Based on Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy, explore the development path of China-Japan relations

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Abstract. Japan was the first country to propose the concept of "Indo-Pacific strategy" and was also a staunch supporter and active promoter of it. The formation of Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy has gone through four stages of evolution: initial appearance, initial formation, extension, and all-round development, and has continuously promoted the development of the Indo-Pacific strategy in a more institutionalized and mature direction from many fields. It has formed a strategic layout in many fields such as comprehensive value sharing, economic and trade competition, maritime security, and multilateral mechanisms. Under the influence of the increasingly fierce competition between China and the US and the policy of putting the United States first, Japan has changed from a proposer of the Indo-Pacific strategy to a promoter, and the Japanese government actively seeks Japan and the United States to jointly dominate the Indo-Pacific economic security order. The accession of the United States has made international relations in the Indo-Pacific region more complex and changeable, and it will have a significant impact on China's national interests and strategic orientation in the Indo-Pacific area. Sorting out the Japanese Indo-Pacific strategy will help explain the mechanism, rationale, and implementation effect of Japan's policy choices under the China-US competition, and can also provide a reference for China's decision-making.

1 Introduction

With the rapid development of China, the strategic competition between China and the US has intensified. The US attaches great importance to the Indo-Pacific strategy and believes that the Indo-Pacific region is the key to the global integration strategy. After Biden took office, he made the development of alliances and partnerships a top priority in his foreign strategy. As a loyal ally of the US, Japan is situated in East Asia, bordering the Pacific Ocean. It plays very important in inhibiting China's foreign cooperation, especially in the maritime direction. Moreover, Japan considers China's ascent as a significant threat to its security. Japan believes that the relationship between China and the US is crucial to its security and foreign policy formulation.

Most of the previous research on the Indo-Pacific strategy was carried out centered on the US, and the understanding of Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy was insufficient. Studying Japanese Indo-Pacific strategy is of great value and significance for enhancing China's understanding of Japan's strategy, handling China-Japan relations properly, and grasping the security situation in the Indo-Pacific area rationally.

2 The formation of Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy

The "Indo-Pacific Strategy" was formally written by the US into the National Security Strategy Report in 2017 under the Trump administration. Therefore, the research on this issue was detonated again. However, there is an overlooked fact that the US is not the first country to propose the Indo-Pacific strategy. As a geopolitical, geoeconomic, and even comprehensive maritime security strategy, it was gradually constructed and developed by Japan after a long period of continuous brewing. From the beginning, Japan was the real active promotor of the Indo-Pacific strategy.

2.1. Initial appearance

The first stage is the formulation and vision of Japan's foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific area.

In 2006, after Shinzo Abe first came to power, Japan began to implement a foreign strategic transformation. In 2007, when addressing the Conference of the Republic of India, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe asserted that the Pacific and Indian Oceans, as oceans of freedom and prosperity, were forming a dynamic unity. Japan has offered to join the US, Australia, and India, in building a vast network spanning the entire Pacific Ocean. At this
stage, Japan first introduced its foreign policy for the Indo-Pacific area and initially proposed alliances with India and Australia. In his first speech to the Diet since becoming prime minister, Abe proposed to strengthen the Japan-U.S. alliance and engage in strategic dialogue at the highest intergovernmental level with countries that share values, such as India and Australia.

Shortly after, Taro Aso, the foreign minister of Japan, formally proposed to establish an "arc of freedom and prosperity." Additionally, it contains the two fundamental frameworks of geopolitical factors and value diplomacy, which can be regarded as the initial formation of the Indo-Pacific strategy.

2.2. Initial formation

The second stage is when Japan clearly puts forward the Indo-Pacific concept and initially forms an Indo-Pacific strategy.

After taking office for the second time, the Abe government regained its previous geostrategic concept and began to mention the concepts of "two oceans" and "Indo-Pacific" more on official occasions. Abe proposed that Japan, the US, Australia, and India form a democratic security diamond framework to ensure security from the Indian Ocean to the western Pacific region in an article he published at the end of 2012 on the website of the Indian Press Syndicate to explain the idea of "Asia's democratic security diamond"[1]. The introduction of this idea is a continuation of the "arc of freedom and prosperity".

Japan initially diplomatically introduced the Indo-Pacific idea in Jakarta, Indonesia, in February 2013, and declared that its main role in the region of the Indo-Pacific is to promote rules and defend the general welfare of the world. Japan originally put forth a free and open Indo-Pacific strategy in August 2016 during the opening ceremony of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development. At this stage, Japan formally put up the proposal of an "Asian Democratic Security Country Diamond" and encouraged the development of the Indo-Pacific strategy's military security components.

