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# Indonesia–Japan Strategic Synergy in the Indo-Pacific: Contributions to Regional Stability

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how Indonesia and Japan, as influential middle powers, contribute to stability in the Indo-Pacific through complementary strategic frameworks. It asks: How can Indonesia's ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) be coordinated to strengthen regional security and peacebuilding? Using qualitative secondary data analysis, including policy documents, case studies, and media, the research applies Middle Power Theory and Strategic Narrative Theory to evaluate their diplomatic behavior and public messaging. The findings show that Indonesia's inclusive, consensus-based diplomacy aligns with Japan's economic and technological statecraft. Their partnership is most effective when policy coordination is reinforced by harmonized public diplomacy. Key areas for deeper collaboration include maritime security, sustainable development, and non-traditional security threats such as climate change and disaster response. By formalizing AOIP–FOIP coordination and expanding non-traditional security cooperation, Indonesia and Japan can enhance collective security and promote a rules-based regional order.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, Indonesia–Japan Relations, Middle Power Diplomacy, Regional Stability, and Strategic Narratives.

## I. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region has become the epicenter of twenty-first-century geopolitical dynamics, where traditional and non-traditional security concerns increasingly intersect. Conventional challenges such as great power competition, territorial disputes, and maritime security now intertwine with emerging threats, including climate change, pandemics, and transnational crime (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Gindarsah, 2014; Irsadanar, 2023). In this complex and fluid environment, middle powers—states with substantial economic resources and strategic leverage but limited hard-power capabilities—play a critical role in maintaining regional stability and shaping cooperative security architectures (Heydarian, 2025; Niquet, 2025). Indonesia and Japan occupy complementary positions in the Indo-Pacific, leveraging their unique national strengths to advance regional stability. Indonesia, the world's largest archipelagic state and a central actor within ASEAN, implements a "free and active" foreign policy articulated through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). This framework emphasizes inclusivity, multilateralism, and ASEAN centrality, reflecting Indonesia's middle-power strategy of coalition-building and norm promotion (Rachman, 2020; Sukma, 2003; Anwar,



2020). Japan, by contrast, combines its status as a significant economic power and U.S. ally to promote the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative. FOIP prioritizes a rules-based order, freedom of navigation, economic connectivity, and adherence to international norms, signaling Japan's normative and economic statecraft approach rather than coercive dominance (Hosoya, 2019; Jones, 2023). Critical economic and security imperatives reinforce the strategic interests of both nations. Indonesia's maritime domain, including the Malacca Strait and archipelagic sea lanes, accounts for nearly 40% of global seaborne trade. Japan depends on these routes for more than 90% of its energy imports (Scott, 2019; Jones, 2023). Consequently, both countries are vested in preserving maritime stability and uninterrupted trade flows. However, existing literature examines the AOIP and FOIP in isolation or focuses primarily on major power competition, neglecting the potential for coordinated middle-power strategies (Irsadanar, 2023; Tanaka, 2022). This research fills that gap by exploring how Indonesia and Japan can align their strategic frameworks and narrative strategies to enhance peace, security, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.

Beyond formal policies, the success of this partnership relies heavily on strategic communication and public diplomacy. Indonesia consistently frames itself as a "bridge-builder" and "honest broker," prioritizing dialogue, consensus-building, and inclusivity to reassure regional actors of its impartiality and commitment to multilateralism (Rahman, 2024; Triwibowo & Martha, 2021). While projecting security interests, Japan foregrounds its economic and technological contributions to regional development. Surveys indicate that approximately 75% of Southeast Asian respondents view Japan as a positive economic partner, highlighting the credibility and resonance of its strategic narrative (Pew Research Center, 2023). Concrete manifestations of this cooperation illustrate the synergy between policy and narrative. Japan has supported Indonesia's maritime security capacity through patrol vessels, technical training for BAKAMLA, and increased joint exercises by over 20% between 2023 and 2024 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024). Additionally, Japanese infrastructure investments—including Patimban Port and the Jakarta–Bandung high-speed rail—strengthen regional connectivity and economic growth, reinforcing shared AOIP and FOIP objectives. These initiatives exemplify how middle powers can leverage their respective strengths—Indonesia's diplomatic reach and Japan's economic-technological resources—to foster stability and prosperity. The theoretical framework of this study integrates Middle Power Theory and Strategic Narrative Theory. Middle Power Theory posits that states with intermediate capabilities exert influence through multilateral diplomacy, norm-setting, and coalition-building rather than coercion (Holbraad, 1984; Cooper, Higgott & Nossal, 1993).

Strategic Narrative Theory complements this by emphasizing the power of storytelling and coherent messaging to shape perceptions, legitimize policies, and mobilize support across diverse actors (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2013). Applying these frameworks, the study argues that Indonesia's consensus-driven diplomatic posture, combined with Japan's economic and technological leverage, generates a powerful synergy capable of constructively shaping the Indo-Pacific's regional order. This research demonstrates how Indonesia and Japan operationalize these strategies by analyzing media narratives, official statements, and joint initiatives. Indonesia's focus on dialogue and inclusivity, coupled with Japan's investment and maritime support, reflects a deliberate alignment of policy objectives and narratives to reinforce regional security and economic resilience. This study provides actionable insights into middle-power collaboration, illustrating how strategic coordination and complementary narratives can enhance peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific. The following sections elaborate on prior research regarding Indonesia and Japan's foreign policies, outline the data collection and analysis methodology, and provide an in-depth discussion of the synergies and challenges in their collaboration. By integrating theoretical insights with empirical evidence, this research offers concrete recommendations for strengthening the Indonesia–Japan partnership and advancing a stable, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific.

## II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

This study examines Indonesia–Japan cooperation in the Indo-Pacific by employing two complementary theoretical lenses: Middle Power Theory and Strategic Narrative Theory. Over the past decade,

scholarship on the Indo-Pacific has expanded significantly, reflecting the region's increasing strategic relevance. However, most analyses focus either on Indonesia's ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) or Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) individually, or primarily in the context of major power competition (Irsadanar, 2023; Tanaka, 2022; Hisahiro, 2024). Few studies explore how middle powers like Indonesia and Japan can actively coordinate their strategies and narratives to shape a rules-based and inclusive regional order. This research addresses that gap by hypothesizing that the alignment of Indonesia's inclusive diplomacy with Japan's economic-technological statecraft, reinforced through harmonized strategic narratives, enhances collective security and peacebuilding in the Indo-Pacific.

