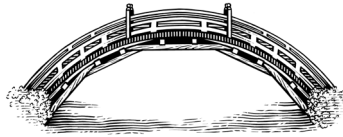


SPECIAL ESSAY

# Indo-Pacific Visions: Giving Solidarity a Chance

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**KEYWORDS:** INDO-PACIFIC; REGIONAL FRAMEWORK; INTERNATIONAL ORDER

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This essay recounts the emergence of various Indo-Pacific concepts in recent years and assesses the different regional frameworks articulated by a range of countries.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

Many countries have articulated Indo-Pacific frameworks for regional security. The Indo-Pacific is being posited as a counter to a China-centric view of regional order under the Belt and Road Initiative. Critics of the concept argue that it is new and artificial, unlike the established Asia-Pacific; it is a U.S. ploy to “contain” China; the Indo-Pacific is too large and vague a region to provide the basis for a strategy; and the multiplicity of Indo-Pacific views from different countries highlights an inability to cooperate in handling Chinese power and U.S.-China tensions. However, the Indo-Pacific is not a new idea, nor is it narrowly American; rather, it renews the region’s enduring maritime and multipolar character. The Indo-Pacific also does not exclude or contain China, though it does dilute China’s influence. Moreover, the region’s scale, ambiguity or “duality,” and apparent diversity of national approaches are advantages rather than liabilities. They can improve the durability and effectiveness of the Indo-Pacific in framing strategies to cope with Chinese power.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The U.S. and its allies and partners will need to demonstrate patience and solidarity as the Indo-Pacific continues to develop as a useful concept to frame policy responses to growing Chinese power and U.S.-China tensions.
- Governments espousing or considering Indo-Pacific concepts should consult with one another to identify and emphasize the commonalities among their outlooks. These include recognition of the need to act within a multipolar and two-ocean strategic system, as well as support for equal sovereignty, rules, and noncoercive behavior.
- An effective U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy will need to take into account the interests and sensitivities of many regional states, involving a focus on competing with China rather than confronting it.

Much of the world now lives in a region that can usefully be called the Indo-Pacific.<sup>1</sup> The Indo-Pacific is no longer an exotic idea, even if no two nations seem to agree entirely on what it means. In 2013, when the Australian government became the first to officially redefine its region according to this two-ocean framework, the term was still a novelty. Some observers began tracking the use of this fresh terminology, looking for diplomatic meaning in what appeared to be an effort to replace the Asia-Pacific as a dominant geopolitical construct. After all, the term Indo-Pacific, or analogous ideas, seemed increasingly popular also with other countries openly concerned about the security impacts of China's growing wealth. Finding a context in which most effectively to respond to Chinese power seemed a major part of what was going on in these efforts to reconceptualize the region.

More recently, the Indo-Pacific is being hailed as an idea whose time has come.<sup>2</sup> Whatever else this two-ocean name may mean, the Indo-Pacific is being posited in some quarters as a counter or alternative to the China-centric view of regional order being pursued by Beijing under the rubric of the Belt and Road Initiative. In other places—notably but not exclusively the policy establishment of the People's Republic of China—it is being rejected as either insubstantial (“an attention-grabbing idea” that will “dissipate like ocean foam”) or dangerous, a cloak for U.S.-led confrontation and containment.<sup>3</sup> Either way, the Indo-Pacific is not being ignored. Instead, it is today being taken seriously as a viable regional definition and a basis for policy in capitals from Tokyo to New Delhi, Washington to Jakarta, and Canberra to Paris.

The Indo-Pacific is the animating principle for Japan's strategic activism in foreign policy under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, now secure in his second term, has articulated an “Act East” policy that places India in a supposedly “natural region” of Indo-Pacific connectivity. Australia's 2017 foreign policy white paper

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<sup>1</sup> The case for the Indo-Pacific presented here is developed further in my forthcoming book *Contest for the Indo-Pacific* (2020), which builds on my arguments in several previous publications, including “Pivoting the Map: Australia's Indo-Pacific System,” Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Centre of Gravity Series, no. 1, November 2012; “The Indo-Pacific: What's in a Name?” *American Interest*, October 2013; “Reimagining Asia: From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific,” *Asan Forum*, June 26, 2015; and “La Chine et l'Indo-Pacifique: Multipolarité, solidarité et patience stratégique” [China and the Indo-Pacific: Multipolarity, Solidarity and Strategic Patience], *Revue Défense Nationale*, no. 811 (2018) ≈ <http://www.defnat.com/e-RDN/vue-article.php?carticle=21779>.