2.3. Extension

The third stage is for Japan to win over the US as an alliance and achieve the transformation of the Indo-Pacific strategy.

At this stage, the core structure of the four-party formation of Japan, the US, Australia, and India under the "Diamond of Democracy and Security" concept, and the important nations along Asia, Oceania, the Middle East, and Africa under the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" concept represent Japan's strategic planning for the Indo-Pacific area under the Abe administration.

Japan focuses on the creation of a "diamond-shaped" core structure in the field of security and promotes the upgrading of three trilateral combinations involving Japan to a quadrilateral strategic linkage mechanism. For the "arc of freedom and prosperity", Japan focuses on overseas investment and infrastructure construction and mainly promotes the dissemination of culture and values. Japan and India have been collaborating to put into action the "Asian-African Development Corridor Plan" since November 2016, which encompasses Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the African continent. Specifically, it refers to the trade route that links the Indian and Pacific Oceans with Africa and Asia.

However, after Trump took office in 2017, Abe's "following the United States" Asia-Pacific strategy was bankrupt, especially under the "America first" US policy, Japan had to adjust its diplomatic strategy. The Indo-Pacific strategy has become necessary to attract the US to enter and even replace the leader. In other words, Japan needed to replace the Japanese version of the Indo-Pacific strategy with the American version, to expand the Indo-Pacific strategy and increase Japan's influence in the Indo-Pacific area. Therefore, after 2019, Japan has temporarily slowed down the pace of promoting the Indo-Pacific strategy and has been exploring ways to give full play to its independent strategic initiative.

2.4. All-round development

The fourth stage is the all-round development of Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy during the Biden administration.

At this stage, to further avoid the head-on hedge with China in East Asia, Japan chose to weaken the frontal military confrontation characteristics of the Indo-Pacific strategy, highlighting and expanding it in the fields of geo-economy, science and technology, and institutional construction. And gradually promote the fixation and normalization of small multilateral mechanisms, and expand the Indo-Pacific strategy into an all-round external strategy including security, economy, science and technology, and mechanism building.

In August 2020, Japan, the US, Australia, and India held the third "2+2" meeting and decided to formalize and normalize the Quad mechanism. In September 2021, the four countries officially issued a joint statement saying they would not give in to China[2]. So far, Quad has established mutual logistics support agreements and strategic partnerships. The Quadrilateral Alliance for Maritime Democracy conceived by Shinzo Abe was finally formalized. The successive Yoshihide Suga and Kishida administrations inherited and consolidated their strategic promotion in Asia and Africa, actively built a wide-area multilateral mechanism, and relied on three important parallel mechanisms, namely the Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the Japan-EU Economic Partnership (EPA), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), to help Japan, which has relatively limited hard power, exert its strategic influence capability to the maximum.

3 Japan's China strategy and limitations under Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy
3.1. The main measures of Japan's China strategy under the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" structure

The reality at home and abroad cannot support Japan's independence from the U.S. strategic layout in the Asia-Pacific region, but Japan is striving for more voice in the construction of a new round of regional order to counteract the intensifying power transition between China and Japan.

3.1.1 Pursuing values diplomacy and building the Japan-U.S. alliance

Diplomatic efforts are one of the more prominent paths in Japan's implementation of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Firstly, Japan proposes to "establish a free and open order based on common values and principles, such as the rule of law" and promotes "values diplomacy"[3]. At the ideological level, Japan wants to draw in or put pressure on the neighboring democratic countries, and force them to join Japan’s strategy of containing China. Despite China's peaceful rise, its rapid development tends to create fear in neighboring countries, with many foreign political elites believing that engagement and "democratization" have failed and that defensive measures must be taken against China. Japan will undoubtedly deepen this fear and undermine China's diplomatic efforts.

Second, Japan has further consolidated the Japan-U.S. alliance. If Japan once held a defensive realism strategy toward China, Japan's attitude toward China has gradually shifted to resentful realism. In the confrontation between China and the United States, Japan is increasingly turning toward the United States, and the two countries on the issue of China's policy convergence has been increasing. In the era of the Trump administration, the U.S. policy of unilateralism and anti-globalization has put Japan in a disadvantageous position in the game with China in East Asia. Therefore, the Japanese government attaches great importance to the Biden administration, and the United States to the return of multilateralism change. In addition, Japan maintains vigilance towards China's rise during the epidemic and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and attaches importance to the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy to counterbalance the synergy of China. The further deterioration of US-China relations may force medium-sized and small countries to "choose sides" and develop their security systems.

