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# Japan-Bangladesh geo-economic cooperation: the lens of Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) for peace, stability and prosperity

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## Abstract

The ongoing transfer of economic power from the West to the East created a shift in economic dominance and the global power balance, allowing emerging nations to enhance their positions. Several countries favor a Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiative to preserve the status quo. Because it maintains an essential seaport in the Indian Ocean, Bangladesh is recognized as a maritime nation. Bangladesh's geographic advantage allows it to serve as a node and hub in regional and inter-regional trade and investment. This potential stems from the global movement of economic power toward the Indo-Pacific Region. This study assesses whether Japan's FOIP can provide peace and stability to Bangladesh while grasping geopolitical sustainability. Furthermore, this paper argues FOIP's regional economic cooperation is managed effectively, and Japanese investment might benefit Bangladesh's economy for sustainable development. This qualitative study uses primary and secondary data to evaluate the feasibility of Japanese geopolitical projects in Bangladesh for peace, stability, and prosperity. This study provides a new paradigm in analyzing the strategic geopolitical implications of FOIP in the Bay of Bengal area, highlighting the repercussions of geopolitical transformation into a strategic focal point. This study depicts the equiangular developmental diplomacy's balancing instrument and standards for joint stability and growth in the Bay of Bengal area.

**Keywords:** Geo-politics, FOIP, Bangladesh, Japan, Indo-Pacific, Bay of Bengal

## Introduction

To maintain the region's freedom and accessibility for all nations based on legislation, in 2016, Japan disclosed the strategic 'Free and Open-Indo Pacific' (FOIP) plan (Hosoya 2019). The FOIP's anticipated goal is to improve availability between Asian and African nations through an autonomous and free Indo-Pacific territory to increase provincial harmony and success (Ministry of Defense 2021). The Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) comprises Asia's vast economic growth and the Indian and Pacific Oceans; about a portion of this region's population lives, flourishing over time. Despite the ample opportunities and

potential, this region confronts several threats, including military invasion, piracy, terrorism, human rights violation, and natural disasters. Establishing a free and open international system is crucial to regional and global unification and security (Yoshimatsu 2018). Therefore, Japan proposed this FOIP vision available to all nations with the same ideology in response to the need for an unbiased international system in the Indo-Pacific region (Akon et al. 2023). The FOIP vision has already gained extensive support worldwide, i.e., from the United States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the European Union (EU), Australia, and India (Hanada 2019b). The FOIP policy is formed based on three pillars. The fundamental principles of law and order, the opportunity of the route, and deregulation are laid out and advanced (Jain 2018). Second is the desire for monetary improvement with the connected nations. At last, it guarantees the obligation to harmony and soundness of the locale (Calabrese 2020; Satake 2019). To portray an autonomous and free Indo-Pacific, like-minded nations and regions cooperate in developing high-quality infrastructure, maritime order, and human resources.

The FOIP has undergone comprehensive examinations in academic and policymaking circles and inspired worldwide interest (Kitaoka 2019). It has been seen from two distinct angles globally. One side views the FOIP strategic policy as a functionalist network drive to advance financial reconciliation among similar nations in the Indo-Pacific locale (Yoshimatsu 2021). Others consider FOIP as a geo-strategic component of Japan's works as a regional strategic plan. Thus, from the beginning, Shinzo Abe's FOIP policy has been described by academics as a geopolitical strategy that is designed to counterbalance Chinese strength and influence by building a marine alliance with regional democracies (Koga 2020). Some scholars have argued that the FOIP is an alternative to this region's Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Satake 2019). In addition, further study connects the approach to Japan's strategy to emerge as a significant global power (Rossiter 2018). However, Japanese officials dismissed the geopolitical component of FOIP. They argued that it functions as a comprehensive framework for Japanese regional policies, especially those that promote regional connectivity and development cooperation (Paksal 2021).

The incline of China as a significant player in global politics has ushered in a struggle between Japan and the United States to control the norms, regulations, and principles that support global order. The battle between BRI and the FOIP policies shows that South Asia is central to these dynamics. Despite China's dominance through BRI in this region, South Asia is essential in making FOIP effective due to its geo-strategic location. As a result, this has significant ramifications for South Asian governments navigating through the Sino-Japanese competition. Japan has strengthened its strategic cooperation with India and Bangladesh over the years. For instance, Japan forged a 'comprehensive partnership' in 2014 with Bangladesh. To tighten the partnership, Japan offered the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B) initiative (Saint-Mézard 2016), a flagship project in Bangladesh. Following this USD 6 billion plan, the two nations are constructing Dhaka's railway network, the coal-fired power plant in Matarbari, and Bangladesh's first deep-water port. Recently, Vessels from the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) paid a visit and participated in training for the goodwill of Bangladesh (Kurita 2020).

However, given that China and Japan have pledged to invest in several aspects of Bangladesh's economy, Japan's initiative has raised a more comprehensive range of concerns among Bangladeshi experts (Koga 2020). The public authority and specialists view

the FOIP strategy as a valuable chance to attract speculations to work on Bangladesh's insufficient foundation. Japan has contributed the highest amount of foreign aid and has become the largest donor to Bangladesh since the late 1980s (Dubey 1990). Japan's international aid organization (JICA) supports Bangladesh's development initiatives. Japan has contributed incredible support and contributions to Bangladesh over the years. However, China is already an active participant and developing partner in Bangladesh and most South Asian countries; several academics have advised against associating with this new global political entity unveiled by Japan in the IPR. As a result, China and Japan are driven into rivalry in the regional development context (Kuo 2021).