<sup>2</sup> Richard James Heydarian, “The Indo-Pacific Era Debuts at Shangri-La Dialogue,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, June 8, 2018; and Melissa Conley Tyler, “The Indo-Pacific Is the New Asia,” Lowy Institute, Interpreter, June 28, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Birtles, “China Mocks Australia over ‘Indo-Pacific’ Concept It Says Will ‘Dissipate,’” ABC (Australia), March 8, 2018.

confirmed a bipartisan view in Canberra that Australia's strategic interests are concentrated in the Indo-Pacific and that the country's security could be advanced through an expanding web of partnerships with other maritime democracies across that region.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. Department of Defense has defined the Indo-Pacific as its primary theater of rivalry with revisionist powers, most particularly a China that the United States now perceives as seeking regional hegemony as a stepping stone to global preeminence. The military dimension is part of a wider Indo-Pacific strategy unevenly taking shape in Washington, thus far with less convincing economic and governance pillars. The entire ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has formulated a more nonaligned Indo-Pacific outlook, driven by Indonesia, which itself seeks to leverage its core maritime geography as a basis for legitimacy and influence in shaping the regional debate. Europe is reimagining its regional engagement as Indo-Pacific, a shift led by France in its capacity both as a resident power and as a stakeholder in this most globally connected region.

Yet the very speed with which the Indo-Pacific concept has been adopted has also given rise to doubts over its viability. Observers parse official texts for policy signals in the presence or absence of coded words like "free," "open," and "inclusive" and for the diplomatic significance of upper or lower case. Much is made, for example, of slight variations of wording in national statements emerging from meetings of the Quadrilateral Dialogue that consists of the United States, India, Japan, and Australia. It all gets rather theological.

The inference is that the Indo-Pacific will not amount to much because key countries do not agree precisely on what the idea means. According to this argument, the multiplicity of Indo-Pacific visions put forward by different countries highlights their fundamental inability to agree on how to respond to Chinese power and U.S.-China tensions, underscoring in turn the ineffectiveness and unreality of an Indo-Pacific worldview as a basis for policy. This is one of several prominent criticisms of the idea. Other criticisms include claims that the Indo-Pacific is new and artificial, unlike the more established Asia-Pacific; that it is a concept manufactured by the United States to "contain" China; and that it is too large and vague a regional definition to provide the basis for a strategy.

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), *Opportunity, Security, Strength: The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* (Canberra, 2017), 37, 40.

In response, this essay argues that the Indo-Pacific is not an entirely new idea but is one that renews the region's enduring maritime and multipolar character. It is authentically regional rather than narrowly American. The Indo-Pacific serves not to exclude or contain China but to dilute its influence—a reasonable objective from the perspective of many other countries. The region's scale, ambiguity or “duality,” and diversity of national approaches are advantages, not liabilities, particularly because of the broad solidarity of national preferences for connectivity, rules, noncoercive behavior, and equal respect for sovereignty. These features of the region can enhance the durability and effectiveness of national strategies to cope with Chinese power. The emerging Indo-Pacific context provides opportunities for nations to coordinate in trying to forestall a future scenario involving either a Chinese bid for hegemony or unconstrained U.S.-China rivalry. In question is whether this solidarity can be sustained and deepened to avoid grim futures of capitulation or conflict.

#### WHAT IS THE INDO-PACIFIC?

##### *Mental Maps*

In statecraft, mental maps matter. Relations between states, whether competitive or cooperative, involve a landscape of the mind. This is about conceptions of what defines each country's natural “region”—what is on the map, what is off the map, and why. It equates to a strategic system or a regional security complex: a part of the world where the behavior of one or more powerful states has a strong and inescapable impact on the interests of other countries, large and small.<sup>5</sup> What a nation imagines on the map is a marker of what that nation considers important. This in turn shapes the decisions of leaders, the destiny of nations, and strategy itself. How leaders define and imagine regions can affect their allocation of resources and attention; the ranking of friends and foes; who is invited and who is overlooked at the top tables of diplomacy; what gets talked about, what gets done, and what gets forgotten. A sense of shared geography or “regionalism” can shape international cooperation and institutions, privileging some nations and diminishing others. For instance, late twentieth-century notions of the Asia-Pacific and an East Asian hemisphere were ambivalent about India at

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<sup>5</sup> Barry Buzan, “Security Architecture in Asia: The Interplay of Regional and Global Levels,” *Pacific Review* 16, no. 2 (2003): 145–48.

the very same time that Asia's second most populous country was opening to the world and beginning to look east.

