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Japan's Pacific Moment

Recalibrating Japan's Pacific Islands Engagement

By Kathryn Paik

Over the past decade, interest in the remote Pacific Islands region has grown rapidly, due to the increasing centrality of the Pacific in global issues such as great power competition, climate change, and resource scarcity. As China has ramped up its interest in the Pacific, traditional partners like Australia and New Zealand are expanding their already robust development portfolios, and countries as far afield as Europe now view the region as an arena of intense geopolitical competition. While Japan, like the United States, has a long history of relations with the Pacific, including decades of development programming, a deteriorating Indo-Pacific security environment coupled with uncertainty about U.S. commitment to the region is prompting Japanese policymakers to expand and evolve Tokyo's engagement across the Pacific Islands.

The combination of historical ties, current alliances, and a reputation for delivering high-quality, no-strings-attached development aid make Japan uniquely positioned to be one of the most critical players in the Pacific. In 2016, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced his vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), which promoted engagement and capacity building to "maintain fundamental principles of the international order." Several recent indicators, including Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) and the creation of a new Official Security Assistance (OSA) initiative, further demonstrate Tokyo's resolve and capacity to be a critical actor in the Pacific.

For those hoping that recently elected Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi will continue to be a strong proponent of FOIP, questions about the future of U.S. presence in the Indo-Pacific have added urgency to the need to consider Japan's role in promoting stability and security, including protecting its interests in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. This may mean drastically increasing Japan's defense spending—potentially to as high as 3.5 percent of GDP. It also means a more strategic application of all levers of national power, including through development and security cooperation efforts in the Pacific.

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The Pacific's Evolving Strategic Significance

The Pacific Islands region—which spans almost 20 percent of the globe and is home to more than a dozen nations and numerous territories—features prominently in both Japanese and U.S. history, as well as in current strategic calculus. For both nations, the critical nature of the Pacific—and the landmasses speckled across it—was realized most acutely during World War II, though commercial, cultural, and diplomatic connections with the Pacific began decades and even centuries earlier. For the United States, interest in the Pacific was first prompted by pursuit of increased trade with China and Southeast Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Pacific islands emerged as critical refueling and logistical stopping points.[1] The United States established consulates in Fiji, Samoa, and the Marshall Islands in the mid-1800s. Also during the 1800s, Japan's newly formed Meiji government viewed emigration into the Pacific as an opportunity to expand commercial ties and encourage Japanese outmigration.[2] Japan quickly realized the potential of the northern Pacific from a security lens, establishing a provisional defense corps in Micronesia.[3] The League of Nations later granted Japan a mandate to administer several northern Pacific islands.

As the United States expanded its reach as a global power at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, its perception of the Pacific evolved—from a series of stopping points en route to larger trading partners to a set of critical logistical and diplomatic nodes in their own right. For Japan, the same was true, but in reverse: As Japan's ambitions in Asia grew in the lead up to World War II, the Pacific became an essential arena for countering the United States and disrupting critical logistical lines between the United States and Australia. As a result, Pacific locations such as Guadalcanal, Peleliu, and Tarawa hosted some of the bloodiest and most consequential battles of the war.

In the decades following World War II, U.S. relations with the Pacific were dominated primarily by decolonization efforts and nuclear testing. Japanese relations with the islands grew slowly but steadily over the latter half of the twentieth century, focused on development aid and fisheries. As China's interest in the Pacific accelerated in the early twenty-first century, however, both the United States and Japan began to turn their attention more fully to the great blue expanse separating the United States from Asia.

China's Growing Pacific Ambitions

Over the past decade, China has massively amplified its outreach to and engagement with Pacific Islands nations, driven by a thirst for resources, a desire to limit Taiwan's diplomatic alliances, and the imperative to complicate U.S. and allied military planning in the event of an Indo-Pacific contingency.[4] While not all of China's efforts have proceeded smoothly—such as the failed attempt by then-Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to strongarm the region into signing a wide-ranging security agreement in 2022—China has notched several successes in recent years.[5] These include decisions by Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, and Nauru to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China; a security arrangement with the Solomon Islands in 2022; and a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with the Cook Islands.[6] Such inroads, especially into security and maritime spaces, have greatly alarmed partners and prompted concern that China's ambition extends to establishing a security foothold in the region.

