

**China and the Indo-Pacific:  
Multipolarity, Solidarity and Strategic Patience**

*Professor Rory Medcalf  
Head, National Security College, Australian National University*

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It is time to reimagine the strategic map of Asia. A brief but increasingly obsolete late 20<sup>th</sup> century concept called the Asia-Pacific is giving way to something we can call the Indo-Pacific. Rather than an obscure distinction about labels on a map, this development has real-world consequences for international security and stability, especially when it comes to the effects of China's power on its region and ultimately on the world.

The leaders of Japan and India, Australia and now also the United States, are openly privileging the term Indo-Pacific when they talk about regional diplomacy, geo-economics and strategy. Some other countries in Asia, such as Indonesia and Vietnam, are beginning to experiment with it, and, words aside, others such as Singapore have long practised a diplomacy that bridges the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. Recently in Hanoi I heard a Vietnamese senior official publicly urge ASEAN institutions to preserve peace and stability “in the Asia-Pacific and the wider context of the Indo-Pacific”. Seemingly a minor point of semantics, but actually a signal of Vietnam's intent to play a more active game of balancing Chinese power.

European powers, notably France, are also taking an interest in the changing ways in which Asian nations are framing their own region, as they should. In a connected global system where democracies are under strain and where a rising China appears to be expanding its interests and its influence all directions, Australia's part of the world is more Europe's part of the world than might immediately be assumed.

So, what's in a name? Quite a lot, as it turns out. The emerging Indo-Pacific debate is in large part about China. It is *not* a China-centric region – that is part of the point - but without China there would be no Indo-Pacific, as we will see.

For some years now, I have been advocating a reframing of the Asia-Pacific as the Indo-Pacific – a globally-central, two-ocean strategic system with fluid boundaries and an Asian core. This suits the geography and perspective of my own country, Australia, which five years ago became the first country in the world to formally redefine its region of principal security and diplomatic interest as the Indo-Pacific. As a policy-oriented scholar of strategic affairs, one knows one is doing something right when the Foreign Minister for the People's Republic of China (PRC) takes the trouble to publicly dismiss a concept one has helped develop. Recently, Wang Yi called the Indo-Pacific “an attention-grabbing idea” that will soon “dissipate like sea foam”.

Why did he bother? Why would the rulers of China – who surely have plenty of much more tangible things to worry about – feel the need to criticise the mere use of the words Indo-Pacific? Could it be that Beijing sees in these words the seed of something more substantial? In short, the Indo-Pacific is emerging as the chief conceptual challenge to the idea of One Belt and One Road – a China-centric vision of the extended region. It is also reducing the salience of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century idea of the Asia-Pacific, essentially an East Asia-centric order that had come to suit China because it tended to exclude China's emerging rival, India.

Yet Beijing's determination to discredit the Indo-Pacific idea is deeply ironic – and probably futile – given that it is the extension of China's own interests, capabilities, presence and influence in the Indian Ocean that, more than any other factor, has driven this redefinition of the region. Consider:

- China's deep dependence on the sealanes of the Indian Ocean for its oil security;
- the now permanent presence of its Navy in the Indian Ocean;
- Its multiple experiments with submarine forays and annual surface warfare exercises there;
- Its development of naval platforms such as aircraft carriers for projecting power far from home;
- Its active strategic diplomacy to encircle India;

- the recent establishment of its major military base at Djibouti;
- Its growing semi-colonial presence in Pakistan (soon prospectively to include Chinese gated communities);
- Its efforts at influence over strategic waypoints like Sri Lanka and Maldives;
- The rapid growth of its fishing presence and seabed resource exploration efforts in the Indian Ocean;
- Its massive bid to export surplus capacity by building infrastructure and influence southwards and westwards;
- Its powerful public expectations, fanned by action movies and other propaganda, that it will protect the interests and dignity of its million-plus nationals in Africa no matter what;
- And its active reimagining of history, in line with the old imperial concept of *tian xia* – everything under the heavens - to justify an expansive regional and global role.

