



Report

# FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC: BOLD VISION FOR BOLD PLAYERS

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During the last debate in the EU-Pacific talks, our speakers Antoine Bondaz, Research Fellow, from Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, Takashi Hosoda, Lector and External Associate at Charles University, and Nicholas Szechenyi, Senior Fellow from CSIS discussed why is it a common interest for the international community to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

Even though every state has its interests regarding the region, several global issues could be noticed that the states should face together since one state can not solve them. On the other hand, it is complicated, indeed, to set a dialogue with the Indo-Pacific countries.

In this context, Szechenyi highlighted the importance of Japan's strategy in the region. It is the first very pragmatic step taken by a country in the Indo-Pacific. The key elements are maintaining regional security, promoting economic opportunities and strengthening the rule-based order in the region. Japan is not only successful in setting bilateral relations in the region, but also in bringing them to a multilateral level. The free and open indo-pacific will be on the agenda in the next G7s Summit hosted by Japan next year.

However there are surely several security issues, such as stability, and maritime security, but also capacity building, rules and norms, and conflict prevention digital economy, the speakers also highlighted that climate change is one of the most important global challenges for the interested states that could also easily emerge as a key driver that could lead the cooperation in the region.

In fact, air pollution, for instance, is growing drastically in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, which is also the main indicator of 7 million deaths according to WHO. Plastic pollution is also causing severe problems, in fact, 15 of 20 rivers are polluted in the Indo-Pacific region. It's the main reason for the loss of biodiversity and thus natural disasters. The rainforests are in massive danger in Solomon island, Tanzania. Environmental criminality is also visible in the growing fishery

industry, including illegal fishing. Climate change only worsens this tendency since 5% of the fishery community is located in the Indo-Pacific, the region is massively suffering from extreme weather circumstances and access to fresh water is raising as a crucial issue as well.

This also shows that traditional security issues are – however still important – less relevant in the region. There are issues that require more critical awareness than military capacities, such as supply chain resilience, sensitive technology, principles, and democratic values. It is more crucial, according to the speakers to secure these elements than the more traditional security issues. Climate security is an important issue since climate change expand indirectly other security issues, such as the loss of biodiversity or migration crises.

The speakers raised that the key elements are maintaining regional security, promoting economic opportunities and strengthening the rule-based order in the region. It is quite important since the Indo-Pacific strategy is not containing China in the region. Although the Chinese economy is the second largest one, the states are not quite sure about what are the Chinese ambitions in the region and worldwide. Therefore, the rising power of China either in the economy or military way created a lot of security concerns and by leaving many questions without an answer.

Only Japan has a nuanced strategy to stabilize its relations with China to maintain strategic competition with Peking either in the region or globally. Tokyo chose not to isolate but rather embrace China to shape Peking's actions and embrace China to accept the rules-based international order. The essence of strategic competition, therefore, of the strategy is to cooperate with China under the common institutions led by international rules. However, this idea of balancing deterrence and inaction is quite difficult, even for the US. Despite being a partner for the second largest economy in the world, the US has emerged rather a

competitor for China. This containment, however, does not leave room for improvement, thus making the interactions quite complicated.

The speakers also mentioned how needed the EU's engagement is. The issues the speakers were talking about were mainly global, which means that large-scale cooperation is highly needed. The open and free EU-Pacific region also depends on the EU's investments and actions. However, there is a lot to do with the implementation on the EU level. As Bondaz pointed out, the exact work should start on the ground and not stop after the member states reached a consensus or agreement. The US's presence is also quite needed mainly contributing to stability and economic prosperity. The EU and US should not replace each other, but duplicate their contributions with cooperation.

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