Japan Redefines Itself as a Regional Actor

The reality of Chinese ambitions and actions across the Indo-Pacific has created a worsening strategic environment for Japan, and Japanese policymakers and experts have taken note. Starting with Tokyo's "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" in the mid-2000s, and then later the more widely recognized FOIP concept, Japan's view of itself as a regional actor began to shift toward that of a more active player in pursuit of peace and stability in Asia.[7]

Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) states at the outset that "Japan's security environment is as severe and complex as it has ever been since the end of World War II" and that Japan must "protect its own national interests," which are broken into three primary buckets: maintaining its sovereignty and independence; achieving prosperity through maintaining an open and stable international economic order; and supporting and protecting universal values such as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law.[8] This NSS specifically calls out China's attempts to "unilaterally change the status quo by force" as posing a direct threat to Japan's core national interests and security.

While there is a long history of Japan-Pacific engagement, it has primarily centered on meeting regional development needs and was shaped by relatively cautious diplomacy. Japan's flagship event with the Pacific is the Pacific Island Leaders' Meeting (PALM), a gathering of leaders from Japan and all 18 members of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) that has been held every three years since 1997.[9] At PALM10 in 2024, the leaders released a joint declaration outlining priority areas of cooperation, including expanding people-to-people ties; bolstering regional trade and investment, especially in the fisheries sector; and tackling climate change-related disasters and challenges, including through Japan's new "Pacific Climate Resilience Initiative."[10] The statement also promoted cooperation on technology and working together to promote Pacific voices on the international stage.

Japanese Pacific Development Efforts—Evolving into the Security Sphere

Japan's development efforts have traditionally focused on technical assistance and infrastructure such as roads and buildings—endeavors which have earned the country a reputation as a high-quality, no-strings-attached partner. Yet as China has pushed its own engagement into the security realm—and as Pacific Islands themselves have looked to have more agency in their own security footing—Japan, like other development partners, has looked to do the same. While article 9 of Japan's constitution limits military action except in self-defense, interpretation of this article has evolved over time to allow Japan to meet its security needs in an increasingly dangerous world, and provision of some types of military equipment and training to regional partners has slowly become a key component of Japan's foreign assistance.[11]

TRADITIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The majority of Japan's development assistance is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and delivered through Official Development Assistance (ODA) programs, primarily implemented by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). JICA is well positioned to engage on the ground, with 10 offices across the Pacific Islands region and an annual budget of just under $1 billion in 2024.[12] In addition to supporting economic development, expanding communication infrastructure, minimizing the impacts of climate change, and bolstering preparedness for natural disasters, JICA also sends

hundreds of Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) to the Pacific and accepts numerous foreign officials into JICA training programs each year.

The cycle of ODA programming begins by soliciting and receiving requests from countries based on those nations' development priorities. JICA then assesses and reviews these requests, consults with other Japanese ministries, and provides recommendations to MOFA on which projects JICA should execute. Criteria used during the review and recommendation process include sustainability of the project, alignment with the ODA strategy for each country, outcomes from the most recent PALM meetings, and resourcing availability. While ODA country strategies outline the context of Japan's relationship with each country and identify avenues for engagement based on country-specific needs, they do not currently assess each country's strategic importance to Japan or how development will advance Japan's broader strategic objectives.[13]

SECURITY COOPERATION

Pacific engagement through Japan's Ministry of Defense (JMOD) and Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) is primarily focused on capacity building, with an overall objective of "stabilizing the international security environment." This work has included programming in the Pacific Islands region, including Tonga, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji. JMOD also oversees Japan's Pacific Ship Rider Cooperation Program (SRCP), numerous high-level meetings and exchanges such as the Japan Pacific Islands Defense Dialogue, and an annual Indo-Pacific deployment with routine stops in several Pacific Island ports.

The Japanese Coast Guard (JCG), as with the U.S. Coast Guard, is often better suited than its military counterparts to engage with Pacific nations—only three of which have standing defense forces. In addition to annual port calls, the JCG regularly conducts maritime law enforcement training and support, especially in the northern Pacific countries of Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). Despite the popularity and effectiveness of these efforts, however, current resourcing and prioritization do not allow for increased JCG presence in the Pacific. The top focus for the JCG is protecting and patrolling the Senkaku Islands, which are administered by Japan but claimed by both Japan and China. This mission often requires allocating resources away from other potential missions, such as engagement in the Pacific. Given increased Chinese activity around the Senkaku Islands in recent years—including heightened tensions just this past November—this priority is only likely to increase.[14] To meet these requirements without sacrificing other missions, the JCG plans to acquire several new boats, although recruiting and personnel challenges remain.