It adds up to a lot more than ocean foam. China's own geoeconomic regional influence-through-infrastructure enterprise, the Belt and Road Initiative, includes the so-called Maritime Silk Road. This is essentially the Indo-Pacific with Chinese characteristics; indeed, for now, China may be the only nation with a truly Indo-Pacific strategy.

So what does this new way of imagining Asia mean for countries seeking to cope with Chinese power? The Indo-Pacific holds lessons about multipolarity, solidarity among like-minded nations, and patient strategic confidence – that is, strategic confidence combined with strategic patience, not hesitation or timidity or complacency - in dealing with Xi Jinping's China.

The debate about how to define a region may seem largely about words, maps and history. But words, maps and history can have material potency when it comes to the decisions, behaviour and interests of states in international relations. The maps in the minds of political leaders have real-world consequences for matters of diplomacy, economics, strategic competition, peace and war.

I will hold off defining the Indo-Pacific for the moment: it is a deceptively complex concept, encompassing many dualities, and even its definition is a work in progress. We will see presently why the idea of the Indo-Pacific so complicates China's or indeed any country's expansive strategic ambitions in Asia – and indeed globally. We will also see why the idea of the Indo-Pacific is so admirably suited to many of the other powers seeking to moderate Chinese behaviour in regional and global politics. These include my country, Australia, but also, as it happens, France.

This discussion requires some long detours through history, the submerged, somewhat forgotten history of maritime Asia, to demonstrate that the Indo-Pacific is more venerable, arguably more legitimate and certainly more enduring, than the short-lived late 20<sup>th</sup> century formulation of the 'Asia-Pacific' that many of us have been accustomed to. History matters and maps matter, especially in this era when powerful nations like China are trying to rewrite history and redraw maps to justify their strategic behaviour.

Along the way, it is necessary to dispel some emerging myths about the Indo-Pacific, such as the suggestion that it somehow marginalises Asia in the world. Maritime Asia and the sea lanes of Southeast Asia are absolutely at the core of the Indo-Pacific. Among other things, this map of the region reminds us that the contested and international waters of the South China Sea are not a Chinese lake but will remain everybody's business. Rather than disempower the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Indo-Pacific offers it a new vehicle, a new purpose, if only its member countries seize the opportunity to shape this new development. In fact, ASEAN nations have far more scope to shape the emerging, inclusive, multipolar and maritime Indo-Pacific framework than they do the China-centric Belt and Road, which essentially treats them as way stations in a chain of connectivity that has Xi Jinping's Party-State at the core.

Developing a dynamic sense of the Indo-Pacific idea provides a foundation for a set of policies for many nations everywhere – especially maritime nations, especially democracies, but not them alone – for protecting their interests in the face of assertive Chinese power. Indeed, if one follows some of the latest and finest scholarship and reportage on how China's future may unfold – the work of Carl Minzner, David Shambaugh, Minxin Pei and Howard French, to name a few - you may begin to see the virtues of patience fused with confidence, rather than panic or awe, in devising a China policy.

Their and others' growing body of work illuminates an overstretched 21<sup>st</sup> century quasi-empire which uses military modernisation, the inducements and promises of the

Belt and Road, and an extraordinary investment in hard, soft and indeed what is now termed sharp power, to expand its reach and influence. Such analysis suggests that China's haste and confidence may in fact mask a quiet desperation to lock in relative advantages in the current high point of opportunity before rapidly ageing demographics, the limits of an unreformed economy, worsening authoritarianism, institutional brittleness and coalitions of strategic pushback begin to manifest in ways that accelerate China's stagnation and instability.

Against this altered backdrop, the notion of a fluid, adaptable Indo-Pacific regional order begins to increase in appeal. Whether Chinese power grows or founders, there are good arguments for the region's many middle powers and stakeholders to coordinate their policies to moderate China's influence and discourage its risk-taking. Indeed, the shape of the region, thus defined, lends itself to such a strategy. It is a region too large and diverse for true hegemony. It is a region defined by multipolarity and connectivity, the centre of strategic and economic gravity in a still-globalised world.