The increasing use of the term Indo-Pacific both reflects and influences the changing way countries approach diplomacy, economics, and security. Nations choose maps that help them simplify things, make sense of a complex reality, and serve their interests. The Asia-Pacific, Southeast Asia, the Far East, Eurasia, the Belt and Road: these are all constructs that governments have at one time or another invented with a purpose. Curiously, some academics have been reluctant to treat the Indo-Pacific as a serious framework of study on the grounds that it is something policymakers have “just made up.” Yet the same could once have been said for other long-accepted regional labels such as Southeast Asia, a framework invented by a British-led military command in Colombo in the (Indo-)Pacific War in the early 1940s, or the Asia-Pacific, a transiently useful conflation of ASEAN-centric and Pacific processes of institution building in the late twentieth century. Definitions of Asia have shifted constantly during the thousands of years since the ancient Greeks invented that geographic label for everything that lay to their east. Like all previous mental maps, the Indo-Pacific is in some ways artificial and contingent. However, it suits the times: a 21st century of maritime connectivity and multipolar geopolitics.

### *Geography and Policy: A Multipolar, Maritime Region*

In diplomacy, maps influence reality and words wield weight. The term Indo-Pacific has become code for certain decisions of consequence. In part, the term is a message to a rising China that the country cannot expect others to accept its self-image as the center of the region and the world. It is a reminder that China and the United States are not the only two nations that count. The message here is of inclusion and solidarity among new coalitions of middle players, signaling that they will work together, and where possible with the United States, to balance Chinese power and keep an equilibrium in an uncertain future.

Science has long recognized the Indo-Pacific as a bio-geographic region. But connected marine ecosystems do not automatically make a chunk of the world a region in the minds of strategists. The strategic origins of the modern Indo-Pacific were economic and maritime. The Pacific and Indian Oceans have become increasingly connected through trade, infrastructure, and diplomacy with the rise of both China and India. Since the mid-1990s, their economies, together with many others, have relied on the sea lanes

of the Indian Ocean to ship oil from the Middle East and Africa along the world's vital maritime commercial artery. The new significance of these sea lanes had security consequences, notably heightened interest in naval deployments and access. This reflects basic and enduring advantages of the sea over the land in economics and security: seaborne cargo transport is unbeatable in terms of affordability and volume, and sea power has unique flexibility and reach. China and India, once primarily continental powers, have turned to the sea both because they are becoming richer and stronger and because they wish to stay that way. Now, on the eve of the 2020s, a new economic—or, more specifically, geoeconomic—dimension is emerging as the contest between China and others over infrastructure and influence extends across the wide region.<sup>6</sup>

The Indo-Pacific has thus become the global center of strategic and economic gravity, just as the North Atlantic was for much of the 19th and 20th centuries. At one level, the term is a neutral description of the new map of Asia. But at another level, the Indo-Pacific provides a foundation for policy. Indeed, if enough relevant nations manage to align ends, ways, and means, this concept may yet provide the basis of a strategy for one of the great international dilemmas of the 21st century: how can nations respond to a strong and coercive China without resorting to capitulation or conflict?

China's expanding economic, military, and diplomatic activity in the Indian Ocean is a sign of an emerging Indo-Pacific strategic system, where the actions and interests of one powerful state in one part of the region affect the interests and actions of other powerful states there. The Indo-Pacific power narrative 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, including in Europe. Russia, too, is making its presence felt. The Indo-Pacific is thus 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 by the interests and agency of many states. The region is not China-centric, even though its foremost strategic challenges may be.

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<sup>6</sup> It is ironic that China has chosen to reject the term “Indo-Pacific” when its own interests, actions, and policies make China the most quintessentially Indo-Pacific of nations. Interestingly, until the unveiling of One Belt, One Road in 2013 (renamed the Belt and Road Initiative in 2015), some Chinese analysts had experimented with Indo-Pacific terminology. This should come as little surprise given that the maritime “road” in Beijing's Belt and Road strategy is really the Indo-Pacific with Chinese characteristics. See, for example, Minghao Zhao, “The Emerging Strategic Triangle in Indo-Pacific Asia,” *Diplomat*, June 4, 2013.