### **FOIP's Geo-strategy in South Asia**

Territories of the Indo-Pacific are geo-strategically important for Japanese authorities because of their geopolitical location and economic potential (Bishoyi 2016). Japan and the IPR have endured political, cultural, religious, and economic relations, notably with South Asia. However, the ties between Japan and India have safeguarded the FOIP policy's prospects in South Asia (Envall 2020). China's ongoing military and political meddling in the Indo-Pacific area strengthens the two countries' symbiotic alliance. India has become a unifying factor and a point of convergence for most security issues and engagement frameworks in the IPR (Saha 2022). Japan claims that FOIP might deepen links with the Indo-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region's (IOR) coastline areas. This strategy could serve as a tactical measure to alleviate concerns regarding geo-politics and security amidst the ongoing Ukraine-Russia conflict. Global security concerns were raised by the aggressive actions of Russia toward Ukraine. And the Japanese prime minister addressed this issue in Japan's new plan for a "free and open Indo-Pacific Together with India, as an indispensable partner" (Kishida 2023). The prime minister showed concern about security threats and global peace around the Asian region. The FOIP-driven Japanese investments in South Asia and the IOR have calculated efforts to strengthen ties between Japan and South Asia and counteract Chinese predominance in the Indo-Pacific. South Asia's Indian Ocean littoral states have been getting global attention in the contemporary era. The IOR has substantial oil and mineral potential, making it an energy supply and demand center. The area is strategically significant on account of connecting the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean to the Pacific through the East and West.

Additionally, this region has developed as a critical intersection for marine trade, linking the nations that produce natural resources with the consumer states. The world's oil, about 0.67 per cent, and China's and Japan's oil, about 80 percent, have been transported through this region (Albert 2016). Approximately half of all shipments worldwide travel over the Indian Ocean. Japan aims to establish an equitable and impartial economic system that does not promote disintegration using the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy. Japan intends to advance additional endeavors towards greater liberalization in collaboration with nations that possess the capacity and determination to pursue such objectives while upholding the principles of the World Trade Organisation as a fundamental framework. This framework might include initiatives such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Furthermore, the political concerns and the FOIP policy raised certain economic factors. South Asian countries enjoy excellent trading ties with Japan, especially Bangladesh and India. According to some academics, the proposed FOIP would increase Japan's economic supremacy in the South and Southeast Asian markets by promoting the nation's high-quality exports. South Asia's diversity offers tremendous import–export, investment, and economic development opportunities, as seen by the nation's spectacular accomplishments in the current era. While not so long ago, South Asia was seen as a conflict-ridden region with an overabundance of the poor, low per capita income, and slow economic progress. Their economies have thrived and grown increasingly interconnected with one another and the rest of the world. India, the largest economy in South Asia, and now more countries in the region are becoming some of the significant players in the global economy. Bangladesh, which shares a contiguous boundary with India, is on the verge of transforming from its present classification to a least developed nation.

Japan has established the Joint Study Group intending to investigate the practicality of an Economic Partnership Agreement with Bangladesh. As mentioned, the assertion reflects the crucial principle of inclusiveness within the context of FOIP, underscoring the significance of refraining from excluding individuals or groups. Due to Japan's enormous assistance, the situation has much improved, and South Asia's development has continued unabatedly as the days go by.

Moreover, regional collaborations like SAARC, BIMSTEC, and BBIN will be working to enhance communications and transport links, facilitating trade. Regional alliances might streamline trade within the region and open new trade opportunities given the region's central spot at the intersections of Asia, connecting oil-rich Western and Central Asian countries and the vibrant economies of Southeast Asia. South Asia is also essential to Japan's future aspirations for the global order. The region is home to around one-fourth of the world's population, making it a significant market for Japanese manufactured goods (Trivedi et al. 2007).

In previous instances, Japan has refrained from establishing a correlation between the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept and matters on geo-politics or security. In light of the recent paradigm shift in global politics resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine-Russia dispute, Japan is currently reassessing its security strategies and prioritizing the promotion of peace as a critical component of its new Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) agenda. Though the government of Japan still consistently emphasizes that FOIP is not planned to go against Beijing's fundamental advances in foundation advancement or to limit the ascent of China. Japan chooses to characterize the FOIP goals using the terms 'vision' or 'concept' rather than 'strategy' to promote bilateral cooperation with China (Szechenyi and Hosoya 2019). The FOIP, however, has a geo-strategic element generally known as South Asia and the IPR. For instance, in 2017, the QUAD framework for quadrilateral cooperation, which brings together the USA, Australia, India, and Japan, generated a new equation for world politics (Hanada 2019b). The QUAD is extensively considered the security partnership in the Indo-Pacific locale. Besides, Japan will eventually access Middle Eastern natural resources through similar projects like FOIP through various pathways. Japanese authorities have always been concerned about Chinese solid naval forces in crucial locations like the South China Sea because it may jeopardize Japan's access to numerous international trade routes

and electricity sources. Besides, many countries have almost completely taken over the free and open sea lanes of the Indian Ocean. Despite Indo-American joint naval forces' efforts to confront Chinese influence, the region's economic and military supremacy over China cannot be conquered. In addition, China has developed two strategic deep-sea ports: Sri Lanka's Hambantota and Pakistan's Gwadar (Kanwal 2018) and another deep seaport in Kyaukphyu, Myanmar (Calabrese and Cao 2021). India has therefore preferred Japan and the USA to work together to secure this region because China's expansion is frequently seen as a hegemonic power.

In today's geopolitical developments, the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal are constantly taking center stage. Moreover, due to China's BRI, the Strait of Malacca and the Indian Ocean now have greater geopolitical significance as Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) (Khan and Khalid 2018). Recent significant power involvement in Indo-Pacific has contributed to geopolitical instability, frequently inspiring more dread in the Bay of Bengal maritime region and even the Indian Ocean. Bangladesh can play a crucial role in territorial and interregional trade and financial operations thanks to its vital location in the Bay of Bengal (Alam 2022a). Considering the geo-strategic value of South Asia and part of the FOIP strategy, Japan has improved relations with Bangladesh, notably in the Indian Ocean region. As the vital gateway to South and Southeast Asia, Japanese megaprojects like the BIG-B would increase Bangladesh's capacity and aid in advancing the country's economy.