Of course, prediction is foolish. Much will depend now on the strategic choices and political will of many governments, of democracies struggling with the global challenge to the rules-based order, and of the many middle players, those seeing in their ties with one another new avenues for independent agency in between the United States and China.

We are living through the early phases of a long Indo-Pacific moment, with great opportunity for many countries to shape a new and multipolar order – or alternately to bow to the impression of China's centrality and the illusion of China's endless upwards trajectory, and live with the consequences. In Asia, many analysts have begun to assume that China is on an unstoppable rise to unchallenged regional hegemony. It is easy to leap to that conclusion by glancing at China's decades of rapid, if now slowing, economic growth and dramatic military modernisation. This narrative reflects China's expanding confidence, power and interests along with the uncertainties about America under Donald Trump.

Without question, the rude arrival of the Trump Administration has come at precisely the time when Asia needed confidence in America's commitment to leadership, liberal values and the support of its allies. Many people are starting to pay attention to the terminology of the Indo-Pacific now, only because late last year the Trump Administration began formally using it in speeches and policy documents like the new US National Security Strategy. But the Indo-Pacific idea is not solely an American one, and I suspect it will be around a lot longer than a Trump Presidency.

A defining feature of the emerging Indo-Pacific order is that it is multipolar, that China and America are not the only nations whose interests, power and will are consequential. A web of counter-narratives is emerging that are beginning to shape strategic expectations and behaviour among some key states in Asia. The narratives vary somewhat from nation to nation – Japan, India, Australia, for instance each have their own - but they revolve around the concept of managing security competition across a multipolar, globally central and highly connected two-ocean region.

The Indo-Pacific idea feeds into the recent revival of a quadrilateral security dialogue or ‘quad’ among the United States, Japan, India and Australia. But it is much larger and more inclusive than the quad. There is already lots of mythology about the quad. Some portray it as an Asian NATO, the embryo of a formal alliance to balance or even ‘contain’ Chinese power. Some see this as a provocation to confrontation, even war. On the other hand, some dismiss the quad as unlikely to amount to much, since so far its member states seem inclined only to talk rather than stick their necks out in each other’s defence – especially when it comes to India.

Like the Indo-Pacific, the quad is a work in progress. The very fact that four nations have succeeded in formalising a new security dialogue in the face of deep disapproval from China is a sign of their growing determination to prevent Beijing from vetoing their strategic choices. It is also a signal that China’s behaviour is stirring strategic anxiety among many nations – and that India, in particular after the Himalayan border confrontation at Doklam last year, is now fundamentally mistrustful of China’s behaviour and motives, for the long run. While the quad has an Indo-Pacific character, it should not be equated with the entirety of the Indo-Pacific idea.

With the growth of Chinese power – but not China’s power alone - a great contest of geopolitics is underway in Asia and by extension the world. Geopolitics is about the intersection of geography and the power politics of nations. Of course, part of this is about how geography affects the interests of countries and the strategic choices they make to protect and advance those interests. Ultimately it is the material side of geopolitics that matters: what geography does to nations and what they can do with it.

But before we arrive at that tangible stage, we need to understand how the very act of imagining the geopolitics of nations and regions can have real-world effects. The Asian strategic competition plays out on a landscape of the mind – and this has implications for the real contest. I am talking here about mental maps: conceptions of what defines a region, what is on the map, what is off the map, and why. The importance of mental maps is as old as map-making itself. What you imagine as being

on the map is a marker of what you, as a nation, consider important. This in turn affects your behaviour, your allocation of resources, your prioritisation of problems and your choice of friends.

More specifically, the way policymakers define and imagine regions can affect, among other things, the allocation of resources and high-level attention; the prioritization of security partners among countries; and the membership and agendas of regional diplomatic institutions.