3.1.2 Establishing a multi-level security system

Security and defense are also the focus of Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy. Japan continues to take the Japan-U.S. alliance as the center, actively expanding the security pattern in Northeast Asia, and building a multi-level security system against China in the Indo-Pacific region. The "U.S.-Japan-India-Australia" alliance is the key link in this system, and the idea of Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy relies on this alliance, strengthening horizontal cooperation with Asia-Pacific allies, and creating flexible small multilateral collaboration frameworks according to different topics.

In the Indo-Pacific security system conceived by Japan, Japan, and the United States are the core, India and Australia are the second layer, and Vietnam, the Philippines, and other South China Sea-rim countries, as well as ASEAN countries, constitute the third layer. ASEAN countries are located in the center of the Indo-Pacific Ocean, with the natural advantages of geography, no clear stand between China and the United States, and has been an important region for Japan to develop diplomatic economic and trade relations, and is a potential object of Japan's pull. In addition to traditional trade relations, Japan is also trying to develop its centripetal force towards ASEAN countries, such as expanding its strategic assistance to these countries. And these behaviors themselves pose a great threat to China's peripheral security.

3.1.3 Creating the Indo-Pacific economic circle in the new era

Firstly, Japan has strengthened its economic ties with its allies to capture the Chinese trade market. 2015 saw the launch of Japan's "High-Quality Infrastructure Partnership" program for Asian countries, and it has been increasing its investment in overseas export infrastructure projects. In 2015, Japan launched the "high-quality infrastructure partnership" program for Asian countries and has been increasing its investment in overseas export infrastructure projects[4]. In the financial aspect, Japan, the United States, Australia, as well as the three banks and financial companies together to form a "tri-national partnership", for the Indo-Pacific infrastructure construction to provide investment.

Secondly, Japan spares no effort to participate in the formulation of economic rules in the Asia-Pacific region, squeezing the "China Program". Japan supports multilateralism and a liberal market economy, and the Abe government has declared that it intends to create a "free and open Indo-Pacific economic circle in the new era" and supports a "liberal international economic order". In addition, with the Indo-Pacific concept, Japan tries to develop economic and trade relations with Southeast Asian countries while building a more multifunctional partnership, to radiate the influence of the economic order in its vision. This has a strong impact on the concept of "Belt and Road" in China, and the two programs will inevitably compete for countries and resources in the region. Japan's consolidation of its liberal economic order will transform its economic leadership into political international influence, thereby creating a regional order that is favorable to the country and a counterweight to China.

It is worth noting, however, that not all of Japan's policy of checks and balances on China has been followed through and paid off. At the beginning of the formulation of Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy, its competitive and aggressive nature was more obvious, but after nearly a decade of development, the flexibility of the strategy has become more prominent, guiding how
Japan can turn the tables between China and the United States. From both diplomatic and economic perspectives, Japan's insecurity stems not only from the rapid rise of neighboring China but is also influenced by concerns about an asymmetric alliance with the United States. While Japan has developed an alliance with the U.S., it has not given up its engagement with China: In 2021, the Kishida administration put Yoshimasa Hayashi, a representative of the "China-awareness school," at the helm of the foreign affairs department; on the economic front, despite negative attitudes toward the ADB, Japan pushed ahead with negotiations on the China-Japan-South Korea Free Trade Area (FTA) despite U.S. objections and reached a tariff concession agreement with China in 2020. In 2020, it reached an agreement with China on tariff concessions.

3.2. Limitations of Japan's "Indo-Pacific Strategy" to Counterbalance China

At present, Japan’s Indo-Pacific strategy is still a relatively new and developing diplomatic strategy, and its development is not yet perfect, which is bound to be limited by many factors.

First of all, Japan's domestic problems will hinder the pace of Japan's outward development. If Japan wants to implement a global strategy, it needs strong economic strength to support it, and Japan's because of aging, unemployment, and other problems, the process of economic recovery is slow.2022 October 18, Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications announced that the national consumer price index in October was 103.4, an increase of 3.6% over the same period of the previous year. For Japan, it is more urgent to solve the current domestic problems than to check and balance China.

