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South and Southeast Asian Perceptions of Japan's Strategic Rise for a Balanced Indo-Pacific: a Cross-National Case Study on Bangladesh and Thailand

Md. Saifullah Akon¹ · Narut Charoensri² · Md. Zakiul Alam³

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Abstract

The Indo-Pacific region is vital to the emerging countries' geostrategic and geo-maritime strategic competition. It is crucial for Japan's economic, political, and security interests. For the last few years, Japan has been promoting a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy to protect the region free from other countries' dominance and make a balance of power by countering China's hegemony. Despite the growing strategic involvement of Japan in the Indo-Pacific region, some literature focused on the people's perception of Japan. Thus, this study explores the public perception regarding Japan's strategic rise in the Indo-Pacific to fill the knowledge gap. Using a snowball sampling method, we conducted a descriptive cross-national study with 365 individuals in Bangladesh and Thailand. Most participants (88%) agreed that the strategic rise of Japan would promote peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Besides, they agreed (69.1%) that the FOIP could be the alternative to the Chinese BRI in this region. However, around 52.6% of respondents moderately supported Japan's FOIP and QUAD in the region not to provoke China. Participants in this multi-country research generally expressed optimism about Japan's strategic ascent and its implications for a balanced Indo-Pacific. Therefore, the findings of this study can assist policymakers in gaining a better understanding of public attitudes and preparing for future policy formation.

Keywords Indo-Pacific · QUAD · FOIP · South Asia · Southeast Asia · Japan

✉ Md. Saifullah Akon
Saifullah.djs@du.ac.bd

¹ Department of Japanese Studies, University of Dhaka, 1128, Faculty of Social Science Building, Dhaka 1000, Bangladesh

² School of International Affairs, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, Thailand

³ Department of Population Sciences, University of Dhaka, Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh

Introduction

The “Indo-Pacific” is an emerging lexicon constructed by Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2016 [20]. Abe’s idea of the “Indo-Pacific” can be traced back to the so-called key milestone speech titled “Confluence of the Two Seas” in 2007 when he visited the Indian Parliament. Since then, the idea has been interpreted, conceptualized, and turned into the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy (FOIP) that we know [21, 27]. Once the idea was invented, the USA, India, and Australia welcomed it and interpreted the idea and values behind the liberal concepts (i.e., democracy, human rights, free and open economy) and constructed their version of the Indo-Pacific. After that, other countries and international organizations started proposing revising and interpreting the Indo-Pacific concept to align with emerging global ideas [9]. The idea itself is broad in cooperation, and to what extent does the idea aim to cover geographically? However, Japan’s Indo-Pacific emphasizes Southeast and South Asia as the geographical area between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Because of the physical connections, they form an element of the Indo-Pacific strategy (maritime and land transport). As a result, understanding the perceptions of South and Southeast Asian countries towards Japan’s strategic rise is critical for achieving a balanced regional order.

Here, strategic rise refers to a country’s increasing economic, political, and military power, enabling it to assert its influence in the global arena [17]. A strategic rise can have significant regional and global security implications, leading to shifting power dynamics and increased competition among the major powers. Japan has also increased its economic and security engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. As the world’s third-largest economy, Japan has been expanding its regional influence through initiatives such as the FOIP strategy, which aims to promote a rules-based order and connectivity. Besides, Japan has also been deepening its economic engagement with countries in the region through investment and aid and enhancing its security partnership with countries such as the USA, India, and Australia [15].

However, the idea of the Indo-Pacific is growing on a global scale. The Japanese government promotes the idea of the Indo-Pacific by integrating it with its bilateral and multilateral relations. The emerging and active engagement of Japan in the Indo-Pacific region is debatable. Many scholars argued that Japan has been trying to challenge the Chinese regional order by promoting the FOIP strategy [18, 34], while Japanese officials always denied this argument. One of the factors that shaped the argument for Japan’s endeavor to take over China’s leading role in the region is the presence of China in South and Southeast Asia. We have witnessed China’s expanding influence and leading role in South and Southeast Asia in different ways and forms. For instance, the active engagement between China and India and China and Pakistan, particularly on the hard infrastructure development under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) [3], has been seen as one of the most critical factors shaping geo-economic and geopolitical dynamics in South Asia. Meanwhile, Southeast Asia is another area of rivalry between China, the USA, and Japan. The Chinese government initiated the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) to help link economic and political activities between China and

the Mekong subregion, comprising Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, to strengthen and promote development in the sub-region.

