

# Ontological Power

## Narrative in a New Era of Competition

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With the dawning of great-power competition and the rebalancing of geopolitical power to the Indo-Pacific region, three Asian powers—China, Japan, and India—have forged new mechanisms to engage with and shape the international order via development cooperation. This article introduces ontological power, the creation of a narrative to communicate a specific world order, value system, and collective identity. While many are familiar with material power (economic and military) and soft power (culture and ideas), the effective use of ontological power to shape development, geopolitics, and international institutions represents the newest phase of twenty-first century competition and conflict. As the world reemerges from the COVID-19 pandemic and grapples with the horrors of a conflict in Ukraine, it is evident that control of information and, more importantly, control of the *narrative* is a critical twenty-first century center of gravity.

This article begins by defining ontological power, arguing that ontological power is a critical domain in a highly networked and interconnected world. Next, a case study of Japan, China, and India's development engagement in Africa illuminates the synthesis of ontological, material, and soft power in action. Through engagement with Africa's 54 diverse nations, regional blocs, and the African Union, these three Asian donor powers participate in defining the international order in their own terms. The case study allows a close look at the strategic narratives of each Asian power. China's brand of South-South cooperation defines a paradigm of development cooperation steeped in Chinese histories, values, and perceived destiny. India's brand of South-South partnership and its commitment to *strategic autonomy* offers partners increased agency and self-determination, and an alternative to extraregional influence in their development pathways. Japan's innovative forum diplomacy and visionary role as a bridge between Asia and Africa positions Tokyo at the nexus between great powers and emerging powers. As a paragon of triangular development cooperation, Tokyo is redefining twenty-first century development cooperation frameworks, norms, and values. Asian donors' ontological development narratives are disrupting established aid constructs and reshaping the international order. In this context, this article offers four tenets of ontological power and recommendations on how to command this newest domain of power in the era of great-power competition.

## **What Is Ontological Power?**

In international relations theory, the concepts of soft power, smart power, and sharp power have come into vogue recently. Joseph Nye (2009) defined soft power as the use of culture, political values, and foreign policy to co-opt rather than coerce. Smart power leverages tools across the spectrum of statecraft (e.g., DIME),<sup>1</sup> advocating a combination of hard and soft-power tools in crafting effective foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> Sharp power, on the other hand, is a criticism of the exploitation of soft power by authoritarian regimes—notably China and Russia—to influence, manipulate, and censor.<sup>3</sup> While these concepts are valuable, they overlook a domain of power that has emerged in a globalized and interconnected world—the role of a strategic narrative in shaping perceptions, inspiring alignment, and building legitimacy.

Ontological power is defined as the ability to influence the behaviors of others to align with or reinforce a nation's desired worldview. It centers on the creation of a “brand” that communicates an existential world order, value system, and collective identity to partners. Priya Chacko's work on “ontological security” highlights biographical narratives and core values as the drivers for foreign policy discourses and interstate relations in the globalized world. She argues that identity and narratives of civilizational exceptionalism reinforce perceptions of security as established hierarchies of power and established relationships are revised and challenged.<sup>4</sup> Analysts such as Andréa Worden have highlighted examples of ontological power such as the war of discourse in UN bodies and the efforts of Asian powers (especially China) to validate strategic narratives.<sup>5</sup> This and other formulations of ontological power will be explored in this article. Whereas victory in war established global power status in the twentieth century, the emerging powers in Asia harness strategic ontologies to win the war without fighting.