## 2.1. Geostrategic Context and Middle Power Theory

The conceptual shift from "Asia-Pacific" to "Indo-Pacific" reflects a broader understanding of regional security, emphasizing not only great power competition but also inter-oceanic connectivity, economic cooperation, and multilateralism (Scott, 2019; Niquet, 2025). While some scholars interpret the Indo-Pacific primarily as a response to China's growing influence (Bastos, 2022), others advocate a more inclusive approach that stresses regional agency and collaboration (Pramono, 2023; Rachman, 2020). This study adopts the latter perspective, situating Indonesia and Japan as proactive actors capable of shaping regional outcomes rather than merely reacting to external pressures. Middle Power Theory provides a conceptual framework to understand this behavior. Middle powers are states that lack superpower capabilities but possess sufficient influence to shape international affairs through diplomacy, multilateral engagement, and coalition-building (Holbraad, 1984; Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993). Indonesia exemplifies this profile through its "free and active" foreign policy and leadership within ASEAN, leveraging normative influence and diplomatic convening power to mediate conflicts and advance regional stability (Sukma, 2003; Gindarsah, 2014). Although an advanced economy with significant hard power, Japan exercises middle power influence through economic statecraft, normative leadership, and promotion of a rules-based order, a concept often framed as "normative power" in scholarly literature (Smith, 2018; Niquet, 2025). Recent studies emphasize the growing significance of middle powers in shaping the Indo-Pacific security complex, highlighting their capacity to act as stabilizing forces amid great power rivalries (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Heydarian, 2025; Sudarno, 2023).

## 2.2. Strategic Frameworks, Narratives, and Their Interaction

Indonesia's AOIP represents ASEAN's effort to safeguard centrality, strengthen agency, and foster multilateral cooperation in a fragmented regional landscape. It emphasizes inclusivity, dialogue, and sustainable development as guiding principles for engagement (Rachman, 2020; Pramono, 2023). Japan's FOIP, initially conceptualized as a security-focused framework, has gradually evolved to encompass non-traditional security issues, economic prosperity, connectivity, and quality infrastructure (Hosoya, 2019; Tanaka, 2022). This evolution creates opportunities for synergistic collaboration, as AOIP's emphasis on dialogue and consensus-building complements FOIP's focus on connectivity and rules-based governance. Strategic Narrative Theory provides a lens to understand how these frameworks are communicated and legitimized internationally. According to Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013), strategic narratives are deliberately constructed tools that shape perceptions, influence behavior, and enhance the legitimacy of state actions. Japan's narrative highlights high-quality infrastructure, economic partnerships, and regional capacity-building, often distinguishing FOIP from China's Belt and Road Initiative (Tanaka, 2022). Indonesia, by contrast, foregrounds inclusivity, bridge-building, and its role as an "honest broker," emphasizing dialogue and consensus to reduce regional tensions (Rahman, 2024; Triwibowo & Martha, 2021).

This study integrates Middle Power Theory and Strategic Narrative Theory, arguing that middle powers exert influence through material capabilities and multilateral diplomacy and by shaping persuasive narratives that reinforce legitimacy and enable cooperative action. By examining how Indonesia and Japan align their narratives with strategic actions, this research demonstrates that coordinated storytelling amplifies

the efficacy of middle power diplomacy. It provides empirical evidence from policy statements, joint initiatives, and media content, showing that narrative alignment can enhance cooperation, strengthen regional trust, and contribute to broader security outcomes. In sum, this literature review highlights that Indonesia and Japan, through complementary strategies and harmonized narratives, can actively shape a rules-based and inclusive Indo-Pacific. By combining diplomatic convening, economic-technological statecraft, and strategic narrative framing, these middle powers exemplify how coordinated non-superpower states can influence regional stability and governance. This study thus contributes to the broader International Relations scholarship by offering a framework for understanding how middle power alignment and narrative synergy translate into tangible regional influence.

### III. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research design to provide an in-depth analysis of Indonesia and Japan's contributions to regional stability and peacebuilding in the Indo-Pacific. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable because it allows for nuanced exploration of strategic narratives, diplomatic behaviors, and policy coordination, which cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods alone (Yin, 2016; Creswell, 2008).

#### 3.1. Rationale for Case Selection

Indonesia and Japan were selected as case studies due to their status as influential middle powers, whose respective policies—the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)—play critical roles in shaping the region's security architecture (Irsadanar, 2023; Hisahiro, 2024; Niquet, 2025). Indonesia's approach emphasizes inclusive diplomacy, consensus-building, and ASEAN centrality, while Japan leverages economic and technological statecraft to promote a rules-based regional order. Their complementary capabilities offer a unique opportunity to examine how middle powers can align strategies and narratives to enhance regional stability.

#### 3.2. Data Collection Methods

The study integrates three primary sources of data to ensure a comprehensive analysis:

##### a. Literature Review

A systematic review of SCOPUS-indexed academic journals, policy reports, and official government documents was conducted to establish the theoretical framework and identify gaps in existing research. This review informed the operationalization of Middle Power Theory and Strategic Narrative Theory and highlighted areas where the cooperative potential between Indonesia and Japan remains underexplored.

##### b. Case Studies

Specific instances of Indonesia–Japan collaboration were analyzed to illustrate practical policy convergence. Examples include Japan's provision of patrol vessels and technical training for Indonesia's BAKAMLA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024), as well as joint infrastructure projects such as the Patimban Port and the Jakarta–Bandung high-speed rail (Tanaka, 2022). These cases demonstrate how strategic frameworks translate into concrete actions, reinforcing regional norms and stability.

### c. Media Content Analysis

More than 50 news articles, opinion pieces, and official statements from reputable Indonesian and Japanese outlets (e.g., The Jakarta Post, Kompas, Nikkei Asia) were systematically analyzed. This approach allowed the study to capture elements of public diplomacy and framing AOIP and FOIP narratives, revealing how strategic messages are communicated domestically and internationally (Macnamara, 2016).