Thus, the increasing use of the term Indo-Pacific carries implications for the way countries approach security competition or cooperation in maritime Asia. This has ramifications for how countries manage and incorporate China's rise in the regional and indeed the global order. There is no one right way of framing the geopolitical world – nations choose to frame their regions in ways that help them simplify things, make sense of a complex reality, and serve the purposes of their national interests. Powerful nations have always used mapmaking for very serious purposes of state – in the service of their interests, and at the expense of everyone else's. And nowhere is this more apparent today than in Asia.

By now, we have all heard of something called the Belt and Road initiative, China's diplomatic and geo-economic artistry formally known as One Belt One Road. For a long time we have also heard of the Asia-Pacific, East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia, the North Atlantic, Eurasia and so on. These are all geographic constructs – places that governments have at one time or another essentially invented, with a purpose. So it is with the seemingly new concept of the Indo-Pacific. A decade ago, it was almost unheard of in the discourse of international relations. Today we are seeing the great contest of ideas in the mental maps of Asia can be simplified to the big two: China's Belt and Road versus the Indo-Pacific, championed by Japan, India, Australia and gradually, as it gathers its wits, the United States. Other nations are seeking to understand both concepts and identify how they can leverage, evade or influence them.

So what is the Indo-Pacific? At one level it is merely an objective description of the new regional strategic and economic dynamics, rather than, at this stage, a fully-fledged strategic blueprint – but it will increasingly inform strategy, in my view. Put simply, the Indo-Pacific treats as a single strategic system what were hitherto seen as two very separate Asian regions – East Asia, centred on China and lapped by the Pacific Ocean, and South Asia centred on India and abutting the Indian Ocean.

A strategic system can be understood as a set of geopolitical power relationships

among nations where major changes in one part of the system affects what happens in the others. In this sense, the Indo-Pacific can be understood as a maritime “super-region” with its geographical center in Southeast Asia. For the international relations scholars, this has some resonance with the 1990s concept of regional supercomplexes, developed by theorist Barry Buzan.

To reiterate, none of this should be mistaken as some kind of effort to reduce the centrality of Asia in regional conceptions; rather, it is a region with maritime Asia at its core. The Indo-Pacific concept underscores the fact that the Indian Ocean has replaced the Atlantic as the globe’s busiest and most strategically significant trade corridor, carrying two-thirds of global oil shipments and a third of the world’s bulk cargo. The powerhouse economies of East Asia depend acutely on oil imports across the Indian Ocean from the Middle East and Africa, and this dependence is set to deepen further. Around 80 percent of China’s oil imports, perhaps 90 percent of South Korea’s, and up to 90 percent of Japan’s are shipped from the Middle East and/or Africa through the Indian Ocean. And even with all its ambitions overland pipeline projects, China could only offset a small proportion of this seaborne dependency – and at great expense.

This maritime energy dependence is of course a major strategic vulnerability, which is influencing diplomacy and partnership building, as well as the hard-power priorities of naval modernization. The reality of an Indo-Pacific region has been brought about by a confluence of economic and strategic factors. A principal driver has been the rise of China and India back to their precolonial status as great trading economies and powers that have become increasingly outward-looking in their economic and military affairs. This has led to the rapid expansion of their economic interests and, therefore, of their strategic and diplomatic imperatives into what the other might once have considered its primary maritime zone of interest—China’s into the Indian Ocean and South Asia and India’s, to a lesser but growing degree, into the Pacific and East Asia. The Asian giants are brushing up against each other, in what will become one of the most consequential bilateral relationships this century.

This thickening of economic and strategic interaction between China and India is a major part of the Indo-Pacific story. Even so, the Indo-Pacific power narrative is not only about China and India. The region involves the intersecting interests of at least four major powers—China, India, Japan, and the United States—as well as many significant middle players including Australia, South Korea, the Southeast Asian countries, and more distant stakeholders such as from Europe.