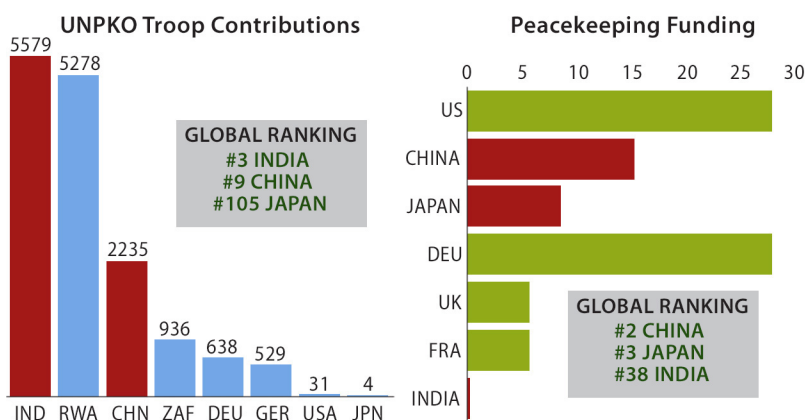
Tools of ontological power shape the norms, values, and national identity to conform to a nation's strategic development narratives. These tools include forum diplomacy, key-leader engagements, transfer of narratives, and institutional alignment. Asian powers employ shared historical memory (i.e., the Silk Road, anticolonial struggles, civilizational links), cultural values (i.e., peaceful development, noninterference, democracy), and societal identity (i.e., Southern hemisphere and non-Western identity) to establish strategic relationships with the developing world, especially in Southeast Asia and Africa. In Asia-Africa forums, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian leaders increasingly tout the use of ontological power, in concert with material and soft power. President Xi Jinping declared the “rise in China's international influence, ability to inspire, and power to shape” on the basis of China's national, cultural, and historical strength.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Japan and India proposed an Asia-Africa development vision based on “deep civilizational

links,” “common heritage,” and “commitment to democracy, openness, and the rule of law as key values to achieve peaceful co-existence.”<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, this article presents ontological power as a defining characteristic of Indo-Pacific powers. The following case study shows how established and emerging Asian donors’ twenty-first century development engagement presents a pathway to geopolitical power. The synthesis of ontological, material, and soft power sparks a new understanding of Asia and Africa’s role in the global order as geopolitical gravity shifts toward the Indo-Pacific region.

### Case Study: Asia-Africa Engagement

Africa is considered the “final frontier” for global development with diverse and vast untapped domestic growth engines. Speculation about Africa’s potential as the “next emerging market” is often couched in the context of growing Asian investment and increased South-South cooperation.<sup>8</sup> Impressive annual GDP growth trends have given momentum to the “Africa Rising” narrative. Rising stars such as Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Kenya have achieved annual GDP growth averages of 10 percent, 7 percent, and 6 percent over the ten years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup> Africa’s potential to contribute to the global economic value chain has led many scholars to speculate that Asian investment may make Africa the world’s next manufacturing and services powerhouse.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the 55 African Union members represent the largest voting bloc in the governing bodies of the UN system, accounting for more than a quarter of all votes. For its part, Japan, a top global donor, uses official development assistance (ODA) as its chief foreign policy tool to demonstrate an alternative brand of Japanese leadership both within and outside the established international institutions. For China and India, African development cooperation represents a strategy to define themselves as new types of global powers.