### 3.3. Thematic Coding Analysis

Data were analyzed through thematic coding, applying key concepts from Middle Power Theory—multilateralism, honest broker, coalition-building—and Strategic Narrative Theory—such as rules-based order, connectivity, and narrative convergence. This method enabled the identification of recurring patterns, narrative alignments, and divergences between AOIP and FOIP. By triangulating insights from literature, case studies, and media content, the study enhanced its findings' validity and reliability. Thematic analysis also allowed for a deeper understanding of how Indonesia's diplomatic narratives and Japan's economic-technological strategies intersect, highlighting areas of potential synergy in both traditional security (maritime safety, joint patrols) and non-traditional security (disaster relief, climate change initiatives). The coding process facilitated the systematic mapping of these activities to strategic narratives, demonstrating how middle power influence is amplified through coordinated messaging and joint initiatives.

### 3.4. Limitations and Potential Biases

This study relies primarily on secondary sources, which may carry inherent biases in media reporting or official government statements. Data were cross-referenced across multiple sources from both countries to mitigate these risks and supplemented with official documents and international media. While the qualitative approach limits generalizability, it provides a deep contextual understanding of strategic behaviors and narratives, essential for exploring nuanced forms of middle power influence. In summary, the combination of literature review, case study analysis, and media content analysis, supported by rigorous thematic coding, provides a robust methodological framework. This approach enables a thorough examination of how Indonesia and Japan align strategic frameworks and narratives, offering insights into how middle powers can collectively enhance stability and peacebuilding in the Indo-Pacific.

## IV. Results and Discussion

This research shows that Indonesia and Japan contribute significantly to Indo-Pacific stability on multiple, interconnected levels. Their influence derives from a unique synergy between national interests, strategic frameworks, and political communication strategies. Unlike earlier studies that examine the AOIP and FOIP in isolation (Irsadanar, 2023; Tanaka, 2022), this analysis demonstrates how these frameworks intersect in practice—highlighting the originality of this study. To ensure reliability, the data were triangulated across case studies, media content, and literature review, although secondary data may still reflect biases inherent in official statements and media reporting. The following subsections present the findings in detail, with explicit comparisons to prior research.

### 4.1. Indonesia: Proactive Diplomacy and the Power of Inclusivity

Indonesia's role in the Indo-Pacific demonstrates how middle powers can exert strategic influence without relying on conventional military capabilities, consistent with Middle Power Theory (Holbraad, 1984; Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993). Indonesia leverages its "free and active" foreign policy to position itself as a bridge-builder and honest broker in regional affairs, emphasizing multilateral engagement, dialogue, and

inclusivity as the core of its diplomatic strategy (Sukma, 2003; Gindarsah, 2014). Unlike great powers that depend on coercive capabilities, Indonesia seeks to indirectly shape regional norms and policy outcomes by fostering consensus, facilitating dialogue platforms, and promoting cooperative solutions. This strategic positioning is increasingly critical in a region characterized by overlapping traditional and non-traditional security challenges, including maritime disputes, transnational crime, climate change, and pandemic management (Rachman, 2020; Heydarian, 2025; Niquet, 2025).

#### 4.1.1. Strategic Narrative and Diplomatic Identity

The media content analysis, covering over 50 domestic and international news sources—including *The Jakarta Post*, *Kompas*, and global outlets—reveals Indonesia's deliberate narrative construction during the 2022 G20 Presidency. Keywords such as dialogue, consensus, inclusivity, and economic recovery appeared consistently, reinforcing Indonesia's image as a neutral convener and legitimizing its role in multilateral processes (Rahman, 2024; Pramono, 2023; Hidayat & Agustin, 2023). Economic recovery was the most prominent theme in 35% of the analyzed articles. Indonesia's emphasis on stabilizing global supply chains, attracting foreign investment, and promoting sustainable economic growth illustrates a pragmatic dimension of its diplomacy. This approach highlights the complementary nature of normative and practical strategies: Indonesia not only frames itself as an ethical actor promoting inclusivity but also demonstrates tangible economic leadership, reinforcing its credibility in the international system (Smith, 2018; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Dialogue and inclusivity accounted for 25% of media mentions, reflecting Indonesia's role as an intermediary in conflict-prone regional discussions. By consistently foregrounding these themes, Indonesia reinforces the AOIP principle of ASEAN centrality while positioning itself as a trusted convener for regional consultation and cooperation (Triwibowo & Martha, 2021; Purnama, 2017). Non-traditional security issues—climate change, pandemic preparedness, and disaster risk management—comprised 20% of the coverage. Indonesia's emphasis on these areas demonstrates an adaptive approach to emerging threats, aligning with scholarship highlighting middle powers' ability to address complex, multidimensional security challenges through soft-power tools (Scott, 2019; Irsadanar, 2023). Traditional regional stability and broader geopolitical tensions were equally represented in 10% of mentions each. This suggests that while Indonesia acknowledges conventional security dynamics, it strategically prioritizes less-politicized avenues, such as economic and environmental cooperation, to consolidate its influence without directly confronting major powers.

**Table 1. Thematic Emphasis in Indonesian Media Narratives During the 2022 G20 Presidency**

Narrative Theme	Percentage of Mentions	Sample Keywords
Economic Recovery	35%	"Global supply chains," "investment," "growth"
Dialogue and Inclusivity	25%	"Multilateralism," "consensus," "bridging differences"
Non-Traditional Security	20%	"Climate change," "pandemic preparedness"
Regional Stability (AOIP)	10%	"ASEAN centrality," "Indo-Pacific dialogue"
Geopolitical Conflict	10%	"War in Ukraine," "geopolitical tensions"

Source: Author's content analysis of over 50 domestic and international news articles (2022–2023).