Put simply, the Indo-Pacific treats as a single emerging strategic system what for decades was seen as two very separate subregions: East Asia, centered on China and lapped by the Pacific Ocean, and South Asia, centered on India and abutting the Indian Ocean.<sup>7</sup> None of this should be misconstrued as an attempt to reduce the centrality of Asia in regional conceptions. Instead, the Indo-Pacific is a region with maritime Asia—especially Southeast Asia—at its core. It is the globe’s busiest and most strategically significant trade and energy corridor.

### *The Indo-Pacific in History*

A common misconception about the Indo-Pacific is that it is a newer idea than the Asia-Pacific framework that it supplants. Early recorded use of the term dates from around 1850.<sup>8</sup> But associated ideas are of much older vintage. Recent scholarship is affirming the long and half-forgotten past of a two-ocean super-region.<sup>9</sup> This integrated perspective has an antique pedigree. The precursors of the Indo-Pacific go back thousands of years to a proto-economy of regional maritime trade and migration before recorded history. This was followed by the spread of Hinduism and Islam to Southeast Asia; Buddhism to China, Japan, and Korea; Chinese geopolitical influence to Southeast Asia and briefly the Indian Ocean; and European colonialism and the consequent pan-Asian resistance across so much of the map. The contours of the Indo-Pacific were there all along in the history of cartography and ages of exploration. From the 1400s to the mid-twentieth century, the typical map titled Asia caught the sweep of the Indo-Pacific in a single frame. The age of European empires first broke, then bound, then re-broke the region, concluding with Japan’s imperial power play, which came to its own end in 1945.

What followed was a prolonged flux in Asian security in the post-World War II era, in part a quest for structures of regional cooperation and identity. China and India were estranged—to the point of war in 1962—and held back their own prosperity by closing their economic doors

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<sup>7</sup> Former senior official Peter Varghese, one of the proponents of an Australian Indo-Pacific worldview, suggests that the Indo-Pacific is not yet a “strategic system” but is rather a “work in progress”; however, much depends, of course, on what the term strategic system is taken to mean. Peter Varghese, “The Indo-Pacific and Its Strategic Challenges: An Australian Perspective” (speech at ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, January 8, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> James Richardson Logan, *Ethnology of the Indo-Pacific Islands* (Singapore: Jacob Baptist, 1852).

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Philip Bowring, *Empire of the Winds: The Global Role of Asia’s Great Archipelago* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019).



to the world. The Cold War kept the region further divided. An ephemeral idea called the Asia-Pacific arose as a way both to connect Japan and other Asian economies to the United States and Australia and to keep Washington engaged across the Pacific, even as the end of the Cold War gave it a reason to leave. But the structural re-emergence of an Indo-Pacific order was inevitable once China and India began to reform, trade, and look out again. The Asia-Pacific turned out to be just an evolutionary stage.

In the first decade of the 21st century, Indo-Pacific realities became apparent as China, India, Japan, the United States, and others began to compete or cooperate across the Indian Ocean as well as the Pacific. These new patterns were reflected in international responses to the devastating Boxing Day tsunami of 2004 and the upsurge of Somali piracy a few years later. The architecture of regional coexistence, then cooperation, that began with ASEAN in the 1960s and extended to an Asia-Pacific framework in the 1990s now reached its more conclusive shape in the Indo-Pacific. The countries of Southeast Asia had sought to give structure to their region through the East Asia Summit in 2005, but this diplomatic forum ended up including a much wider range of countries. These included not only “East Asian” nations but also Australia, India, New Zealand, the United States, and Russia. This reflected the new Indo-Pacific in all but name and manifested the interests of many countries to ensure a grouping too large for China to dominate, as acknowledged by former Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa.<sup>10</sup> The June 2019 consensus among ASEAN countries to develop an “Indo-Pacific outlook” was a *post facto* recognition of the true regional footprint of key ASEAN-centric institutions that had existed for years: not only the East Asia Summit but also the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting-Plus process.