The USA and Japan are worried about China's increasing power in South and Southeast Asia. The close bilateral and multilateral diplomatic relations between China and countries in South and Southeast Asia are vital in dynamic regional arrangements such as FOIP. Shazzad [36] argued that Japan-Bangladesh relations have always been overlooked and have been one of the essential actors in Japan's FOIP strategy. Japan is Bangladesh's biggest donor, and Bangladesh was the primary beneficiary of Japan's official development assistance (ODA) in 2020 [26]. It reflects the importance of economic opportunity that the Japanese investors see in Bangladesh as Japan's Keidanren, a vital business conglomerate in Japan and has an impact on Japan's ODA direction, once stated that the allocation of Japan's ODA should help Japanese investors abroad [28]. Thailand, meanwhile, is also another important actor in the Indo-Pacific. Locating at the center of mainland Southeast Asia, Thailand has been facilitating an international production network (IPN) in the region since the mid of 1980s when Japan signed the Plaza Accord that led to the relocation of Japanese manufactories to Southeast Asia. Additionally, Thailand has developed strong diplomatic, economic, political, and security relations with China and the USA.

Bangladesh and Thailand are confronting superpower rivalry. Accordingly, both countries need to develop strategies that could help develop economic and political foreign policy with the big powers in the region. To reach those goals, governments need public support. Public opinion is one of the most crucial factors that help make and shape foreign policy. How the public in each country views other actors or issues in the international arena shape how the government frames its foreign policy. In Bangladesh, the government considers public opinion when making foreign policy decisions, particularly regarding regional security and economic relations. For instance, the government considers the general public's views when negotiating trade agreements or participating in regional security initiatives. On the other hand, public opinion significantly impacts Thailand regarding the country's relations with its neighbors. For instance, before joining the CP-TPP in 2018, the Thai Department of Trade Negotiations held different public hearings regarding the potential impact of TPP on the country [5]. The poll's findings showed that most Thai people supported the agreement, and the government considered this when negotiating the terms of the agreement and determining whether to join.

South and Southeast Asia play an important role in Japan's FOIP strategy. Geographically, South and Southeast Asia are the two main maritime trade routes linking the Middle East and North-East Asia. The volume of shipping between South and Southeast Asia is significantly high. At the same time, maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region is also another factor that has a vital impact on trade and logistics in the region because there are a considerable number of maritime terrorism in the region, for instance, Al Qaeda, Aby Sayyaf, and Jemaah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia [43]. However, although a significant number of security and economic issues might affect public interests, as mentioned above, the opinions and views of the public vis-à-vis crossed-border issues

(i.e., terrorism, environment). The superpower rivalry in the international system would not gain interest from the government unless the public views them as threats or challenges.

For Bangladesh and Thailand, Japan's growing economic and political engagement in the Indo-Pacific, whether it is because of the growing engagement of China in the region, led to the questions of how the Bangladeshis and Thais see Japan in Japan's constructed Indo-Pacific region. Although Bangladesh and Thailand are different in many ways, there are some similarities in their economic development, political stability, and strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific, which make them worth analyzing together. Both Bangladesh and Thailand have experienced significant economic growth in recent years. Geo-strategically, both countries are equally important in making FOIP and QUAD effective. For example, Thailand is strategically located at the center of the Southeast Asian region and is an important hub for FOIP and BRI's land and sea corridors [13]. On the other hand, Bangladesh connects South Asia with Southeast Asia [30], and its Bay of Bengal (BoB) is an important maritime trade route in the region. However, Bangladesh and Thailand's strategic location and strong regional economic and political ties make them critical partners for Japan in implementing its FOIP in the Indo-Pacific. Considering the importance of both Bangladesh and Thailand, it is imperative to see the public reaction and understand their opinion regarding Japan's presence in the region.