#### **FOIP in the Context of Bangladesh**

Japan wants to establish FOIP to encourage harmony, security, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific Region. Bangladesh is a nation that appreciates the value of a controlled maritime order. Bangladesh has friendly relations with Japan and other like-minded countries and expresses its opinion regarding the relevance of such an order. Bangladesh is steadfastly committed to regulating its maritime boundary in the Indo-Pacific region and the Bay of Bengal for a peaceful and prosperous future. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina clearly outlined the vision of Bangladesh in the Indo-Pacific area during the Paris Peace Forum in 2021 (Alam 2022b). She said, "The Indo-Pacific region must be peaceful and prosperous. Our (Bangladesh) goal for this region is a free, open, peaceful, secure, and inclusive region" (CFISS 2022). The statement emphasizes that Bangladesh shares the same perspective on the Indo-Pacific issues as Japan and others.

Japan will include Bangladesh in the FOIP due to three geopolitical factors. First, Bangladesh is situated at the northernmost point of the Bay of Bengal, where Southeast Asia meets. Due to Bangladesh's geo-strategic location between South and Southeast Asia, Japan may have access to substantial South Asian markets and the Bay of Bengal. Second, Bangladesh's expanding economy may allow Japan to export its large manufacturing capacity to help Bangladesh create its desperately needed infrastructure. Megaprojects like the Padma Multipurpose Bridge, the Metro Rail Project, and the Matarbari deep seaport is progressing at maximum velocity despite the COVID-19 epidemic. Finally, Bangladesh is a desirable investment location because of its cheap and productive labor force, high-quality ready-made garments, steady economic growth, and large population (Shazzad 2022). Bangladesh's garment factory is well-known worldwide, and as time goes on, people appear to be learning more and more about it.

Japan has a limited supply of inherent reserves (Morck and Nakamura 2016). Therefore, its continued economic success depends on its access to international markets. Thus, Japan must acknowledge the value of maritime trade routes and financial gateways. The Bay of Bengal is quickly becoming a critical commercial gateway within the IOR (Alam 2022c). The Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, on which the Japanese marine trade route primarily depends, are geographical features for Japan. For its economic interests, it considers the Indian Ocean a significant sea route regarded as a sea line of communication (SLOC) (Yamazaki 2018). The Indian Ocean, for its sprawling vibrant scape, is essential for China, India, and Japan as their trade with the Middle East to supply crude oil passes through this sea lane as alternative options to the maritime pathways of the Indian Ocean are generally less viable or pose significant hindrances. Therefore, preserving security and stability in the Indian Ocean is essential to nations that rely heavily on oil imports from the Middle East.

Furthermore, the IOR has 25% land and hosts about 40% oil and gas reserves (Shepard 2016). The area has also become a geo-strategic confrontation for significant global countries (Kabir and Ahmad 2015). India, which considers the IOR the “sphere of interest” (Saimum 2020), supports Japan’s intention to operate in the Bay of Bengal. Furthermore, to promote Japan’s FOIP vision and restrain China’s BRI ambition within this region, the United States aligns with the Indo-Pacific significant powers, particularly India, as part of its rebalancing strategy.

Bangladesh maintains a balance between China and Japan, two immense powers that have become increasingly antagonistic in the IOR, particularly between China and Japan and its allies. Bangladesh and the other Bay of Bengal littoral nations prefer to work together than be adversaries or create conflicts. Despite Bangladesh’s neutral stance, there is a visible effort to pull sides equal to that of China and Japan. Concerning China’s BRI ambitions, the United States and Japan are now attempting to enlist Bangladesh in the Indo-Pacific alliance. Bangladesh had already signed a treaty to join the Chinese BRI in 2016 (Das 2017), while Chinese President Xi Jinping traveled to Bangladesh for the first time in history. However, to lessen China’s ascendancy in Bangladesh, Japan, India, and the United States are pursuing all potential options of collaboration and coercion. For instance, due to pressure from India, Bangladesh withdrew its intention to construct a deep-sea harbor near the island of Sonadia with Chinese funding (Byron 2020). China is one of the world’s wealthiest nations, and it has a significant economic and infrastructure presence in Bangladesh, which raises serious concerns for Japan and its allies.

Bangladesh has a potential market with a substantial chance of economic growth, a developing global player to be considered, and a country with a demographic dividend that offers cheap labor and stimulates investment. Bangladesh’s recent economic progress has been fueled predominantly by the growth and success of its apparel sector. Japan shifted its focus to Bangladesh due to its availability of inexpensive labor, raw resources, and relatively simple norms and procedures for conducting business. However, in this flexible labor market, gradually enhancing purchasing power parity of the general people and high profitability attracts Japan to invest in infrastructural development as Bangladesh requires essential infrastructures to maintain its economic progress. The demand for infrastructure in developing nations like Bangladesh gives a significant opportunity for Japanese state-owned and private businesses to penetrate global

markets. Such international enterprises would help Japanese companies become competitive on a worldwide level.