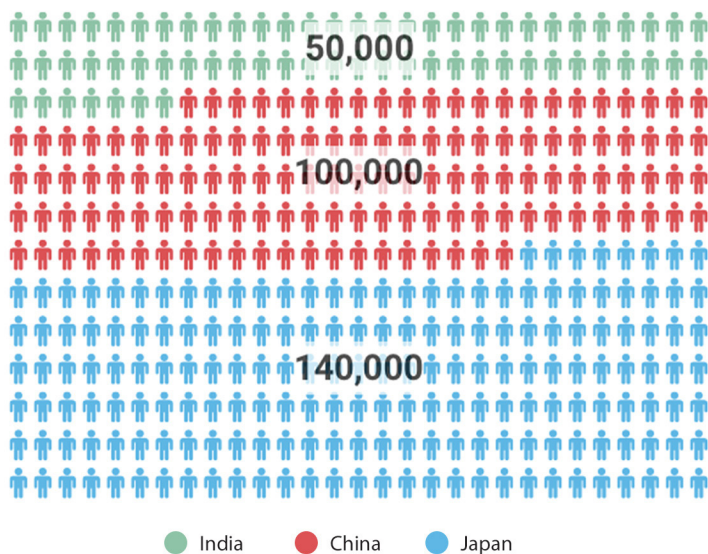


**Figure 1. UNPKO Troop (2021) and Funding Contributions (2020–2021).**

During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Japanese, Chinese, and Indian development investment in African states grew rapidly along with their respective narratives. From 2011–2021, Japan committed to invest over \$90 billion (USD), China \$140B, and India \$16B in African development projects ranging from large-scale infrastructure, to digital networks and telecommunication, to medical and green technology. While the flavor of these investments varies widely from grants and development assistance (Japan) to loans and lines of credit (China and India), the impact on the African continent is undeniable.<sup>11</sup> Beyond economic investment, India remains a top contributor to African peacekeeping<sup>12</sup> with over 80 percent of its peacekeeping troops deployed to the continent and the largest contributor among Asian donor nations, with 5,579 troops deployed in 2021 in comparison to Beijing's 2,235 (see fig. 1). China is the second largest global contributor of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO) funding (over \$15B), followed by Japan as the third largest contributor (\$8.5B).<sup>13</sup> The Asian powers are also heavily invested in human development. Through extensive scholarship programs, institutional exchanges, and training centers Japan, China, and India have trained hundreds of thousands of African citizens (fig. 2). Many of these training programs bring African youth, academics, politicians, and industry leaders to Beijing, Tokyo, and New Delhi, developing de facto ambassadors with a deep understanding of the core interests, history, and values of the respective Asian power. As the United States and other long-established donors withdraw from infrastructure and human capacity building in Africa, Asian states are leaning in. Japan, China, and India have chosen to cultivate a new quiver of geopolitical tools on the African continent. This strategy is underlined by the belief that, beyond spurring economic growth, development engagement in Africa advances national interests through the proliferation of worldviews and ontological values in the building of interstate relationships.

New viable development pathways are emerging. Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),<sup>14</sup> and India's Security and Growth for All in the Region offer grand regional architectures steeped in rich cultural symbolism. Japan, China, and India have each established their own Asia-African forums. The Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), and the India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS), have become the primary mechanisms for Asian donors to achieve strategic alignment with African partners. Africa, the final development frontier, has become the stage upon which to demonstrate a new leadership paradigm to the world.

## Africans trained by Asian Partners (2016-2021)



**Figure 2. Training commitments made at Asia-Africa forums from 2016 to 2021.**

The roots of ontological power reside in a well-told story—a compelling narrative that provides structure and coherence to the material and soft-power investment. Now we take a close look at the deployment of ontological power by China, Japan, and India in turn.

### *China*

The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) relationship with African states is not new,<sup>15</sup> but its transition from primarily trade relations to a development-centered relationship has accelerated in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Since 2000, the China–Africa forum has steered China’s innovation of development cooperation principles. Extensive bilateral and multilateral engagement through FOCAC has allowed Beijing to clearly define the rules of engagement for cooperation with a burgeoning Chinese power. While Beijing preaches non-interference and win-win cooperation, China’s core interests—the “One China” principle, respect for sovereignty, and solidarity in international affairs—remain non-negotiable for partner nations seeking investment. Beijing’s international brand centered on the Belt and Road and China Dream has evolved through experimentation on the African continent.

The “China Dream,” popularized by Xi Jinping in 2012, promises “national rejuvenation, improvement of people’s livelihoods, prosperity, construction of a better society, and military strengthening.”<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the individual pursuit of prosperity, the China Dream is fundamentally centered on national rejuvenation and the restoration of China’s pride and prominence. Xi draws on the glories of Chinese heritage and history to envision a future of power and prosperity that celebrates the characteristics and values of Chinese society.