Some existing literature studied the general public perception of Japan in the international system. A recent study by the ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore reported that the survey conducted in 2021 that Japan is the most trusted significant power in Southeast Asia [29, 35]. However, the survey participants were mainly scholars in universities or think tanks. Not a significant number of students and laypeople might have different views and opinions. Moreover, the views of a group of the younger generation might also have some significances and implications that we might learn from and could lead to policy formulation in the next 10 years when the new generation grows older.

As Japan's FOIP and its bilateral relations with Bangladesh and Thailand are strengthening and the emerging FOIP, which is transforming the geopolitical arrangements in the region, Bangladesh and Thailand's foreign policy requires public support. Japan's public perceptions help construct and shape how Bangladesh and Thailand gear towards Japan. Therefore, this research paper set out to understand the perceptions of the Bangladeshis and Thais towards Japan. It aims to understand how people of the two countries see the relations between Japan and their countries. Japan has played a significant role in developing Bangladesh and Thailand, so they need more explicit policies towards Japan. Positive public opinion towards Japan can increase support for deeper economic and political ties. Against this backdrop, this study will help to determine the public views on Japan's increased presence in the Indo-Pacific. It will also help Bangladesh and Thailand formulate their strategy and develop action plans to ensure the rights and interests of the region. The research question of this paper is: what is the perception of the people of Bangladesh and Thailand towards Japan? This research can help policymakers see the perceptions and prepare for policy formulation in the future.

Methodology

Study Design and Sites

This descriptive cross-sectional survey study was conducted in two South and Southeast Asian countries, namely, Bangladesh and Thailand, for 3 months, from November 2021 to January 2022.

Participants, Sampling, and Sample Size

This study was conducted using a cross-sectional research approach among people 18 and older. Thus, the population who are aged 18 years and above, living in either Bangladesh or Thailand, and know about international politics, particularly Japan, Indo-Pacific, and QUAD (for example, in the case of students: they were undergrad or grad students from the Japanese Studies department, or International Relations and Political Sciences; beyond students, data also collected from MOFA officials, academia from international relations or Japan-related department; or researchers from IR focused think tank) were applied as the survey's selection criteria. As face-to-face techniques were not feasible during the pandemic, a Google survey form was created and sent to survey participants using snowball sampling. The total sample size was 400, where 35 respondents had to be excluded since they were unfamiliar with Japan and the Indo-Pacific. Thus, the ultimate sample for this current study was 365, of which 200 respondents were from Bangladesh, and the other 165 were from Thailand.

Data Collection and Analysis

We initially distributed the questionnaire using personal contacts through web-based platforms and other social media tools, i.e., Facebook and WhatsApp. Participants who received the survey link by e-mail, Facebook, or WhatsApp were asked to complete the survey form and share it with their networks to reach more people. Participants were allowed to respond to the questionnaire form only once. There was no comprehensive list of adults who knew about Japan and the Indo-Pacific, so a non-probability sampling method was used to complete the survey. Finally, after collecting all the information, Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) 26 was used to analyze the data. We used descriptive (percentage) and inferential (chi-square test) statistics for this study.

Results

Characteristics of the Participants

Table 1 demonstrates the social and demographic features of the survey participants for this study. A total of 365 participants completed the survey questionnaire, 200

Table 1 Characteristics of the study population ($n = 365$)

Variables	Study sample, n (%)
Age (in years)	
18–25	274 (75.1)
26–35	61 (16.7)
36–50+	30 (8.2)
Sex	
Woman	168 (46.0)
Men	197 (54.0)
Education	
Graduate	175 (47.9)
Masters	160 (43.8)
PhD	30 (8.2)
Institution	
Japan-related	83 (22.7)
Non-Japanese	282 (77.3)
Occupation	
Government job	28 (7.7)
Academia	27 (7.4)
Think tank	39 (10.7)
Students	262 (71.8)
Others	9 (2.5)
Nationality	
Bangladeshi	200 (54.8)
Thai	165 (45.2)

from Bangladesh and 165 from Thailand. In the study, most respondents were aged 18 to 25 (75.1%). Males comprised more than half of the participants (54%), whereas female participants were 46%. About two-thirds of the participants were from non-Japanese institutions (77.3%). Table 1 also shows that, among the total respondents, the majority are students (71.8%), whereas more than 47% (47.9%) were graduate students, and about 43.8% completed their Master's degrees.