The projects funded by Japan's FOIP in Bangladesh are planned to build first-rate infrastructure for the efficient and secure movement of goods and people. However, the success of these investments may depend on Bangladesh's ability to draw additional foreign investment to its export-oriented manufacturing sector. In this instance, corruption and administrative challenges may hamper efforts to increase Japanese investment in Bangladesh. Bangladesh must still entice private-sector investment to create a solid industrial base. Continued framework-building and communication between the governmental and non-governmental sectors may also be a potent catalyst (Alam 2022d). It is critical to offer practical, open, and investor-friendly conditions. The nation must diversify its export markets and destinations to increase international commerce. As per the joint statement released by Japan and Bangladesh on April 26, 2023, the two countries are embarking on a new strategic alliance, having progressed from their previous comprehensive partnership. This collaboration could establish a trilateral relationship between Japan, Bangladesh, and India.

Consequently, this would enhance regional connectivity and stimulate the advancement of Bangladesh as a regional center. Similar to other nations, Bangladesh is currently experiencing an economic crisis. However, implementing these fresh initiatives has the potential to facilitate the country's sustainability.

### **Research objectives and questions**

The primary objective of this research is to thoroughly comprehend the collaboration between Japan and Bangladesh within the framework of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative. The secondary objective is to understand the geopolitical cooperation between Japan and Bangladesh within the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework and its potential consequences for regional peace, stability, and economic growth. This research is essential to examine the partnership's consequences in advancing peace, strength, and economic growth in the Indo-Pacific area. Therefore, there are two research questions to address:

- i) To what extent does Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) policy demonstrate potential in the context of Bangladesh?
- ii) How did Bangladesh maintain security hazards due to its support or contradiction for the (FOIP) policy and the Japanese investments FOIP facilitated?

### **Methods**

This study employs a qualitative approach to acquire a clear perception and comprehensive understanding of the dialectical strategies in IPR utilized by Japan's FOIP and the Chinese BRI. This research follows a systematic review strategy, and the different findings converge by comparing the different results during the interpretation. The qualitative data were collected based on the analytical framework to gain a clear, wide-ranging insight, and the thematic analysis technique was adopted for the qualitative data. This research aims to reinforce and broaden the study's conclusions by including qualitative research components, adding relevance to existing knowledge.

Inductive reasoning was employed in this study to incorporate new knowledge in academia. This study utilizes primary and secondary data sources to better understand the geopolitical strategy and foreign policy in the context of Bangladesh's relationship with Japan, guiding policy formulation in international relations balancing mechanisms and progress toward Bangladesh's continuous socio-economic growth.

### Data sampling

This research was conducted with a sample of 30 participants ranging from academic scholars working as university teachers to foreign investment specialists. Each participant in this study has an extensive understanding of this research issue and works closely with various facets of it in their fields of employment. The collected data from the participants helped the researcher gain more insight into the subject and shape the paper based on the analyzed data. The expert opinions of the respondents held more in-depth knowledge of the topic and details. Therefore, helping the researcher get answers to their research questions and objective results in completing the research paper. The sample table with the list of participants is mentioned in Table 1.

### Data collection and analysis

This study used distinctive data sources to understand the research objectives to answer the research questions. All research questions related to the survey were utilized when the content analysis was used. The researchers collected primary data for this study using in-depth interviews and secondary data from the relevant document reviews. Secondary data sources were utilized in this study to understand better the FOIP strategy and how it is implemented in IPR. This researcher employed two crucial tools to assemble the data for this study: in-depth interviews and document review.

This study attempted to adhere to all applicable ethical standards for primary data collection through in-depth interviews. Before primary data collection, respondents were informed of the research goals. The researchers interviewed only those who agreed to offer information; nobody was compelled to provide information. Participation has been kept optional, transparent, and secure in this research. Participants are informed about the study's funds, purpose, benefits, risks, and support before consenting or rejecting to participate. The researchers were highly devoted to maintaining the privacy of their information and data sources and making every effort to collect data unbiasedly. Table 2 shows the data analysis process and how the study was conducted.

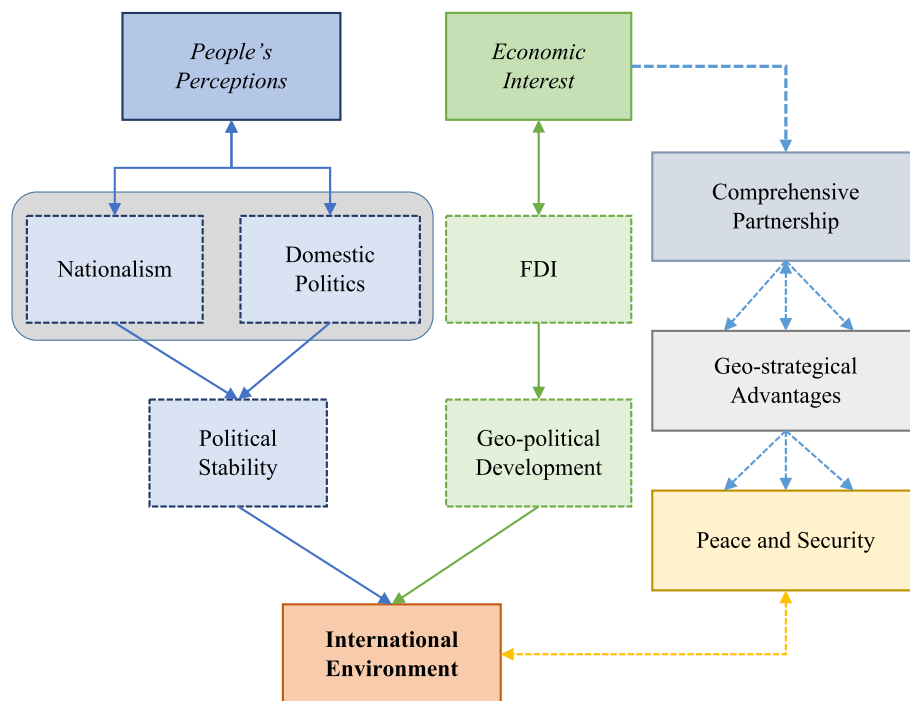
**Table 1** Sample table and list of participants