The fulfillment of the China dream has been marketed in the developing world. The China Dream appeals to African states by highlighting China’s unique role as a development partner and developing country, and by drawing parallels with an “African renaissance” to advance “common development.” The African renaissance, popularized by former South African President Thabo Mbeki, calls for Africa to “rise from the ashes” and seek glory.<sup>17</sup> This dream has been incorporated into the bloodstream of the African Union, becoming a prominent facet of Agenda 2063.<sup>18</sup> In multiple forums, Xi Jinping stressed the parallel nature of the China Dream and the African renaissance, creating “one community connected by a common fate”<sup>19</sup> and urging nations to draw on uniquely African culture, heritage, and identity to propel the continent to *renewal* and international prominence. The PRC’s growth trajectory and ambitions to achieve prosperity and modernity with Chinese characteristics offers a compelling paradigm for African nations. As Xi boldly stated, Beijing’s narrative is “blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization,” reflecting Beijing’s newfound confidence as an ontological influencer on the global stage.<sup>20</sup>

The BRI is Beijing’s mechanism to operationalize the China Dream. Built upon the legacy of the historic Euro-Asian trade route, the “New Silk Road” is a multitrillion dollar whole-of-government strategy that envisions overland and maritime links connecting Asia, Africa, Europe, and beyond (see fig. 3).<sup>21</sup> China’s investment in the Suez Canal redevelopment, East African port infrastructure, and pan-African rail links show the extent to which the BRI narrative and ontological power are shaping the brick and mortar realities in African states.<sup>22</sup>

Capturing the spirit of the Silk Road, BRI uses historic memory to endow Beijing’s brand as one rooted in ancient glory and international cooperation.<sup>23</sup> Importantly, this narrative invokes a pre-Western period, where, according to the PRC, Chinese wisdom and philosophy contributed to constructive and mutually beneficial engagement with foreign states. As Xi elaborated, the narrative draws “wisdom and strength from the ancient Silk Road, which features the spirit of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit.”<sup>24</sup> The value of Chinese wisdom as a positive contributor to human heritage resonates in the narrative, offering an alternative to “Westernization.”



**Figure 3. Map of Silk and Road Initiative released by China's Xinhua News Agency in 2014.** Published map as reproduced in English by The China Africa Project (Eric Olander, Cobus van Staden, and Matt Ferchen, "China's Ambitious New 'Silk Road' Trade Route Takes Shape in Africa," *China in Africa* [podcast], 16 June 2016, <https://www.chinafile.com/>.)

President Xi has taken deliberate steps to legitimize his vision. The publication of the Belt and Road action plan and establishment of the Belt and Road Forum were fashioned to advance the legitimacy of the BRI model and strengthen development policy synergy both within and outside established global governance structures.<sup>25</sup> Beijing has invested extensively in training African political elites, academics, scholars, and policymakers. The deployment of Confucius Institutes across the African continent, development of African states' digital and telecommunications infrastructure, and institutional entrenchment have resulted in the proliferation of Chinese language, culture, history, and values. China launched a CCTV<sup>26</sup> HQ in Nairobi in 2012 and now broadcasts in dozens of African languages, providing first-time service to many rural communities. Extensive media engagement has resulted in the training of African media professionals in China and the signing of at least 12 cooperative agreements linking Chinese and African media institutions. Deepening high-level engagement is a persistent objective of the FOCAC forum, resulting in the launch of the China-Africa State Governance Forum and the China-Africa Think Tank Forum in 2018 to promote Beijing's "diplomacy with Chinese characteristics" and outline core values and policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In 2018, the CCP Party Conference attracted 40 political party representatives from 36 African countries. According to press releases, the CCP training content includes coaching on "Xi Jinping Thought" and elaboration of China's core interests (One China Policy, Reunification with Tai-