Perception Towards Japan's FOIP Policy

Table 2 depicts the respondent's opinion that the strategic ascent of Japan would promote peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region and that the FOIP policy could be the alternative to Chinese BRI. The respondents were enthusiastic about Japan's growing engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. About 88% of respondents

Table 2 People’s perception of Japan’s strategic rise and its FOIP policy

Variables and items	Opinion (%)			P value
	Disagree ^a	Neutral	Agree ^b	
Japan’s FOIP policy				
It will contribute to the peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific region	1.6	10.7	87.7	<0.001
It could be the alternative to the Chinese BRI	3.3	27.7	69.1	<0.001

^aIncludes strongly disagree and disagree

^bIncludes strongly agree and agree

either strongly agreed or agreed that the strategic rise of Japan would promote peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region, whereas 10.7% were on the fence.

Furthermore, the respondents who believed that the FOIP could be the alternative to the Chinese BRI had a more positive response (69.1%) than those who did not believe it (3.3%). There is a positive relationship between these two variables. For example, the respondents who believed in the role of Japan in maintaining stability and peace in the Indo-Pacific region also believed in the existence of FOIP policy as an alternative to BRI.

Supporting Japan’s FOIP and QUAD in the Indo-Pacific Region

Figure 1 shows that more than half of the respondents (52.6%) reported that they would moderately support Japan’s FOIP and QUAD in the Indo-Pacific region so

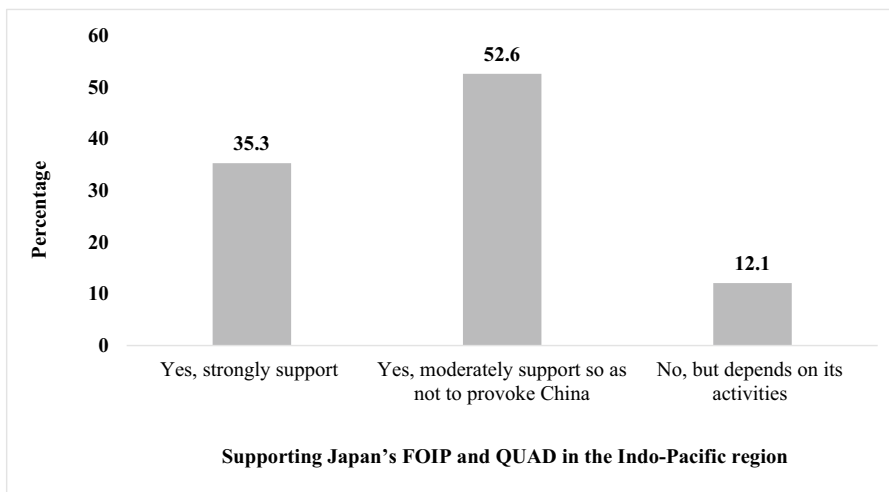


Fig. 1 Supporting Japan’s FOIP and QUAD in the Indo-Pacific region (n = 365)

as not to provoke China, which means only if Japan's FOIP and QUAD do not provoke China—already a decisive actor in the region—and obviously if the FOIP and QUAD do not become a reason for further arms race or arms conflict in the region. Besides, 35.3% of both countries strongly supported Japan's presence in the region. On the other hand, only 12.1% of respondents did not support Japan's FOIP and the activities of QUAD in the Indo-Pacific.