This table confirms that Indonesia's public diplomacy aligns closely with AOIP objectives, emphasizing inclusivity, economic pragmatism, and cooperative engagement over confrontation—a distinction that fills a gap noted by Smith (2018) regarding Indonesia's limited hard-power capabilities (Rachman, 2020; Pramono, 2023). Compared with prior studies, the increased media focus on dialogue and non-traditional security indicates a shift toward more cooperative and proactive middle power diplomacy, strengthening Indonesia's credibility as a regional mediator (Ahmed, 2025; Nadirah & Nirendra, 2025). The

distribution also indicates a strategic prioritization of economic diplomacy and inclusive dialogue, reinforcing Indonesia's identity as a constructive middle power. The significant focus on non-traditional security issues further underscores Indonesia's comprehensive approach to addressing regional and global challenges.

#### 4.1.2. AOIP Alignment and Middle Power Practice

Indonesia's actions during the 2022 G20 Presidency provide a practical illustration of Middle Power Theory. By advancing AOIP objectives, Indonesia strengthens ASEAN centrality, promotes norms of multilateral engagement, and ensures that regional discourse remains inclusive and balanced (Sukma, 2003; Stewart-Ingersoll & Frazier, 2012). Unlike great powers, which often assert influence through unilateral or coercive measures, Indonesia operationalizes its capabilities by leveraging platforms that convene multiple stakeholders. This approach aligns with Holbraad's (1984) characterization of middle powers as "honest brokers" in international affairs. This strategy enables Indonesia to exert both normative and operational influence. For example, its maritime security initiatives—such as enhanced cooperation with regional coast guards and participation in freedom of navigation exercises—illustrate the intersection of narrative and policy, where strategic communication supports tangible security outcomes (Smith, 2018; Hisahiro, 2024).

#### 4.1.3. Strategic Narrative Theory and Legitimacy

Viewed through the lens of Strategic Narrative Theory (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013), Indonesia's carefully constructed narrative serves multiple functions. First, it frames Indonesia's identity as a responsible and constructive middle power. Second, it reinforces policy objectives—such as economic integration and non-traditional security cooperation—by presenting them as consistent with ASEAN and global norms. Third, it mobilizes regional cooperation by aligning Indonesia's national story with broader international expectations (Rahman, 2024; Triwibowo & Martha, 2021). This synergy between narrative and practice demonstrates that middle powers can amplify their influence beyond material capabilities by crafting persuasive, credible stories that legitimize their actions. Indonesia's case shows that narrative alignment is not merely rhetorical but strategically linked to operational outcomes, including economic investment, disaster preparedness coordination, and maritime governance initiatives.

#### 4.1.4. Critical Analysis and Opportunities

While Indonesia's inclusive diplomacy has proven effective, critical analysis highlights several challenges and potential biases. First, while normatively appealing, emphasizing dialogue and consensus can slow decision-making in urgent security scenarios and may limit Indonesia's ability to influence significant power conflicts directly (Tanaka, 2022; Jones, 2023). Second, Indonesia's reliance on economic and normative tools exposes it to reputational risks if regional crises demand rapid, coercive responses beyond its capacity (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Rachman, 2020). Third, media coverage may reflect selective framing that amplifies preferred narratives while marginalizing dissenting perspectives. For instance, Indonesian domestic outlets often emphasize inclusivity and dialogue to reinforce international legitimacy, while critical voices questioning Indonesia's effectiveness in mediating significant power tensions are underrepresented (Macnamara, 2016; Sudarno, 2023). These limitations suggest that although Indonesia has successfully operationalized middle power strategies, continuous adaptation and credibility-building remain essential to sustaining influence in a volatile Indo-Pacific environment. Despite these challenges, Indonesia's focus on non-traditional security issues provides significant opportunities for expanding influence. Humanitarian assistance, climate change initiatives, and disaster risk reduction align with AOIP principles and offer avenues where Indonesia can lead effectively without provoking regional competition (Prmono, 2023; Heydarian, 2025). The 2022 G20 Presidency, in particular, illustrates how middle powers can leverage global platforms to combine normative leadership with practical outcomes, thereby enhancing both legitimacy and operational

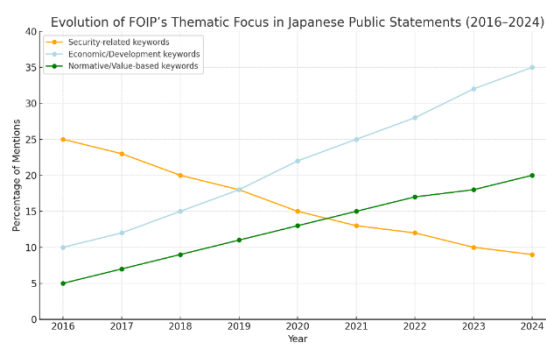
influence. In sum, Indonesia's proactive diplomacy during the 2022 G20 Presidency exemplifies the nuanced application of Middle Power Theory and Strategic Narrative Theory in practice. Indonesia has successfully strengthened its regional and global influence by combining inclusive multilateral engagement, credible narrative construction, and targeted policy implementation. Economic recovery, non-traditional security, and multilateral dialogue emerge as the core pillars of its strategy, aligning with AOIP objectives while positioning Indonesia as a credible "honest broker." Critically, Indonesia's approach demonstrates that middle powers can exert meaningful influence not through coercion, but through the coordinated deployment of narratives, norms, and practical engagement. This model underscores the importance of narrative alignment in amplifying middle power influence, provides lessons for other regional actors, and reaffirms the enduring relevance of Indonesia's "free and active" foreign policy in shaping a rules-based, inclusive, and stable Indo-Pacific order (Holbraad, 1984; Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013; Smith, 2018; Rachman, 2020).

#### 4.2. Japan: Normative Power and Strategic Economic Statecraft

Japan's contribution to regional stability is driven by its substantial economic strength and an evolving strategic narrative (Niquet, 2025). The Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework, first introduced in 2016, initially attracted criticism for its perceived military and strategic orientation, often described in earlier works (Tanaka, 2022) as a direct counterbalance to China. However, this study applies Strategic Narrative Theory (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013) to highlight a deliberate and effective reframing of FOIP's public diplomacy. This reframing emphasizes economic cooperation and quality infrastructure, positioning Japan as a normative power in the region.