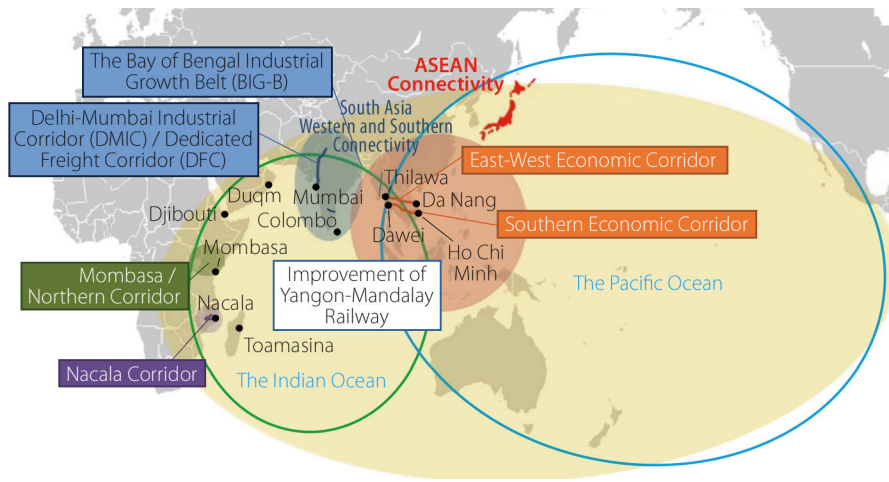
wan, Party control of Hong Kong, bilateral resolution of disputes in the South China Sea, among others) to foster African government policy alignment with Beijing.<sup>27</sup> While often overshadowed by Beijing's multibillion-dollar railroad or energy investments in Africa, the increasing resonance of African narratives, social identity, and institutions with the BRI and the China Dream must not be overlooked. Drawing the China Dream and African renaissance into alignment has built legitimacy for Beijing's narratives beyond the African continent.

### ***Japan***

Established in 1993, TICAD was the first Asian-African summit of its kind, allowing Japan to convey its national identity and development philosophy directly to development partners in Africa. Emerging powers, China and India followed Japan's lead and established FOCAC and IAFS in 2000 and 2008. As an established donor and OECD-DAC member, Japan achieved the status of a major development power through investment in TICAD initiatives. Japan distinguished its bold development paradigm and elevated a non-Western development philosophy through its leadership in African development issues via TICAD.

At TICAD VI in 2016, Prime Minister Abe announced Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision. Rooted in Abe's desire for the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, FOIP embodies the strategic and effective use of development cooperation to advance Japan's position as a global influencer (see fig. 4). Africa offers an unharnessed growth opportunity and serves as the testing ground for Japan's proactive development engagement. Under the FOIP strategy, Tokyo plans to a) establish and promote fundamental principles of development engagement, b) promote quality infrastructure development, and c) ensure peace and stability.<sup>28</sup> The US government's official embrace of the FOIP strategy in political discourse and reorganization of command structures in 2018 further legitimized Japan's disruptive development narrative.<sup>29</sup> However, Japan differs from the United States in its approach by including Africa and the Western Indian Ocean in its Indo-Pacific construct, branding FOIP as a development pathway, and emphasizing triangular cooperation and soft-power engagement. These efforts align with Tokyo's promotion of a disruptive brand centered on the cultivation of ontological influence. Tokyo uses TICAD to tie FOIP initiatives with African and Indian Ocean agendas, to make the connection from "Asia to Africa a main artery for growth and prosperity."<sup>30</sup>





**Figure 4. Tokyo’s framework for the realization of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” as illustrated in the 2018 Diplomatic Bluebook (MOFA 2018: 21)**

The distinctive features of Japan’s ODA philosophy in Africa, centered on *ownership*, *partnership*, and *human security*, have proven to be influential in shaping emerging development principles. Most notably, after their debut in TICAD, Japan’s development principles have been mainstreamed in global governance frameworks, such as the G20, UN SDGs, and AU Agenda 2063. Tokyo’s extension of the FOIP vision to include African partnerships places Japan at the forefront of shaping twenty-first century African narratives in alignment with prevailing OECD-DAC values. Japan uniquely offers African nations a triangular partnership that links priority initiatives in Asia, Africa, and the UN. Japan’s new Japan International Cooperation Agency, the world’s largest bilateral aid institution,<sup>31</sup> exemplifies a mature and effective development institution and is central in brokering Asia-Africa cooperation in coordination with Tokyo’s strategic national interests.

