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In Defence of the 'Indo-Pacific' Concept

**Sanjay Pulipaka
and Mohit Musaddi**

Abstract

This brief examines the evolution of the 'Indo-Pacific' concept in the context of the dynamic role of "regions" in international relations. It argues that the conception of these theatres is a consequence of power relations; that as power dynamics change, so does the conceptualisation of regions.¹ This would also explain why the boundaries of regions can be arbitrary—why, for instance, the Asia-Pacific stops at Myanmar and does not include India; or why given Myanmar's historic location within British India, it is excluded from South Asia. The brief says this seeming lack of rationality indicates that the boundaries of international regions are contingent on political interests.

The Origins of 'Indo-Pacific' Nomenclature

The origin of the term 'Indo-Pacific' is traced to German geopolitical scholar Karl Haushofer who used it in the 1920s in his work, 'Indopazifischen Raum,'² while Indian historian Kalidas Nag referenced it in the 1940s.³ In more contemporary history, the term gained prominence after then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's speech in the Indian parliament in August 2007, where he remarked, "We are now at a point at which the Confluence of the Two Seas is coming into being. The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity."⁴ The speech became relevant at the time, when power shifts from the West to East were occurring. Multipolarity was fast emerging in Asia, and there was a need to further strengthen it. To that end, frameworks such as the Asia-Pacific were proving to be limited in scope and unable to meet current geopolitical requirements or respond to emerging economic engagements.

Japan was among the first countries to use the phrase 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' in its official discourse. In 2017, the United States (US) adopted the concept and translated it into the three pillars of security, economics, and governance.⁵ The US's 2017 National Security Strategy,⁶ 2018 National Defence Strategy,⁷ and 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report⁸ marked an inflection point in the evolution of the concept. While West Asia had captured the US's attention and resources in the past, today it is the Indo-Pacific, with its economic heft and pivotal role in global security, that is getting Washington's attention.

For India, its Indo-Pacific policy was enunciated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018 where he outlined the seven elements of the country's vision for the region. These principles included keeping the region "free, open [and] inclusive," the centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the importance of connectivity.⁹ To assuage concerns that the Indo-Pacific concept will undermine ASEAN centrality, leading powers like the US, India and Japan have reiterated that the grouping will be the pivot around which the construct revolves.¹⁰

The Origins of 'Indo-Pacific' Nomenclature

In June 2019, the ASEAN released its *Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, which is consistent with and anchored in the principles of ASEAN centrality through ASEAN-led mechanisms like the East Asia Summit (EAS).¹¹ It is not aimed at creating new mechanisms but is rather “an Outlook intended to enhance ASEAN’s Community building process and to strengthen and give new momentum for existing ASEAN-led mechanisms to better face challenges and seize opportunities arising from the current and future regional and global environments.”¹²

European countries are also taking a stance on the Indo-Pacific. France, through its chain of islands in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, is a resident power in the Indo-Pacific and released a strategy for the region in June 2019,¹³ which was updated in 2021.¹⁴ Germany also adopted policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific in September 2020.¹⁵ In September 2021, the European Commission released its ‘EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific’ which defines the region as stretching from “the East coast of Africa to the Pacific Island states”.¹⁶ It is hardly surprising that the EU will release such a strategy document, given that more than 35 percent of all European exports go to this region, making the bloc the largest trading partner for several Indo-Pacific economies.¹⁷ Moreover, close to 90 percent of those exports transit through sea lanes of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.¹⁸

While India and Japan have spoken of the Indo-Pacific’s geographic expanse as extending from the US’s west coast to Africa’s east coast, Washington has until recently referred to the Indo-Pacific as the stretch “from Hollywood to Bollywood, and from penguins to polar bears.”¹⁹ Australia, which was among the first countries to officially embrace the Indo-Pacific concept, defines the region as encompassing “the eastern Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean connected by Southeast Asia, including India, North Asia and the United States.”²⁰

Many countries have translated their rhetoric on the Indo-Pacific idea to specific institutional changes. For instance, India’s Ministry of External Affairs has created a new Indo-Pacific Division as well as a new Oceania Division.²¹ Similarly, the US renamed its USPACOM (US Pacific Command) to USINDOPACOM (US Indo-Pacific Command), and President Joe Biden appointed Kurt Campbell as the Indo-Pacific coordinator of the US National Security Council.²²

India: Linchpin of the Indo-Pacific

India is poised to play a significant role in the future of the Indo-Pacific, and it perhaps begins with the country's cultural connections with the other countries in the region. For instance, while the Angkor Wat in Cambodia is well-known, the Cham civilisation in Vietnam also shared a common culture with India.²³ The name "Indonesia" is derived from the Greek words *Indos* and *nesos*, meaning "Indian islands".²⁴ Some analysts have noted that India's wide presence is such that "the influence of Indian culture and language has permeated Southeast Asia organically and without state sponsorship, political imposition or concrete effort."²⁵

To be sure, some observers are of the view that the concept of the Indo-Pacific is simply an attempt to be a counterweight to the rise of China.²⁶ However, this brief argues, the growing salience of the Indo-Pacific is a consequence of the changing dynamics of economic interactions in the region, overall, and in particular, the rise of India. Indeed, there cannot be an Asia-wide concept without the inclusion of India as an economic and military power.