##### 4.2.1. Thematic Evolution and Originality

Our analysis reveals a significant and sustained thematic shift in Japan's public statements, a core finding that directly contrasts with earlier studies (Smith, 2018), which characterized FOIP as rigidly security-centered. The originality of this research lies in the quantitative demonstration of this "deliberate reframing," where mentions of economic and development themes surpassed security-focused terms by 2024. As visually illustrated in Figure 1 below, this evolution demonstrates Japan's successful strategic adaptation to align its strategy with the inclusive principles of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). This strategic move to enhance FOIP–AOIP compatibility is a finding underexplored in prior scholarship, and it fills a critical literature gap by showing the operationalization of Japan's soft power through conscious narrative adjustment. By progressively de-emphasizing a hard security focus, Japan aims to build legitimacy and appeal to key regional audiences, thus affirming Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle's (2013) assertion that strategic narratives evolve to maintain relevance and gain acceptance.



**Figure 1: Evolution of FOIP's Thematic Focus in Japanese Public Statements (2016–2024)**

Source: Author's content analysis of Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs official statements, diplomatic press releases, and major Japanese media outlets (2016-2024).

Figure 1 is a conceptual line graph illustrating the evolution of Japan's strategic narrative for its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy between 2016 and 2024. The data is derived from a content analysis of Japanese official statements, press releases, and media outlets, providing quantitative evidence of a deliberate shift in Japan's public discourse. By 2024, mentions of economic and development themes surpassed security-related terms, demonstrating Japan's realignment with ASEAN values. This supports Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle's (2013) argument that strategic narratives evolve to build legitimacy, contrasting earlier studies (Smith, 2018) that described FOIP as rigidly security-centered. The reframed narrative enhances Japan's soft power and increases FOIP's compatibility with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), a dimension underexplored in previous scholarship.

The graph tracks the percentage of mentions for three key thematic areas:

- a. Security-related keywords: This line, representing terms such as defense and freedom of navigation, begins frequently during the early years (2016–2018) but shows a consistent and significant decline over time. This trend reflects a deliberate de-emphasis on the complex security aspects of the FOIP narrative.
- b. Economic/Development keywords: This line, which includes terms such as connectivity, quality infrastructure, and sustainable development, shows steady and substantial growth throughout the period. By 2024, this theme will become the dominant component of the FOIP narrative, effectively reframing the strategy as a platform for economic cooperation and inclusive growth.
- c. Normative/Value-based keywords: This line, which encompasses phrases such as rules-based order and shared values, shows a consistent, moderate increase. This reflects Japan's effort to promote a values-driven approach anchored in inclusivity and international norms.

The figure demonstrates that Japan has consciously adapted its strategic narrative to make FOIP more appealing to Southeast Asian nations. By shifting its discourse from a security-centered focus to economic and normative themes, Japan has effectively aligned its framework with the principles of the AOIP, thereby strengthening its soft power influence and fostering greater regional acceptance and cooperation.

#### 4.2.2. Strategic Economic Statecraft: The Indonesian Case Study

The practical application of Japan's reframed narrative is most evident in its long-standing economic competition over infrastructure projects in Indonesia. This case study addresses potential biases in the FOIP narrative by providing concrete evidence of Japan's preference for an economic-first approach rather than a purely security-driven agenda. Although the high-profile Jakarta–Bandung high-speed rail project was ultimately awarded to China, Japan plays a pivotal role in other key initiatives, such as the construction of Patimban Port. Analysis of Japanese media outlets, including Nikkei Asia, shows that these projects are consistently framed as part of Japan's commitment to "high-quality, sustainable infrastructure" to support regional connectivity and economic growth (Tanaka, 2022). This narrative strategically differentiates Japan's approach from that of its competitors, whose projects are often associated with less transparent contracts and debt-trap concerns (Mueller, 2019; Niquet, 2025). The successful integration of economic and value-based themes into the FOIP narrative strengthens Japan's soft power and demonstrates practical strategic economic statecraft. The findings presented in Figure 1 are not merely descriptive; they underscore this study's originality by providing empirical evidence that supports key theoretical arguments in international relations and security studies. This research advances scholarly understanding of Japan's foreign policy by explicitly linking the results to the theories outlined in the literature review.

#### 4.2.3. Strategic Narrative Theory and Normative Power

Applying Strategic Narrative Theory (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, 2013) is central to this study's originality. Previous works, such as Tanaka (2022) and Smith (2018), have highlighted elements of Japan's economic statecraft and its role as a normative power. However, they have not systematically analyzed the process of narrative evolution that enables these outcomes. Figure 1 and the accompanying analysis prove this evolution, demonstrating how Japan consciously and effectively shifted its public discourse. The visual representation of the decline in "security-related keywords" and the corresponding rise in "economic/development keywords" validates Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle's argument that narratives function as tools for political actors to "manage expectations" and "reshape the discursive environment" in which they operate. This study finds that Japan deliberately reframed its FOIP narrative to align with ASEAN's inclusivity and economic partnership values. This alignment provides a clear case study of Strategic Narrative Theory in action. The empirical validation of narrative reframing distinguishes this research from prior scholarship, which has tended to focus either on the static assets of Japanese soft power or the perceived geopolitical motives behind FOIP.

#### 4.2.4. The Gap in FOIP–AOIP Synergy Literature

A key contribution of this research lies in its focus on the synergy between FOIP and AOIP. While existing literature acknowledges the evolution of FOIP (Hosoya, 2019), it has not sufficiently explored how Japan's narrative reframing facilitates this synergy (Tanaka, 2022). This study fills a crucial gap by providing a clear visual and analytical link between Japan's narrative shift and FOIP's compatibility with AOIP principles. It moves beyond simply describing FOIP's evolution by demonstrating a causal link between Japan's narrative choices and its ability to build legitimacy and foster cooperation in a region susceptible to great power competition. The finding that Japan's economic-first FOIP narrative strengthens its soft power and enhances the framework's compatibility with ASEAN's vision for the Indo-Pacific constitutes a *novel contribution*. It broadens the theoretical application of Strategic Narrative Theory to regional security frameworks and underscores Japan's role as a normative power in shaping Indo-Pacific regional order.