In contrast to Beijing, Tokyo completely avoids efforts to influence African media or journalism institutions. Rather than entrenching Japan’s institutions in African states, TICAD is used to advance Japan’s prominence in multilateral organizations, such as the UN, G20, and global financing institutions. During Japan’s presidency of the G20 in 2019, Tokyo prioritized TICAD initiatives for quality infrastructure and health, demonstrating Japan’s role as a global development leader. TICAD promotes the empowerment of African regional institutions such as the AU/NEPAD and Regional Economic Communities, to advance intra-Africa and Asia-Africa cooperation. Japan’s approach distinguishes its core values and identity as a high-quality, principled development power. Japan’s deployment of ontological power contrasts sharply with Chinese and Indian efforts.

As an established donor, Tokyo deepened cooperation in international governance institutions and leveraged the TICAD brand of high-quality technical excellence and sustainable human-focused development to elevate Japan's strategic narratives on the global stage.

## ***India***

Although India is overshadowed in terms of the scale of financial investment, New Delhi's strategic regional approach and focus on niche high-end sectors offers African nations a viable partnership alternative. India's core interests of strategic autonomy, regional multilateralism, and international system reform speak to the pursuit of self-determination by African states in a postcolonial, post-apartheid world. Since 2008, India has reoriented its near neighborhood strategy to include African nations as a top foreign policy priority.<sup>32</sup> As such, African cooperation has spread from commonwealth states to a pan-African engagement approach. New Delhi's brand of South-South partnership, founded on the principle of human resource development, distinguishes India as a soft-power and ontological stronghold in the Indian Ocean and African region. New Delhi's strategy of providing high-tech solutions to address common development challenges and realize the aspirations of Africa's massive youth populations has allowed India to punch above its weight in Africa and on the international stage. From 2008 to 2019 IAFS has advanced a network and technology backbone that aligns Indian and African domestic development initiatives in sustainable energy solutions, solar power generation, pharmaceuticals, and digitization. Decades of investment in the Pan Africa e-Network, a massive information and communications technology satellite and fiber-optical network, has resulted in close cooperation between Indian and African institutions. With an additional \$15B investment in 2015, India's modernized e-network increases direct touchpoints with African stakeholders in academia, governance, medicine, and industry to consolidate Southern solidarity. Additionally, a half-century of Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation scholarships has resulted in generations of influential African leaders cultivated on Indian soil. New Delhi is becoming a heavyweight in attracting like-minded partners and friends on the African continent, evidenced by the alignment of India and African states in the UN voting records and policy alignment.

The twenty-first century creation of the Indo-Pacific regional order has positioned India as a counterweight to a swiftly expanding China. The growing material, ontological, and soft-power influence of China in Africa and the Indian Ocean sent shock waves through a zone of historical Indian influence. Former Prime Minister Singh's gentle approach of seeking common ground with a rising China has given way to Modi's more explicit and assertive foreign relations tactic.

This new posture is reflected in India's active disruption of Beijing's influence through the advancement of its alternative South-South development narrative. New Delhi progressively leverages ontological and soft-power strongholds in the Indian Ocean and African region to create a framework for regional multilateralism in domains of security, technology development, and governance. Both domestically and internationally, expectations of its emerging renaissance prod India toward self-realization as a global power.