Japan's Relationship with the Indo-Pacific Region

Table 3 illustrates the significant sectors of Japan's relationship with the Indo-Pacific region's countries. Most male (57.7%) and female (48.7%) respondents believed that Japan's relationship with the Indo-Pacific region's countries is economical, political, and strategic rather than only one sector. Even most respondents from two different countries, Bangladesh (51.5%) and Thailand (54.5%), also believed that Japan's engagement with the Indo-Pacific region's countries covers all sectors.

On the other hand, most respondents, those working in Japan-related organizations, supported that Japan's relations with the region are mainly economic. In contrast, only 29.4% of respondents from non-Japanese organizations believed that statement. Besides, about 41.1% of the bachelor-level students supported the economic sectors as the ground of Japan's relationship with the region. However, the same percentage of respondents also supported all three sectors.

Table 3 Japan's relationship with the Indo-Pacific region (%)

Variables	Economic partners	More political than economic	Strategic connectedness	Both economic, political, and strategic
Sex				
Male	38.1	5.6	7.6	48.7
Female	26.2	3.0	13.1	57.7
Age				
18–25	32.8	4.0	10.9	52.2
26–35	37.7	3.3	8.2	50.8
36–50+	20.0	10.0	6.7	63.3
Education				
Bachelor's degree	41.1	6.3	11.4	41.1
Master's degree	23.8	3.1	7.5	65.6
PhD	30.0		16.7	53.3
Japan-related organization				
Yes	43.4	6.0	8.4	42.2
No	29.4	3.9	10.6	56.0
Nationality				
Bangladeshi	34.5	5.5	8.5	51.5
Thai	30.3	3.0	12.1	54.5

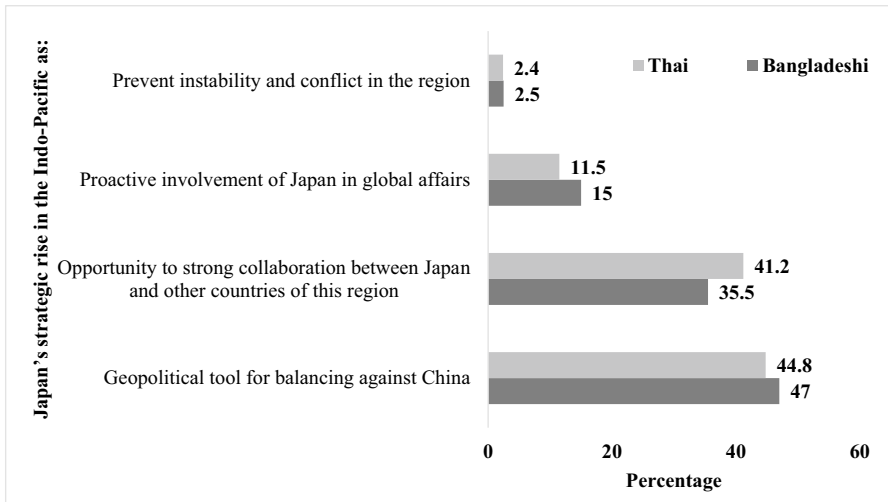


Fig. 2 Perception towards Japan’s strategic rise in the Indo-Pacific

Japan’s Strategic Rise in the Indo-Pacific

As shown in Fig. 2, in terms of Japan’s strategic rise in the Indo-Pacific, most Bangladeshi (47.0%) respondents believed that the rise of Japan was a geopolitical tool for balancing against China. Besides, more of the respondents from Thailand (41.2%) believed that the rise of Japan is an opportunity to strengthen collaboration between Japan and other countries of this region than Bangladeshi (35.5%). On the other hand, about 15% of Bangladeshi respondents considered the rise as a proactive involvement of Japan in global affairs, whereas the percentage is only 11.5% for Thailand. Very few respondents from Bangladesh (2.5%) and Thailand (2.4%) believed that the strategic rise of Japan in the Indo-Pacific could prevent the instability and conflict in the region.