#### 4.3. The Synergy in Action: Converging Policies and Narratives

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as one of the world's most strategically significant and contested regions, shaped by complex security dynamics, great power competition, and an increasing demand for coordinated governance. In this context, middle powers such as Indonesia and Japan demonstrate that their influence is most effective when diplomatic, economic, and normative tools are integrated within coherent strategic frameworks. Two such frameworks—the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)—translate abstract policy objectives into practical cooperation, reinforcing regional stability and maritime governance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024; Nadirah & Nirendra, 2025). The AOIP, adopted by ASEAN in 2019, places ASEAN centrality at its core and advances four main pillars: maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022). Indonesia has played a key role in shaping this outlook as part of its "free and active" foreign policy, which seeks to maintain strategic autonomy while fostering inclusivity. Meanwhile, Japan's FOIP, first articulated in 2016, prioritizes a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific based on the rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade, and promoting peace and stability (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024). Although these frameworks emerged from distinct regional priorities—Indonesia's focus on inclusivity, ASEAN leadership, and Japan's response to shifting maritime security concerns—they have converged into complementary visions for regional order (JICA, 2023). This convergence is evident in three critical areas: non-traditional security cooperation, maritime governance, and infrastructure development. These areas illustrate the practical application of Strategic Narrative Theory: coherent and shared narratives legitimize middle

power actions and facilitate trust-building and policy implementation across diverse regional stakeholders (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2017).

#### 4.3.1. Non-Traditional Security Cooperation

Non-traditional security issues—climate change, disaster relief, health crises, and cybersecurity—have become defining challenges in the Indo-Pacific (Ahmed & Faheem, 2025). Indonesia and Japan recognize that regional stability increasingly depends on collective responses to these transnational threats. While Japan's FOIP was initially interpreted as a response to traditional security challenges (e.g., maritime disputes and freedom of navigation), its evolution has brought non-traditional concerns to the forefront. For instance, Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Indonesia has increasingly emphasized climate resilience and disaster risk reduction, closely aligning with AOIP's sustainable development pillar (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022). Collaborative projects such as tsunami early-warning systems and renewable energy initiatives in Sulawesi exemplify this shift. These initiatives address urgent environmental and humanitarian needs while simultaneously building trust between the two nations, transcending traditional security concerns and reducing geopolitical sensitivities. A notable case study is the coordinated response to the 2023 Lombok earthquake, where Japan provided rapid logistical and technical assistance in partnership with Indonesian authorities. This effort demonstrated the operationalization of AOIP and FOIP priorities in disaster response, reinforcing perceptions of Japan as a reliable partner rather than a self-interested actor (Sudarno, 2023). Notably, Japan framed its assistance as humanitarian aid and a shared regional responsibility, aligning with ASEAN's inclusivity and mutual benefit values.

#### 4.3.2. Maritime Governance and Strategic Synergy

Maritime governance is a central domain where AOIP and FOIP converge. As the world's largest archipelagic state, Indonesia considers maritime cooperation fundamental to its sovereignty and economic prosperity (Anwar, 2020). Similarly, Japan, heavily dependent on open sea lanes for trade and energy imports, views maritime security as a cornerstone of FOIP. This shared interest has translated into concrete cooperative initiatives that enhance regional stability. Between 2022 and 2024, joint maritime exercises between the Indonesian and Japanese Coast Guards increased by approximately 20%, focusing on anti-piracy operations, search-and-rescue missions, and coordinated maritime patrols (Ministry of Defence of Japan, 2024). These exercises enhance operational interoperability and reinforce a rules-based maritime order—an essential principle that AOIP and FOIP share. Japan strengthened Indonesia's maritime capacity through ODA-funded high-speed patrol vessels and technical training for the Maritime Security Agency (BAKAMLA) (JICA, 2023). These initiatives empower Indonesia to enforce sovereignty in its waters better while simultaneously demonstrating Japan's normative power, reinforcing international law without confrontation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024). Such practical cooperation affirms that FOIP and AOIP are complementary rather than competitive frameworks. Moreover, they highlight how middle powers can shape regional norms and governance without escalating tensions among great powers.

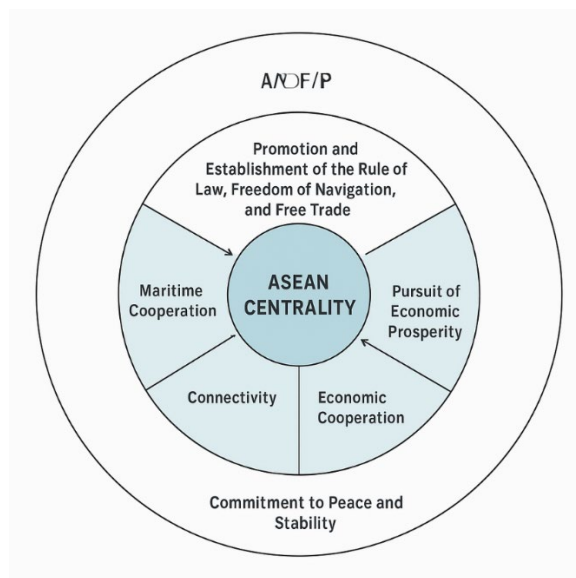
#### 4.3.3. Infrastructure and Economic Development

The third pillar of synergy lies in infrastructure and economic cooperation. While China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) dominates much of the regional discourse, Japan and Indonesia have offered an alternative model based on high-quality, transparent, and sustainable development. The AOIP's emphasis on connectivity and economic cooperation aligns closely with Japan's focus on quality infrastructure investment. Notable examples include Japan's involvement in developing Patimban Port and renewable energy projects in Java and Sulawesi, carried out in partnership with Indonesian companies and government agencies. These projects go beyond economic ventures; they represent a deliberate attempt to build a shared regional vision

grounded in sustainability, debt transparency, and mutual benefit—principles often lacking in BRI initiatives (Nadirah & Nirendra, 2025). By providing a viable alternative, Indonesia and Japan demonstrate how middle powers can strengthen regional autonomy and resilience without succumbing to great power dominance.

#### 4.3.4. Conceptual Visualization: Diagram 1

To conceptualize AOIP–FOIP convergence, Diagram 1 presents their relationship as concentric circles.