An acceleration of recent activity has locked in the new shape of the region. This includes the historic return of China’s navy to the Indian Ocean; the rapid extension of a Chinese economic empire through the Belt and Road Initiative; India’s Act East policy; the dramatic growth of strategic partnerships between the United States, India, Japan, and Australia; the revival of European engagement; and the efforts of Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries to reimagine their diplomacy around two oceans.

Hints of the contemporary Indo-Pacific idea in policy appeared shortly after the turn of the 21st century, starting a trend among governments

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<sup>10</sup> Marty Natalegawa, “An Indonesian Perspective on the Indo-Pacific,” *Jakarta Post*, May 20, 2013.

and scholars.<sup>11</sup> Australia was the first country to formally name its region the Indo-Pacific in a defense policy white paper in 2013, which included a map convincingly showing how this super-region was connected by sea lines of energy and trade.<sup>12</sup> Indonesia began to articulate its own Indo-Pacific vision in 2013. Japan formalized its Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2016, drawing on ideas Prime Minister Abe had been formulating for a decade. India and Japan had already established a comprehensive Indo-Pacific partnership before Donald Trump became the U.S. president. Even the U.S. Asia “rebalance” under President Barack Obama was to some extent focused on the Indo-Pacific in both practice and expression, informed by a growing two-ocean awareness among some prominent American analysts.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, the concept of the Indo-Pacific attained much wider international awareness once the Trump administration comprehensively adopted the term in late 2017 and defined it as the United States’ region of principal strategic interest in its National Security Strategy document.<sup>14</sup> In diplomatic summits in 2017 and 2018, a domino effect took hold, with many governments suddenly referring to the Indo-Pacific, even while China warned them away from such language. Japan, India, Australia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and France were among those to notably champion the term.

## CHARTING A COURSE FOR COOPERATION OR BALANCING

### *Not Made in America*

The Indo-Pacific is now the standard American lens for the region. The powerful U.S. military force based in Hawaii has been renamed Indo-Pacific

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<sup>11</sup> The first modern academic articles to mention the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical term were by New Zealand maritime expert Peter Cozens and an Australian journalist Michael Richardson in 2005, followed by Indian naval officer Gurpreet Khurana in 2007. The author also began developing the term from 2007, beginning with an open letter to Australia’s then foreign minister. See Peter Cozens, “Some Reflections on Maritime Developments in the Indo-Pacific during the Past Sixty-Years,” *Maritime Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2005): 15–35; Michael Richardson, “Australia–Southeast Asia Relations and the East Asian Summit,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 59, no. 3 (2005): 360–65; Gurpreet S. Khurana, “Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India–Japan Cooperation,” *Strategic Analysis* 31, no. 1 (2007): 139–53; and Rory Medcalf, “Incoming Government Brief: Australia’s Relations with India,” Lowy Institute, Interpreter, December 21, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Department of Defense (Australia), *Defence White Paper 2013* (Canberra, 2013), 7, 13.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Robert Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (New York: Random House, 2010); and Michael Auslin, “Security in the Indo-Pacific Commons: Toward a Regional Strategy,” American Enterprise Institute, December 15, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C., 2017), 45–47.

Command, and the new terminology threads policy speeches, strategic documents, and bipartisan legislation emerging from the White House, the Departments of State and Defense, and a Congress awakening to the prospect of a long-term rivalry with China. For many of those who see merit in the Indo-Pacific idea, Trump's use of the term is a mixed blessing. He is far from the ideal advocate for this or any foreign policy idea focused on allies or multilateralism. So it attests to the resilience of the concept that the Indo-Pacific so far has survived the difficulty of operating in an "America first" environment.

One reason for such durability is that the Indo-Pacific concept is one that is authentically of the region: it is not the initiative or invention of any one country. A downside of recent U.S. championing, in fact, is that it fuels the misconception that the Indo-Pacific is a new intellectual confection made in America and foisted on an unreceptive Asia.<sup>15</sup> Washington has been a follower, not a leader, in lifting an Indo-Pacific banner.