Modi has proposed two major fronts to propel India into its new role of power within the Indo-Pacific regional order, aligning domestic and foreign policy agendas. The first aims to mobilize a massive youth population and deliver on the promise of opportunity for India and Africa's aspiring middle class. The second, Project Mausam, laid the strategic foundations for Modi's Security and Growth Across the Region vision. India's development narrative leverages historic anchors in Africa to cement an ontological alignment. These anchors include: 1) a shared geography making India the "insider" donor, 2) mutual historical heroes and martyrs that form the basis of shared emancipation legends, and 3) similar development states and conditions. These commonalities are vital in creating an aligned value system, regional interdependency between African states and India, and unity of effort toward international reform. They form the basis of New Delhi's formidable ontological power and ability to impart strategic disruption. Through multilateral economic, cultural, and security integration, India has compensated for its limited resources and enhanced its geopolitical weight in the international arena. Ultimately, both initiatives reveal the growing importance of the Africa-India strategic partnership as a pillar of Indian-led regional multilateralism.

Under the leadership of Japan's prime minister, Shinzo Abe, and India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, a "Special Strategic and Global Partnership" between Japan and India was confirmed in 2015. With the landmark partnership, India's Project Mausam and Japan's "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" evolved into the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), a grand strategic vision that aligns with both nations' interests as a subset of Japan's FOIP vision. Like Beijing's Belt and Road, the AAGC emphasizes the alignment of development strategies against the backdrop of infrastructure and institutional connectivity. The AAGC reflects the growing synergy between Japan's TICAD narratives and India's IAFS narrative.

### **Ontological Power in the New Era of Competition**

The use of ontological power has great bearing on modern geopolitics and is shaping future engagement strategies. In a reflection on the tenets of ontological power, four key recommendations—control the narrative, build alignment, mar-

ket the brand, and invest in development—are proposed for consideration by policymakers and leaders in the military, business, and development sectors.

Control the Narrative. It has never been more evident that we live in a contested information environment.<sup>33</sup> The ability to project and maintain a narrative is essential to national legitimacy and provides a political mandate. Reflecting on the current conflict in Ukraine, it is clear that the Putin administration has lost both the information war and the ontological war with severe impacts on national reputation and regime legitimacy. Although the battle continues to wage, the war has been lost and the damage to the Russian state (both material and reputational) is irreversible under the current system. On the other hand, China is much more sophisticated in its ability to control the narrative. Under the guise of the Belt and Road and regional security, Beijing has successfully established numerous military outposts in the South China Sea and secured access to dual commercial-military use ports in strategic locations in the Indo-Pacific (including Africa).<sup>34</sup> Despite being ruled illegal, Beijing has extracted support from development partners, including numerous African states, undermining the legitimacy of the 2016 International Court of Arbitration ruling.<sup>35</sup> Veiled in the narrative of security, stability, and prosperity, China's suppression of freedoms in Hong Kong and increasing aggression toward Taiwan have so far thwarted opponents. Beijing's skillful control of the narrative in a long war of attrition has proven a challenging problem for Western powers to overcome. The United States and its allies and partners must provide an alternative to challenge the hegemony of Beijing's development narrative. The Western world and key partners, such as Japan and India, have the essential ingredients of ontological power but have failed to effectively operationalize the narrative, build alignment, market the brand, and invest in development.

As a starting point, the United States can look at the successes of Japan in the broad deployment of the FOIP vision that extends far beyond a security strategy. In coordination with partners, the United States must tell the story of its core values, beliefs, and identity as the foundation for a compelling vision of the world order. An America first narrative or a narrative based on countering China or maintenance of the status quo will not be effective. The United States can reference historical development feats, such as the Marshall Plan, and learn from Japan and India in crafting a visionary development narrative aligned with the strategic interests of our nation.