FILLING THE GAP—OFFICIAL SECURITY ASSISTANCE

As Japan strives to expand the scope of its relationships with recipient countries in the Indo-Pacific, the constraint on ODA providing military-related equipment has emerged as a clear shortfall. To fill this perceived gap, the 2022 NSS called for the creation of a "new cooperation framework . . . for the purpose of deepening security cooperation with like-minded countries," and the result was the creation of OSA in April 2023, housed and funded by MOFA.[15] Separate and distinct from ODA, which cannot provide military-related development, and from JMOD programming, which can only provide repurposed, not new, equipment to partners, OSA has the mandate to provide equipment, supplies, and assistance for infrastructure development to partner countries "with a view to strengthening their security and deterrence capabilities for international peace and security."[16]

As a new office, OSA remains relatively small—as does its budget, at around $54 million in 2025—but it has already executed several programs in the Indo-Pacific, including in Fiji (provision of patrol and rescue boats) and Papua New Guinea (provision of heavy machinery). Project selection currently operates similarly to ODA, with OSA receiving requests from potential recipient countries, considering feasibility of proposals, and then recommending projects within MOFA. Thus far, OSA has implemented projects through the Japan International Cooperation System (JICS), a private procurement entity.

Key Findings from Conversations in Tokyo

Through a series of robust engagements with Japanese scholars, think tank experts, and government officials, the author drew the following key findings:

THE PACIFIC IS EAGER FOR MORE JAPANESE ENGAGEMENT

Conversations that Japanese Pacific experts have had with Pacific Islanders reflect a constant refrain: China is increasingly active in the region—including in the security domain—and many would like to see greater Japanese engagement as an alternative to Chinese offers of assistance. There is a widespread opinion of Japan as a reliable, high-quality development partner with no strings attached. As one Pacific Islander previously explained to the author, Japan is so popular because "they come, they build, they clean up, and they leave."

And yet as challenges mount for the region and great power competition between the United States and China intensifies in the Pacific, there is also a consistent call for more proactive Japanese engagement beyond just traditional development assistance. And as many Pacific nations endeavor to have more agency in prosecuting their own security needs, there is increasing interest in Japan as a security partner. What this looks like will take continued engagement with Pacific nations on a bilateral and regional basis to craft effective, targeted programming that both meets Pacific country needs as well as Japan's own national security interests.

OVERALL PACIFIC LITERACY IN JAPAN REMAINS LOW

While the Pacific region has gained prominence in Japanese policy, overall expertise on the Pacific remains limited, with only a few Pacific-focused academics and even fewer government tacticians consistently engaged with Pacific issues. The result is that those assigned to work Pacific engagement within the Japanese government often enter the portfolio with expertise in other, very different areas of the world. For a region like the Pacific Islands, which faces immense challenges that are amplified by the islands' unique geography, this lack of Pacific proficiency can result in poorly fitting programs and approaches.

Similarly, overall public perception of the Pacific is that of small, developing islands—and potentially tourist destinations. There is not yet a clear public understanding of the linkage between Japanese development efforts in the Pacific and Japan's own security as a nation.

THERE IS A CONTINUING DEBATE ON HOW JAPAN SHOULD PROSECUTE ITS NATIONAL SECURITY INTERESTS ABROAD

While there is broad consensus across Japan that the country faces a complex and highly contested regional environment, there remains extensive debate as to how Japan should articulate and prosecute its national interests abroad. For some, this debate is fueled by the sense that Japan's identity as a peace-

oriented, defensive-minded nation is at odds with the imperatives of a maritime nation that depends heavily on a stable, rules-based global order that needs constant reinforcement.

Abe's promotion of FOIP was done partially to "wake up" the Japanese public to current strategic threats and promote the need for Japan to more forcefully articulate its national security interests throughout the region. FOIP continues to guide Japanese government thinking, and was raised in numerous discussions, especially in the context of predicting that Takaichi, a close former ally of Abe's, would be likely to further embrace FOIP as a guiding principle in Japan's foreign policy outlook.