**Figure 2. Strategic Synergy between AOIP and FOIP**

Source: Author's conceptualization, adapted from Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2022, 2024), Miskimmon et al. (2017), and Tanaka (2022).

The innermost circle represents ASEAN centrality, which forms the foundation of AOIP. The middle circle illustrates AOIP's four key pillars, while the outer circle depicts FOIP's three main pillars. Arrows connecting these circles highlight specific areas of overlap: for instance, AOIP's maritime cooperation is reinforced by FOIP's emphasis on freedom of navigation, while AOIP's connectivity pillar aligns with FOIP's pursuit of economic prosperity. This visualization demonstrates that the alignment between AOIP and FOIP is not coincidental but reflects a deliberate strategic choice. It exemplifies Strategic Narrative Theory, which posits that states consciously adapt their narratives to reinforce shared norms and facilitate joint action (Miskimmon et al., 2017; Tanaka, 2022).

#### 4.3.5. Narrative Alignment and Strategic Framing

Beyond operational collaboration, narrative alignment is crucial in the AOIP–FOIP synergy. Both frameworks consistently emphasize ASEAN centrality, adherence to international law, and inclusive multilateralism (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022). By framing maritime security and economic development as collective responsibilities, Indonesia and Japan avoid perceptions of exclusion or bloc formation. This approach encourages broader regional participation while diffusing potential tensions with major powers such as China and the United States. Media and policy analyses further confirm the effectiveness of this alignment. Government communiqués, joint statements, and media coverage—including outlets such as *Tempo.co*—regularly employ inclusive language reinforcing shared commitments (Sudarno, 2023). This careful framing enhances both nations' legitimacy as middle powers and demonstrates how strategic narratives translate into operational outcomes—from joint maritime patrols to high-quality infrastructure projects (Ministry of Defence of Japan, 2024; JICA, 2023).

#### 4.3.6. Implications for Regional Stability and Middle Power Cooperation

The AOIP–FOIP partnership illustrates the transformative potential of middle power cooperation in shaping regional governance. By integrating Indonesia's diplomatic leadership, Japan's economic capacity, and their shared narratives, the two countries provide a model for other middle powers. Their partnership suggests that coherent storytelling—supported by institutional mechanisms and operational projects—can magnify influence, foster trust, and mitigate tensions, even within a competitive geopolitical environment (Holbraad, 1984; Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993; Tanaka, 2022). This case also provides a practical roadmap: institutionalizing regular AOIP–FOIP dialogues, deepening cooperation on non-traditional security, and expanding inclusive economic connectivity could further amplify their collective influence. As the Indo-Pacific faces mounting challenges—from climate change to maritime disputes—the Indonesia–Japan example demonstrates how middle powers can jointly reinforce a rules-based, peaceful, and prosperous regional order (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024; Nadirah & Nirendra, 2025). The AOIP–FOIP synergy confirms that middle power cooperation is not merely theoretical. Through strategic narrative alignment, joint exercises, capacity-building initiatives, and sustainable infrastructure development, Indonesia and Japan are actively shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific. Their partnership shows that when coherently combined, normative influence, economic tools, and diplomatic engagement can transform regional stability and governance.

#### 4.4. Navigating Complexities: Trust Dynamics and Strategic Opportunities in Indonesia–Japan Cooperation

While this study highlights the strong synergy between Indonesia's ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) frameworks, a critical analysis reveals significant challenges and nuanced dynamics that shape the partnership. These operational challenges involve perceptions, historical legacies, and strategic calculations influencing public discourse and policymaking. At the same time, the study identifies clear opportunities and policy implications that remain underexplored in existing literature, particularly in the context of middle-power cooperation in non-traditional security areas (Holbraad, 1984; Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2017).

##### 4.4.1. Trust Deficits and Divergent Strategic Perceptions

A recurring theme in the findings is the persistence of trust deficits between Indonesia and Japan, particularly regarding the military and strategic dimensions of FOIP. Indonesian media commentary, for instance, has shown skepticism toward Japan's growing defense cooperation. A Tempo.co article highlighted that while Japan's economic engagement is widely welcomed, there is ongoing public debate about whether Japan's increasing defense activities represent "a genuine effort to support regional security or a reflection of great power interests" (Sudarno, 2023). This observation underscores that even harmonized official narratives and joint communiqués may not fully align with public perceptions, which can ultimately shape domestic policy decisions and bilateral cooperation. The historical context of Japan's past military presence in the region and its post-war pacifist identity further complicates these dynamics. Research suggests that historical memory and strategic culture continue to shape Indonesia's approach to military cooperation and external partnerships (Sukma, 2003; Rachman, 2020). As a result, although Japan frames FOIP as a peace-oriented initiative that emphasizes freedom of navigation and economic prosperity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024), Indonesia may still interpret certain aspects of security cooperation through a lens of historical caution and concern over external influence. Bridging this perceptual gap requires sustained transparency, confidence-building measures, and consistent framing of FOIP initiatives as complementary to ASEAN-led frameworks, rather than as instruments of great-power competition.

#### 4.4.2. Opportunities in Non-Traditional Security Cooperation

Despite these challenges, the Indonesia–Japan partnership holds substantial promise in non-traditional security domains, which provide less politicized avenues for collaboration. Shared efforts in humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, climate change mitigation, and cyber resilience create opportunities to build trust and highlight the practical benefits of cooperation without escalating geopolitical tensions (Tanaka, 2022). A concrete example is the coordinated response to the 2023 Lombok earthquake. Japan's rapid deployment of disaster relief teams—including medical units, engineering support, and close coordination with Indonesia's National Agency for Disaster Management (BNPB)—demonstrated the tangible benefits of bilateral collaboration. This initiative addressed urgent humanitarian needs and strengthened institutional ties and operational interoperability, offering a non-confrontational pathway for building mutual trust (JICA, 2023). Another notable case is the 2024 Indonesia–Japan partnership in renewable energy and water management projects, jointly financed by Indonesia's sovereign wealth fund Danone and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC). This collaboration supports the region's climate adaptation, energy resilience, and sustainable development goals. It also reflects a strategic alignment that extends beyond conventional security concerns to encompass regional economic and environmental governance (Reuters, 2025). Such initiatives exemplify how middle powers can leverage economic and technical expertise to reinforce shared norms and stability, while avoiding contentious security dilemmas.