Second, the Japan-US alliance still has structural contradictions. On the one hand, Japan cannot get rid of the United States and develop its strategy independently. Japan has considerable dependence on the United States in energy supply, health, semiconductor technology, aerospace, and aviation; and in recent years, due to the behavior of following the United States, Japan's relations with some of the world's major powers have been deteriorating: tensions in Sino-Japanese relations have continued; and after the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Japan has followed NATO sanctions against Russia and has been met with countermeasures, and the two countries have ceased to sign a peace treaty. It can be said that Japan's current strategic security is very dependent on the protection of the United States, and the uncertainty of U.S. action in the Indo-Pacific will put Japan in a very passive situation. On the other hand, the U.S. cannot get rid of the influence of the alliance dilemma on its thinking. The United States encouraged Japan in East Asia for its counterbalance to China but also did not want to let Japan too strong, Japan has always existed in the quagmire of being involved in the confrontation between the United States and China's concerns, these two countries' interests contradictions highlighted, will make the U.S.-Japanese alliance towards disintegration.

Therefore, the two countries' attitudes toward each other are very entangled, and this dilemma has laid a fuse at the beginning of the asymmetric alliance concluded between the United States and Japan.

Furthermore, Japan has difficulty in securing ASEAN's partnership. For Japan, ASEAN countries are currently the most worthwhile partners to strive for, but ASEAN countries are more looking forward to keeping the peace between China and the United States and are not willing to choose sides[5]. Compared to China, Japan can release relatively few economic benefits to ASEAN on a sustained basis, and naturally, it is difficult to gain a loyal partner.

4 Trends in the development of China-Japan relations

4.1. Strategic cognition of China-Japan relations

4.1.1 Friction under the Indo-Pacific Strategy between China and Japan

The focus of Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy is on shaping the environment in the Indo-Pacific region. As the driving force and purpose of Japan's strategic measures[6], the execution of Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy will undoubtedly intersect with China's national interests. After Japan observed that the United States had positioned China as the solitary competitor with the ability to continuously challenge the international system[7], it drew the U.S. into the camp of strategic control over China. On the surface, it appears to be a strategic measure by Japan to strengthen the Japan-US alliance, but in essence, its real purpose is to consolidate the international situation that is more favorable to Japan. In recent years, with the continuous expansion of Japan's right-wing forces, there have been many frictions between China and Japan. This article summarizes the following three points.

Firstly, economic competition. In the context of economic globalization, Japan believes that maintaining and building a rule-based economic order is crucial for its cross-border economic activities to be more convenient. In recent years, Japan's manufacturing industry has been affected by external shocks, leading to a decline in the international competitiveness of its core industries. In addition, Japan's aging and oligopolization have led to insufficient domestic demand momentum and Japan earlier incorporated economic security into its national security strategy[8], which has forced Japan to actively consider using the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) as an implementation path to expand the external demand market while building a favorable regional economic and trade order with relevant countries. Secondly, territorial disputes. From the normalization of diplomatic relations between China and Japan to the beginning of this century, the territorial disputes between China and Japan were "frozen". Since the Diaoyu Islands incident, the Japanese government has continuously strengthened its military presence on the islands and conducted large-scale comprehensive
firepower exercises in 2023. Japan's move will hurt the construction of mutual trust between China and Japan, and will inevitably exacerbate the contradictions and tense relations between the two countries. Thirdly, the Taiwan Strait issue. Behind Japan's involvement in the Taiwan Strait issue lies both subjective and objective factors. Objectively speaking, 80% of Japan's annual overseas material transportation must pass through the Taiwan Strait and Busi Strait, so the strategic importance of Taiwan in geography is self-evident. Subjectively, Japan had colonized and controlled Taiwan for over 50 years, and in its heart, it had always regarded Taiwan as its former colony.

4.1.2 The influence of the Japan-US alliance on China-Japan relations

In May 2022, the Secretary of State of the United States, Antony Blinken explicitly stated in his speech that the United States will make interfering with Chinese government decisions a goal in the next 10 years on China policy[9]. Since the deterioration of China-US relations in recent years, the Japanese government has successfully promoted the Indo-Pacific strategy to the US government, while also cooperating with the US to curb China's prosperity. Japan shared the same interests in curbing China's power with the USA. For instance, Japan intends to weaken the increasing influence of China in the Belt and Road on the maritime space from the South China Sea to Europe via the Indian Ocean. In addition to following the United States on various strategic diplomacy topics, Japan has also reached an agreement with the United States on expanding the scope of application of the US-Japan Security Treaty to the Diaoyu Islands issue. Unless there is a fundamental change in the US policy towards China, China, and Japan will face a long-term negative relationship under Japan's subjective understanding of the international political landscape.