DEVELOPMENT IS STILL BROADLY SEEN AS SEPARATE AND DISTINCT FROM NATIONAL SECURITY

Japan's NSS is clear on the direct connection between development assistance and national security; in fact, the document directs the use of all vectors of national power to achieve the country's national security objectives, including "strategic use of ODA and other international cooperation" as guided by the vision of FOIP.[17] It concludes that because of the worsening security environment, the NSS is the "supreme national security policy document," providing guidance across all national security policy areas, *including ODA*.[18]

Yet despite this top-level policy direction, many in Japan continue to view development as entirely separate from national security. Even a brief review of perspectives in Tokyo reveals a wide range of opinions on the role—or absence—of national security interests in planning and implementing development assistance.

Many in the Japanese system view JICA-implemented development efforts as fully unrelated to the security sector—and do not believe that development priorities should be driven by national security interests. As put simply to the author in one discussion, "we do development work, not security." Despite the NSS's direction that development serves as an instrument of national power in support of national security objectives, JICA's current approach reflects a "development for development's sake" mentality, exemplified by the absence of national security considerations in the programming process. While there was recognition that certain ODA programs, such as initiatives related to subsea cables, could serve Japan's national security interests, this alignment was regarded as a positive byproduct rather than the result of a deliberate process. Discussions with development professionals highlighted an emphasis on "balance" and "fairness" in ODA, prioritizing the equitable distribution of engagement rather than focusing on target countries or priority sectors.

This misalignment of development with national security is not only a Japanese phenomenon. The United States and Australia have also struggled with both aligning and articulating development priorities, but this lack of national security input into assistance programming was a consistent refrain across Japanese development professionals, with the exception of JMOD. In the Pacific Islands region specifically, both OSA and ODA tend to be directed toward where Japan has the strongest historical relationships—or, as one interviewee stated, where operating is "easiest." The projects themselves are based on the needs of Pacific Island countries rather than Japan's own national security priorities. There is a more consistent view in JMOD that development activities are directly tied to national security interests. This difference of views between JMOD and MOFA occasionally causes tension between the agencies, inhibiting deeper coordination on OSA and JMOD projects.

Still, the overall trendline for Japanese Pacific development assistance—particularly in the security sector—is positive, if funding and resourcing can continue. Most discussions reflected a belief that Prime Minister Takaichi would be likely to push for more security-related engagement, and perhaps even further clarification of how all development efforts meet national security objectives.

OSA—LIMITATIONS REMAIN, ALTHOUGH WORK IS BEING DONE TO ADDRESS THEM

In addition to OSA's limited budget—which practitioners hope will increase in the coming years—several interviewees raised additional issues which limit the effectiveness of OSA projects in the Pacific. These include guidance that OSA will only work with Pacific countries that have military forces (only three out of 14 currently do), being limited to equipment only (not training or engagement, which is primarily done by JMOD), and an unclear implementation mechanism. Additionally, limited human resourcing also hinders flexibility in programming. Recently, the office developed new programming on a shortened 30-day timeline to meet a deliverable requirement for Prime Minister Takaichi's visit to Malaysia, but that effort was "very troublesome" and required a surge of effort that OSA would not be able to replicate without significant increases in personnel.

Efforts are underway to alleviate some of these limitations, with plans to increase the budget and, potentially, to expand the scope of recipient countries—such as including the three Freely Associated States (FAS) in the North Pacific. To help direct resources, OSA aims to develop specific security assistance plans for each country, similar to U.S. country security assistance plans. However, the amount and sustainability of budget increases will depend upon continued internal support for OSA and its ability to coordinate effectively across the interagency.

UNCERTAINTY REMAINS OVER HOW FORWARD-LEANING OSA AND ODA SHOULD BE—AND HOW TO ENSURE JAPANESE PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THESE MECHANISMS

Both OSA and ODA are in a period of expansion, but also uncertainty—uncertainty not only about their scope, but also about how forward-leaning and explicit these programs should be in justifying their role in Japan's national security.

OSA, as a new office, is still in "outreach mode," both among partner nations but also within Japan. This is partially being done to test how OSA's mandate of providing defense articles to other nations lands with the Japanese public. Internally, MOFA is sensitive to public opinion, and as it considers increasing OSA's budget and resourcing, it also wants to ensure that Japan's public is not alarmed by these efforts.