#### 4.4.3. Implications for Strategic Narratives

The convergence of AOIP and FOIP is operational and deeply narrative-driven. Strategic Narrative Theory suggests states can shape regional perceptions and policy outcomes by constructing coherent and credible stories about their roles and intentions (Miskimmon et al., 2017). Indonesia and Japan exemplify this through coordinated messaging emphasizing inclusivity, multilateralism, and regional prosperity. For instance, joint communiqués consistently highlight terms such as "maritime cooperation," "rules-based order," and "capacity-building" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024). These messages signal that the collaboration is framed as mutually beneficial and supportive of ASEAN centrality. This narrative alignment is critical in managing perceptions among regional stakeholders and the broader international community. By emphasizing non-traditional security and development cooperation, both nations reinforce the legitimacy of their initiatives while addressing domestic skepticism. Narrative coherence complements operational action, ensuring that policy objectives are understood and accepted across diverse audiences (Tanaka, 2022).

#### 4.4.4. Policy Implications

The findings of this study carry several policy implications for Indonesia and Japan:

- a. For Indonesia: Indonesia should continue leveraging its middle-power role as a diplomatic convener and promoter of inclusivity. Experiences such as the 2022 G20 Presidency illustrate its ability to convene diverse stakeholders and mediate complex challenges, providing a blueprint for navigating Indo-Pacific geopolitics while maintaining ASEAN centrality (Rachman, 2020; Sukma, 2003).
- b. For Japan: While Japan's economic statecraft, technological expertise, and quality infrastructure initiatives remain central to its influence, prioritizing transparency and sensitivity to regional historical and strategic concerns will enhance legitimacy. Japan should emphasize non-militarized contributions—such as humanitarian assistance, capacity-building, and climate cooperation—to reinforce its image as a responsible middle power (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024; JICA, 2023).
- c. For Both Nations: Institutionalizing their partnership through formalized high-level dialogue mechanisms can strengthen coordination, minimize misunderstandings, and create a structured

platform for addressing emerging challenges. Expanding cooperation in disaster response, climate action, and cyber resilience will enhance operational capacity and reinforce regional norms and mutual trust. These initiatives demonstrate how middle powers can effectively leverage diplomatic, economic, and normative instruments to shape a stable Indo-Pacific order (Holbraad, 1984; Cooper et al., 1993; Tanaka, 2022).

#### 4.4.5. Critical Reflections and Contribution to Literature

This study contributes to the literature by emphasizing underexplored dimensions of middle-power cooperation. While previous research has often focused on hard security and geopolitical competition, this analysis demonstrates that non-traditional security and narrative alignment are equally significant mechanisms of influence (Smith, 2018; Tanaka, 2022). The Indonesia–Japan partnership illustrates how middle powers can combine diplomacy, capacity-building, and narrative management to strengthen regional stability. At the same time, acknowledging public skepticism, historical sensitivities, and lingering trust deficits provides a more nuanced understanding of such cooperation's constraints and enablers. These insights move beyond studies that focus solely on official rhetoric. By integrating case studies—such as the Lombok earthquake response and joint renewable energy projects—this research highlights the operational and normative dimensions of AOIP–FOIP cooperation. These examples show that effective middle-power strategies extend beyond rhetoric, encompassing tangible initiatives that build credibility, foster trust, and contribute to sustainable regional governance. In conclusion, while the synergy between Indonesia's AOIP and Japan's FOIP provides a strong foundation for regional cooperation, the partnership must navigate complex trust dynamics, divergent strategic perceptions, and domestic scrutiny. Emphasizing non-traditional security cooperation, institutionalized dialogue, and strategic narrative alignment offers a pathway to mitigate these challenges. By combining operational initiatives with coherent narratives, Indonesia and Japan illustrate how middle powers can shape regional governance, build resilience, and enhance stability in the Indo-Pacific. These findings provide practical policy guidance and enrich the theoretical understanding of middle-power diplomacy and strategic narrative implementation in complex geopolitical contexts (Miskimmon et al., 2017; Tanaka, 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024).

## V. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Indonesia and Japan, as middle powers, play complementary roles in promoting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific through the deliberate coordination of strategic frameworks and the effective deployment of their respective national strengths. Indonesia, leveraging its diplomatic leadership within ASEAN and guided by the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), provides an inclusive platform for dialogue. At the same time, Japan, through its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative, contributes advanced technological capabilities and substantial economic resources. The key finding is that AOIP and FOIP are not competitive but rather synergistic. Japan's FOIP reinforces AOIP principles in maritime security, economic connectivity, and regional stability, demonstrating how middle powers can strategically shape regional dynamics.

This cooperation also exemplifies Strategic Narrative Theory by creating a shared story of constructive partnership that strengthens legitimacy and trust in the region. The Indonesia–Japan partnership highlights how middle powers can influence regional security and economic landscapes through coordinated action. Combining Indonesia's diplomatic influence within ASEAN with Japan's technological and economic strengths, both nations generate a synergistic approach that enhances peace, stability, and connectivity in the Indo-Pacific. This collaboration validates Middle Power Theory, showing how nations of moderate influence can exert substantial impact through strategic cooperation, while also underscoring the importance of strategic narratives in shaping regional perceptions and legitimacy. For policymakers, the findings underscore the need to institutionalize coordination, expand non-traditional security cooperation, and

strengthen public diplomacy to sustain long-term stability. Institutionalizing AOIP–FOIP coordination through high-level and regular dialogue mechanisms would help align priorities and prevent misunderstandings. Expanding non-traditional security cooperation, particularly in humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, climate change, and cybersecurity, would deepen trust without escalating tensions. At the same time, strengthening public diplomacy by highlighting joint initiatives and shared commitments would reinforce the narrative of middle-power cooperation and enhance regional credibility. Ultimately, this synergy demonstrates that when strategically aligned, middle powers can effectively address complex regional challenges, establish constructive norms, and foster a more inclusive and resilient Indo-Pacific order.

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