Targeted Groups	Sample	Female	Male
University Teacher	10	3	7
Employees of national & international development organizations	10	2	8
Foreign investment specialist	10	6	4
Total	30	11	19



**Table 2** Data analysis process and explanation of components

Data Analysis Process	Explanations
Organizing the collected data	Structurally organizing the data was an enormous challenge to consolidate for this study
Categorize the data for analysis	Labeling was essential to categorize the data, and the categorization, structuring, and familiarizing were necessary for this study to understand the phenomena
Identifying a specific framework	An analytical framework was essential for the study plan analysis
Sort the categorized data into a framework	This study tries to identify similarities, create generalizations, extract themes, highlight differences, and identify phenomena to analyze the findings



**Fig. 1** An analytical framework for Japan-Bangladesh geopolitical diplomacy. Source: Illustrated by the authors

**Analytical framework**

In explaining Bangladesh’s geopolitical relationship with Japan, this research develops the analytical framework as shown in Fig. 1. A sovereign international security environment can be operationalized by focusing on a few major areas. First, internal political stability is significant for a proper geopolitical and diplomatic relationship; therefore, the perception of the people of Bangladesh and Japan should be considered an essential part and presented as a reflection of the people’s democratic exercise in their respective nations. It helps stabilize its internal and external political situation. Second, this research has explored its context by concentrating on two aspects of Japan’s economic diplomacy. Japan’s economic interests and partnership economic cooperation with Bangladesh. The two nations have significant geostrategic benefits thanks to all forms of comprehensive growth, which is crucial to maintaining regional security and peace.

## Findings

### Japanese economic engagements in Bangladesh

For a very long time, Japan and Bangladesh have maintained close bilateral ties. In 1971, Japan was one of the first states to acknowledge a free but conflict-torn Bangladesh. The Japanese parliament and academics raised significant money to aid Bangladesh's liberation war. Post-war, Japan's president and the people of Japan provided Bangladesh with great help. Japan and Bangladesh formed a friendly relationship through their support and efforts, which has only intensified over time. Numerous welcoming visits serve to emphasize the two countries' bilateral ties. In the early years of its independence, Japan was one of the countries that extended support to Bangladesh, helping it to overcome all challenges. The Japanese government invited the then Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to visit Japan in 1973. A robust organizational group visited Bangladesh in 1974, led by Nagano Shigeo, the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry's chairman, who discovered the immense potential of Bangladesh.

Japan is a crucial contributor to Bangladesh's prosperity window in the post-independence era, standing on the golden anniversary of the two country's relations. Japan has contributed financial and technical assistance for Bangladesh's socioeconomic and infrastructure development since its independence, including roads, bridges, power, health-care, education, and infrastructure. Since the late 1980s, Japan has been Bangladesh's top economic contributor (Atahar 2014). The Jamuna Bridge is a notable instance of Japanese financial support. The bridge symbolized Japan-Bangladesh's friendship. Japan, by this, became one of the most significant contributors to Bangladesh.

However, throughout time, trade, investment, foreign assistance, and technical cooperation have all aided in the growth and strengthening of diplomatic ties between Japan and Bangladesh, especially on the economic front. Japan is currently Bangladesh's principal bilateral development partner. In 2014 the 'Japan-Bangladesh Comprehensive Partnership Treaty' was signed, for which the two friendly countries were encouraged to continue developing cooperation. Due to Bangladesh's internal political stability, cheap labor, growing preference for Japanese goods from the country's burgeoning middle class, and a more favorable business climate, the number of Japanese companies and their Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has been growing recently in Bangladesh.

After journeying for fifty years, Bangladesh is progressing and facing new opportunities and challenges. The economy has grown slowly but steadily and consistently. Bilateral cooperation was more significant than ever because Bangladesh wanted to advance from being an LDC to a developing country and improve the nation to become a mid-income country. Moreover, Japan and Bangladesh are moving towards a strategic alliance expected to facilitate Bangladesh's development process. As a result, it is anticipated that the geopolitical importance of Bangladesh to other nations in Asia will experience a swift rise. Japan increases practical cooperation with Bangladesh as a partner to achieve harmony, security, and prosperity throughout the region as the FOIP's significant aim. This partnership provides higher facilities, communications, and coastline protection. Japan has increased its financial aid to Bangladesh and given Bangladesh the required technical help to realize its "Vision 2041" in light of the FOIP's second aim: seek economic growth through high-quality infrastructure and connectivity.

### Infrastructural investments in Bangladesh

Historically, Japan and Bangladesh have a robust political and economic relationship. Japan's engagement in Bangladesh began under this cooperation structure in 1977 and grew in the 1990s due to the Bangladesh government's adoption of economic liberalization policies. Initially, the quantity of investment was relatively modest, but it has grown steadily over the years, notably after the 2014 meeting between the two nations' prime ministers. Bangladesh's economy is expanding admirably. As a result of geography, the country is shifting from being a victim of environmental disasters to one that benefits from it and becomes a middle power. Due to several variables, the Japanese are now beginning to exhibit interest in Bangladesh as their future investment opportunity, including consistent economic growth, a favorable geographic location, rising interregional and international remittances, a young and skilled labor force, competitive labor costs, infrastructure, and policy supports like fiscal and non-fiscal incentives to investors. The country's advantageous geographic location, investment climate, and resource availability have improved considerably. According to the articulated provision, Japan has contributed significantly to Bangladesh's economic expansion by offering Official Development Assistance (ODA).