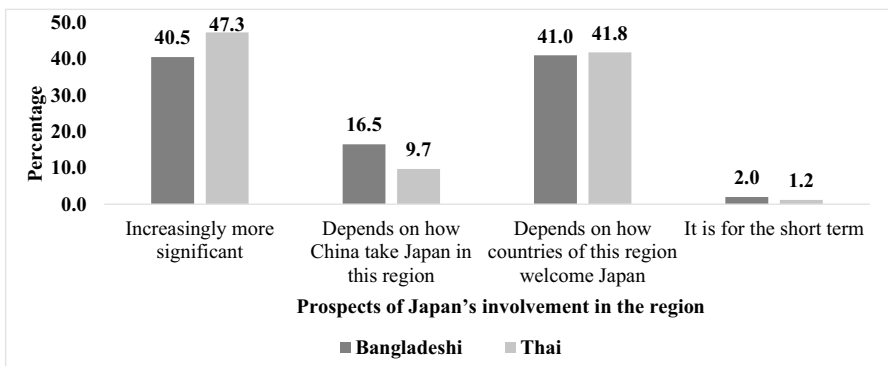


Fig. 3 Prospects of Japan’s involvement in the Indo-Pacific region

Prospects of Japan's Involvement in the Indo-Pacific Region

According to Fig. 3, more than 47% of the respondents in Thailand (47.3%) believed that it is increasingly more significant in terms of the prospects of Japan's involvement in the Indo-Pacific region. In contrast, the percentage is 40.5% of Bangladesh believed so.

On the other hand, most Bangladeshi (41%) respondents believed that the prospects of Japan's involvement depend on how the countries of this region welcome Japan. Even 16.5% of Bangladeshi respondents also believed that it depends on how China takes Japan in this region as China is already a key global actor in this area, whereas it is only 9.7% for Thailand. Very few respondents from both Bangladesh (2.0%) and Thailand (1.2%) believed that the prospects of Japan's involvement in the region are only for the short term.

Discussion

Our two-country study of the Indo-Pacific region, particularly South and Southeast Asia, provides essential insight into the perception of Japan's strategic rise in the Indo-Pacific region, formulating FOIP and QUAD policy to create a balanced political environment. Most participants believed that Japan's rise in the Indo-Pacific area would create a rules-based free, balanced Indo-Pacific and open maritime order, reflecting the same argument Koga proposed [22]. Again, most respondents from Bangladesh and Thailand (52.6%) supported Japan's FOIP and QUAD policy in the region only if it did not provoke China. A study by Thu [41] on Japan's FOIP and QUAD policies indicates that other states in the Indo-Pacific area have also highly valued and supported QUAD. Countries like Vietnam and the Philippines, with territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea, have welcomed the QUAD's increased presence in the region. For example, 77% of respondents in Vietnam and 56% in the Philippines either unambiguously supported the QUAD or supported the condition of not provoking China [41]. However, around half of the respondents (46%) found Japan's rise as a geopolitical tool for balancing against China in the Indo-Pacific.

Although some ASEAN countries supported FOIP and QUAD, it has also elicited complex perspectives in the ASEAN countries. On the one hand, the QUAD is seen as a positive development in maintaining regional stability and countering the growing assertiveness of China [7, 22, 41]. On the other hand, it is also seen as a means to enhance economic cooperation and connectivity in the region [15]. The ASEAN countries are worried that the QUAD might cause regional division and fragmentation and pose a challenge to the centrality of ASEAN in regional affairs [24, 39]. Furthermore, several ASEAN countries are also worried about being caught in the middle of great power rivalries and the potential impact on their relationships with China [33], a significant trade partner of many. In addition, they are concerned that the QUAD's focus on security could undermine the region's economic integration efforts, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)

agreement [39], as they have been working towards greater economic integration for decades.

Our study shows that Bangladesh and Thailand are predominantly positive about Japan's strategic rise in the Indo-Pacific, as very few respondents disagreed with the issues. Japan's security and defense strategy focuses on both non-traditional and traditional maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region. The strategic priority of Japan under the rules-based order (RBO) is sea lane security in the region [4]. Besides, the "peace constitution" and Japan's internal political restraints limit Japan's regional military engagement in the area [23]. Instead, Japan assists littoral states by improving capability in several Southeast Asian countries. For example, on May 2, 2022, Japan signed a military pact with Thailand, the latest step in Tokyo's efforts to expand its security presence in Southeast Asia amid escalating rivalry with China and regional concerns [16]. This military pact also signals Thailand's shift towards a more assertive foreign policy and its commitment to regional security.