This uncertainty in how explicit to be in justifying development programming also results in defaulting to a practice of "fairness," whereby OSA and ODA projects are spread evenly across eligible partner nations. This drive for a broadly balanced approach comes from an effort to enhance Japan's bilateral relations across the region, as well as the need to demonstrate to the Japanese public that development funding is being distributed fairly. It is also driven by the desire to avoid alarming China by appearing to focus on one particular region or country—a belief which stems from the assumption that China can be convinced that Japanese activities do not run counter to its own interests.

SHALLOW COORDINATION BETWEEN DEVELOPMENT OFFICES

Despite regular tactical-level meetings between agencies, MOFA and JMOD are not always fully aware of each other's programs, and there is limited strategic-level coordination to ensure alignment between regional and national programming objectives.

Inside Japanese policy circles, there is a low awareness of what programs ODA and OSA are implementing across the Pacific. Additionally, differing views as to the role of development—as laid out above—and separate funding streams inhibit closer collaboration between JMOD and MOFA. For example, the fact that MOFA funds OSA appears to limit JMOD's interest in OSA programming.

These issues are not unique to Japan. As with other development partners such as the United States, weak coordination is often due to traditional stove piping of budgets and responsibilities within the government itself. But in Japan these challenges are also exacerbated by the differing views across the Japanese system as to the role that national security interests play in development.

COORDINATION WITH PARTNERS SOMETIMES EQUATES TO DECONFLICTION ONLY

Countering growing Chinese influence and presence in the Pacific requires thinking creatively and jointly about how like-minded partners can and should approach the region. As traditional development partners ramp up already existing engagement in the region, there is also drive to collaborate more effectively to meet regional needs and simultaneously protect vital national security interests in this highly contested region. Some efforts have been made to align strategies and outlooks, such as the Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative, launched in 2023, but coordination between major development partners remains sporadic at best.[19]

Every discussion in Tokyo reinforced a broad understanding on the need to coordinate with external partners such as the United States or Australia on development in the Pacific. As with interagency coordination, partner coordination occurs relatively frequently at the tactical level, with MOFA and JMOD action officers regularly meeting with counterparts to discuss upcoming projects. At times, this coordination leads to effective collaboration, such as joint JBIC-DFAT-DFC missions in Papua New Guinea and the Philippines, or a recent example in Fiji, where OSA provided patrol boats to the Fijian navy and Australian forces provided supporting training.

However, oftentimes what is cited as coordination actually translates to deconfliction. For example, Japanese embassy representatives often meet with Australian, New Zealand, or U.S. embassy counterparts to review upcoming projects and engagements in a particular country, but this is tail-end coordination. It misses the opportunity to align efforts at the strategic level to ensure an integrated and effective approach between partners that are broadly aligned on the need to promote Pacific development and prevent Chinese security inroads in the region.

The fact that joint strategic-level analysis between major development partners is largely absent is partially due to friction in the Japan-Australia relationship in the Pacific. While the Japanese government sees Australia as a critical partner across the entire Indo-Pacific region, the instinct of some Japanese policymakers is to moderate the amount of collaboration with Australia in the Pacific Islands. This is due to two perceptions within the Japanese government. Firstly, there is a perception that Australia would prefer to keep Japan at bay in the Pacific, driving Japanese policymakers to be cautious about proposing Japan-Australia collaborative projects. The second factor hindering deeper Japan-Australia cooperation in the Pacific is the view that Japan should prioritize bilateral engagements in the region, rather than working alongside Australia, to avoid being weighed down by Australia's historical relationships in the Pacific.

Further complicating efforts to fully coordinate development efforts with Australia is the difference in bureaucratic approaches. Japan's top-down approach requiring senior-level approval for tactical-level changes can be at odds with Australia's more bottom-up approach, which favors flexibility for tacticians operating under a general directive. This mismatch can lead to a sense among Australian officials that Japanese counterparts are unwilling or unable to coordinate on relevant programming.