Japan's ODA has consistently aimed to promote world peace and prosperity while preserving Japan's security and economic expansion. As for Bangladesh, Japan has been the major bilateral contributor since 2012, when its aid as a Yen Loan reached \$22 billion (Embassy of Japan in Bangladesh 2020). The Japanese ODA to Bangladesh has three components: grant aid, loan aid, and technical cooperation. On May 29, 2019, conferring in Table 3, JICA and Bangladesh signed a financing contract to provide Japanese ODA loans worth 132.659 billion yen for multiple projects, including Matarbari Port Development Project (I); Dhaka Mass Rapid Transit Development Project (Line 1) (I); Foreign Direct Investment Promotion Project (II); and Energy Efficiency and Conservation Promotion Financing Project (Phase 2) (JICA 2022).

The assistance of seven projects costing 338.247 billion yen has recently been included in Japan's 41st loan package, which was announced in 2020. Japanese support represents the country's most extensive loan package since it was founded in 1974. These most extensive loan packages are given in Table 4.

When the Japanese invest abroad, they frequently aim for the inclusive growth of the host country. Increased emphasis is placed on economic collaboration and infrastructural development in the friendship between Japan and Bangladesh. Table 4 depicts that the bulk of projects funded by Japan is to improve road and rail connectivity nationwide.

**Table 3** Japan's ODA to Bangladesh, 2016–2020

Fiscal Year	Amount (in billion Yen)
2016	174.00
2017	178.223
2018	200.371
2019	132.659
2020	338.247

Source: Estimated by the authors based on JICA (2022)

**Table 4** List of running Japan-financed projects in Bangladesh

Name of the Project	Expected Completion	Total Budget (in billion USD)
Dhaka Mass Rapid Transit Development Project (IV)	2030	0.564
Dhaka Mass Rapid Transit Development Project (Line 5 Northern Route) (I)	2030	0.435
Energy Efficiency and Conservation Promotion Project	2030	9.06
Matarbari Deep Sea Port	2026	1.4650
Matarbari Ultra Super Critical Coal-Fired Power Project	December 2026	4.28
Matarbari Port Development Project	December 2026	2.09
Urban Development and City Government Project	June 2026	0.264
Matarbari Deep Sea Port	2026	1.465
Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport Expansion Project (II)	April 2025	0.628
Jamuna Railway Bridge Construction Project	March 2024	0.696
Dhaka Underground Substation Construction Project	December 2023	0.11
Small Scale Water Resources Development Project Phase – 2	December 2023	15.17
Chattogram – Cox's Bazar Highway Improvement Project	September 2023	.018
Cross Border Road Network Improvement Project	June 2022	0.29
Health Services Strengthening Project	June 2022	.074

Source: MOFA 2020

Likewise, Moni (2006) contends that Japan contributed loans for the Kaptai Hydro Electric Power Plant, the Greater Dhaka Telecommunication Exchange, mining, industrial sectors, and communication projects.

#### The BIG-B initiative

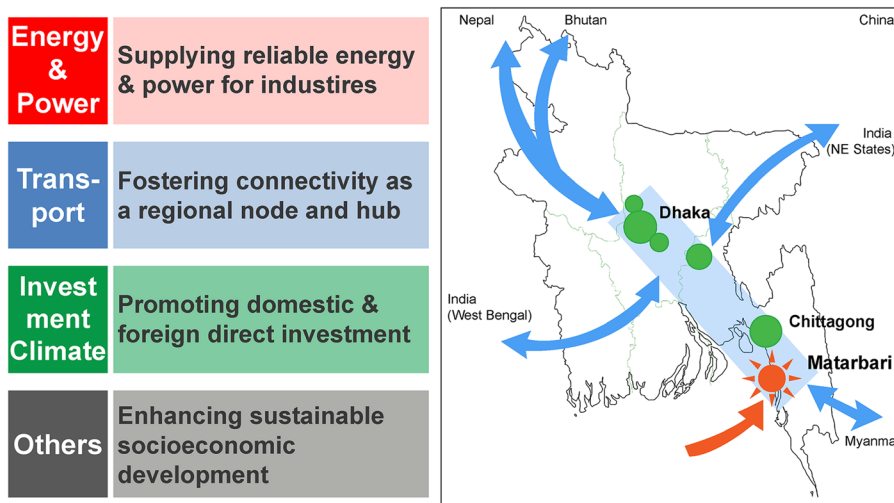
Geographically, Bangladesh is in a highly advantageous position. Bangladesh may serve as a passageway for its isolated neighbors Nepal and Bhutan, which might aid them in developing more and showing off their beautiful nature and potential growing economy to the world. Besides, it also can function as an alley for northeastern Indian states. A regional connection framework must be established to make this development process possible. Japan has worked hard to promote industrial supply chains, increase FDI, and enhance regional connectivity while investing in economic infrastructure. Besides, Japan has been actively involved in the developing-border transportation infrastructure in Asia, and it is keen to increase the network among the nations of Asia and ASEAN.

Nevertheless, the lack of productive trade routes and free commerce zones hindered the economic unification of South Asia. Given Bangladesh's location between South and Southeast Asia and the significance of inter-regional connections, both governments directed their economic fusion underneath the Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B) project for Bangladesh's inclusive and dynamic development in the twenty-first century. In this instance of the FOIP, Bangladesh has been seen as an essential partner for maintaining peace and development in the region.

The BIG-B program was launched in 2014, according to an agreement of Comprehensive Partnership between Japan and Bangladesh. Infrastructure construction, improving the investment and economic climate and fostering connection throughout the Dhaka-Chittagong-Bazar Cox's belt and further afield are the objectives of this initiative (Fig. 2). Bangladesh will position itself as a regional economic hub. This effort might serve as a bridge

## BIG-B Initiative (The Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt)

*Accelerate industrial agglomeration in Dhaka-Matarbari belt and beyond to shape a value chain hub for South Asia and Southeast Asia*



**Fig. 2** BIG-G Initiatives of Japan. Sources: JICA (2014)

for more direct interregional connections between South Asia and Southeast Asia, going beyond its national borders. This initiative will also assist Bangladesh in developing into a vibrant trade nation well integrated into regional and global value chains.