Build Alignment. An effective ontological narrative must realize alignment across the whole of government and among allies and partners. Beijing's BRI and China Dream provide the developing world a blueprint for a community of common destiny. China's increasing policy synchronization with partner states means that Beijing is buffered from international isolation by a growing network of de-

velopment partners. At the same time, as liberal institutions such as the UN, OECD, EU, and even NATO grapple to define their mandate in the twenty-first century, the United States recognizes the critical role of a robust system of allies and partners to deter and win future wars. The existential threat that built cohesion in the post-WWII and Cold War era has atrophied. A US-led ontological narrative must be developed in concert with strategic partners to achieve alignment and bolster critical international institutions and alliances. Furthermore, the United States must deliberately invest in the maintenance of alliances and partnerships and the development of new partnerships. This requires the United States to demonstrate commitment, be present at the table to shape the narratives in international organizations and institutions, and prioritize key-leader engagements. Alignment with nonprofit organizations and even the private sector can be a force multiplier for US ontological power.

Market the Brand. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has demonstrated extreme prowess in marketing Ukraine's narrative and harnessing ontological power. Despite an obvious mismatch in military power, Zelenskyy has made impassioned appeals to global audiences with each message meticulously aligned to the core values and existential security of his audience. Zelenskyy echoed the words of Winston Churchill in the darkest hour in his speech to the British parliament, he invoked Pearl Harbor and 9/11 to energize a US audience, he reflected on the aftermath of the nuclear crisis and pacifist ideals while compelling the Japanese parliament to build its mantle of leadership in the Pacific, and the list goes on.<sup>36</sup> The American brand still holds great appeal around the world; however, soft power is not a substitute for the deliberate promotion of the United States' ontological narrative. Beijing's compelling growth story and development model is capturing increasing market share outside of the Western world. The United States' brand must be paired with a concrete pathway for current allies and aspiring nations. As a starting point, the Quad (comprised of Japan, India, Australia, and the United States) should be the heart of an Indo-Pacific region development vision, rather than just a security-focused dialogue.

Invest in Development. The United States' post-WWII military campaigns and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been tactical and operational successes but strategic failures. One of the core failures was a lack of understanding of the limit of military operations to achieve political and social outcomes.<sup>37</sup> Recent military interventions have highlighted the risks of Department of Defense-led operations without a clear military objective and robust whole-of-government strategy. Instead, we can learn from partners and allies in the Indo-Pacific about the power of a development vision. Japan's post-WWII constitution limits its maintenance or projection of a military force; however, its extensive ODA budgets and decades of

development experience posture Japan as a global development power. Tokyo's model of proactive engagement is tackling social, environmental, and security challenges in some of the most challenging development contexts. It is evident that a strategic investment in development could headline US ontological power and increase security and stability. This strategy requires a compelling narrative to rally domestic and international support, significant long-term investment in development through USAID and the Department of State, and the rebalance of the Department of Defense within the whole-of-government apparatus.

The United States should not go head-to-head with China in an aid arms race, but rather, use ontological power in concert with our partners to offer viable alternatives and increased ownership in development. Rather than a zero-sum game (United States versus China), more development options and investment will increase growth potential and improve security while forcing Beijing's adherence to international environmental, social, and transparency standards. To secure US interests at home and abroad, we must tell the story of American core values, identity, and vision for a free and democratic world. Along with allies and partners—Japan, India, the EU, and beyond—the United States can ensure that it maintains a constructive great-power competition and deters a devastating conflict in the Indo-Pacific. 🌐

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#### **Notes**

1. DIME—diplomatic, information, military, and economic instruments of power.
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11. Brittany Morreale and Purnendra Jain, “Foreign Aid and Asian Donors,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Asian Foreign Policy*, ed. Takashi Inoguchi, 500–20 (Tokyo: SAGE, 2019).
12. In 2021 more than 80 percent of India’s UNPKO contributions were in support of African missions. India ranked as the number three contributor to African UNPKO missions, behind Bangladesh and Nepal (UNPKO 2021).
13. Funding values reflect contributions to UN Peacekeeping Operations for 2020–2021. Reference: A/73/350/Add.1
14. The original English name, “One Belt One Road,” was rebranded to the Belt and Road Initiative in 2015.
15. Outside of a few exceptional examples, such as China’s TANZAN railway in the 1960s, China and India’s role as donors in African states was minor until the late twentieth century.
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