When considering U.S.-Japan coordination, Japanese interlocutors asserted that engaging the United States in strategic-level discussions on the Pacific has become more difficult under the current administration. There does not appear to be a Matt Pottinger (from first Trump administration) or Kurt Campbell (from the Biden administration)-like figure in the second Trump administration who both understands the strategic significance of the Pacific and is willing to push for large-scale multilateral efforts. This leaves some Japanese policymakers concerned that the current U.S. administration lacks a clear champion of FOIP principles and Pacific engagement. Additional complications include the eradication of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which has left JICA without a clear U.S. government counterpart, as well as the United States' cessation of engagement on climate change, which Japan views as a top priority for its Pacific engagement. One interviewee posited that because the United States is receding from the development space, Japan may have to be the "glue" in the region, using all tools available to knit together a cohesive network of like-minded partners. And yet this lofty aim runs up against resource constraints, especially as a worsening security environment around the Japanese homeland may divert the government's attention.

Recommendations

BROADEN THE UNDERSTANDING OF HOW DEVELOPMENT WORKS IN SUPPORT OF NATIONAL SECURITY OBJECTIVES

Some Japanese scholars and practitioners appeared almost allergic to the word "security," equating the word to military action. This was especially true for those working on the Pacific Islands, where host nation needs are often cited as the primary—and sometimes only—driver of project prioritization. Yet, as the NSS makes clear, Japan's national security interests are the umbrella that should drive all vectors of national power, including development efforts.

Advancing Japan's national security objectives and meeting host-nation needs are not mutually exclusive. In the Pacific, aligning engagement with the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) priorities as laid out in the 2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Continent is an essential piece of any partner's strategy, as it demonstrates a partner's willingness to listen to the region and work through regional architecture, which then lays the foundation for greater and deeper diplomatic, economic, and security relationships.[20] The PALM10 Joint Action Plan does exactly this by citing the seven priority areas of the 2050 strategy as guidance for Japanese engagement with Pacific Islands countries.[21]

While the Joint Action Plan lays out general sectors for engagement, however, the specific types and targets for programming should be driven by Japan's own national security interests—and communicated as such to relevant departments and agencies within the Japanese bureaucracy. This could be accomplished through a **stand-alone Japanese Pacific Strategy**, which would more explicitly articulate how development efforts in the Pacific should align with Japan's national security priorities as set out under the NSS. This document could also lay out a clear argument for why a stable, secure,

and independent Pacific is critical to Japan's national security, thereby helping make the case to the Japanese public.

Additionally, the government should consider **bolstering the coordination role of the National Security Council staff** to enable the NSS more oversight and direction of agency programming, with convening mechanisms for regular check-ins on the status of Pacific Strategy follow-through, and to ensure full interagency awareness of both the Pacific strategy and of other department programming.

BOLSTER PACIFIC LITERACY AND MAKE THE CASE TO THE JAPANESE PUBLIC

As the funding and scope of Japan's development efforts continue to increase—especially through security cooperation—it will be more imperative than ever to build public support for how an active development agenda is in service of Japan's national security needs. This can be achieved both by **communicating Japan's Pacific strategy and by bolstering general Pacific literacy** throughout Japan. Engaging think tanks and academia through public events and publications to communicate the rationale behind FOIP and how the Pacific fits into Japan's broader security needs is essential to building general support for resourcing efforts like OSA and greater security engagement.

ENABLE OSA PROGRAMMING TO BE MORE TARGETED AND FLEXIBLE

Some discussions revealed concern among security cooperation officials that if Japan appears too targeted in its programming—rather than pursuing a policy of evenly distributing assistance across the region—China might attempt to block Japan's development efforts. Yet this caution underestimates both Pacific countries' eagerness to work with Japan and the likelihood that China will view any efforts by Japan in the region as benign. In other words, China will try to foil Japanese relationships in the Pacific regardless of where and to what level Japan is engaging. Letting concern over a potential Chinese reaction drive decisionmaking will only limit Japan's ability to more fully protect its national security interests.

Instead of prioritizing fairness and balance in OSA programming across recipient nations, the Japanese government should **use a Pacific strategy to translate its regional national interests as outlined in the NSS into specific security assistance targets**. These targets should be considered alongside other development partner efforts to ensure complementarity and, when possible, a layered approach incorporating multiple development partners.

To develop OSA's portion of the overall Pacific strategy as OSA resourcing continues to expand, the government could convene a **working group of retired senior military officials** to advise on OSA's strategic direction and objectives. This group could both advise on how to directly meet NSA objectives through OSA programming and also help develop an outreach plan to socialize Japan's increased security assistance work with the Japanese public.