In parallel to the geographically expanding interests and reach of China and India, the

continued strategic role and presence of the United States in both the Pacific and Indian oceans is a major factor defining the regional dynamic. The interests of Japan and of South Korea, which rely even more acutely than does China on energy supplies across the Indian Ocean, also need to be taken into account. Japan's active strategic diplomacy in recent years, including an enhanced security and economic partnership with India and the establishment of a small military base in Djibouti, can be seen as Indo-Pacific in character. Indeed, in 2016 Prime Minister Abe declared that Japan would pursue a so-called 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy', encompassing development, connectivity, investment and security issues stretching all the way to Africa. This built on his earlier championing of a precursor to the Indo-Pacific, the so-called confluence of the two seas - *futatsu no umi no majiwari* - which he articulated in a historic speech to the Indian Parliament in 2007. India and Japan is the strategic alignment to watch: on the day Trump was elected, Modi and Abe were meeting over maps in a Shinkansen carriage in Japan, and no doubt sensibly swapping notes on how to handle America as well as China.

The most active power, however, in advocating the Indo-Pacific idea has been Australia. Canberra has a unique role here: it is a middle power in the gathering Indo-Pacific strategic game, in multiple ways. These include its relative diplomatic influence, its unusual two-ocean geography, its proximity to and advanced surveillance of the crucial sea lanes connecting the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, and its status as a state that—despite being a close US ally—is diversifying and deepening economic, societal, and security relations with multiple Asian powers.

Moreover, Australia has long grappled with its singular status as neither an Asian nor a Western power, perceived as both integral to yet separate from both the Western world and the Asian region. All of this helps explain why Australia has been at the forefront of driving an Indo-Pacific understanding of the region, notably by formally recognising this as the name of Australia's zone of strategic interest in its 2013 defence white paper. This was reinforced in our most recent defence and foreign policy white papers, in 2016 and 2017 respectively, and has become a bipartisan orthodoxy.

As well as a strategic system, the Indo-Pacific is a geo-economic system: the changing economic interests and links among countries have helped give rise to their power relationships. As with colonialism, the flag follows trade. Indeed, the origins of the modern Indo-Pacific were economic, especially the sudden dependence, since the mid-1990s, of a burgeoning China on imported oil from Africa and the Middle East, crossing the maritime highway of the Indian Ocean.

There are some other significant features of the Indo-Pacific. It is a *maritime* system, where the interests of and interactions of countries at sea tend to overshadow the continental, land-based elements of their relations with each other. It is a *multipolar* system, in which the fate of regional order, or disorder, will not be determined by one or even two powers – the United States and China – but also by the interests and choices of others. Beyond those two obvious features, it is characterised by *duality*, also encompasses a range of dualities – in other words, the reconciliation of contrasting aspects within one idea.

The Indo-Pacific idea is both an objective description of geopolitical circumstances and the basis for a strategy. It is both inclusive and exclusive: It is about incorporating Chinese interests into a regional order where the rights of others are respected; but it is also about balancing against Chinese power when those rights are not. It is both economic and strategic: it has economic origins but profoundly strategic consequences. As a maritime region its boundaries are fluid, in every sense of the word, and this helps explain why some different countries define it differently. Is Africa in or not? It depends on the extent to which the interests of the key Indo-Pacific powers – China, the US, India, Japan – are engaged.

Still on the exposition of dualities, the Indo-Pacific matters as a maritime region, but give the emphasis on competing port access and infrastructure in the unfolding great game, perhaps it is the connection of the sea to the land that defines what is strategically important. The Indo-Pacific is thus better understood as a complement, not merely an alternative, to continental conceptions of connectivity in Eurasia. (Or more accurately, Eurasia is the complement to the Indo-Pacific, if you accept that the sea outweighs the land for ease of power projection and cheapness of transportation.) It is about Asia but also more than Asia. It still includes the old Asia-Pacific, and for now is a conception that can exist alongside the Asia-Pacific, but in time may replace it. It is regional *and* global: the Indo-Pacific is the main highway for commerce and energy between Asia, Africa, Europe, Oceania and the Americas. So it is the most globally-connected of regions. You could call it the global region, and that is a duality not a contradiction.