On the other hand, since Xi Jinping's "China Dream" strategy was announced in 2012 [1], China has dominated the Indo-Pacific region, attempting to implement its BRI project. In this situation, the South and Southeast Asian areas are critical for realizing China's BRI aims [3, 11]. Bangladesh and Thailand are strategically and economically crucial for the Chinese BRI's success. For example, China has been conducting economic operations and various development projects with Bangladesh for several decades and has already established a strong position in the Bangladeshi market [14]. This economic partnership reached a new level when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Bangladesh in 2016. After this state-level visit, Beijing pledged to provide \$22.5 billion of the loan in 27 different projects [8] following an MoU titled "Strengthening and Production Capacity Cooperation." Many Bangladeshi now regard China as an "all-weather friend [32]." In contrast, China has been actively pursuing economic activities in Thailand to promote its BRI due to its strategic location. One of the major infrastructure projects is the high-speed rail link connecting Bangkok with Nakhon Ratchasima, which is being built with Chinese investment and technology [38]. As a result, it is difficult to say if the FOIP and QUAD regulations would alter China's BRI. However, the findings of this study show that 69.1% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that Japan's FOIP and QUAD could be alternatives to the Chinese BRI in the Indo-Pacific because of the Japanese increasing economic engagement in both Bangladesh and Thailand. Besides, the FOIP is more transparent and sustainable than the BRI but is criticized for its lack of transparency and debt sustainability concerns [10].

The respondents' perception of supporting Japan's FOIP and QUAD appeared to be one of the key findings of our study. Overwhelmingly more respondents supported Japan's FOIP and QUAD in the region. Nevertheless, they also emphasized the issue of China; therefore, Japan's strategic rise should not provoke China in the region. China's top diplomat has accused this four-country alliance of being "the Asian version of NATO" [31]. On the other hand, interestingly, the existing survey report done by Thu [41] shows that some respondents from Southeast Asian countries, mainly Singaporeans (30%) and Indonesians (22%), did not support QUAD in the Indo-Pacific region [41]. This higher number may partly be explained because the existing studies were conducted to assess the QUAD rapidly. The existing study

also had a small sample size, 190 from 10 ASEAN countries; respondents from Singapore and Indonesia were 24 and 33, respectively. However, although there has been no empirical study on how the Thais see prospects in QUAD, it could be argued that Thais would see QUAD as another opportunity. Thailand has been implementing “bamboo diplomacy”—rhetoric that depicts the flexibility of Thai foreign policy, which is similar to bamboo that “bend with the wind” [6]. This bamboo diplomacy helped Thailand through the Cold War by giving a massive room for interpretation of its national interests and diplomatic approach vis-à-vis superpowers. Until now, Thailand still uses its bamboo diplomatic way to engage with superpowers in the region. Therefore, QUAD is welcomed by elites and practitioners as one another channel and platform that can expand Thai national interests.

Like Thailand, Bangladeshi respondents also support the FOIP and QUAD due to several strategic and economic considerations. These initiatives allow Bangladesh to further its economic integration with the Indo-Pacific region [42], which has been identified as a critical driver of future economic growth. Besides, by aligning itself with major Indo-Pacific powers like India, Japan, and the USA, Bangladesh can enhance its strategic influence and assert its role as a key player. Bangladesh will also be able to address the ongoing Rohingya crisis through this connection and moves towards a sustainable solution [40] by pressuring China and Myanmar.