ENHANCE STRATEGIC-LEVEL ANALYSIS AND COORDINATION WITH PARTNERS

While partners such as Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States are broadly aligned on strategic outlooks and priorities in the Indo-Pacific, there remains a lack of regular and in-depth joint analysis on the evolving challenges and vulnerabilities in the Pacific Islands region. Rectifying this will require a deliberate effort from all capitals to prioritize the sharing of information and transparency in each nation's development planning.

Achieving better strategic-level alignment also requires **shedding existing caution around closer collaboration with Australia**. The immense challenges facing the Pacific Islands region, and the strategic challenge that China poses to the global world order, require deeper alignment and collaboration across all sectors, including development and security assistance. Canberra knows this, as likely do senior policymakers in Japan. There is no time or room for exclusivity in assistance, and there is strength in demonstrating what close allies and partners can deliver, together, for the region. Greater coordination also has the benefit of pooling and maximizing resources among partners in a way that China is unable to match.

SUPPORT INCREASED COLLABORATION THROUGH MINILATERAL MECHANISMS

Despite the Trump administration's skepticism toward multilateral institutions, there remains space for increased **multilateral efforts through mechanisms such as the Quad**—which consists of Australia, Japan, India, and the United States.[22] For example, even though the word "multilateral" was used only once in the recently released U.S. National Security Strategy, (when the document critiques multilateral development banks), the NSS specifically calls for more cooperation through the Quad.[23]

The **U.S.-AUS-Japan trilateral mechanism** is also ripe for further collaboration. This trilateral has had several marked successes in the Pacific in recent years, including the East Micronesia Cable, which was raised by Deputy Secretary of State Landau in his visit to the region in September 2025 for Papua New Guinea's 50th anniversary of independence.[24] Recent positive meetings between Prime Minister Takaichi and each of her U.S. and Australian counterparts, as well as Prime Minister Albanese's successful oval office sit down with President Trump, reinforce not just the strength of these three bilateral relationships but also the potential for great trilateral cooperation.[25] Japan and Australia could push the United States to expand this trilateral engagement in the Pacific, focusing on current Trump administration priorities such as enhancing commercial ties, countering drug trafficking, bolstering maritime security, and promoting secure and stable communication networks—all of which align with Pacific concerns and priorities.

The Japanese government should also **consider other more bespoke, fit-for-purpose multilateral partnerships** which leverage Japan's existing strong relationships across the Pacific and Southeast Asia, such as a Philippines-Indonesia-Japan-Palau grouping to focus on the critical maritime domain encompassed by those nations, or a Japan-Philippines-Pacific Islands Forum discussion on enhancing maritime law enforcement efforts.

LEVERAGE THE U.S.-JAPAN ALLIANCE TO BOLSTER U.S. SUPPORT FOR THE PACIFIC

While recent trips by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Landau have been a welcome reinforcement of U.S. interest in the region—and confirmation that the United States will continue some of its top regional initiatives such as funding the Compact of Free Association (COFA) agreements and the Tuna Treaty—questions remain as to U.S. commitment to the Pacific, especially in the wake of closing USAID, halting or reducing U.S. programming in the region, and, more recently, recalling multiple career ambassadors from regional posts.[26] President Trump's meeting with Prime Minister Takaichi in late 2025 demonstrated that the U.S.-Japan relationship remains strong, and Japan maintains a position of influence in U.S. foreign policy circles. **Prime Minister Takaichi should leverage her strong relationship with President Trump to urge continued U.S. engagement in the Pacific, including making the case for a Pottinger or Campbell-like Indo-Pacific coordinator** and for increased soft-

power engagement in areas such as education and health, which support long-term national security priorities for both Japan and the United States. To further reinforce this argument, Japan should frame its own Pacific engagement as aligning with the U.S. administration's emphasis on burden sharing between allies and partners.

Closing

The political scientist Nicholas Spykman stated in 1942, "Geography is the most fundamental factor in the foreign policy of the state because it is the most permanent."[27] The strategic nature of the Pacific has not eroded with time. Japan's own national security is intimately tied to the Pacific, making this region a vital arena in which to engage—on its own, with allies, and in larger concert with like-minded partners. Fully maximizing its potential as a regional actor, however, will require resolving the internal debate about how forcefully the country can and should assert its own national security interests abroad. ■

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Endnotes

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