Thus, in practical terms, not all the Indo-Pacific's chief stakeholders are necessarily resident or fully-resident powers. For instance, consider all the countries with interests and capabilities deployed in the Indian Ocean – fairly much all the world's ocean-going navies converged there against Somali piracy - and yet how few of them actually have territory there.

Another way to comprehend the Indo-Pacific is through history. The development of the modern Indo-Pacific can be told as narrative, or it can be told as a chronology of turning points, which together provide clues to a structural shift of the map. Here are some of the key pivotal moments in recent decades:

1993 – China became a net importer of oil, mostly from the Middle East and Africa. It is now grievously reliant on imports from afar and it trusts nobody else, least not the United States, to guard the sea lanes for it.

2004 – US security analysts warned of a so-called ‘string of pearls’ strategy by China to build naval access points in the Indian Ocean. These warnings were widely dismissed as alarmist.

2005 – the East Asia Summit was established, bringing India and Australia into what was meant to be the crowning institution of the so-called Asia-Pacific.

2005 – negotiations began on the US-India nuclear deal, signalling new strategic trust between the world’s two largest, and hitherto estranged, democracies.

2007 – Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe proclaimed the ‘confluence of the two seas’ as a basis for Japanese foreign policy and Japan-India security ties. The first quadrilateral dialogue among Australia, India, Japan and the United States was held then abandoned under Chinese pressure.

2008 – In December the Chinese Navy deployed for counter-piracy missions in the Indian Ocean, arriving in January 2009. It has never left.

2013 – Xi Jinping announced the Maritime Silk Road and the One Belt One Road initiatives, now the Belt and Road Initiative.

2013 – Australia’s defence white paper proclaimed the Indo-Pacific as its zone of strategic interest.

2015 – Xi Jinping announced that “the traditional mentality that the land outweighs the sea must be abandoned” in formulating Chinese military policy. This reflected and spurred China’s investment in a massive ocean-going navy.

2016 – Japanese Prime Minister Abe announced a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy’.

2017 – The Trump Administration identified competition with China in the Indo-Pacific as being a top strategic concern in its National Security Strategy.

2017 – the quadrilateral dialogue of Australia, Japan, India and the United States resumed.

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Now let's put these dates into context. The idea of the Indo-Pacific is not really new at all. It has a long line of antecedents, dating back to pre-colonial times. It has been a more enduring way of understanding the geography of Asia than the late twentieth-century separation of East Asia and South Asia—a consequence of Cold War dynamics and the inwards turn of the Chinese and Indian economies in the first few decades after World War II.

Economic and cultural interactions between Asia's sub-regions go back millennia, as attested by the spread of Buddhism from India to East Asia and Hinduism into Southeast Asia, what these days we would call the ultimate projection of "soft power". The interactions were not always from west to east: in the early 1400s, the Chinese empire sent a powerful "treasure fleet" led by Admiral Zheng He on multiple voyages into the Indian Ocean.

For multiple reasons, including to do with internal instability, domestic economic pressures and continental unrest, Chinese interest in this enterprise was not sustained; a new emperor no longer saw merit in such contact with distant foreigners; and the fleets were called home, never to return west. Of course, soon after Zheng He ceased his expeditions, from the fifteenth century onwards, European adventurers saw merit aplenty, and began to visit the Indian Ocean and the waters and lands to its east and north.