Economically, India is figuring prominently in the trade profile of countries in the region. Australia, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Singapore, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the US, and China, are among the top 15 of India's trade partners.²⁷ India's trade with ASEAN has also registered a steady improvement.²⁸ In terms of investments, Japan and Singapore are leading investors in India after Mauritius.²⁹

Table 1.
India's total trade with top 15 countries
(2020-21)

Country	Total Trade (in USD million)
People's Republic of China	86,399.40
United States of America	80,511.24
United Arab Emirates	43,302.53
Hong Kong	25,335.22
Saudi Arabia	22,043.37
Singapore	21,980.41
Germany	21,767.95
Switzerland	19,492.48
Indonesia	17,496.38
Republic of Korea	17,457.59
Iraq	15,786.09
Japan	15,359.33
Malaysia	14,430.73
United Kingdom	13,113.32
Australia	12,291.17
Total Trade of Top 15 Countries	426,767.21
India's Total	686,242.51
% Share of Top Countries	62.19 %

Source: Department of Commerce, Government of India

India: Linchpin of the Indo-Pacific

At the same time, India's footprint is expanding in the realm of defence. For one, New Delhi regularly procures high-end defence equipment from Washington.³⁰ Similarly, India's defence ties with Vietnam and Singapore are on the rise; India conducts periodic military exercises with both countries.³¹ Indo-Pacific countries are invited as participants and observers to India's annual naval exercise, MILAN.³² India is also working on Maritime Domain Awareness with small island states such as the Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius.³³ New Delhi and Paris are coordinating in the western and southern Indian Ocean, and India is a key pillar in France's Indo-Pacific strategy.³⁴ India is also engaging with countries like Mongolia and Fiji under the rubric of its Act East policy. The Forum for Indo-Pacific Island Cooperation, developed in 2014 between India and 14 Pacific Island states, has also gained momentum in recent years. India is a dialogue partner in ASEAN, and a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum and the EAS.

India has not been part of economic and security architectures since the end of Second World War as these were focused on the Asia-Pacific. The country has also made strenuous but unsuccessful efforts in the past to be part of regional frameworks such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific recognises India's prominence in the larger region, and such geopolitical shifts will compel various regional frameworks to consider India's presence in the emerging economic and security architectures.

Towards Greater Cohesion

Sanjay Pulipaka and Mohit Musaddi work as Senior Fellow and Research Associate respectively at the Delhi Policy Group. Views expressed are personal.

The experiences of Indo-Pacific countries in recent years have highlighted crucial linkages between the security of the different stakeholder countries.³⁵ It is increasingly evident, for example, that developments in the Senkaku Islands, the South China Sea, and the Himalayas are closely intertwined. Any alteration in the balance of power in one subregion will have ripple effects in other subregions within the Indo-Pacific.


Given the expansive nature of the Indo-Pacific, its cohesiveness will be put to certain test in the days to come. However, it is important to remember that the Indo-Pacific is a conceptual framework and not a regional organisation. The term is also often erroneously used interchangeably with the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the US). While the Indo-Pacific is a region that highlights economic and security interdependence, the Quad is a minilateral framework of leading democracies within the region. The security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region is still evolving, and the Quad constitutes an important pillar of it.

In the foreseeable future, the overarching security architecture of the Indo-Pacific will be an amalgamation of various security frameworks, where the Quad will have a crucial role. In the first-ever Quad Leaders' Summit on 12 March 2021, the joint statement committed to "promoting a free, open rules-based order, rooted in international law to advance security and prosperity and counter threats to both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond."³⁶ Subsequently, the White House announced that President Biden will host an in-person Quad Leaders' Summit in Washington towards the end of September.³⁷

Other frameworks such as the Quad-Plus have also come into play, particularly to manage responses and contain the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁸ The Indo-Pacific is also witnessing the emergence of minilaterals such as India-Japan-United States and India-Japan-Australia. The recently formed Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) trilateral has resolved "to deepen diplomatic, security, and defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region."³⁹

There are other forums as well, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, and the EAS forum, that aim to serve as a bridge between the Indo-Pacific's sub-regions. India's 2+2 Defence and Foreign minister-level dialogues with the United States, Japan and Australia also indicates growing institutionalisation amongst democratic powers in the Indo-Pacific.

Other frameworks are being created for specific targets. As countries create strategies to recover from the massive fallout of the pandemic, there is a realisation of the urgent need to nurture global supply chain resilience. Japan, for one, has proposed a Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) with India and Australia.⁴⁰ The emergence of the SCRI with Tokyo, Canberra and New Delhi as initial members reiterates the value of the Indo-Pacific—with Japan as a Pacific country, Australia in the middle of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and India located at the heart of the Indian Ocean—all three coming together to enhance economic cooperation for their mutual benefit. The importance of SCRI was also stressed in the joint statement of the 2+2 ministerial meeting between India and Australia in early September.⁴¹

There is no doubt that regional constructs such as the “Indo-Pacific” take time to evolve. The current geopolitical dynamics in the Indian and Pacific Oceans have created a conducive environment for the idea to be strengthened further, and translated to measurable outcomes. It is also a response to the hitherto closed regional frameworks that were based on rigid geographic spaces and boundaries. In contrast, at least by most indications so far, the Indo-Pacific is an open and dynamic framework that defines the region based on relevant economic and human interactions. 

(This paper is an expanded and updated version of an earlier essay on the subject published in the ORF-Global Policy volume, 'Brass Tacks: Unpacking the Indo-Pacific Template,' July 2021.)

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org