Our study shows that most respondents believe that Japan’s connection with the Indo-Pacific area cannot be described in a single sector but rather that Japan is involved in economic, political, and strategic activities. Since the end of the twentieth century, Japan’s ties with South and Southeast Asian nations have grown fast, particularly regarding security and strategy and its long-standing economic cooperation [25]. Most South and Southeast Asian countries consider Japan as a key development partner. For example, since Bangladesh’s independence in 1971, Japan has provided economic and technical assistance to its growth, becoming its most significant development partner. Japan has contributed its official development assistance (ODA) to Bangladesh in three components: grant aid, loan aid, and technical cooperation. In the case of Bangladesh, Japan has been the largest bilateral donor since 2012, when its aid as Yen Loan reached \$22 billion. Recently, in their 41st loan package declared in 2020, Japan compromises assistance of seven projects amounting to 338.247 billion yen, the largest ever loan package since its inception in 1974. In addition, to recognize Bangladesh’s geostrategic importance in South Asia or the Indo-Pacific region, Japan has launched its first megaproject in Bangladesh, the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B), in the strategic location of Matarbari in the Cox’s Bazar district [12]. BIG-B is a strategic endeavor to unite South and Southeast Asia and brings closer two oceanic regions—the Pacific and the Indian. This mega project is one of Bangladesh’s most exhilarating economic expansion and development possibilities. The BIG-B initiative will strengthen Bangladesh’s infrastructure and investment linkages if it is implemented successfully. However, Bangladesh had previously invited China to develop Chittagong as a deep seaport but had been rebuffed owing to diplomatic demands from India and the USA [12].

On the other hand, the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, which the Japanese sea-trade route primarily relies on, are vital to Japan. The Indian Ocean, with its expansive, diverse landscape, is essential for China, Japan, and India, as its trade with the

Middle East for crude oil supplies travels through this sea channel [2]. Furthermore, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) holds 40% of the world's oil and gas reserves and 25% of the world's land [37]. Japan's primary concern is China, which has already established strong strategic relations with several South Asian countries by establishing deep seaports such as Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Pakistan [19]. As a result, according to our study, Japan's involvement in the Indo-Pacific region has started to be seen as a geopolitical tool for balancing against China. As an illustration, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has constructed an LNG terminal and deep sea port in Matarbari of Maheshkhali in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. This initiative is regarded as a significant achievement of Japan's South Asian diplomacy.

Limitations of the Study

This survey looked at the future of Japan's involvement in the Indo-Pacific area, with most respondents believing that Japan's role in the region is becoming increasingly significant. However, this study has some limitations that should be considered in interpreting the results. First, the study followed non-probability sampling. As a result, the generalization of the findings should be taken carefully. Second, the sample size does not fully reflect the population of both countries, and students are the majority of respondents. Third, as Japan is one of the friendly states of both Bangladesh and Thailand, the data may suffer from reporting bias. Fourthly, this study utilized a cross-sectional design, making it difficult to ascertain causality completely. Despite all these limitations, this study can be helpful as a preliminary scope study for further in-depth studies on this burning issue.

Conclusion

This study provides a crucial understanding of the people's perception regarding Japan's strategic rise in the Indo-Pacific region from the lens of the two countries. Participants in this two-country study generally showed a positive perception of Japan's engagement in this region. However, other respondents brought out the China issue in this relationship, pointing out that China is still the dominant player in the region with a strong presence. Japan's aim to promote the rules-based order under its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" framework is amplified by the QUAD. Japan enjoys easy access to South and Southeast Asia as a friendly country. No country will support Japan in the future if its presence in the area, particularly QUAD and FOIP, disrupts the status quo, stability, and peace. Even if Japan's effort is perceived as an attempt to isolate China inside the Indo-Pacific area, most Asian nations will hesitate to join it because China is their largest trading partner. Moreover, Japan must deepen its involvement and establish strong ties with the countries in these two areas. It should be considered that many countries in this region, including Bangladesh and Thailand, have their own economic and political goals concerning China. So, Japan needs to work to enhance its relations with Asian countries. It will be challenging to execute Japan's FOIP and QUAD effectively without the assistance of

Thailand and Bangladesh, and other nations from South and Southeast Asia. However, further in-depth research on QUAD and BRI and how to maintain the status quo in the Indo-Pacific region should be a priority.

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Data Availability The data used in the manuscript is available upon reasonable request from corresponding author.

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