The fact that the Indo-Pacific is not solely or even primarily an American invention is important in several ways. It undermines the argument of a binary choice—the assertion that the only alternative to accepting a China-led regional order is unconditional enlistment with Washington in an intensified strategic competition with Beijing. Instead, middle players see their adoption of Indo-Pacific definitions as having almost totemic status in reflecting their independent agency. Whether or not they choose to align to a significant degree with the United States' Indo-Pacific policy, they were there first. The United States has followed their lead, both in the regional footprint it recognizes as important and in the principles it espouses as a basis for regional order. Whatever the deficiencies of U.S. regional posture under Trump, broadly shared Indo-Pacific frameworks now provide certain common understandings and diplomatic vocabulary for allies and partners to try to influence U.S. policy in a more stable direction.

### *China: Inclusion and Dilution*

Just as the Indo-Pacific framework has been accused of privileging the United States or India, there are claims that it is intended to exclude China by legitimizing a strategy of containment. In fact, there is nothing intrinsic about the Indo-Pacific that excludes or contains China. China is by definition a major player in such a region. Recognizing China as an

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<sup>15</sup> "India's Cautious Courtship with the U.S.-Led Order in Asia," East Asia Forum, September 24, 2018.

Indo-Pacific power is to acknowledge, for instance, the legitimacy of it playing a substantial security role in the Indian Ocean. India has no more right to exclude China from the Indian Ocean than China has to shut out the United States from the western Pacific.

It is also true, however, that the Indo-Pacific idea dilutes Chinese influence. That is part of the point. Yet this strategy is not about shutting China out of its own region but rather about incorporating it as a country that in a large and multipolar region is prominent—just not dominant. The logic of the Indo-Pacific is to recognize that Chinese interests and power can be addressed only in the expansive two-ocean context across which China’s wealth, military, influence, and diaspora are extending. A “sphere of influence” approach, in which China is allowed to dominate East Asia while India in turn is allowed to dominate the Indian Ocean, will simply not work: China’s seaborne energy dependence and the security footprint of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road make it too late for that.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, given China’s strategic weight and temptations toward hegemony, an Indo-Pacific perspective is empowering for other countries, encouraging them to build new defensive and balancing partnerships across outdated geographic boundaries. This is typified by the fast-evolving relationship between India and Japan, as well as the web of small groups and minilateral dialogues involving these and other countries. These include not only the Quadrilateral Dialogue but robust (and less contentious) trilaterals as well, involving not only U.S. allies but autonomy-focused powers such as India and Indonesia.<sup>17</sup>

### *A Region of Dualities*

As discussed earlier, the Indo-Pacific idea is easily criticized for its ambiguity. Is it an objective geographic label or a code word for a strategy? Is it focused on economic connectivity or security competition? Does it promote maritime Asia or diminish Asia’s importance? Does it exclude or include China in the regional order?

Asian statecraft has long been comfortable with duality—a unity composed of difference. The Indo-Pacific encompasses multiple dualities, the reconciliation of contrasting aspects within one idea. The concept is both an objective description of geopolitical circumstances and the basis

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<sup>16</sup> The “sphere of influence” argument is advanced by Australian scholar Hugh White as a basis for his assertion that a country like Australia will end up having to face China alone. Hugh White, *How to Defend Australia* (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 2019), 38–42.

<sup>17</sup> As of 2019, prominent trilateral dialogues in the Indo-Pacific include India–Japan–United States, Australia–United States–Japan, Australia–India–Japan, and Australia–India–Indonesia.

for a strategy. It is both inclusive and exclusive. It incorporates Chinese interests into a regional order where the rights of others are respected, but it also prepares the ground for balancing against Chinese power when those rights are not. It is both economic and strategic, having economic origins but strategic consequences.

The Indo-Pacific's boundaries are fluid—it is, after all, a maritime region—and this helps explain why some countries define it differently. Nonetheless, the core of the region is clear: the sea lanes of maritime Southeast Asia. As for the periphery, it is more defined by connections than borders. This is consonant with the ancient Asian concept of the *mandala*, adapted from Hindu cosmology, which in many variations defined the universe around a circle and a central point. For thousands of years, the mandala has been an organizing principle in the politics of Southeast Asia: polities defined by their center rather than their boundaries. Its contemporary incarnation explains the new realities of the Indo-Pacific.