This article believes that the fundamental point of strategic understanding of China-Japan relations under the Indo-Pacific strategy is that both China and Japan need to establish mechanisms and orders conducive to their development in the Indo-Pacific region. Faced with the situation of mutual restraint between China and the United States, Japan not only has the purpose of maintaining the Japan-US alliance and the task of implementing the Indo-Pacific strategy but also alleges that China's rise, especially the unrelenting enhancement of military power, will pose a significant threat to itself.

4.2. Suggestions for the development of China-Japan relations

Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy aims to shape a favorable regional situation and even regional order, and Japan believes that the "Russia-Ukraine conflict" is a direct challenge and a major threat to the post-war international order[10]. Japan must expand its strategic influence in the Indo-Pacific region. China has always adhered to an open and cooperative attitude in international affairs and actively promoted regional economic integration. The impact of the promotion of the Indo-Pacific strategy on China's regional interests not only affects the main body of China-Japan relations but also proves there are fundamental conflicts of national interests between China and Japan in East Asia.

The future direction of China-Japan relations largely depends on Japan. From the specific manifestations, it can be seen that Japan's attitude towards China is contradictory. While taking part in the American strategic layout to contain China, Japan also continuously strengthened China-Japan trade. On the one hand, China is currently Japan's largest trading partner and export market, with a total bilateral trade volume of 357.42 billion US dollars in 2022. On the other hand, Japan's historical legacy issues, territorial disputes, and attitude and strategic choices towards China will directly affect the future direction of China-Japan relations.

4.2.1 Suggestion on Japan

Firstly, Japan abandons excuses such as security threats and pursues freedom and openness, contributing to alleviating regional tensions and avoiding regional strategic competition. Secondly, Japan needs to adjust its Indo-Pacific strategy towards China and abandon some strategic measures that exacerbate tensions between China and Japan. Thirdly, avoid zero-sum games and minimize the negative impact of the United States on its diplomatic strategy. Fourthly, the strategic focus should be on addressing domestic issues, such as using IPEF to address domestic economic weakness, rather than using regional economic frameworks to exclude China and exacerbate regional tensions. Japan's foreign strategy and policy formulation should not be entirely influenced by the political interests seen by politicians.

4.2.2 China's response

Firstly, China should adhere to its development, and continue to enhance its comprehensive national strength. On the one hand, adhere to high-quality economic development, for instance, to promote the upgrading of the industrial chain and build a modern industrial system. On the other hand, to increase investment in high-tech fields and attract international talents to work for themselves to break through the monopoly and blockade of technology fields such as chips led by the United States. Besides, in the post-pandemic era, many industries in Japan are in a stagnant state of development, and seeking multilateral cooperation increases the possibility of cooperation between China and Japan; This article argues that as China's economic competitiveness improves, Japan will have to be more cautious in considering and choosing its policies towards China.

Secondly, continue to promote the construction of the "Belt and Road", deepen multilateral cooperation, develop in-depth commercial cooperation with countries along the road, actively promote third-party cooperation.
with many other countries, and build a multilateral win-win pattern.

Thirdly, China should always maintain a high level of vigilance toward ideological security. While maintaining normal economic, trade, and cultural exchanges with Japan, China should always adhere to the historical red line and be vigilant against the invasion of social ideologies such as militarism and historical nihilism.

5 Conclusion

Under the leadership of Japan and the United States, geopolitical changes with the Indo-Pacific as the basic strategic orientation have begun, directly affecting the trend of relations between major countries. Japan has deeply embedded its national pursuit and interests-oriented Indo-Pacific strategy into the current national strategic system and echoes the convergence of China's foreign and maritime policies. It is precisely because Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy has a directional orientation for China, especially the thinking of geopolitical confrontation and strategic competition in East Asia, which has led to a highly tense and delicate situation in the relationship between China and Japan. However, it is worth noting that Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy and policy practice is not only to follow the United States but also to lure the international power shift of East Asian geopolitics.

The future direction of China-Japan relations requires the joint efforts of both sides. To maintain the overall stability of China-Japan relations and peaceful trade in the Asia-Pacific region, China should study Japan's Indo-Pacific strategic thinking through the dual dimensions of history and geography, understand its strategic logic, and identify its impact on China, consider the way China and Japan interact in the current international environment and China's countermeasures.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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