Bangladesh needs BIG-B strategically to expand its economic potential, promote regional connections, and advance development. This tactical move brings together the growing development regions of South and Southeast Asia and the Pacific and Indian Oceanic basins. Trade and investment, energy and electricity, and transportation are all included in the program. Under this flagship project, Japan is constructing Bangladesh’s deep seaport at Matarbari near Chittagong, the Dhaka MRT, and the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport Extension. The new port might grow into a hub for logistics, energy and power, and waterfront commerce. From a strategic standpoint, the port is essential since it may serve as a center for monitoring its SLOCs and is the primary location for its relevance.

This expansion system under the BIG-B program, which comprises the south-eastern belt’s roadways and trains, would allow the flow of goods and services to Bhutan, Nepal, and Northeast India, a 70-million-person market. BIG-B is one of Bangladesh’s most promising economic possibilities. Successful implementation of BIG-B would increase Bangladesh’s infrastructure and investment links and boost its reputation as an inter-regional connectivity center.

### Discussion

The Rohingya plight is the most extensive and complicated social catastrophe in the recent history of Bangladesh because of its political, economic, human, and minority rights components. 800,000 Rohingyas have relocated across Bangladesh due to the rise of brutality against the minority group inside the Rakhine state, aggravating the

humanitarian crisis. The Rohingyas received significant assistance from several organizations and people thanks to the backing of Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Action for Hunger (ACF), BRAC, UNHCR, WaterAid, Cox's Bazar's District Commissioner's Office, Cox's Bazar's Ukhiya Upazilla's Office, and the Bangladesh Army stationed in Cox's Bazar are among the organizations. Former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said it was "an ethnic cleansing" (Gonzalez 2018). Myanmar, however, has managed to obtain the backing of two significant neighbors, especially China and India (Chakma 2019). Since the military took over in the late 1980s, China and India have supported Myanmar (Routray 2011; Haacke 2010). Mainly due to the severe Chinese blockade, the Western nations in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) could not agree on a legally binding resolution even though the UNSC issued a statement denouncing the violence (Choong 2019). India made no comments regarding the Rohingya issue or the military's abuse of them. Given their substantial monetary expenditures in Myanmar's infrastructure development programs, it is simple to understand China and India's involvement (Saha 2018). For instance, China is funding the Kyaukphyu deep seaport in Myanmar under the BRI (Rahman and Akon 2019). Conversely, Bangladesh assisted the Rohingyas and took on the Rohingya issue with determination for peace and stability to uphold human rights using the resources at its disposal.

Japan, like India, first took the path of silence until announcing its intention to act as a consultant to settle the conflict. The Rohingya issue has received little attention from Japan, one liberal democracy in Asia and a strong supporter of Bangladesh on all fronts, including geopolitical, economic, and humanitarian issues. In the past, Japan has given Bangladesh financial support to help the refugees. During a visit to the Rohingya shelters inhabiting Cox's Bazar in 2019, the former foreign minister of Japan, Taro Kono, allegedly promised that Japan would continue to assist and support the Rohingya community (Daily Star 2019). As the first donor nation, Japan gave \$2 million to UNHCR and the WFPA on January 26, 2022, for humanitarian assistance and security of the Rohingya refugees in Bhasanchar (Prothom Alo 2022). To put pressure on Myanmar to solve the Rohingya problem, Japan has resisted speaking out against the Rohingya and even voted against every UNGA and UNHRC resolution (Bhuiyan 2021). For instance, Japan's ambassador to Myanmar, Mr. Ichiro Maruyama, stirred up controversy with his statement of "praying" for the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to decide in favor of Myanmar and find that the nation's long-persecuted ethnic Rohingya Muslims were not victims of genocide in December 2019 (Kasai 2020a). The Bangladeshi and international media highly criticized this statement. For example, Human Rights Watch highly criticized Japan's 'Cold-Blooded Approach' in a quandary in a report published in 2019 (Kasai 2020b).

Despite signing a repatriation treaty between Bangladesh and Myanmar on November 23, 2017, the two countries' efforts at repatriation failed respectively in 2018's November and 2019's August due to Rohingyas' less confidence in their government of Myanmar (Dhaka Tribune 2021). Sending Rohingyas home is now more difficult due to the coup's aftermath and the current situation in Myanmar. Nevertheless, as resolving the Rohingya situation from the standpoint of FOIP implementation is equally essential, Japan continues to work with Bangladesh and the international

community to speed up the repatriation of the Rohingya. As a component of the strategic alliance with Bangladesh, Japan has consented to assist Bangladesh in addressing its refugee predicament. Furthermore, the revised vision of FOIP endeavors to foster tranquility and steadiness in the Asian locality and strives to assist the adherents of this approach in managing external menaces. However, the implementation of the updated FOIP policies that align with Bangladesh's stance of maintaining neutrality on this issue has not been observed yet.

Rohingya migration threatens Indo-Pacific security cooperation. Since the Rohingya crisis arose, the QUAD's strategic and economic goal has been threatened (Bhuiyan 2021). Japan should help Bangladesh establish the best humanitarian approach to implementing FOIP in the region (Dutta 2016). Bangladesh supported Japan in global forums when it picked Japan over itself while bidding for a non-permanent UN Security Council seat in 2014. Furthermore, Bangladesh supports Japan's desire for permanent Security Council membership. Therefore, Japan should help Bangladesh solve the Rohingya crisis and preserve the group's human rights. Japan should speak out against the Rohingya crisis to retain its human rights leadership.