Is the Indo-Pacific just another name for Asia, or a definition that privileges the oceans while marginalizing the Eurasian continent? The answer is that this region is about Asia but is about more than Asia. It is Asia-centric, privileging maritime Asia as a global economic and strategic fulcrum. It should thus be no surprise that an increasing number of Asian countries are comfortable owning or adapting Indo-Pacific frameworks. These include and coexist with the late twentieth-century Asia-Pacific concept, even while replacing it. Although the Indo-Pacific is a place, it is also an expression of global connectivity: the main highway for commerce and energy between Asia, Africa, Europe, Oceania, and the Americas. It is the most globally connected of regions. In practical terms, not all of the Indo-Pacific's chief stakeholders are necessarily resident powers. What happens there—including in the lanes of the contested South China Sea—is the entire world's business.

The Indo-Pacific concept is not only focused on the sea, however. Admittedly, sea power has the advantage in a competitive world: it has been decisive in major wars, helped empires rule the waves, facilitates the transport and trade of 90% of everything,<sup>18</sup> and has underpinned a rules-based order in more cooperative times. Yet one of the key dualities about the Indo-Pacific is that power and economics at sea are most effective when and where they connect with the land. China's own Belt and Road strategy illustrates this combination. Ports are key, especially when roads,

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<sup>18</sup> Rose George, *Ninety Percent of Everything: Inside Shipping, the Invisible Industry That Puts Clothes on Your Back, Gas in Your Car and Food on Your Plate* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013).

rails, and political leverage bind them closer to industry, to resources, and to China itself—hence, China’s highway and railway ambitions into Pakistan or the China-Japan rivalry to build high-speed rail in Southeast Asia. The Indo-Pacific is a complement, not merely an alternative, to continental connectivity in Eurasia. Or more accurately, Eurasia is the complement to the Indo-Pacific, given that the sea is superior to the land for ease of power projection and cost effectiveness of transportation.

### *Convergence and Diplomatic Opportunity*

The speed with which Indo-Pacific thinking has taken off in recent years may be one reason that the viability of the concept remains so intently questioned. The coalescence of the Asia-Pacific idea from the 1960s to the 1990s was more gradual. It was socialized over time and less closely associated with political divisions between China and other nations. Even so, it is worth recalling that for much of that era, governments often crafted policy in terms of “Asia” or the “Pacific” but not automatically both. China was initially wary of the Asia-Pacific framework too.

Yet it is easy to accentuate the differences in national descriptions of the Indo-Pacific. Japan and the United States both refer to a “free and open” Indo-Pacific, for example. But the United States appears to go further than Japan in interpreting what this means. Abe’s original “free and open” Indo-Pacific speech in Kenya in 2016 accentuated connectivity, prosperity, and the rule of law, even though it had a subtext of competing with China.<sup>19</sup> Trump’s November 2017 speech in Vietnam, by contrast, focused on maximizing each nation’s sovereignty. It set the scene for the more fully fledged strategic competition with China, which drove the administration to formulate a national security strategy that identified the Indo-Pacific as the principal zone for contesting China’s vision of a repressive world order.<sup>20</sup>

In Southeast Asia, meanwhile, there is an aversion both to describing the regional order in overtly freedom-espousing terms and to defining the core strategic problem as China’s actions rather than U.S.-China rivalry. Indonesia describes its Indo-Pacific cooperation concept as “open, transparent and inclusive, promoting the habit of dialogue, promoting cooperation and

<sup>19</sup> Shinzo Abe (address at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development, Nairobi, August 27, 2016) ≈ [https://www.mofa.go.jp/af2/af2/page4e\\_000496.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/af2/af2/page4e_000496.html).

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region,” June 1, 2019 ≈ <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>.

friendship, and upholding international law.”<sup>21</sup> The long-awaited ASEAN Outlook in June 2019 listed more than fourteen principles, including, unsurprisingly, ASEAN centrality, along with openness, inclusivity, rules, mutual respect, and renunciation of the threat or use of force.<sup>22</sup> Australian rhetoric emphasizes “open and inclusive.” Australia refers to freedom more occasionally and indirectly, while still underscoring its security alignment with the United States.<sup>23</sup> India liberally combines its adjectives—“a free, open, inclusive region”—with a stance that is less confrontational than the United States’ but more forthright than ASEAN’s with respect to Chinese behavior. Modi referred specifically to freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific manifesto that was his Singapore speech in June 2018.<sup>24</sup>

Nonetheless, the similarities across the various national and ASEAN visions are what is really striking. There is a shared rhetorical emphasis on rules, norms, and international law. Respect for the centrality of ASEAN and its regional institutions is consistent, including from non-ASEAN powers such as India, Japan, Australia, and the United States. Insistence on the protection of sovereignty and the rejection of coercion as a solution to international differences are common themes. Regional connectivity and the interaction of strategic dynamics across the two oceans are regularly acknowledged as defining features of the new era. Together, these principles chart a convergence of Indo-Pacific perspectives, providing a basis for solidarity.