The activities of European mercantilist trading companies, explorers, diplomats, and military expeditions were not confined to narrow twentieth-century conceptions of Asia. Throughout colonial times, with extraordinary consistency from the 1500s to the early 1900s, European maps entitled "Asia" encompassed an Indo-Pacific arc from the Indian Ocean rim, through Southeast Asia to China, Korea, and Japan. One of my favourites is titled *Asie Moderne*, by French cartographer Alain Manesson Mallet from the 1600s. Encompassing an Indo-Pacific arc including India, Southeast Asia, China and Japan, it is modern Asia indeed. Another, even earlier, is by the Dutch cartographer Ortelius', from his extraordinary atlas of 1570, the world's first modern atlas. Apart from its decoration with mermaids and sea monsters, this map is strikingly

modern in its conceptualisation of a connected maritime region from the Persian Gulf to the coast of California, with the islands of Southeast Asia very much at the core.

By the 19th century, this breadth of regional definition was reflected in British imperial practice: The trade arteries and military sinews of that Indian empire reached China and Australia via Singapore, and went west to Africa and Suez. In 1848, it made sense for colonial Australia to, in effect, pivot the map, to reflect its lifelines the world, and it did. The portrait-shaped map from the published journal of Scottish-Australian explorer Thomas Mitchell captured India, Southeast Asia, China and Japan as the regional of looming economic and strategic proximity to the colonies, accentuating the importance of the continent's northern and western coastlines, and tracing the vital sea lines of communication to Singapore, India and Britain.

The earlier grand strategists understood all this connectedness. Both the American seapower theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan and the British continentalist geographer Halford Mackinder each saw Asia as an integrated region. So did a range of European and Asian geostrategists after them, from the German Karl Haushofer to India's K. M. Panikkar. And indeed the political thinkers and visionaries of Asian decolonisation and pan-Asianism, such as Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian thinker, poet and visionary so popular in China and Japan, saw the region as one connected place.

During the Second World War, the Allies recognized their theatre of operations against Japan as having something like an Indo-Pacific character. The British (with Indian troops) fought to regain Southeast Asian from their regional headquarters in what is now Sri Lanka. And indeed Japan's intended Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere also envisaged an Indo-Pacific footprint of domination and exploitation of resources.

After the war, British and sometimes Australian strategic planning for the region continued to be Indo-Pacific, using that terminology into at least the 1960s. But change was afoot. The long colonial era of the Indo-Pacific ended with what should have been the two great Asian economies of the region, newly independent India and Communist China, essentially turning inward, autarchic, away from the sea. From the late 1960s the Asia-Pacific came to dominate conceptions of Asia. This was generally understood as a region connecting Northeast and Southeast Asia with Australia and the Americas.

Much of the purpose of this idea was to reflect and reinforce the US role in Asia. The Asia-Pacific reached institutionalization by the late 1980s, with the establishment of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) process. So by the time China finally

began engaging with Asian multilateralism in the 1990s, it found an Asia-Pacific set of institutions: not only APEC, but also ASEAN and its wider security dialogue the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

Yet in retrospect, the Asia-Pacific concept could not last without coming to terms with two factors that emerged in the 1990s. The first was the rise of India as a substantial economic and military power with interests beyond South Asia. The second was the increased connection between the economic powerhouses of East Asia and the Indian Ocean region, related to their demand for energy and resources. These new dynamics were soon reflected in what was still mislabelled Asia-Pacific institution-building. Thus the ARF came to include India and other South Asian players in the mid-1990s.

At the apotheosis of East Asian institution building—the establishment of the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005—the process of developing an Asia-Pacific region took such a decisive twist that it effectively ended itself. Southeast Asians accepted India, Australia, and New Zealand as members of that regional leaders’ forum from the outset—against China’s lobbying— and so the contemporary Indo-Pacific-era began. This interpretation of events was subsequently borne out in 2013 by Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa, when he argued that the shaping of the EAS was a conscious act of Indo-Pacific diplomacy by Southeast Asian states.