China's growing strategic involvement in South Asian countries, particularly Chinese President Xi Jinping's BRI policies under his 'China Dream,' has substantially threatened Japan's new FOIP vision (Akon et al. 2021). The BRI is a multi-trillion-dollar program that aims to increase connectivity and economic cooperation between Asia, Africa, China, and Europe through land and sea pathways. This initiative would give China the best chance to continue its economic development. The BRI aims to connect around 60% of the global communities with 30% of the worldwide GDP (Yang 2017). Besides, China is already a decisive actor in the IOR. By constructing deep seaports like Sri Lanka's Hambantota and Pakistan's Gwadar (Ali 2020), significant strategic ties between China and numerous South Asian nations have been forged. China has primarily utilized the BRI to oppose Japanese participation in the IOR because it views the FOIP as a significant obstacle to advancing China's regional and international goals.

Bangladesh is a platform for advancing China's strategic objectives of implementing the BRI in the South Asian region (Yasmin 2019). The past several years have focused much on China's growing influence in Bangladesh. China is incredibly anxious to forge closer connections with Bangladesh and to create a deep-sea port there, similar to those in Pakistan and Sri Lanka; when Xi Jinping visited Bangladesh earlier in 2016 and pledged roughly \$21.5 billion (Jha 2021) for 27 various projects, Bangladesh became a member of the BRI. China has already committed to the Payra sea port project as a component of BRI. Five projects worth over 4.5 billion USD have already been inked outside the Payra port. At the same time, many projects are ongoing in various phases, such as "planning, preparation, negotiation, and approval."

The scale of the relationship between China and Bangladesh's advancement justifies the future of QUAD and the application of Japan's FOIP inside the IOR. China's relations with the QUAD nations, especially India, have deteriorated recently. Even though India has a large fleet in the Indian Ocean, without American help, it cannot affect the entire ocean. China's present goal is strategically pushing India while linking the BRI countries. China has expanded its influence in Ladakh and Arunachal

Pradesh in line with this goal. To address this situation, India is increasing its military Budget and taking steps to procure arms from the United States. India is still behind China geographically by a wide margin. India now ranks third in the world for military spending. The country is still behind China's spending by a wide margin.

On the other hand, China has had serious concerns about the QUAD and FOIP. Beijing's concerns over the elaboration of this informal strategic cooperation were made clear by the recent comments by the Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh, Li Jimming. Li warned Dhaka not to join this coalition and said that if Bangladesh did, it would gravely damage bilateral relations with China (Haider 2021). The envoy advised Bangladesh not to join this 'narrow-purposed' group, referring to the QUAD as a military alliance targeted against China's ascent' in South Asia (Bhattacharjee 2021). Bangladesh is considered a vital judicious ally by China in implementing BRI. If Bangladesh joins the QUAD, China's attempts to implement BRI in South Asia will suffer a severe setback as India is against the BRI. Although this statement violates the Chinese policy of 'not interfering in another country's internal affairs (Zheng 2016), it clearly shows how the China factor would be a big issue for Bangladesh in implementing Japanese FOIP in this region.

## Conclusion

Bangladesh now has a more prominent position in the IPR because of its strategic location and closeness to the Bay of Bengal. Japan views Bangladesh as a key supporter in implementing the FOIP due to Bangladesh's strategic location. As a cornerstone of the Indo-Pacific and a node and hub of the region's economy in this situation, Japan helped Bangladesh expand. Bangladesh's prospects will change once the megaprojects supported by Japan are finished. Given that Bangladesh connects South Asia and ASEAN, Bangladesh's progress and affluence are crucial for Indo-Pacific integration. Dhaka effectively honored the 50th anniversary of the bilateral collaboration between Bangladesh and Japan as a center of connectivity and regional diplomacy. That illustrated Bangladesh's influential regional position, reflected in its rapid economic growth and political stability.

Bangladesh could be more significant in fostering regional collaboration and addressing global concerns. Successfully preserving a delicate equilibrium between various international powers is Bangladesh. Bangladesh might transform from an underdeveloped country to an emerging one in 2026. After graduation, significant financial challenges will arise. Bangladesh will no longer enjoy the trade benefits it appreciates as a least-developed country. To address future economic challenges, Dhaka is aware that it must retain positive connections with solid nations such as the US, Japan, China, and India to ensure its future growth. Bangladesh collaborates strategically with China in addition to its close ties to India and Japan. Beijing and Dhaka collaborate in various areas, including commerce and defense. Despite maintaining diplomatic balance with the world powers, Bangladesh has been close to Japan historically. The seaport of Bangladesh might expand into an essential hub for trade, business, and linkages to other continents and Asia. Japan's economic and political clout would unquestionably grow due to such a strategic investment, which would also assist in realizing Japan's FOIP aims to advance regional development, stability, and



peace. This strategy will also hasten the establishment of top-notch infrastructure, raise investment opportunities in Bangladesh, and improve interregional connectivity. Bangladesh, however, might help with project execution where FOIP and BRI can be integrated since the FOIP does not oppose Chinese BRI. It would be intriguing to watch Bangladesh strike a balance between advancing regional connections and defending its geopolitical and economic interests.

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#### Patient consent statement

Not applicable.

#### Permission to reproduce material from other sources

Not applicable.

#### Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the manuscript's conception and design. Dr Md Jahangir Alam and Mr Md Saifullah Akon performed manuscript preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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#### Availability of data and materials

Due to protecting and preserving respondent confidentiality, the data sets developed or analysed during the current study are not accessible to the public but are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

#### Declarations

##### Ethics approval and consent to participate

The authors certify that they have no conflicts of interest to declare which are related to the content of this study. In addition, the author declare that he has no engagement or affiliations with any organisations or institutions with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter of this manuscript.

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The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

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