This observation does not wish away the most difficult and obvious tension within Indo-Pacific visions. Is an Indo-Pacific framework a channel for compelling the many middle players—ASEAN and non-ASEAN alike—to choose between the United States and China? Or is it a platform for all powers to engage both countries in efforts to manage their strategic competition within an emerging multipolar order?

Much will depend on how nations choose to use the current window of pan-regional awareness. This is a fertile time for diplomatic initiatives involving or led by middle players such as Australia, Indonesia, Singapore, India, and Japan. It is worth highlighting the opportunities as well as the risks. The opportunity exists for creative coalition-building to push the boundaries of solidarity. This could involve using the overlap of ASEAN and non-ASEAN

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<sup>21</sup> Jansen Tham, “What’s in Indonesia’s Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept,” *Diplomat*, May 16, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> ASEAN, “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” June 23, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Marise Payne, “Address to the Raisina Dialogue,” Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), January 9, 2019 ~ [https://foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/Pages/2019/mp\\_sp\\_190109.aspx](https://foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/Pages/2019/mp_sp_190109.aspx).

<sup>24</sup> Narendra Modi (keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 1, 2018) ~ <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>.

viewpoints to drive further convergence and mutual adjustment, enabling partners to do more to hold one another to their word. If ASEAN nations are serious about respecting rules and rejecting coercion, they will need to more effectively use and strengthen their institutions, such as the East Asia Summit, to hold China accountable for its maritime intimidation.<sup>25</sup> At the very least, that forum needs a permanent secretariat and a willingness from governments to keep sensitive issues on the agenda. For its part, if the United States is serious about promoting regional connectivity, development, and prosperity, it will need to take much more notice of regional partners' interests in shaping and moderating its long-term economic and technological competition with China. Otherwise, it will not likely succeed in persuading other states that some variant of that competition is in fact in their interests.

Indo-Pacific solidarity provides a context for these challenging but essential conversations. To the extent that such initiatives succeed, the region's many small and medium powers will have greater confidence in resisting and together moderating Chinese unilateral assertiveness and influence. In responding to China's power, Indo-Pacific solidarity is not a blueprint for containment or accommodation but rather a third way that could be termed "incorporation" or "conditional engagement." This means accepting a major role for China, but on the region's terms rather than on China's alone, while preparing for more active balancing if such engagement founders.

## CONCLUSION

Like any geopolitical construct, the Indo-Pacific has its ambiguities and limitations. However, in the present phase of strategic uncertainty, this concept is a useful platform for the many nations seeking to hedge between Beijing's assertiveness and Washington's uncertainty, and between fears of Chinese dominance and risks of U.S.-China confrontation. The dualities of the Indo-Pacific concept and the diversity of national approaches to it can be diplomatic advantages rather than liabilities. They improve the durability and effectiveness of the Indo-Pacific in framing coordinated national strategies to cope with Chinese power. Those who warn that the term is code for balancing China are right in a sense. The very nature of the Indo-Pacific—its connected vastness, its multipolarity as a game with many players—is part of the answer

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<sup>25</sup> Similar views on the need for an enhanced East Asia Summit have been put forth by a distinguished Indonesian scholar-diplomat. See Dino Patti Djalal, "Are We Ready for Indo-Pacific 2.0?" *Jakarta Post*, February 25, 2019.



to the region's strategic problem of grappling with China's grand power play and the more unilateral and confrontational aspects of U.S. reassertion, provided that a sufficient collective of nations recognize their opportunities to act together. This is a region too big and diverse for hegemony, as China, despite its ambitions, is likely to discover. The shape of the region—with far-flung resources and strategic locations—will tempt overstretch but punish it too. This region is made for multipolarity and creative new partnerships across collapsed geographic boundaries. The Indo-Pacific concept privileges solidarity, increasing the potential for middle players to coordinate. Whether these states will successfully make use of that agency is another question. ◆

