organised around a set of core themes and is continuously evolving, reflecting the changing agenda of European integration, the expanding membership of the European Union, developments in Europe's neighbourhood and the wider world.

www.eui/rsc



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute or the European Commission.
© European University Institute, 2021
Content © Chiyuki Aoi.

doi:10.2870/264978
ISBN:978-92-9466-069-5
ISSN:2467-4540
QM-AX-21-031-EN-N