So, since the early 2000s, the Indo-Pacific has returned. Although Australia has led the way by rebadging its region as the Indo-Pacific in its 2013 defence white paper, officials in the United States, India, Japan, and Indonesia have also begun using the term. The Indo-Pacific entered the American foreign-policy lexicon in 2010, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton started using the term in some speeches leading to the US rebalance to the Asia-Pacific. It was not a new idea to the US military. For, Pacific Command, based in Hawaii, the default definition of the region in which their forces have operated for many years had been the “Indo-Asia Pacific” – from Hollywood to Bollywood, as they say.

Any lingering American ambivalence about the Indo-Pacific under Obama has given way to something more under Trump. This is evolution not revolution. Since George W. Bush the United States has consistently embraced India as a priority strategic partner, so there is notable continuity of Indo-Pacific policy on that front at least. And now, whatever else may be said about Trump, he has supported, or at least accepted, a comprehensive endorsement of the Indo-Pacific concept within the Administration.

So what is going on here? Is the Indo-Pacific idea, as some academics have claimed, some kind of conspiracy to exclude China from the region? Hardly. Does it dilute

China's influence? Yes, naturally.

The increasing evidence of Indo-Pacific terminology and thinking by various governments is an evolution of parallel perspectives. Of course, there is some interplay and mutual encouragement, experimentation, and emboldening. Some notable appearances of the term have been, for instance, in joint statements such as in India's interactions with ASEAN, Australia, or Japan, or Australia's with the United States. This underscores that the Indo-Pacific is a useful metaphor for collective action and so-called minilateral cooperation – self-selecting small coalitions of countries united by shared interests, capacities to contribute, and a willingness to work together in shaping and playing by a set of rules. There has been a proliferation of so-called trilateral dialogues, for instance India, Japan and Australia. Three legs are more stable than two, or indeed perhaps than four, and China has learned to live with the trilaterals, a good sign.

The Indo-Pacific legitimises and facilitates such cooperation across the two oceans, breaking down old boundaries that may once have prevented partnership between, say, India and Japan, or India and Australia, or indeed Australia and France. In this context, the Indo-Pacific idea empowers not only the small and medium powers of Asia, but also global stakeholders in the region, such as France. All the maritime trading nations of Europe have interests in an Asia that is predictable, prosperous and abides to by international rules.

France is the most Indo-Pacific of the European powers, given that it also has a territorial presence in both the Indian and Pacific oceans, capable and independent global power projection, and a web of significant strategic relationships underpinned by growing defence technology links, notably with Australia and India. Indeed, with President Macron's visit to India, Indian strategists now openly talk of Delhi looking to Paris to replace Moscow as a principal – and more trusted - defence technology partner. Ideas are now being explored that seemed far-fetched just a few years ago – such as France, India and Australia, which between them command some of the most strategic real estate in the Indian Ocean, pooling maritime surveillance information and collaborating in training and technology.

We don't yet know how far any of this will go – after all, Australia is most comfortable with the Anglo-Saxon world of the Five Eyes, while India and France have their own distinct versions of strategic autonomy. But there is much shared interest in beginning the journey, and a growing recognition in Australia that our historic submarine partnership with France is more than merely commercial.

So, where to now? For all of us, resident powers and stakeholders alike, the policy challenge ahead is about finding ways to incorporate Chinese power and interests in a multipolar region in ways that do not fundamentally harm the interests of others. What matters is not so much the labels diplomats choose to apply but what actions their nations take – thus the need for truly Indo-Pacific strategies, strategies that take account of connections, risks and opportunities across the two oceans.

The Indo-Pacific is a recognition that China is rising in a multipolar region with a long history of empires and colonialism, of hubris and over-reach. What happens next is in many ways up to China, as the quintessential Indo-Pacific power. We need to use our resources and diplomacy, wisely but firmly, and above all in solidarity, in helping motivate China to make choices that favour stability, prosperity and the equal rights of nations. The good news is the Indo-Pacific is too vast and motley a region for any one power to dominate. It is in everyone's interests, however, that no would-be hegemon ends up discovering this the hard way.